

The Totem of Black Hawk



EVERETT McNEIL

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THE TOTEM OF BLACK HAWK



“The Totem of Black Hawk,” he cried

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THE TOTEM OF BLACK HAWK

A Tale of Pioneer Days in Northwestern Illinois
and the Black Hawk War

By

EVERETT McNEIL

Author of "The Boy Forty-Niners," "In Texas with Davy Crockett,"
"With Kit Carson in the Rockies," etc.

Illustrated by

HENRY S. WATSON



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To
the Boys and the Girls
of America
who are interested
in knowing something of
how our Great West was wrested
from the savage and the wilderness
this tale of pioneer life in
Northwestern Illinois
is affectionately
and hopefully
dedicated

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THE TOTEM OF BLACK HAWK

CHAPTER I

THE ARRIVAL

“**W**HOA!” and, with a downward thrust of the handle of his long ox whip, Big Tom Clay brought the tired oxen to a welcomed halt. “Martha,” and he turned a pair of shining eyes to the woman, who, with a baby in her arms, was seated on the front seat of the huge covered wagon that the weary oxen had been drawing, “Martha—Home!” and his eyes, sweeping the surrounding scene, returned quickly and a bit questioningly to the face of the woman. “Here’s the land, right from the hand of God, all waiting for us to make a home on it. I hope it looks as good to you as it does to me. It’s the pick of the whole Rock River Valley. Plenty of wood and water, and the soil good enough for a king and ready right now for the plow, without no grubbing out of trees or burning of brush. I reckon ’twon’t take us no time to make ourselves mighty comfortable here. It’s all that I pictured it, ain’t it? You ain’t none disappointed, be you?” and a look of affectionate anxiety came into the eyes of the big man.

“No, Tom, I ain’t disappointed,” and Mrs. Clay turned her eyes from the surrounding scene to the

face of her husband. "It's better than I thought it was going to be. Now, give me a hand. I want to set my feet on our own ground."

Big Tom promptly lifted up both hands and helped his wife, with their baby in her arms, to the ground.

"It is glorious!" Mrs. Clay said, drawing in a long breath of satisfaction, as her eyes slowly circled the beautiful scene. "Looks as if it was made a-purpose for a home—a home for us and the children," and her eyes rested tenderly for a moment on the smiling face of the baby in her arms, and then turned, glowing with mother pride, to two children, a boy and a girl, who were hurrying toward them from a second ox-drawn wagon that had halted a short distance behind the first.

"Is this the place? Have we reached our own land?" the boy called excitedly at sight of his mother's face.

"Yes!" shouted back Big Tom joyously.

"Hurrah!" yelled the girl, catching quick hold of her brother's hand and racing alongside of him to the spot where their father and mother stood.

"Well, what do you think of our new home, Gid? Like it better than you did back in Ohio?" queried the father, smiling down into the excited boy's face.

"I reckon I will," answered Gideon soberly, his eyes slowly scanning the surrounding country. "It looks just about right and—"

"But," interrupted the girl, looking around anxiously, "I see no house. Where is our house?"

"Right there in them big trees, Ruth," grinned Big Tom, pointing to the heavy timber that stretched along the edge of the prairie on which they had halted.

"Where? I—I can't see it," and Ruth, shading her eyes with one hand, searched the spot indicated eagerly.

"Well," laughed her father, "it's there, right in them big trees, just waiting for our axes to cut it out."

"O," and the lights in Ruth's eyes danced with excitement, "you mean, we've got to cut down the trees and make a house out of them! But, where will we live until the house is made?" and her face sobered.

"That's a great question for a pioneer girl to ask," laughed Mrs. Clay. "Why, we've all outdoors to camp in!"

"But—but just camping out isn't like home-living. I thought we'd have a real house to live in, when we got to our land. I'm tired of camping out. The cooking is so smoky and I am always afraid of snakes, specially since dad shot that rattler off the top of my blanket the other morning," and Ruth's face whitened and she shivered at the thought of that dreadful experience.

"Well, if that's all that is troubling you," cheered her father, "your troubles will soon be over. We'll have some sort of a shelter up before a Dutchman could say Jack Robinson. 'Twon't take no time to put up a half-faced camp; and that will do splendid

until we can get the house up. O, we'll soon be as snug as four bugs in a rug."

"Five," smiled Mrs. Clay, "counting the baby."

"Right," grinned Big Tom. "Couldn't keep house nohow without the baby. Now, just see the little rascal grin. Reckon she fancies we're doing all this for her special benefit, the conceit of her!" and he chucked the baby under the chin with one of his big fingers. "But then I reckon it's just the woman breaking out in her," and he winked one eye at his wife. "Howsomever, talk and looks never built a house; we must get busy. It's past noon now," and he glanced up at the sun; "and we've got enough to do before sleeptime to keep six men busy. Gid," and he turned to the boy, "unyoke and turn the critters loose to feed. We'll leave the wagons right where they be. Now, Martha, just give me a hand, and we will get some of the things we need first out of the wagon," and Big Tom sprang into the back end of one of the big canvas-topped wagons, while Mrs. Clay gave the baby to Ruth and made ready to help her husband with the unloading.

Gideon, with eager, practiced hands, hurriedly unyoked the three pairs of oxen hitched to each heavy wagon, and turned the tired and hungry animals loose to feed on the rich grass that covered the prairie, together with the three cows and the two horses that the pioneers had brought with them. Then, with a long indrawing of his breath, he stopped, for a moment, near where his sister sat on

the grass, the baby in her arms, and looked around him.

The trip westward from their rude Ohio home to this beautiful forest-fenced Illinois prairie had been a wonderful journey for the boy and the girl. A year before their father had mounted his horse and, rifle in hand, had ridden off into the mysterious West in search of a new home. Four months later, near the close of one never-to-be-forgotten day, they had seen him come riding home from out the unknown land of the setting sun, bronzed and weather-beaten, but hale and hearty; and with a wonderful tale of the beautiful country in the distant Rock River Valley in northwestern Illinois, where he had purchased, for two dollars an acre, the virgin land on which to build a home.

Then had followed the long winter months — it had been too late in the fall when Mr. Clay returned to think of making the long wagon journey that year — during which hardly a day had passed when Gideon and Ruth had not dreamt of the new home they were to build in that wonderful Illinois country, and of the long overland journey into the unknown mysteries of the West that they would have to make to take them to it. And all winter long, with an ever increasing interest, they had helped their father and mother prepare for the long journey and the building of the new home. Then had come spring and the final preparations for the departure; and, at last, one early April morning, the oxen were yoked to the two heavily-loaded,

canvas-topped wagons and headed westward. The long-looked-ahead-to journey had actually begun.

The country between their home in Ohio and the Rock River Valley in Illinois was then, 1830, almost an unbroken wilderness, with the few settlers, scattered at irregular intervals through Ohio and Indiana, constantly becoming fewer and farther apart as they journeyed westward, until, when Illinois was reached, there were days at a time when our lonely travelers did not see any signs of human habitation, save those made by the Indians. There were no roads; only trails made by the Indians and the few pioneers that had preceded them. The rivers were bridgeless, and had to be forded or ferried. For food they were obliged to depend almost entirely on the supplies they had brought with them and on their rifles; but wild turkeys, prairie chickens, and quails were plentiful and easily shot, and hardly a day passed when the rifle of father or son did not bring down a deer. Consequently there was no lack of good wholesome food, even though the cooking had to be rudely done over the hot coals of a camp fire. At night Gideon and his father rolled themselves up in their blankets and lay down on the ground, the stars above them and all outdoors around them. Mrs. Clay and the baby and Ruth slept in one of the wagons, except on warm, clear nights, when they, too, sometimes made their beds on the ground, or did, until some ten days back, when Ruth had been awakened one morning by the crack of her father's

rifle to find, to her horror, that he had just shot the head from a large rattlesnake that, during the night, had curled itself up on her blanket. After that she and her mother slept in the wagon, no matter how warm and clear the night might be.

Thus, slowly, day after day for six weeks, the patient oxen had drawn the heavy wagons westward, over the hills and through the forests of western Ohio and across the swamps and through the great woods of northern Indiana, and over the rich prairies of Illinois, until, at last, they had come to this beautiful forest-fenced prairie in the north-western part, where, as we have seen, Big Tom Clay had brought the wearied animals to a halt and had declared the long journey ended.

At first this free outdoor life, this constant changing of scenery, this ever moving westward into new and unknown regions, had been very fascinating and interesting to Gideon and Ruth. After some four or five weeks of it, however, its disagreeable features—hard, cold beds at night, smoky fires, swarming flies and mosquitoes, storms, from which there was no shelter, frequent deep mud and loose sand of the trail, through which the oxen could pull the heavy wagons only with the greatest difficulty, dirt and grime, and a hundred other petty inconveniences—all these disagreeable things began to dull the edge of their enjoyment of the wild free life they were living and to make them long for the quiet and the comforts of a home, however rude and humble it might be. So, when their

father had declared the journey ended; that they had at last reached their own land, the site of their new home, the children welcomed the news eagerly—much more eagerly than they would have welcomed it four weeks before.

“Well, what do you think of our new home, Ruth?” Gideon asked, after he had stood for a minute or two by the side of his sister contemplating the beautiful scene, primeval in its wildness. “Looks as if it was going to be right lonesome, doesn’t it? Don’t believe there is another human being, unless it is Indians, within a hundred miles of us. But it is beautiful!” And again his eyes swept the broad prairie, untouched by the plow of man, gorgeous now with the green of the rich grass and the bloom of the many-hued flowers, and followed the long stretch of virgin forest that fenced the prairie on one side as far as he could see.

“Yes, it is very beautiful,” agreed Ruth; “and so quiet looking and peaceful-like. But I guess you were right when you said that it’s going to be lonesome. I heard dad tell mother that our nearest neighbor was a good fifteen miles away to the south of us, and that the next nearest one was more than twenty miles north. I do hope that someone will come in and settle down near us; and that they will have girls and boys. I can’t see how we can have much fun without anyone to play with; but, I suppose we’ve just got to make the best of it,” and Ruth sighed and snuggled the baby up closer in her arms.

“Pshaw!” laughed Gideon, “’twon’t do no good to get gloomy over it. Besides, we’ll be too busy, for a time at least, to do any playing. Now I wonder where dad is going to build the house. I think the top of that little hill over yonder, with the clump of willows growing round the big rocks near its bottom, would make a fine place for a house, don’t you?”

“That’s the very spot I picked out for the house,” declared Ruth, jumping quickly to her feet, her face lighting up with interest. “Come, let’s tell dad,” and followed by Gideon she hurried to where her father and mother were still getting things out of the wagon.

“O, Dad!” she cried, excitedly, the moment she came to where her father and mother were unloading, “we’ve picked out a splendid place for the house. It’s right there on top of that hill,” and she pointed to the flat top of the little hill that rose above the level of the prairie a few rods away.

“Don’t you think it is the place for the house, Dad?” and Gideon, too, pointed excitedly to the little hill. “It’s high and dry, and there’s plenty of room for barns and stables.”

“Now, just see how great minds run in the same channel,” Big Tom grinned, as he straightened up from the heavy bureau that he and Mrs. Clay had just lifted from the wagon and placed on the ground, “for that is the identical spot I picked out for the house when I bought the land, and your

ma, not more than five minutes ago, remarked that that identical hill looked as if the good Lord had put it there on purpose for us to build our house on top of it. So it looks as if the election of that spot for the house was unanimous, as the district chairman back East used to say; and it certain is as fine a building spot as a body could want. There's about the cleanest looking spring I ever saw, with the coolest and best tasting water that ever passed my lips, bubbling up right from under one of them big rocks, where you see the little clump of willows near the bottom of the hill, that will give plenty of good drinking water for ourselves and the animals."

"Then I want a drink out of it right now," and Gideon started off on the run toward the spring.

"Hi, there!" called his father. "Come back and take a pail with you. I reckon we all want a drink."

Gideon quickly caught up a wooden pail and hurried off to the spring of water. In ten minutes he was back, with the pail full of water and his eyes shining with excitement.

"Dad," he cried, as he sat the pail of water down, "there's a big buck and four does feeding about half a mile beyond the spring and near the edge of the timber. I am sure, by going into the woods, I can creep up near enough for a shot. Can I have a try?"

"Gosh, yes!" answered Big Tom, his own face lighting up with interest. "If there's any fresh



“ Here’s the land, right from the hand of God, all waiting for us to make a home on it ”

venison near, we want some of it; but get back as soon as you can. If I wasn't so tarnal busy I'd go with you. Now," he cautioned, as Gideon hurried to the wagon for his rifle, "no chasing after the deer. If you can get one without going too far from camp, all right; but I've no time to hunt for a lost boy."

"No danger," Gideon called back, as he caught up his rifle and flung powder-horn and bullet pouch over his shoulder. "I'm not so green as to get lost, even if this is new country. I'll be back inside of a couple of hours with the saddle of one of those deer on my back, unless luck is plumb against me."

"Get the buck, if possible," called his father, as Gideon started off.

"Do be careful and not go too far from the camp," warned his mother. "It's new country, and the Lord only knows what's in it."

"O, I'm not a baby any longer, Mother," Gideon laughed back. "Never fear; I'll be back, right side up with care. Have a good hot fire ready, for I'm calculating on having a slice of that big buck for supper tonight," and, with a final laughing "good-by," he was off in the direction of the woods that edged the prairie some forty rods away.

CHAPTER II

GIDEON GOES DEER HUNTING

GIDEON CLAY was an unusually large and strong-muscled boy for a lad of fourteen years, and well-versed in all the ways of the rough outdoor life of the pioneer. He had often hunted deer and smaller wild animals back in his Ohio home; and once he had gone with his father on a bear hunt to the Big Woods in the northern part of the state and had helped him kill a large black bear. Consequently deer hunting was no new sport to him and he knew, as well as any man, how to creep, unobserved, upon the timid and wary animals; but this hunt was in a new country and he must be extra cautious, for, as his mother said, the Lord alone knew what was in it. There might be larger and more dangerous animals than deer. Bears, he had heard, were sometimes found in the woods; and he knew that Indians still hunted, in savage wildness, over the prairies and through the forests of these unsettled regions. He had the pioneer's scorn for the cowardly black bear and he did not much fear the Indians, notwithstanding the rumors, which had reached them on the route, that trouble was brewing between the Indians and the settlers in northwestern Illinois. Still, even black bears were sometimes dangerous; and the pioneers had long since learnt, to their cost, never

to place complete trust in the friendliness of Indians; besides, the country in which he was now was absolutely unknown to him; therefore, it is not to be wondered at, if Gideon's heart did beat a little faster than was usual, even when hunting deer, and if the grip on his rifle was a little tighter than usual, when he entered the dark shadows of the unknown woods and began creeping cautiously toward the feeding animals.

There was considerable underbrush growing beneath the trees and this made Gideon's cautious progress slow; but, gradually, with eyes and ears keenly alert, he drew near the spot where the deer were still quietly feeding, not more than seventy-five yards from the edge of the forest. The buck stood the nearest to the woods; and Gideon, who was now close enough to see the animal distinctly, thought he had never before seen so fine a buck.

"I must surely get him," he mused. "I don't believe that dad himself ever shot as splendid a buck as that," and he stopped to get a clearer view of his surroundings and to pick out the spot from which to make the shot.

Some two rods from the edge of the woods and almost in a direct line between him and the deer he saw a half dozen huge rocks that jutted up above the level of the prairie to the height of a man's head.

"That is the place from which to make the shot," he thought, as his eyes noted that the rocks were considerably nearer to the buck than was the edge

of the woods, "and if I can't get the buck from there, then I'm no son of Big Tom Clay," and moving with the utmost care he began working his way slowly through the underbrush toward the rocks, throwing himself flat on his belly and worming his way through the grass, when he left the shelter of the woods, and being very careful to make no noise and to keep the rocks between him and the buck.

At last, with his heart thumping against his ribs, he reached the rocks and drew himself up behind their shelter to make ready for the shot.

In those early days the modern rapid-fire rifle had not yet been invented, and the hunter was compelled to depend on one of those muzzle-loading, single-shot guns, fired by a flintlock, now found only in museums. It was loaded from the muzzle. First, the right amount of powder had to be poured into the barrel. Then the bullet, usually "patched" with a piece of greased cloth to make it fit the bore of the barrel snugly, was driven down tightly on top of the powder with the ramrod. And, finally, a very small quantity of powder was poured from the horn or jarred, by a smart blow of the hand, from the barrel into the fire-pan, to catch the sparks from the flint. Sometimes this powder would get shaken out of the fire-pan; and the cautious hunter usually, if he had time, poured fresh powder into the pan before risking a shot. Another thing, with such a slow loading rifle there would be no opportunity for a second shot; consequently the hunter

must kill at the first shot, or see the frightened game escape before he could reload.

Gideon, the moment he reached the shelter of the rocks, glanced down quickly into the fire-pan of his rifle to make sure that it held sufficient powder. He found it nearly empty, and swiftly pouring a little powder from his horn into it to make sure that the gun would go off at the first pull of the trigger, he began slowly and cautiously to raise himself up from behind the broad flat rock, back of which he had concealed himself, intending to rest the heavy barrel of the rifle on its firm top while taking aim at the buck. He knew that nothing was so apt to frighten a deer as a quick movement, and, therefore, as his head approached the top of the rock he was careful to move it upward very, very slowly, so slowly that the movement would be imperceptible to the deer. First the top of his head projected slightly above the rock, then slowly his forehead, and, at last, his eyes—and, to his astonishment, he found himself staring straight into the round little eyes of a huge black bear that lay stretched out flat on his belly on top of the rock not six feet away.

The bear, evidently, was on a deer hunt too, and was patiently waiting for one of the deer to come near enough to the rock for him to spring down on his back. Likewise he was as fearfully and as unexpectedly startled as was Gideon.

There was nothing slow in the next movement of Gideon. Terribly as he was startled—frightened,

he did not yell, he did not turn his back on the bear and run; but, with the record leap backward of his life, he threw his rifle instinctively to his shoulder, took a quick aim at one of the little wicked round eyes, and, just as the startled brute's jaws opened for a savage growl, he pulled the trigger.

The bear, with a horribly ugly growl and a convulsive spring, flung himself bodily off the rock and almost on top of Gideon, who stood stock-still, as if every muscle in his body had been suddenly frozen rigid, until the nails of one of the huge paws tore through the strong deerskin that covered his legs and cut a long scratch in his skin almost from hip to ankle.

The scratch seemed to awaken Gideon to his peril, and with a cry that was not so much from fear as it was from pain and rage, he leaped out of reach of those nail-armed paws and drew the long-bladed hunting knife that he carried in his belt.

He did not think of running. His was not the running breed of manhood. He only thought of defending his life from the brute with every ounce of strength in his body.

But there was no need of defending himself further, for, after a few convulsive jerks of the huge frame, the bear lay motionless.

Gideon stood for a minute, knife in right hand, rifle in left, staring at the bear, every muscle tense as a steel spring. Then, seeing that the bear still

remained motionless, he swiftly sheathed his knife and, still keeping an eye on the bear, began rapidly reloading his rifle, and not until the rifle was reloaded did he take a step nearer the animal. He knew too well the value of the rule of the wilderness, never to approach dangerous game, however dead it might appear, with an unloaded rifle, or, indeed, to remain anywhere in the wilderness a moment longer than was necessary with an unloaded rifle in the hand.

When the rifle was reloaded Gideon stepped close to the head of the bear. But there was no need of another shot. The bullet had gone true, through the eye and into the brain, causing almost instant death.

For a moment Gideon stood staring at the body of the bear. He could hardly realize that the huge animal was really dead. He thrust out the barrel of his rifle and cautiously poked the limp, motionless body with its muzzle. It lay motionless, inert as a bag of grain.

For a brief moment, as he realized all that had so suddenly happened, all that might have happened, his blood seemed to stop flowing, his knees trembled; and then the blood surged back through his veins and he threw back his head and gave a whoop of triumph.

He had killed his first bear!

“Gee-mi-ma, but he is a whopper!” and his eyes proudly measured the great hairy form. “I don’t believe dad ever shot a bigger bear than that.

I reckon it will take a yoke of oxen to drag that monster into camp. I must tell dad," and with a last look at the dead beast Gideon started off on the run for the camp, his eyes and face glowing with excitement.

The moment he came within sight of his father and mother and Ruth, he swung his hat around his head and yelled.

"Gid is some excited," grinned Big Tom, as he looked up and saw the running boy. "Reckon he got the buck—No, I reckon from the way he's acting it's a whale," he added, laughing. "One would think he had never seen a deer before, much less shot one. Say," he called, as Gideon rushed up, flushed, panting and almost breathless, "where's the whale?"

"The whale?" and Gideon stared blankly at his father.

"Yes. I reckoned from the way you were yelling and swinging your hat that you must have shot a whale at least," and the grin on Big Tom's face broadened.

"I did! I did! A whale of a bear! The biggest—"

"You are hurt!" and Mrs. Clay, who had just caught sight of his torn leg, which had bled sufficiently to look much more serious than it really was, hurried to him, her face white with dread.

"Pshaw! That's just a scratch!" and Gideon motioned her back. "But, Dad, I've killed the biggest bear you—"

“What’s that, my son?” and with a long stride Big Tom was by the side of Gideon, a look of concern on his face. “A bear; and hurt!” and he was down on his knees by the side of Mrs. Clay, examining the long scratch made by the death-swipe of the bear.

Not until both had assured themselves that it really was nothing more than a scratch, would they listen to the boy’s excited account of how he killed the bear.

Mrs. Clay carefully washed the long scratch made in Gideon’s leg by the bear’s claws and rubbed a little homemade ointment on it; and then Gideon and his father yoked up a couple of the oxen, tied a long drag-rope to the ring in the yoke and started off after the carcass of the bear.

“He sure is a whopper!” declared Big Tom, as he halted the oxen by the side of the body of the dead bear and measured the hairy form with his eyes. “I reckon you got the champion of the Rock River Valley, Gid,” and his eyes turned, with just a little pride in their look, to the flushed face of the boy. “Now, just hold up the head, while I tie the drag-rope around the neck.”

Gideon seized the head of the bear with both hands and held it up, while his father tied the long rope, fastened to the ring in the yoke, firmly around the hairy neck. This done the oxen were started camp-ward and soon the body of the dead bear lay on the ground, near the blazing camp fire that had been kindled midway between the two big wagons.

Mr. Clay at once skinned the dead animal, cut out the choicest portions of meat; and then again tied the drag-rope to the carcass and had the oxen draw the remains far out on the prairie away from the camp.

That night our pioneer friends feasted on bear-steak, instead of venison; and I doubt if there was a prouder or a happier boy in all that western country than Gideon Clay, as he sat at the rude supper table, spread out on the top of an old chest, and ate the meat cut from his first bear. Of course the meat tasted extra good to him; but, to the others, it seemed just a little strong and tough.

CHAPTER III

IMPROMPTU HOUSE BUILDING

“**N**OW,” Mr. Clay declared, as he arose from his somewhat hurriedly eaten supper, “we must rush up some sort of a shelter for the night and for the two or three days that must pass before we can get the half-faced camp in shape. Let me see, what shall it be?” and his eyes looked searchingly around the little encampment. “I have it,” and his face cleared. “We will make a roof out of one of the wagon tops. We can spread out the bows, so as to widen the top and give us more space beneath and tie the ends of the bows to strong stakes driven into the ground. This will give us the frame. We will need eight—better make it ten—straight stakes about eight feet long and as big around as your wrist, Gid, so take your ax and hurry to the woods and cut them, while your mother and I are getting the top off the wagon and making things ready. You can go with Gid,” and he turned to Ruth, who had made a little nest of soft grass for the baby, in which she was sleeping soundly, “and help him with the stakes. Hurry back!” he called, as Gideon and Ruth started off on the run toward the woods.

In half an hour the two children were back with the ten stakes.

By this time Mr. and Mrs. Clay had the canvas top, with its four bent hickory bows, off the wagon, the ground cleared, and everything in readiness for the projected little house.

All worked fast and hard; and in a short time they had the eight stakes driven deep into the ground at the proper distances apart, the ends of the four wagon-bows firmly tied to the tops of the stakes, in such a way that they formed an arched frame above the ground, and the cloth of the canvas wagon-cover drawn over this frame and tied in place. The sides and one of the ends were now closed with skins and blankets firmly tied to the stakes; and to keep the water from running inside the enclosure and soaking the ground, should it rain, Gideon and his father dug a shallow trench all around the little house, throwing the dirt up against the bottom of the blankets and the skins to hold them firmly down and to keep the air out.

"There, I call that a pretty fair impromptu house," Big Tom declared, with satisfaction, when the last shovelful of dirt had been thrown up against the sides of this rude shelter. "It's large enough to protect all, if we sit close, and to furnish cover for such goods as the weather might harm. I reckon we can make ourselves comfortable in it for a few days, don't you think so, Martha?"

"Yes," agreed Martha, heartily, "it will do fine. It beats all what you have done with a few yards of cloth and skins and poles. You are a genius, Tom, when it comes to making something out of

almost nothing," and her eyes turned admiringly to the face of her husband.

"Have to be in a new country, where everything is raw," laughed Big Tom. "Now it is getting late and we must hurry and get things under shelter and herd up and hobble the critters. Don't want to be chasing all over the country after them in the morning. Gid," and he turned to the boy, "you get the critters together; and Martha and Ruth and I will carry the things into the house and get the place shipshape."

In a short time, Gideon had the cattle and the horses herded together near the camp and securely hobbled, to prevent their wandering during the night, while his father and mother and Ruth had moved into the rude shelter, that had been so quickly and ingeniously improvised, things that the rain or the dew might harm.

"Now, for our beds," grinned Big Tom, and, picking up a scythe, he began, with swift strong strokes, cutting the long grass that covered the prairie, while Gideon and Ruth carried it into the little house and spread it out over the hard ground where they were to make their beds for the night. Then Mrs. Clay placed blankets and skins over the grass—and as soft and as comfortable beds as tired bodies could wish were ready.

Already a huge camp fire was blazing brightly a few feet in front of the house-opening, with a large pile of wood near-by with which to replenish it during the night, giving warmth and cheer and an

added picturesqueness to the quaint wilderness camp.

“Reckon we’ve done all we can do for today,” Big Tom declared, at last, as he straightened up his huge form and, standing by the side of the camp fire, glanced searchingly around. “Everything ’pears to be about shipshape; therefore, seeing that it’s getting late and that we’re all about tuckered, I move that we retire to our downy—grassy, I mean—couches.”

“Second the motion,” laughed Mrs. Clay.

“Carried, unanimous,” asserted Big Tom, autocratically. “All get inside our mansion at once. Remember, sunup, everybody up,” and, with a final searching look around the peaceful encampment, he suddenly grabbed Gideon up under one big arm and Ruth under the other and carried them, laughing and kicking, into the house and threw them down on the blanket-covered grass.

There was little undressing to be done; and in a short time all were reposing on their “grassy couches.”

Gideon lay near the opening, where he could look out into the mystery of the night; and tired as he was, it was long before he closed his eyes in sleep, so fascinated was he by the weird beauty of the scene.

A full moon shone down from a cloudless sky; and Gideon thought that never before had the moon looked as big and as bright and the stars as numerous and as luminous as they did now. From where

he lay he could see far out over the peaceful prairie, now almost soundless with the silence of night. The hoot of an owl, softened by the distance, came from the neighboring forest. An eerie rustling, like the lazy flappings of innumerable soft wings, indistinctly heard, seemed to come from the air all around. A katydid called from the grass outside. But these sounds did not break, rather they seemed to Gideon to accentuate the silence of the night. Then, suddenly, from far out on the prairie, came the prolonged howl of a wolf, answered almost instantly by another howl, and then another, and another, until the surrounding air seemed filled with the distant howlings, gradually coming nearer and concentrating at a point a half mile or more from the camp.

Gideon raised himself up on one elbow and listened apprehensively. Were the wolves about to attack the camp? He turned to his father, who lay next to him. Ruth and his mother were asleep.

“The tarnal critters have found the body of the dead bear,” Big Tom growled, “and are holding a pow-wow over it according to their wolfish natures. The fire will keep them away from the camp. Lay down and let them howl. It’s their own lungs that is furnishing the wind,” and he rolled over and pulled the blanket up over his ears.

Gideon lay down; and soon the distant howling and snarling of the wolves began to mingle in with his dreams; and, at last, lulled to rest by this wild lullaby of the prairies, the tired boy slept.

CHAPTER IV

SILAS WEGG

GIDEON did not awaken the next morning until his father had half pulled him out from under his blanket and had shaken him vigorously; but, the moment he had rubbed the sleepseeds out of his eyes, he was up on his feet and eager to begin the day's work. Mrs. Clay was already up and at work about the camp fire, cooking the breakfast. Ruth and the baby still lay, side by side, fast asleep on the blankets.

"Where's Dad?" Gideon asked, as he stepped outside into the cool morning air.

"Tending the cattle," Mrs. Clay answered, looking up with a smile of welcome. "Good sleep?"

"Bully!" Gideon replied, as he hurried off to help his father.

"Hello, son," Big Tom greeted, as Gideon ran up to where he was unhobbling the cattle and the horses. "Great country for sleep, isn't it? Thought I'd have to yank you plumb out of your hide, before I could get you back from dreamland. Feel all right?"

"Like a colt," and Gideon jumped up and cracked his heels together twice before he came down. "Isn't this air great?" and he drew in a long breath of the cool, invigorating morning air.

“Feels just as if I’d like to go swimming in it. And the sun! Did you ever see such a glorious sun?” and he pointed to where the sun was just rising above the eastern horizon, glowing red and golden through the morning mists that rose from the prairie. “Why, it looks as big around as the bottom of one of ma’s washtubs! Now, what are we going to do today?” and he turned eagerly to his father.

“Get to work on the half-faced camp. We must have some sort of a solid house up just as soon as possible, something that will stand a heavy wind and rain and give us plenty of elbow room. Here, you get the pail and milk Brindle and then unhobble her. I’m going to see if I can’t get one of them gobblers for dinner. That bear meat is tougher than boot leather,” and Big Tom hurried to the house for his rifle and started off toward a couple of big trees that towered above the edge of the woods half a mile away, from the direction of which, about every two minutes, came the gobble-gobble of wild turkeys.

Gideon had just finished milking Brindle when he heard the crack of his father’s rifle; and a quarter of an hour later he was back, with a large turkey gobbler hanging from the barrel of his shouldered rifle. The bullet had cut off the head of the gobbler as cleanly as if it had been done with a knife.

After breakfast Gideon and his father yoked up a couple of the oxen to the emptied wagon, threw their axes into the wagon box; and, rifles in hands,

started off for the woods to procure the posts and poles needed in building the half-faced camp.

"There, that tree will do for one of the back posts," Big Tom declared, pointing to the straight trunk of a tree some six inches in diameter, as he brought the oxen to a halt at the edge of the woods. "You cut it down, Gid, while I look for another back post. Cut it close to the ground, trim off all the lower branches close to the trunk; but be sure and leave those forking branches at the top. They are just what we need to hold up the roof poles."

"All right, Dad," Gideon responded heartily; and a moment later the keen blade of his axe was biting deep into the trunk of the tree.

In a short time Gideon and his father had the four corner and the two center posts cut and trimmed and loaded into the wagon. Then they filled the wagon box with roughly trimmed poles, ranging in length from eight to fifteen feet.

"I reckon that will be enough to give us a start," Big Tom said, when the box was full. "Now we'll get back to camp," and, shouting to the oxen, he started the loaded wagon campward.

A couple of rods from where they had built the rude little house the night before was a smooth, level bit of ground, some thirty feet square and a little higher than the surrounding land. Big Tom halted the oxen at this spot.

"Looks to me as if the best place for the half-faced camp was right here," he declared. "You know we will have to live in it for some time, and

so we want to make ourselves as comfortable as possible. What do you say, Martha?" and he turned to Mrs. Clay, who was busy bending over the fire, broiling the turkey on a spit, made by running a long sharpened piece of a hickory limb lengthwise through the body of the turkey and thrusting the other end deeply into the ground at the proper distance and slant for the turkey to hang directly over the coals of the fire. A forked stick, driven into the ground under and at right angles to the limb and in such a way that the limb rested in its fork, helped support the weight of the turkey.

Mrs. Clay slowly straightened up, a long fork, with which she had been testing and turning the turkey, in her hand, and critically examined the spot indicated by Big Tom.

"Yes," she assented, after her eyes had carefully scrutinized the bit of ground, "that will make a good place for the camp; and it is near the spring. How big were you thinking of making it?"

"I calculate about fifteen feet by twenty will be about the right size. We don't want it too big; and yet we want plenty of elbow room. What do you think?"

For a moment Mrs. Clay stood with puckered brows. She was evidently doing some rapid mental figuring. Then her face cleared.

"That'll be plenty big enough. Now, be sure and make the ground for the floor as smooth and level as possible. I'll be powerful glad when I can

get on a wood floor again," and with a swift glance in the direction of Ruth and the baby, who were playing on the grass near-by, she returned to her turkey, which was now browning finely, and sending out the most savory odors.

By the time the wagon was unloaded and the oxen unyoked and turned loose to feed with the other animals, the dinner was ready.

Mrs. Clay and Ruth—the baby was now kicking and crowing in a nest of soft grass near-by—had improvised a table out of a couple of old boxes turned bottomside up, over which they had spread a white tablecloth and placed thereon their best dishes.

"My, but we are getting stylish," grinned Big Tom, as he seated himself on an upturned box in front of the smoking turkey, which lay on a large pewter platter. "What's it all in honor of? 'Tain't nobody's birthday—"

"It's yours!—Yours!" yelled Ruth, making a rush for him. "You are forty years old today; and I am going to give you forty thumps on the back and a great big one to grow on."

"I swun, if it ain't!" and Big Tom's grin broadened. "If it wasn't for you and mother, I'd plumb forget I ever had a birthday. Thump away. I deserve them all." This to Ruth, who, with all her young might, was now thumping her father's broad back and conscientiously counting each thump.

"Thirty-eight!—thirty-nine!!—forty!!! Now for that great big one to grow on!" and Ruth

threw both arms around her father's neck and gave him a smack on the cheek with her two rosy lips that sounded like the crack of a pistol. "There, I hope you will have forty more happy years! And here's—here's something I made for you," and she handed her father a small parcel, carefully wrapped up in a piece of old paper, and stood by his side, with eyes dancing with excitement, while he, with many remarks of wonder and surprise, unwrapped it.

"A coonskin cap! I declare, you couldn't have hit on anything that would have pleased me more. And you made it all yourself!" and he held the cap up where he could examine it better.

"Every bit of it. Didn't I, Mother?" and the delighted girl turned to her mother for confirmation.

"Yes," smiled Mrs. Clay, "Ruth sewed every stitch of it."

"And it's lined with silk!" affirmed the pleased man, as he placed the cap on his head, so that its long, ringed tail hung down his back. "Fits as if it had growed there. I'd be proud to wear it at a reception to the President of the United States."

"Honest," Ruth was now dancing up and down with pleased excitement, "I made every bit of it. Mother only showed me how; and Gid shot the coon and tanned the skin; and I made it on the sly; and you never once caught me; and—"

"You're the best and smartest girl in seventeen states! And this tells you how much your dad loves you," and the big arms suddenly swung out

and caught her up and hugged her close, while the bearded lips pressed the plump cheeks again and again.

At this advantageous moment Mrs. Clay and Gideon both made a rush for Big Tom; and began pounding him on his back and shouting and laughing, so that it is no wonder not one of them saw or heard the tall, lank man, completely dressed in deer-skin, from the beaded moccasins on his feet to the long fringed coat that hung loosely about his frame, until he spoke.

“Howd’y, howd’y, folks,” said the tall stranger, as, dropping the long-barreled rifle from his shoulder and resting the butt on the ground, he gripped the barrel with both of his hands and stood regarding this little tableau of domestic affections with amused and quizzical eyes.

All jumped and quickly untangled themselves, while Gideon and Ruth turned on the stranger two pairs of startled and wondering eyes.

He was a very tall man, some six feet four inches in height, with a scrawny, bony frame that looked as if it might be made out of iron, strung together with steel wires and covered over with wrinkled brown leather, so strong-looking was it and so sun-bronzed and weather-beaten was the skin of the face and the body where it had been exposed to the weather. The face was thin and narrow, with small black eyes, set close to the base of a long hooked nose, a wide mouth and a chin that came squarely to an end. Altogether



“Howd’y, howd’y, folks,” said the tall stranger

there was something of the piercing look of an eagle in the thin face, with its clear eyes and beaklike nose.

At first sight of his face, Gideon and Ruth were quite sure that they would not like the man; but, when he turned his bright eyes, twinkling with good-humor, in their direction, both felt that back of the queer face and form was a very likeable personality; and from that moment he was their trusted friend.

Big Tom had sat for a minute, staring at the tall stranger; then, with a look of surprise and pleased recognition on his face, he jumped to his feet and held out his hand.

"I swun," he exclaimed, "if it ain't Silas Wegg! Say, but you are a sight to make sore eyes well!" and the two hands gripped and the two pairs of eyes looked straight into each other.

"Mother," and Big Tom turned to Mrs. Clay, "this is Silas, Silas Wegg. You've heard me tell of Si Wegg. He's fought more Indians and killed more bears than any other man west of the Alleghanies."

Mrs. Clay greeted and welcomed Silas warmly; and Gideon and Ruth shook his ironlike hand and looked up into his face with the shy awe of childhood in the presence of a hero; for the fame of Silas Wegg, as an adventurous hunter and trapper and old Indian-fighter, was well known to both.

"Sit right down," Mrs. Clay urged hospitably,

the moment the greetings were over, "and help us celebrate Tom's birthday. He's forty years old today."

"Yes, do," joined Big Tom. "I reckon there's turkey enough for all and to spare. It was about the biggest gobbler I ever shot. Get up and give Silas your seat, Gid."

"No, stay whar yew be," and Silas waved Gideon's proffered seat aside. "I'll squat on this box 'longside th' missus. I allers was partial tew good lookin' wimen," and, with a broad grin, Silas Wegg pulled up an old box to the table and "squatted" down on it by the side of the smiling Mrs. Clay. "Now," and he turned to Big Tom, "start some o' that turkey this way. I'm as hungry as a b'ar."

"Sounds like old times, Si, to hear about your famished condition," grinned Big Tom, as he cut off a huge slice of the turkey and passed it to Silas. "Reckon I've heard you make that remark about being as hungry as a bear something like ten thousand times."

"Reckon yew have," grinned back Silas. "I allers was subject tew stumick emptiness. 'Peers sort o' chronic. Doctor says I've got tew eat or I'll die," and, with a solemn glance at Gideon and a sly wink of the eye next to Ruth, he opened a cavernous mouth and filled it with a forkful of turkey.

"Man, but I was surprised when I looked up and saw you standing there!" Big Tom declared,

as he filled his own plate with savory slices of the turkey. "The last I heard of you, you'd gone across the Mississippi to hunt buffalo; and that was a good five years ago! Now, how in creation did you manage to drop down on us out here in this Illinois wilderness?"

"Jest one o' God's coinsidents, as Preacher Cartwright used tew say. Was out huntin' b'ar an' seed your trail an' it sorter smelt like it had been made by a good cook, so I follered it up. I kalkerlated tew hit yew 'bout dinner time; for I knowed yew'd got wimen folks with yew; an' it's wuth a twenty-mile walk eny day in this female-fersaken country tew eat wimen's cookin'. I shore was right; for I never knowed a turkey tew taste as good afore," and he turned a pair of appreciative eyes in the direction of Mrs. Clay. "Yew see I've sort o' settled here in northern Illinois, leastwise I've been livin' here in my own log cabin for th' last tew years an' jest hunted an' trapped round promiscuslike, when I took th' notion. But," and Silas shook his head gloomily, "I reckon I'll soon have tew pull up an' cross th' Mississippi. Th' settlers are a-gettin' that thick that a feller can hardly put a foot down without steppin' on one on 'em. Why, thar's more'n a dozen families already in th' Rock River Valley; an' some on 'em's not more'n ten miles apart; an' that's tew close fer th' kumfert o' eny white man what's use tew livin' whar thar's plenty o' breathin' room. Now, yew ain't thinkin' o' settlin', be yew?" and

his shrewd eyes glanced swiftly and suspiciously around the little encampment.

“That I am,” grinned Big Tom; “and right here on my own land. Bought it last summer of the Government, two hundred acres!”

“An’ yew’re a-goin’ tew plow it, an’ dig it up with a hoe, an’ put in corn an’ wheat an’ sech, an’ work like a hoss, ’stead o’ a human, when all yew’ve got tew dew is tew shoulder your rifle an’ roam th’ wilderness a king!” and the eyes of the old hunter brightened and his back unconsciously straightened.

“Yes,” answered Big Tom softly. “Yes, Si, I am going to make a home for the wife and the children. You forgot the wife and the children, Si. I don’t mind working like a horse for them. You’d do the same, if you had a wife and children.”

“I might, I swun I might try, ’specially if th’ wimen was a good cook, tew settle down an’ be a plow-pusher. ’Twould be mighty temptin’, ’specially th’ cookin’; but, I reckon, ’twouldn’t be more’n a month or tew afore I’d git tew feelin’ kindy choked an’ cramplike an’ jest have tew shoulder my old gun an’ light out for all outdoors, whar a feller can breathe free an’ easy an’ have a-plenty o’ elbow room. It’s powerful hard tew teach an old dog new ways o’ huntin’; an’, I reckon, I’ll allers have tew live as I allers have lived. But,” and the quizzical look came back into the eyes, “sech grub as this,” and he made a sweeping gesture that included the whole table and ended in a flourish in

front of Mrs. Clay's nose, "is powerful temptin'; an' them tew yunks," and his eyes passed swiftly from the face of Gideon and rested longingly on the dimpling cheeks and laughing eyes of Ruth, "is enough tew make a lone man like me have heartache every time he looks on 'em."

"They sure do get in a feller's heart and keep it warm; and, likewise, they keep him scratching powerful lively to keep them in enough to eat. I reckon they're mostly stomachs," and the grin came back on Big Tom's face. "But, your plate is empty! Won't you let me fill it up again?"

"Don't care if I dew, seein' it's in cel'bration o' yewr birthday," and Si passed his emptied plate up to Big Tom. "So yew're forty years old, be yew? Wal, yew ain't no spring chicken no more, nor yit a tough old rooster, with spurs worn smooth an' comb a-gettin' a leetle shy on top, but still spry o' legs an' sound o' wind, same as I be. Now," and he turned questioningly to Mrs. Clay, "how old would yew take me tew be?"

For a minute Mrs. Clay eyed the wrinkled, leatherlike face of the old hunter, with its keen clear eyes and look of vigorous power, and noted the lean strong frame that showed not a sign of the weaknesses of age, then she smiled.

"Yours is a deceiving face," she said, "but I'd take you to be somewhere between fifty-five and sixty; and powerful well preserved at that."

"Sixty-seven my last birthday!" ejaculated Silas Wegg, with a triumphant chuckle. "An' still

able tew outwalk, outshoot, outjump, outrun an' outeat eny man o' my length in th' country. That's what comes o' livin' in th' open, whar thar's plenty o' God's air, an' leavin' likker an' sech contraptions o' th' devil alone. Never drank a drap o' likker, not even a drap o' hard cider, sence I war old enough tew see what likker does tew 'em what uses it; an' I've never knowed a sick day in my life. Sixty-seven years old an' never knowed a sick day in my life!"

"Do tell!" and Mrs. Clay gazed in open admiration at the hardy old exponent of total abstinence and outdoor life. "You sure don't look your age and you don't act it. Why, you're as spry moving as a young man!"

"So I be! So I be! Why, I reckon I kin outrun an' outjump yewr old man; an' th' feller, young or old, who kin outrun or outjump Big Tom Clay ain't no slouch, I kin tell yew. Bet yew twenty loadin's o' powder ag'in twenty loadin's that I kin beat yew in a hundred-yards run or a-jumpin'. Dew yew take th' bet, Tom?" and Silas turned, his black eyes snapping, to Big Tom.

"Not right now," laughed Big Tom. "Not until this turkey has had a chance to settle. I'm that stuffed I couldn't beat a mud turtle now. But, 'long about the middle of the afternoon, when I'm feeling lively again, I don't mind if I give you a whirl. I sure would be proud to beat Silas Wegg running or jumping! If I did, I reckon I'd be the first man that ever did. Now," and he shoved his

plate away from him, "I'm plumb stuffed. Couldn't drive another mouthful down me with a pile driver."

"Nor me," and Silas shoved back from the table. "A powerful good dinner, a mighty powerful good dinner, Miss Clay. If Tom ever gits tired o' yewr cookin', jest let me know. Now," and his eyes turned to the unloaded posts and poles, "it looks as if yew war a-plannin' tew put up a half-faced camp. S'posin' I sot tew an' help yew. I'm powerful anxious for some more o' that cookin'," and, with a wink of the eye in the direction of Mrs. Clay, he jumped up and started off toward the pile of posts and poles, followed by Gideon and his father, who were overjoyed to obtain such efficient help.

CHAPTER V

THE RACE

A HALF-FACED camp to our eyes, accustomed as they are to the comfortable and often luxuriant homes of the present, would hardly look like a fit habitation for human beings, however humble their circumstances might be. It was a floorless shed, rudely made by planting four forked corner posts firmly in the ground, at the proper distance apart to enclose the space desired. Then, to support the roof and the sides, long poles were laid from the forked top of one post to the forked top of another and firmly bound in place with thongs of buckskin. Across these poles other poles were now stretched and lashed into place with strings of deerskin, in such a way as to form the framework of a roof that sloped sharply downward from the rear, the back posts having been left several feet higher than those in front. Over this roof-bed slabs or "edgings" or long strips of bark were arranged so as to shed the rain, and held in place by heavy stones and poles. The rear side and the two ends were "sided" with poles, stood upright side by side and as close together as possible, their bottoms sharpened and driven into the ground and their tops resting against the roof-poles, to which they were tied to hold them

firmly in place. The many openings between the poles were then "chinked in" with chips and plastered up with clay, until the sides were practically wind proof. The remaining lower side was not "sided" with poles; but rudely enclosed by hanging blankets and skins from the roof-pole. The ground inside was smoothed off and pounded down hard for a floor, and a ditch dug around the outside, to keep the water, during a rain, from running inside. Sometimes a crude fireplace and chimney were built in one end or side of the structure; but often the cooking was done over a camp fire, outside when the weather permitted, and inside when it was stormy.

Such was the half-faced camp, as usually built by the pioneer—a rude habitation, indeed, for man to live in; and yet it sheltered as much real contentment and happiness as do the more costly and pretentious residences of today.

As soon as the party reached the piles of poles, Big Tom at once marked out the site of the half-faced camp, by measuring off the proper distances and then driving stakes into the ground at the four corners and connecting them with a strong string. Then he and Silas set to work digging the corner-post holes, while Gideon cleaned and leveled off the ground inside the string for the floor.

The two men and the boy worked fast and hard; and by the middle of the afternoon they had the rude framework of the camp up—the four corner posts and the two center posts firmly set in the

ground, the roof poles tied in their places in the forked tops of the posts and the ground inside smoothed and leveled off to the satisfaction of Mrs. Clay, who had critically supervised the work.

"There, I reckon that frame will stand any wind that blows in Illinois short of a hurricane," and Big Tom gripped one of the corner posts with his two hands and attempted to shake the structure. "Firm as an oak tree," he declared. "We're getting on like a house afire. Say, but it is right neighborly of you to pitch in and help, Si," and Big Tom turned to Wegg with a look that expressed even more satisfaction over his help than did his words. "You are a wonder. You are good for two men's work yet."

"Jest 'bout as good as I ever was, so far as I kin see," and Silas straightened up his tall form and threw back his shoulders. "Now, how 'bout that bet? Twenty loadin's o' powder ag'in twenty loadin's that I kin still beat yew runnin' or a-jumpin'. Ain't afeared tew race a sixty-seven-year-old man, be yew?" and Silas chuckled.

"Try him, Dad, try him," urged Gideon excitedly. He had unlimited confidence in his father's physical prowess, never yet having seen him beaten at any of the rude backwoods sports. "I know you can beat him running or jumping or wrestling or anything."

"If you don't, I'll have to race him myself," laughed Mrs. Clay. "I wouldn't let a sixty-seven-year-old man stump me!"

“Did you hear that, Si?” grinned Big Tom. “Reckon I’ll have to race you, just to keep you from getting beat by a woman,” and he chuckled. “But if they knowed you as well as I know you, they wouldn’t have so much confidence in yours truly’s ability to win. You look fit to race a deer,” and his eyes glanced admiringly up and down the lank bony frame of the old hunter, with its long staglike legs, unencumbered by an ounce of useless flesh. “I swun, Si, you seem to get tougher and stronger the older you grow. Howsomever, it looks as if it was up to me to do my best for the credit of the Clay family,” and Big Tom dropped the ax with which he had been sharpening some of the poles, threw off his loose deerskin coat and stood ready for the race, as splendid a specimen of vigorous manhood as the eye could wish to see, with his two hundred and twenty-five pounds of solid bones and powerful muscles, standing six feet and two inches in his moccasined feet.

“This will dew for th’ finishin’ line,” and Silas picked up a piece of string some twelve feet long and tied one end to a wagon-wheel and the other to a stake driven into the ground. “We’ll pace off one hundred yards from this line; an’ startin’ from thar, th’ fust one tew tech this line wins th’ heat. Best tew out o’ three heats wins th’ race. Th’ missus kin be th’ judge, an’ Gid kin start us,” and Silas threw off his deerskin coat and tightened up his belt.

“O. K.,” agreed Big Tom. “Come on, Gid,”

and, followed by Silas and Gideon, he began pacing off one hundred yards, starting from the line tied to the wagon-wheel, while Mrs. Clay and Ruth took up their station where they could best see the one to touch the line first.

At the one-hundred-yard point, Big Tom thrust a sharpened stick into the ground, to the end of which was fastened a bit of white cloth, to mark the spot.

"We will each toe the stick," he said; "and Gid can give the word to go. All ready at the finishing line?" he shouted to Mrs. Clay.

"All ready!" came back the answer.

"We are ready, son," and Big Tom turned to Gideon, as the two men each placed a foot alongside the starting stake and crouched ready for the word to go.

"I'll count three and then say go," Gideon said, as he took his station a little to the front and to one side of the two men. "Are you ready, Dad? Ready, Si?"

"Yes," Big Tom answered, crouching until one knee almost touched the ground.

"On th' scratch," replied Silas, his tall form bent nearly double and his small black eyes snapping with excitement. "Let her go, son!"

Gideon raised his hand.

"One!" and the hand fell.

"Two!" again the raised hand fell.

"Three!—Go!" he shouted.

With a bound like that of two startled stags, the

two men were off, with Gideon, in great excitement, racing after them.

For the first fifty yards, so far as the eye could judge, there was not an inch's difference in the positions of the two men; and when they crossed the finishing line, they were so close together that Gideon, who was not a dozen yards behind them, could not tell which one had won the heat.

"Who beat? Who won?" he shouted, panting with excitement and his exertions, rushing up to his mother.

"Your dad, by a good three feet!" cried Mrs. Clay triumphantly.

"Hurrah for dad!" shouted the joyous boy, flinging his cap up into the air. "I knew he could do it. I never saw the man yet who could beat dad. But," he added consolingly, turning to Silas, "I never saw another man come as near beating him as you did."

"Shucks!" grunted Silas. "Th' fust heat was jest tew limber up my legs. I'll turn on the steam th' next run."

"So'll dad," Gideon replied confidently.

The two men and Gideon now returned to the starting stake for the second heat.

"Reckon I'm going to give you a tussle for your powder this time, Si," Big Tom said, as he planted one of his feet by the side of the stake.

"I shore'll have tew put in my best licks," replied Silas, as he placed his foot alongside of Big Tom's on the other side of the stake. "But, I reckon, I

kin beat yew yit. No man ever beat me afore; an' I don't kalkerlate tew let yew do it now. I am ready, boy," and his lips came together tightly and he fixed his eyes on the goal and crouched low.

"Ready, Dad?" and Gideon turned to his father, his face flushing with excitement.

"Yes, Son," Big Tom answered, his own eyes on the goal and his great body tense as a hound's held back by the leash.

Again Gideon counted; and again, at the word "go," the two men shot forward, with the boy racing after them as fast as his legs could take him; and again they ran so even that the eye could not tell who was in the lead, until just before the goal was reached, when, somehow, Silas seemed to inject an extra quantity of speed into those long legs of his, and he shot swiftly ahead and touched the finishing line a good six feet in the lead.

There was no need of Gideon asking who had won the heat this time. His own eyes had told him; and it was a very much disappointed boy that hurried up to where the two men stood panting by the side of Mrs. Clay.

"I knowed I could dew it," chuckled Silas triumphantly, turning to the chagrined boy. "Knowed that these long legs wouldn't go back on me atter all these years. But yewr dad came th' nighest tew beatin' me o' eny man I ever raced with yit. He shore made me put on full steam."

"But, you haven't won yet," exclaimed Gideon, his face lighting up. "There's another heat to be

run; and dad's 'most sure to beat you in that. He — he didn't run his best this last time, did you, Dad?"

"I sure did, Son," disagreed Big Tom frankly. "Never tried harder in my life to beat any one. But, I reckon, there's too much ginger in them long legs for me yet. Howsomever, it's the next heat that will tell; and I'm going to turn on every ounce of steam I've got, if I bust the boiler. Come on," and he hurried off toward the starting stake.

There was no smile on the face of either man as he now took his station by the side of the starting stake and awaited the signal. Each was proud of his physical prowess; and each had a hard-won reputation to sustain. All throughout that Western country Silas Wegg was famous for the speed with which those long legs could propel his tall body over the ground. No man yet had ever beaten him in a running race. To win a race from him, even now when he was sixty-seven years old, would leave the victor the unquestioned champion of the Western frontier. Big Tom Clay had beaten every man he had run with, except Silas Wegg; and now there was a chance of his beating even him. He certainly would improve it to the very best of his ability. Silas Wegg had the pride of the never-beaten man. He, too, would certainly do his utmost to win the race. Hence it was that this third heat, the crucial heat, found each of these two men so desperately determined to win the heat from the other.

"All ready?" queried Gideon, as he stepped to

the fore to give them the starting word, his young form aquiver with the excitement of the moment.

"Ready," answered the two men, crouching until the fingers of their hands nearly touched the ground.

"Do your durndest, Dad!" and Gideon lifted his hand to begin the count.

"One! Two!! Three!!!—Go!!!" he shouted.

As if shot forth by the same spring, the two men leaped forward, again with Gideon racing wildly after them and shouting as he ran, "Go it, Dad! Go it, Dad!"

And "dad" did "go it!" At the fifty-yard point he was a good six feet in the lead and still gaining. Then again came that wondrous injection of extra speed into the long legs of Silas Wegg; and his lank body seemed to shoot forward as if propelled by an extra set of invisible and powerful springs. In ten yards he had made up the half of Big Tom's lead; in ten yards more the two men were running neck and neck; and when the goal-line was crossed, Silas Wegg was at least ten feet ahead!

"I knowed I could do it! I knowed I still had my running legs under me, soon as I got 'em warmed up!" Silas panted, as he halted near Mrs. Clay and Ruth. "Purty good for a sixty-seven-year-old man," he chuckled. "Th' old man is tew much fer yew yit, Tom," and still chuckling with pride and satisfaction he turned to Big Tom. "I'll thank yew for them twenty loadin's o' powder, Tom," and the chuckle became a low laugh.

"You shall have a whole horn full of powder, you old race horse," and Big Tom clapped him heartily on the back.

"But—but, I'll bet you dad can beat you wrestling, any hold," Gideon challenged eagerly, anxious to see his father defeat this wonderful old man in something.

"No, yew don't," and Silas winked and grinned. "I onct wrestled yewr dad; an' he came mighty nigh drivin' me headfust through th' earth, plumb down tew China; an' I didn't make a move for th' next six weeks without a groan. I'll jest stick tew my gifts, which is runnin' an' jumpin' an' eatin'," and Silas shook his head emphatically.

This frank admission by Silas of Big Tom's wrestling superiority mollified Gideon and caused Mrs. Clay and Ruth to smile with pleased satisfaction and put all in good humor, even the baby, who cooed and kicked with delight in her nest of grass.

"Well, seeing that the racing is over, let's get to work again," Big Tom said, after the excitement had somewhat cooled down. "I'm specially anxious to get the camp up as soon as possible, so that I can get to work in the field. I want to plant at least enough corn and potatoes and wheat and oats to keep us and the stock until harvest time next year. If I don't, I reckon someone will be going hungry. Come on," and he led the way back to the pile of poles and the unfinished half-faced camp.

The remainder of the afternoon all helped, even the baby by being so good that she needed no

attention; and when night came, they had one end and a part of the side "poled" and "chinked in" and the structure began to take on some of the looks of a rude house.

"There, that will do for today," Big Tom declared, when it became too dark to work to advantage. "And I call it a mighty good day's work, too. If we can do as well tomorrow, I reckon we can come mighty nigh finishing the sides and the roof. What do you think, Si?"

"We shore kin," answered Wegg. "An' it's goin' tew make a powerful kumfertable home, as long as th' warm weather lasts. But yew ain't kalkerlatin' on livin' in it through th' winter, be yew? Th' winters here are cold enough tew freeze th' hair off a b'ar."

"No," answered Big Tom. "I count on having a log house up afore then. But I see Martha has supper ready. Supposing we eat."

"That hits me right. I'm as hungry as a b'ar," and Silas started for the supper table.

That was a wonderful night for Gideon and Ruth; for after the supper was eaten and the few chores done, Big Tom and Silas lighted their pipes and sat down near the camp fire and Silas told tales of his adventurous life. He had been a scout in the army of Mad Anthony Wayne when he conquered the brave Miami chief, Little Turtle, at the battle of Fallen Timbers, in 1794; and he was with General Harrison in the fight at Tippecanoe and, later, at the battle of the Thames, where the

famous Indian chief, Tecumseh, was killed. He had served all through the War of 1812 as a scout on the Indian frontier; and his earlier boyhood days had been passed in the midst of the exciting times of the Revolutionary War. He had seen and spoken to Washington and Lafayette and to other Revolutionary heroes; and when the war was over, he had turned to trapping and hunting and had wandered all over the Western wilderness; and had had innumerable hairbreadth escapes from Indians and wild beasts, from floods and storms and fires and the other perils of war and the wilderness. Consequently he had an inexhaustible fund of thrilling experiences from which to draw; and, in addition, he was a natural story-teller, bringing out the dramatic points of the tale like a skilled novelist and picturing the scenes so vividly and so forcibly that each stood out from the body of the narrative like the rudely engraved relief of a cameo. Then there is no other place in the world quite as appropriate for the telling of such tales as he told as a lonely camp fire, in the midst of a wilderness, with the dark mysteries of night around and above you.

No wonder Gideon and Ruth sat like two children in a trance, hardly venturing to move while Silas was telling his tales, and that Mr. and Mrs. Clay were almost as absorbed as they were in the stories and their teller. Not one of them thought of the passing time, of how late it was getting, until, at the close of one of his most thrilling narratives,

Silas abruptly stopped, knocked the ashes out of his pipe and arose to his feet.

"It is my sleeptime," he said. "Good night," and, picking up a blanket to cover him, he lay down near the camp fire, without another word, except a brief refusal to share the family's rude shelter, declaring it too close and stuffy for him.

"I could have sat and listened to him all night," Gideon sighed, as he rolled himself up in his blanket by the side of his father. "I wonder if anything like that will ever happen to me!"

"Let us hope not," Big Tom answered fervently. "War and bloodshed, and scalping, torturing Indians are mighty interesting in stories, but are dreadful realities that no sensible human wants anything to do with. Now, shut up and get to sleep just as soon as you can. We must be up with the sun in the morning," and he rolled over and pulled the blanket up close around his neck and was soon sound asleep.

Gideon was very tired, so tired that, in spite of his aroused imagination, it was not many minutes after his father's snores had announced his slumbers that his eyes grew heavy and closed in sleep.

CHAPTER VI

BAD NEWS

THE next morning, when Big Tom thrust his head out of the rude shelter where the family slept, he saw Silas Wegg sitting on an old box before the camp fire meditatively smoking.

"A coonskin for your thoughts," he greeted, as he hurried over to where Wegg sat.

"They're wurth more'n a coonskin," Silas retorted. "But I've been a-waitin' tew give 'em tew yew for nothin'. Be th' missus an' th' yunks still sound asleep?" and he lowered his voice and glanced in the direction of the rude hut that sheltered Mrs. Clay and the children.

"Yes," answered Big Tom, a shade of anxiety in his voice. "What is it, Si?"

"Come over yonder by th' wagin, whar our voices'll be out o' reach o' their ears," and Silas rose slowly to his feet, knocking the ashes out of his pipe as he did so and stowing it away in his pocket. "I've got somethin' I want tew tell yew that, I reckon, it's better tew keep from th' wimen an' th' yunks jest at presint," and he walked over to the wagon. "I'd have told yew fust thing yister-day," he began, when seated on the wagon-tongue, "atter I found out yew was a-kalkerlatin' on a-settlin' down here, if 'twon't for th' wimen an' th'

yunks heerin'. Reckon thar's no call tew scare 'em jest yit."

"Now, what are you driving at, Si?" Big Tom spoke impatiently and his face whitened. There were so many dangers that might threaten in this new unknown country; and Silas Wegg was not the kind of a man to alarm one lightly. "Out with it. There is no need of your beating about the bush with me, Si."

"I ain't beatin' 'bout no bush," Silas answered, "but jest gittin' ready tew enter it th' right way. Yew've heered tell o' Black Hawk, chief o' th' Sacs an' Foxes?"

"Yes," answered Big Tom shortly. "'Tain't no Indian devilment, I hope?"

"Not right now, but it is a-comin' sartin, an' it's bound tew come afore long. Th' Government claims that th' Injun chiefs have sold out all th' rights o' th' tribes tew th' land in th' Rock River Valley an' agreed tew move across th' Mississippi. Black Hawk says it is all a lie, that no sech treaty was ever signed by eny chiefs who had a right tew sign it, that it's jest a dirty trick o' th' whites tew git th' land away from th' Injuns; an' he's madder'n a b'ar with a sore ear; an' is a-talkin' 'bout resistin' an' a-boastin' o' what he'll dew if th' whites try tew drive him an' his warriors from th' land o' their fathers, specially from his village at th' mouth o' th' Rock River, whar he's lived for so many years an' whar th' bones o' his ancesters are buried. An', jest tew aggravate things, last winter, when

th' Injuns o' th' village was off on their annual hunt, a lot o' whites moved right in an' took possession o' sech o' th' Injuns' houses as they wanted for their own use an' tore down most o' th' others an' even started tew raisin' craps on th' Injuns' graveyard. An' when Black Hawk an' his Injuns got back this spring, thar was mighty nigh a massaker right then an' thar. Howsomever, they somehow patched up some sort o' a peace; but Black Hawk an' his warriors are feelin' ug'ler 'n mad bulls; an' somethin's li'bel tew happen eny minit tew send 'em ragin' on th' war-path. An' then, God pity yew lone white settlers! I thought yew otter know 'bout this, Tom, afore yew settled down here for good, seein' yew've got yewr wimen an' th' yunks with yew," and Silas looked up solicitously into Big Tom's face.

"I ought to have knowed about it afore I left Ohio," Big Tom answered, his face showing the anxiety and dreadful apprehensions the news of Silas had caused him. "Then I'd knowed enough to have left the wife and the children where they'd be safe. But, as dad used to say, there is no use crying for cream after the milk is spilt. They are here now; and I reckon the good Lord and our rifles will have to protect them," and his face hardened. "Besides, Martha wouldn't go back now, nohow, not unless the Indians were actually on the war-path. She's grit, clean through," and his face lighted up with pride. "It will take more'n threats to scare her, and, if I understand you, there

has been nothing but Indian threats so far; and threatened men sometimes live long lives."

"But I know Black Hawk," Silas answered earnestly; "an' he ain't th' kind of an Injun tew fergit or fergive sech treatment. He ain't no vain boaster neither. He's been a fighter ever since he was sixteen years old, when he won a warrior's rights by killin' his man. He's 'bout sixty now; an' as strong an' as tough as a hickory knot. He's liked by all th' young bucks; an' most all on 'em is a-sidin' in with him an' jest waitin' for him tew give th' word tew dig up th' war ax. I ain't no prophet, but it don't take no prophet tew tell that thar's bound tew be bloodshed atween Black Hawk an' th' whites, Black Hawk bein' th' Injun that he is, an' th' whites bein' atter his land an' determined tew git it by fair means or foul; an' it's bound tew come afore long; an' when it comes, what kin yew, with yer two rifles, dew ag'in' a hundred murderin' savages?"

"There'll be three rifles then, Si," Big Tom said quietly. "You don't know Martha. She has her own rifle and can shoot 'most as good as I can. She was in an Indian fight, back in Ohio, afore I married her; and she has killed her Indian, killed him to save her younger sister; and now she will be fighting for her own children! No, you don't know Martha, Si, if you are counting on only two rifles if the Indians attack us. Besides, as I said afore, it's all talk yet; and it will take a sight more'n talk to scare Martha. She wouldn't go back now,

nohow, outside of being driven out by the Indians. But, there she is."

As Big Tom spoke, Mrs. Clay lifted the deerskin that hung in front of the entrance to the rude shelter, and stepped out.

"We'll leave it to her. I'll do just as she says. Hi, Martha," Big Tom called. "Come here."

Mrs. Clay looked quickly in the direction of the two men and then hurried toward them.

"What is it?" she asked anxiously, the moment she reached their sides, for the looks on their faces warned her of trouble. "Something gone wrong?"

"Yes," answered her husband. "Si brings bad news, the worst kind of news. He says there is liable to be an Indian outbreak at any time; that one is sure to come afore long and that, when it does come, we'll be in very great danger; and that, consequently, the Rock River Valley at present is not a safe place for women and children. I reckon, he thinks if we showed sense, we'd pack up and yoke up and take the back trail out of here at once. And Si, Martha, ain't given to warning afore there's need. We must remember the children, as well as ourselves, Martha," and Big Tom's eyes turned solicitously to the face of his wife.

Mrs. Clay's face had whitened at the first mention of Indians. She knew what horrors an Indian outbreak meant; and for a moment she stood silent, while her eyes studied apprehensively the faces of the two men, then she turned and slowly

surveyed the surrounding beautiful scene of peaceful prairie and quiet woods, with their camp, already beginning to look homelike to her eyes, in the midst.

"'Twould be powerful hard to leave here now," she said, again turning to the men, "just as we are getting started in our new home and things are beginning to look homelike. After all," and her face lighted, "it's only an Indian scare; and I've lived unhurt through many an Indian scare. There has been no bloodshed yet?" and she turned her anxious eyes inquiringly to Silas. "Just talk and rumors of an outbreak?"

"That's all yit; but it's sartin tew come, unless my jedgment has gone askew 'bout ten thousand miles," answered Silas:

"Well, then," and Mrs. Clay's face hardened, "I reckon 'twould be foolish for us to give up all this, just on account of rumors. We've come here to build a home for us and the children; and we're going to stay and build it, Indians or no Indians. It's a woman's duty, just as much as it is a man's, to take risks and brave dangers; and I'm not going to back out, when I know Tom would not think of quitting if it wasn't for me and the children."

"What'd I tell you, Si?" and Big Tom turned a bit triumphantly to Silas. "You see, 'twill take more'n Indian talk to scare Martha."

"Yew shore have th' right pluck," and the look in Silas's eyes showed how fully he appreciated the courage and determination of Mrs. Clay. "But

it's goin' tew be powerful risky stayin'; an', I reckon, if yer bound tew stay, yew'd better put up a good strong bullet an' arrer proof log house, jest as soon as yew kin, an' not put it off 'til fall."

"Right," answered Big Tom. "But I've got to get the crops in first. Might just as well be scalped as starved. We'll get to work on the log house just as soon as the crops are in the ground. That is," and the look of solicitude deepened on his face as he turned to Martha, "if you are sure it is best for us to stay. 'Twill be powerful risky, as Si says; and we must think of the children, of Ruth and Gid and the baby, as well as ourselves. I reckon we could make our home with your folks back in Ohio until the Indian trouble is settled."

"And leave all this," and again the eyes of Mrs. Clay glanced around the beautiful, peaceful surrounding scene, "scart out by talk of an Indian outbreak! And make that long wearisome journey back again to Ohio! No; of the two evils, I'll take my chances with the Indians. Besides, 'twouldn't show much pluck for us to back out now and go sneaking back to Ohio. That's not the kind of grit that runs in our families, Tom. We've got to take our chances with the rest of the pioneers, and make the best of whatever comes. You don't really want to go back to Ohio, do you, Tom?" and her eyes looked searchingly into her husband's face.

"No, I don't," Big Tom answered frankly. "But I'd feel a powerful lot more comfortable if I

knowed you and the children were where you'd be safe in case anything should happen."

"Then we'll stay," Mrs. Clay spoke decisively. A wife's place is with her husband and children and the children's place is with their father and mother; and if we've got to fight Indians we'll fight them for our home and our children."

"Shake!" and Silas Wegg jumped up and reached out and seized the hand of Mrs. Clay and shook it warmly. "Yew're as good as eny man I ever knowed; an' if it comes tew a tussle atween yew an' Black Hawk, I'll bet on yew every time. Tom sartin showed sense when he married yew."

"I surely did," agreed Big Tom heartily.

Mrs. Clay blushed like a young girl, and then, catching sight of Gideon and Ruth hurrying toward them from the door of the little hut, she turned quickly to the two men.

"Hush!" she warned. "Not a word of this where the children can hear. Now I must get to work at the breakfast," and she hastened back to the camp fire, taking Ruth with her.

After breakfast the work on the half-faced camp was resumed by all hands; and when the darkness of night again settled down on the prairie, so swiftly and faithfully had all worked, that it found the roof and the sides of the enclosure completed.

"We'll get things straightened out inside and move in tomorrow," Big Tom declared with satisfaction, when the last slab of wood and piece of bark had been firmly fastened in its place on the

roof and the work for the day was over; "and another day will see the furniture ready; and then I can start right in plowing. Si, you've been a godsend!"

"Shucks, Tom! If yewr stumick had been a-hankerin' for wimen's cookin' in vain as long as mine has, yew'd think it more'n a godsend tew stumble on sech a wimen cook as I have. When I fills up on her cookin'," and he nodded toward the smiling Mrs. Clay, "I'm powerful glad tew git a chance tew work, so I kin work up a big appetite, so I kin fill up ag'in. I've been thinkin' o' offerin' tew work for yew for th' next week free gratis, if th' missus will promise tew keep my stumick filled; an' I'd shore git th' best o' th' bargain at that," and he winked an eye at Mrs. Clay.

"Done," laughed Big Tom. "I'll engage you for a month on them terms and guarantee to fill your stomach plumb to the top three times a day."

"Reckon a week'll be 'bout my limit this time," grinned back Silas. "But I'd shore like tew make it a month; an' I would, if 'twon't that I promised Old Man Kellogg tew go with him on a b'ar hunt down tew th' Big Swamp next week atter Old Whitenose, a monstrous big b'ar with a white nose that's been defyin' us for th' last tew years. Want tew go 'long?"

"O, do, Dad; and let me go with you!" and Gideon, who was sitting near the two men, jumped excitedly to his feet.

"I sure would like to go," and Big Tom glanced

questioningly toward his wife. "How long will you be gone, Si?"

"Not more'n three or four days; an' th' b'ar is a monster, th' biggest ever seen in these parts," answered Silas.

"I've a notion to—" began Big Tom, and stopped abruptly. He had suddenly remembered the threatened Indian outbreak; that it would not be safe to leave his wife and children alone. At the same moment the face of Silas showed that he, too, remembered. For an instant the two men looked into each other's eyes; then Big Tom spoke.

"I sure would like to go, Si," he said regretfully; "and I would, if 'twon't for leaving Martha and the children here alone. No telling what might happen while I was away. Besides, I have no time to spare. I must get the crops in the ground and the log house up just as soon as the good Lord will let me."

"Reckon yew're right," agreed Silas. "If I'd thought o' th' wimen an' th' yunks, I'd knowed better than tew have asked yew. O' course they kin't be left with no men folks tew look atter 'em. But," and Silas hesitated and glanced doubtfully toward Mrs. Clay, "perhaps yew kin spare Gid fer three or four days? I'd like tew show him how we hunt b'ar in Illinoia."

"O, can I, Dad? Can I go?" Gideon was now jumping up and down with excitement. "I'd like nothing better in the world than to go bear hunting with Silas. I can go, can't I, Dad?"

"I'll keep an eye on him all th' time," promised Silas. "'Twould dew th' youngster good; an' he'll be as safe as he would with his own dad."

"'Tain't that, Si," and Big Tom hesitated. "I know he would be just as safe with you as he would with me; but," and he glanced doubtfully toward his wife, "if anything should happen while he was away —"

"He couldn't stop it happenin'," broke in Silas. "Besides, nuthin' is li'bel tew happen th' few days he'd be gone. Black Hawk's gone north tew visit th' Winnerberger Injuns an' won't be back for a couple o' weeks or more."

"Black Hawk?" and Gideon turned quickly to Silas. "Do you mean Black Hawk, the Indian chief, who fought with the British against the United States in the War of 1812? I've heard a lot about him. Does he live near here? I'd like to see him."

"That's th' identickle red reptel," answered Silas. "Th' Hawk's allers been ag'in th' United States; an' allers friendly with th' Britishers. His village is down at th' mouth o' th' Rock River. But we're wanderin' from our subject. Want tew go on that b'ar hunt, Gid? Yew'll have tew bunk on th' ground an' eat rough food."

"Pshaw, that's nothing!" and Gideon's face showed how little the thought of such hardships troubled him. "I've slept on the ground hundreds of times; and I once ate dad's cooking for a week."

"Reckon yew kin stand our cookin' then,"

grinned Silas. "Kin he go?" and he turned to Big Tom. "I shore would like tew have him 'long; an' I'll work for yew for a week, atter we git back, tew make up fer his time an'," he added, with a quick grin, "for a chance tew fill up ag'in on wimen's cookin'."

"What do you say, Mother?" and Big Tom turned to Mrs. Clay. "He'll be as safe with Si as he would be with me."

For a minute Mrs. Clay hesitated. So many things might happen to her boy while he was away. But she was of sturdy pioneer stock, accustomed to seeing her dearest brave dangers and endure hardships, with the fortitude almost of a Spartan mother.

"If you and Si think it is all right for Gideon to go, I reckon it is," she said quietly. "Do just as you think best, Tom."

"Bully for you, Mother!" cried Gideon joyously. "Now, Dad, it is all in your hands," and he turned expectantly to his father. "I can go, can't I?"

"Yes, Son," answered Big Tom, after a moment's hesitation. "But—"

"Hurrah!" yelled Gideon, not even knowing, in his excitement, that he had interrupted his father, who laughed and saved his words of caution for another time. "When are we going?" and the happy boy whirled about and turned to Silas.

"Next week, Thursday, bright an' early," answered Silas. "Be shore yew have yewr rifle in good shootin' trim an' yewr huntin' knife razor-

sharp. Old Whitenose is king b'ar o' these regions an' he'll die like a king."

"I sure will," answered Gideon soberly. "I wish it was next week Thursday tomorrow!"

That night Gideon went to bed to dream of hunting white-nosed bears as large as elephants.

CHAPTER VII

THE BOBCAT

BIG TOM proved a true prophet, for the next day found the half-faced camp ready outside and inside for occupancy; and that night the Clay family moved into its, to them, comfortable quarters. True, the floor was nothing but the ground, smoothed and pounded down hard; and the walls and the ceiling were nothing but the bare poles of the sides and the rudely covered roof; and there was but one door and window, and that was the unpoled open side, protected only by hanging skins and blankets; and yet in two hours the woman art of Mrs. Clay and Ruth had given this rude place a homy look.

There was no furniture, save the little they had brought with them in the wagons—a couple of easy chairs, one of them a rocker for Mrs. Clay; a home-made cradle for the baby, a large bureau, a couple of trunks, a spinning-wheel and the needed kettles, pans, etc., for the cooking. Tables, chairs, bedsteads, cupboards, and the other familiar household furnishings would all have to await their making at the rudely skilled hands of Mr. Clay; the most necessary articles at once, the others as time and leisure permitted.

“We’ll make a table and the bunks and a few

long-legged stools for chairs tomorrow; and the other things can wait awhile," Big Tom said, as all gathered in their newly completed home, after the day's work was over, and were admiring it by the light of a number of homemade tallow candles. "Now, what would you like done most afore we get to bed, Martha?" and he turned inquiringly to his wife.

"Well, if you ain't too tuckered," Mrs. Clay answered, smiling, "I'd like some hanging pegs to hang our clothes and other things on."

"That's easy," and Big Tom picked up an auger from one of the trunks. "Whittle some pegs, Si, while I bore the holes. Now, Gid, if you'll hold one of the candles so I can see, I'll get busy," and Mr. Clay, while Gideon held the candle to give him light, and Mrs. Clay and Ruth told him where they wanted the hanging pegs, began boring holes into the poles that formed the sides of the enclosure. When the holes were ready, the pegs whittled out by Silas were driven into them, leaving several inches of each peg projecting into the room—and the hanging pegs were ready!

"There," Big Tom declared, when the last peg was driven into its hole, "I'm too all-fired tired to do another stroke of work tonight. I'm going to bed," and he threw himself down on the rude bed of skins and blankets that had been made for the men on the ground in one end of the camp.

Gideon and Silas at once followed his example; but, womanlike, Mrs. Clay and Ruth busied them-

selves about the house for an hour longer before they lay down on their bed, made in the opposite end of the one room. And there was not a house in the United States, however comfortable and luxurious, where its inmates enjoyed more restful and peaceful slumbers than did our friends in their rude pioneer shelter.

Early the next morning Mr. Clay and Gideon yoked the oxen to one of the wagons, and, accompanied by Silas, drove to the woods to secure the timber needed in making the table and the chairs and the other household furniture.

“We’ll tackle the tree for the table first,” Big Tom said, when they had reached the woods. “Let me see,” and he looked around. “I reckon that one there will about fill the bill,” and he pointed to a large tree, some three feet in diameter, with a straight round trunk undisfigured by knots or limbs for fifteen feet above the ground. “Bet I can cut through my half of the tree first, Si,” and seizing an ax from the wagon, he started for the tree.

“Choppin’ ain’t one o’ my gifts, like racin’ an’ eatin’, but I’ll give yew a tussle jest tew make yew earn that brag,” and Silas caught up another ax out of the wagon and hurried after Big Tom.

“Get an ax and cut down a number of small straight trees, about four inches thick,” Big Tom called to Gideon, as he halted by the side of the big tree. “We’ll need them for bunks and for legs of the table. Ready, Si?” and he turned to

Silas, who had stationed himself on the opposite side of the tree.

"Yes," answered Silas, and swung his ax aloft.

"Let her go, then," and the ax of Big Tom bit deep into the rough trunk of the tree.

For half an hour the two men swung their axes steadily, then both paused. They had nearly cut the tree in two.

"I knowed I could beat you chopping," laughed Big Tom, as his eyes scrutinized the two great triangular gashes made in the tree on opposite sides by their sharp axes. "I reckon my cut is a good three inches deeper than yours."

"So it is," admitted Silas; "but I'll run yew anuther race, if yew want tew," and he grinned.

"No, you won't," laughed back Big Tom. "We're tree-chopping now, not racing. Reckon 'twon't take a dozen cuts more to bring her down. Hi, there!" he called to Gideon, who was chopping a dozen yards away, "look out!"

"All right, Dad!" Gideon instantly stopped work and fixed his eyes on the tree. It would be a sight worth seeing to see that great mass of trunk and limbs and branches go crashing to the ground.

"I'll give the death-blows," Big Tom said and swung his ax above his head.

Once—twice—three times—six times—eight times the ax bit deep into the wood. At the ninth blow the great tree shivered. Gideon, from where he stood, could hear the rustling of the leaves.

"She's a-going, Dad!" he yelled excitedly.

At the tenth blow a stronger shudder ran up the huge trunk and the great mass of limbs and branches above swayed; then, with a groan as of mortal agony, the small portion of wood still sustaining the huge bulk snapped, and the great tree, with a majestic downward sweep of its mighty limbs, fell earthward, at first moving with stately slowness, but swiftly gathering speed as it fell, until it crashed to the earth with a shock that shattered great limbs and broke down small trees standing in its way.

“Hurrah!” yelled Gideon, running toward the fallen monarch, ax in hand, to begin clearing away the tangle of broken limbs and branches.

“Hi, thar! Look out! Bobcat!” shouted Silas warningly, jumping for his rifle that stood leaning against the trunk of a nearby tree.

Gideon saw the bobcat, or lynx, almost at the instant of Silas’s shout. It had been crouching out of sight on a limb of the great tree, and when the tree fell it had, of course, fallen with it. Now, although not much hurt, it was badly frightened and a thoroughly enraged animal that sprang, spitting catlike with anger, out of the tangled branches of the fallen tree and landed on the ground not a dozen feet directly in front of the running boy. The bobcat’s back was arched and its hair stood out straight from its body, making it look nearly twice as large as it really was to the startled lad.

Gideon tried to stop—what boy would not under the circumstances?—but so great was his momentum that he was almost on top of the bobcat before

he or the cat could do a thing to avoid the meeting. Instinctively, at first sight of the bobcat, he had swung up his ax, his only weapon; and now he struck, with all his young strength, directly down at the spitting brute, crouched ready to spring within a yard of his feet.

But even as he struck the bobcat sprang!

The sharp blade of the ax met the cat's head in midair, splitting it from nose to neck; and the body of the ugly little animal fell writhing in its death agonies at Gideon's feet.

"Reckon yew owe yewr future good looks tew that ax blow, Gid," Silas exclaimed, as he hurried up, rifle in hand, to where Gideon stood staring down at the dead body of the bobcat. "He'd a-torn yewr face tew ribbons afore I could have shot him. A bobcat's 'bout th' ugliest critter alive in a tussle, bein' mostly nails an' teeth. But ain't he a beauty?" and Silas bent and stroked the glossy fur of the dead lynx with one of his hands.

"Hurt, Son?" and Big Tom ran up, his face still a little white from the excitement of the moment.

"Not a scratch, Dad," Gideon answered, giving the body of the bobcat a contemptuous kick with the toe of his foot. "But I'm powerful glad my ax hit his head before he clawed me, or he sure would have spoilt my beauty, as Si says," and he shuddered at the thought of his narrow escape from those sharp nails and teeth.

"The hide'll make a fine cradle-robe for the baby,"

and Big Tom poked the soft fur of the bobcat with the toe of his foot contemplatively. "Now, throw the body into the wagon and get to work on the tree," and, ax in hand, he turned to the prostrate trunk of the great tree. "Bring the saw back with you!" he called, as Gideon picked up the body of the bobcat by the hind legs and started for the wagon.

The bobcat, or lynx, is not a large animal, being only a little more than twice the size of a large cat, which it resembles quite closely in appearance, except in the ears and the tail. The ears of a bobcat are tipped by an upright, slender tuft of black hairs, about an inch and a half long, and the tail is short and thick, hence the name, bobcat. Consequently Gideon had no trouble in carrying the body of the bobcat to the wagon and throwing it into the wagon box. Then he secured the saw his father had asked him to get and hurried back with it to the two men.

Big Tom took the saw, a long-bladed crosscut saw, with a handle at each end, and, roughly measuring off about ten feet of the length of the great trunk, he drew the sharp teeth of the saw across the log.

"Reckon that's 'bout the right length," he said. "Catch hold, Si," and, gripping one of the handles with both hands, he thrust the saw blade sharply across the trunk to Silas, who stood on the other side of the tree. Silas gripped the handle at his end of the blade, and swiftly the two men thrust the

blade back and forth, back and forth between them, while the sharp teeth of the saw bit deeply into the wood of the trunk.

In this way they sawed the great trunk into lengths of about ten feet each.

When the first log was ready, Gideon unhitched the oxen from the wagon, fastened a log-chain around one end of the log, caught the hook at the other end of the chain into the ring of the ox yoke, and started campward, with the oxen snaking the log over the ground behind them, while his father and Silas remained in the woods at work.

By noon three great logs and a wagon load of poles had been hauled to the camp. This was deemed a sufficient amount of material to work with for the present.

CHAPTER VIII

HOMEMADE FURNITURE

AFTER dinner, during which Silas had again proved that he was "as hungry as a b'ar," Big Tom started in to turn one of the logs that only that morning had been a part of a growing tree, into a table. First he and Silas, with axes and a beetle and wedges, carefully split the log lengthwise through its center. Then they again split each of these halves, thus forming two rough planks some ten feet long by two feet wide and six inches thick, when rudely trimmed into shape with the ax. Big Tom and Silas now carefully smoothed off, with a broad-bladed hand-ax and an adz, one side and the edges of each of these planks, carefully fitted the two planks together, edge to edge, and fastened them with wooden pegs driven into holes bored into the edges.

Iron nails, in those days, since they had to be forged slowly by hand, were costly and little used, especially by the pioneers, who were usually far away from blacksmith shops and hardware stores and obliged to economize in every possible way. Big Tom had a few of the precious iron nails, but he never used one, unless absolutely obliged to do so.

The table was now ready for its legs. The legs were made out of poles, sawed off the right length

and whittled off round at one end and driven tightly into auger holes bored through the table top, two at each end and two in the middle. Thus a rude, but strong and serviceable table, had been quickly fashioned out of what that morning had been a tree growing in the forest.

"Quick work," Big Tom declared, with pleased satisfaction, as he and Silas stood the now completed table on its own legs. "Nothing fancy about it, but it is strong and serviceable and the grub will taste as good off it as if it were made of mahogany by the best tablemaker that ever sawed a board; and, I reckon, that's 'bout all we'll ask of it. How do you like it, Martha?" and he turned with a smile to Mrs. Clay, who had hurried out of the house, as soon as the table was completed, to look it over.

"Fine!" she declared, as she moved her hand over its smooth top. "Beats all how easy it is for you to do things, Tom. Just think, this table was a growing tree this morning and tonight we're a-going to eat our supper off it! Don't take much to keep house, when folks know how to use the things God gives free, does it?" and she smiled. "Now lug the table into the house. I can use it right now," and she hurried back into the house.

Big Tom and Silas carried the table into the half-faced camp.

"Tonight we'll have the best supper I can cook," Mrs. Clay said, as the two men set the table down where she directed, "to sort of consecrate the table

to hospitality. May no one ever go hungry from it!" and her face sobered; for she had known what hunger meant—there were few pioneer families who had not. "But," and the smile returned to her face, "what shall we sit on?"

"Chairs, to be sure," grinned Big Tom. "Did you think we would sit on our heels?"

"Better get to work making them, then," admonished Mrs. Clay. "We will need about six to start with."

"All right. Chairs are next on the docket," and Big Tom hurried back to his outdoor carpenter shop.

In an hour the six chairs were ready. They had been quickly made by splitting another log into a plank about four inches thick; and then sawing the plank up into lengths of about eighteen inches each. These lengths were then roughly rounded and rudely shaped into seats, four holes bored into them for the legs, and the legs, sticks of wood sawed and cut to the right thickness and length, driven into the holes and braced with shorter pieces of wood, lashed firmly into place with thongs of deerskin. They had no backs, but, otherwise, they answered the purpose of chairs quite as well as do the costly and beautiful products of the cabinet-maker's skill in use today; and that was all our friends required of them.

"Now for the beds," Big Tom said, when the chairs were completed and placed inside the house in an orderly row for the admiring eyes of Mrs.

Clay and Ruth to look at. "Reckon we'll need three beds?" and Big Tom turned to Mrs. Clay for confirmation.

"Yes," and the good woman paused for a moment from her work to consider the problem, "that'll do. Ruth and I can bunk together when we have company."

Six pieces of wood, about four inches thick, six inches wide and eight and a half feet long, were now split and hewn out of the logs; and auger holes bored in each end of each of these timbers, for the legs and the head and the foot poles. Then the legs and the head and the foot poles were made—and the beds were ready to put together in their places inside the house. This was done by driving the legs and the head and the foot pieces into the auger holes bored for them; and then boring holes into the upright poles, which you will remember "sided" the ends and one side of the half-faced camp, at the right height and distance apart to receive the ends of the head and the foot poles, which, on one side, projected several inches through the holes bored in that side of the bed frame. This gave the solid outer frame of the bed. Small holes, about eight inches apart, were now bored along the upper edge of this frame and hardwood pegs driven into them, leaving about an inch of the peg projecting out of the hole.

"Now get the balls of deerskin and I'll show you how to 'rope' the beds," Big Tom said, when the three frames were up and pegged, turning to

Ruth, who had been a most interested watcher while the bed frames were being put into their places.

Ruth hurried to a large bag, in which various odds and ends were kept and which hung from one of the hanging pegs Big Tom had driven into the walls of the house the night before, and quickly returned with a couple of large balls of narrow strips of deerskin. The strips had been cut about an inch wide and as long as possible and then tied together and tightly wound up into the balls; and answered very well all the purposes of a very strong and serviceable small rope.

Big Tom took one of the balls, tied one end of the deerskin around the head-pole of one of the beds; and then began weaving the deerskin rope back and forth, back and forth, across the bed frame and around the heads of the little pegs driven into the frame, keeping the rope taut and stopping every now and then to tighten it by stretching and pulling up the slack. In this way the entire bed was "roped," making a strong and springy support for the mattress, on which one could sleep as comfortably and dream as happily as on any of our modern spring beds.

"There," he declared, when the "roping" was completed, "that'll make about as comfortable a bed as money could buy, and all that it cost was a little work and planning. Just see the spring to it," and, turning quickly, he caught Ruth up into his arms and tossed her, full-length, on the tightly drawn deerskin meshes of the bed; and so great

was the spring of the deerskin that her body bounded nearly a foot up into the air.

"Do it again! Do it again!" Ruth begged, jumping off the bed and turning to her father with flushed face and shining eyes.

"Too busy," laughed Big Tom. "Must get the other beds 'roped' before supper; and I see that your ma is about ready to set the table now. The first helping at the supper table to the one who gets his bed 'roped' first," and Big Tom turned a grinning face to Silas. "Gid can help you and Ruth will help me," and he indicated the two beds remaining "unroped."

"Let's git a-goin', then," and Silas seized the other ball of deerskin rope. "Th' smell o' that cookin's powerful drawin' tew an empty stumick. I'm as hungry as a b'ar. Lively, now, when I asks for th' ball," and he handed the ball of deerskin to Gideon, and, unwinding a little of the skin, stood ready to tie it to the head-pole of his bed at the word "go."

"And I'll give the victors an extra piece of the pie that I just took out of the baking pan," laughed Mrs. Clay, pausing to turn a face, flushed with the heat of the fire, in their direction.

"Now, we've jest got tew win, if we bust our bilers a-doin' it! Ready, Tom?" and Silas turned a grinning face to Big Tom.

"Yes," answered Big Tom, bending over the head of his bed, skin rope in hand.

"Let her go, then!" shouted Silas. "Remember

the pie!" and his swift fingers began tying the rope around the head-pole.

For a time, so evenly did the swift fingers of the two men weave the deerskin around the pegs in the beds, it was impossible to tell who was ahead; then Ruth, in the excitement of the moment, dropped the ball her father had handed to her to hold for an instant, and the ball rolled some distance away.

"Jumping Moses! There goes our pie!" and Big Tom, followed by Ruth, leaped after the ball, with the result that Ruth's head and her father's nose came together, with a thump that caused Ruth to cry out with pain and Big Tom to grab his nose with both hands and run for the wash basin, leaving Silas and Gideon grinning and chuckling with amusement and triumph.

"Hurrah! The pie is ours!" yelled Gideon, a few minutes later, as Silas tied the final knot in the skin rope that completed the "roping" of their bed.

"An' th' fust helpin' at th' supper table. Don't fergit that. Say, ain't that supper 'bout ready? I shore am as hungry as a b'ar," and Silas straightened up his long frame and turned a whimsically smiling face to Mrs. Clay. "Jest th' smell o' yewr cookin' is 'nough tew give a feller th' appetite o' a hoss."

"Yes, supper'll be ready as soon as you've washed up. Take a pail along with you to the spring and bring it back full of water," and Mrs. Clay handed

an empty water pail to Gideon. "Get out the best knives and forks and the silver spoons that your Uncle Frank gave me for a wedding present," she directed Ruth, as the two men and Gideon set out for the spring to "wash up." "Nothing is too good for us tonight," and she smiled happily, as happily, doubtless, as she would have smiled had they been about to eat their first meal in a well-furnished and comfortable house, instead of that pioneer's rude, half-faced camp, which all goes to show how little our material surroundings have to do with our real happiness.

When Gideon and the two men returned from the spring, after having "washed up," supper was ready.

A white tablecloth covered the roughness of the table, while the shining pewter plates and drinking cups, brightly scoured knives and forks, glistening silver spoons, a few cherished pieces of china, a large pewter platter and a huge bouquet of the beautiful wild flowers that grew so abundantly all around them gave the table something of the appearance of luxury, when seen in the midst of such humble surroundings. The evening was warm and clear and the protecting skins and blankets that curtained one side of the half-faced camp, were lifted to let in the light and the air. A few feet away, just outside of the enclosure, blazed and crackled a camp fire. Around all was the green of the level prairie, framed on one side by the dark shadows of the forest. In the west the sun was

just sinking, in a glory of red and golden lights, behind the flame-topped hills.

“I swun, now,” and Silas paused near the camp fire and looked slowly around, “if this ain’t th’ purtiest picter I’ve seen in a b’ar’s age, so peaceful an’ quietlike, an’ — an’ — I kin’t put th’ feelin’ it gives me intew words, but, I reckon, yew know what I mean, Tom.”

“Reckon I do, Si,” and something very much like tears glistened deep back in Big Tom’s eyes. “Leastwise it makes me think of the goodness of God and the beauty of His creation, mixed with a sort of comfortable homelike feeling.”

“That’s it,” and the face of Silas lighted. “It’s th’ wimen folks that has warmed th’ hull picter with a feel o’ home. It takes wimen’s taste an’ wimen’s cookin’ tew make a home, it shore does — Glory be!” and he turned quickly to Mrs. Clay, who had just set the platter, loaded with a steaming-hot turkey pie, down on the table, “if th’ smell o’ that turkey ain’t got intew my stumick an’ sot it tew beggin’ worsen a Meth’dist parson passin’ round a collection box.”

“Well, you can start taking up the collection right off,” laughed Mrs. Clay. “Set right down.”

Silas and the others needed no second invitation; and, in a moment more, all were seated around the table.

“Tew th’ victor belongs th’ spiles,” grinned Silas, his eyes on the steaming turkey pie. “Fust helpin’s,” and his hand extended his plate to Big Tom.

“And the pie,” exulted Gideon. “Ma, I’ll take my extra piece now,” and he passed his plate to his mother.

Mrs. Clay gave Gideon his extra piece of pie, with a smiling remark about eating pie first, while Big Tom loaded the plate of Silas with turkey pie.

“Good ’nuf for th’ Queen o’ Sheba or th’ Sar o’ all th’ Russias,” was Silas’s comment on the supper, when, at last, he pushed his plate from him and declared himself filled up “clean tew th’ muzzle.”

CHAPTER IX

OLD WHITENOSE

“**N**OW tell us about Old Whitenose, the bear,” begged Gideon; that night, when, the day’s work done, all had gathered around the blazing camp fire. “You said that he had been defying you and Old Man Kellogg for more than two years. Now, what did you mean by defying?” and his eyes, alight with interest, turned eagerly to the face of the old hunter.

“Wal,” and Silas took the pipe he was smoking out of his mouth and carefully laid it down by his side on the log on which he sat, “if b’ar ever defied humans, I reckon Old Whitenose has defied me an’ Old Man Kellogg. Fust he stole a pig from Old Man Kellogg’s pen. That sort o’ riled Old Man Kellogg an’ he started out tew git him. Th’ trail was plain an’ Old Man Kellogg had no trouble in follerin’ th’ thief, till he come tew whar he’d stopped tew eat th’ pig. From thar follerin’ th’ trail wan’t easy; but he managed tew foller it till he come tew th’ edge o’ th’ Big Swamp; an’ thar, right afore his eyes an’ not more’n five rods away, he saw a monstrous big black b’ar, with a white nose, rise up sudden from ahind a big log an’ turn an’ look at him, not scartlike, but inquisitivelike, as much as tew say, ‘Was it me yew was a-lookin’ for?’

“Old Man Kellogg’s powerful quick with his gun an’ he swears that afore th’ b’ar made anuther move, he’d up with his rifle an’ drawed a bead on th’ b’ar’s right eye an’ pulled th’ trigger. Now I’ve seed Old Man Kellogg drive a nail with a bullet from his rifle that far; an’ yit he says that that thar b’ar jest sort o’ shook his head, like he heered a fly buzzin’ ’bout his ears, at th’ crack o’ his rifle, an’ slid back ahind th’ log, not frightenedlike, but slow an’ indifferentlike; an’, when atter loadin’ his rifle, he hurried up tew th’ log, th’ b’ar had vanished without leavin’ no trail ahind him that Old Man Kellogg could find.

“That was th’ fust time Old Man Kellogg saw Old Whitenose; but he’d heered th’ Injuns tell o’ a big black b’ar, with a white nose, that lived in th’ Big Swamp, which was a devil-b’ar that no bullet or arrer or knife could kill; an’ he had laughed at th’ Injuns. Now he shook his head and wondered.

“One mornin’, not more’n six months atter that, I was a-lookin’ for a turkey for breakfust an’ was a-creepin’ through some underbrush up tew a big dead tree, whar I knowed a number o’ fat turkey-cocks was a-roostin’, when, right in front o’ me, not more’n three rods away, a big black b’ar, with a white nose, rise up on his hind legs, like he’d popped up out o’ th’ ground, an’ stood an’ looked at me, not scartlike, but inquisitivelike, as if he wanted tew know was I looking for him. I was so close that I could see his curious white nose plain.

“Wal, I sudden concluded I’d have b’ar steak,

'stead o' turkey, for breakfast, an' throwed my rifle tew my shoulder an' took quick aim for th' b'ar's wicked-lookin' leetle right eye an' fired. An', as shore as I am a-settin' here, that thar b'ar jest shook his head, like a fly was a-buzzin' 'bout his ears, drapt down on all fours, an' slid off through th' woods, not scartlike, but indifferentlike, an' a-turnin' his head back over his shoulder tew look at me an' a-grinnin' scornful-like.

"Wal, I jest stood thar an' stared atter that b'ar, tew 'sprised tew move, for I'd never missed a dead-easy shot like that afore, till th' b'ar got out o' sight, then I begun tew git mad, an' th' more I thought o' that miss th' madder I got. I vowed that no b'ar could stump me like that an' live; an' so I loaded up my rifle an' started tew trail th' b'ar, determined tew git him afore night, if I had tew bust my bilers a-doin' it.

"It had rained hard th' night afore and th' trail was easy tew foller. Th' b'ar headed straight for th' Big Swamp and I follered. Once I caught sight o' him, as he was crossin' an openin'; but he was tew far ahead o' me tew chance a shot. Then I seed nuthin' o' him ag'in till I reached th' edge o' th' Big Swamp, when he rise up from ahind a big log, sudden, like he'd popped up out o' th' ground, reared up on his hind legs an' looked at me inquisitivelike, as if he might be askin', 'Was it me yew was a-follerin'?

"'Shore,' I says back; 'an' I've got yew this time, sartin,' an' I throwed my gun tew my shoulder,

took keerful aim ag'in at that leetle, wicked-lookin' right eye an' pulled th' trigger, th' b'ar not bein' more'n three rods from th' muzzle o' my gun—"

"And—and did you get him?" broke in Gideon, too anxious and too excited to await the slow-spoken words of Silas.

"Th' b'ar," continued Silas, solemnly, "jest shook that white nose o' his, like he heered a fly buzzin' 'bout it, drapt down ahind th' log ag'in, not scartlike or flustered, but unconsarnedlike an' easy, an' disappeared, without leavin' no trail; leastwise I could find none, when I rushed tew th' log, knife in hand, without stoppin' tew load my rifle."

"Good land!" exclaimed Mrs. Clay, her eyes round with wonder, "You don't mean that that bear disappeared, in broad daylight, right before your eyes, and you not able to see where he went?"

"Not exactly right afore my eyes. He jest drapt down ahind that big log an' when I ran up tew th' log he'd vanished, without leavin' no trail, so far as I could see. But that ain't so curious as it is that I should miss him twice in one day, an' both on 'em dead-easy shots. That's what made me feel kindly queer an' sort o' shaky in th' legs, as I stood aside th' log an' tried tew figger it all out. I never knowed my old gun tew miss hittin' what I aimed it at afore," and Silas shook his head, like one who had given up all hopes of solving the mysterious puzzle.

"Th' log was a big one," he continued, "more'n five feet through, an' ran on a slant down a leetle

hill, with th' lower end a-runnin' down intew a leetle pond o' marsh water. Fust off I thought th' log might be holler an' that th' b'ar had crawled intew it; but he couldn't have done that, 'cause thar wan't no way that I could find for him tew git inside o' it, except through a rotten old knothole not more'n six inches across. Then I thought he might have slipped intew th' water an' swam across th' pond; but he couldn't have done that neither, 'cause I searched every inch o' th' bank around th' pond an' I'm ready tew swear that no b'ar crawled out o' that water. If he went intew th' pond, he staid thar. Finally, atter searchin' an' figgerin' an' lookin', I concluded that my bullet must have hit true an' that th' b'ar must have got intew th' water afore he died an' that his body was a-lyin' on th' bottom o' th' pond. That sort o' made me feel better; an' atter restin' a bit, I sot out for home, still puzzlin' over how I come tew miss that fust shot.

“Wal, I'd 'most fergot 'bout th' big white-nosed b'ar, when one evenin', 'bout six months later, I was a-goin' tew th' spring atter a pail o' water an' was jest a-bendin' over th' water tew fill th' pail, when I heered a sort o' s'prised 'Whoof! Whoof!' ahind me. I drapt th' pail quick, for I knowed it was a b'ar, an' whirled about — an' thar, not more'n tew rods from me, a-standin' in th' path on his hind legs, was that identickle white-nosed b'ar that I thought was a-lyin' dead at th' bottom o' th' pond, a-lookin' at me, not scartlike, but inquisitivelike, an'

wrinklin' up his white nose, an' swaying' his head from side tew side. He must have knowed I'd left my gun at th' house, 'cause he stood thar, a-grinnin' an' a-swayin' his head for a couple o' minutes or more, afore, with anuther 'Whoof! Whoof!' he slid down on his feet an' slipped out o' sight in th' willows that growed round th' spring.

"As for me, I was plumb stumpt an' stood thar, like I'd been frozen stiff, till th' b'ar had disappeared in th' willows. Then I picked up th' pail, filled it with water an' walked back tew th' house, a-scratchin' my head an' a-puzzlin' over that white-nosed b'ar.

"Th' very next mornin' Old Man Kellogg routed me out afore sunrise. He was mad plumb from his moccasins tew his coonskin cap. Seems a b'ar had been raidin' his pig pen off an' on for 'bout a year an' th' night afore he had got his last pig. Yes, Old Man Kellogg sartinly was mad; an' he vowed he'd git that b'ar, if he had tew camp on his trail for a week. Now he wanted me tew go 'long with him on a death-hunt for Old Whitenose, as he called th' b'ar, 'cause he tried alone in vain tew git him.

"'Whitenose!' I says. 'Did th' b'ar have a white nose?'

"'He shore did,' answered Old Man Kellogg; an' then he told me o' his experiences with a big black b'ar with a white nose; an' I told him o' mine; an' both on us agreed that it was powerful curious an' some startlin'; but we reckoned it all could be

explained natural-like, when we got the rights o' it, an' not accordin' tew Injun belief that th' b'ar was a devil-b'ar, an' couldn't be killed by no bullet or arrer or knife. Leastwise we wanted tew try some more bullets on him; an', atter I'd eated a hurried breakfast, we shouldered our guns an' started out tew give Old Whitenose th' hunt o' his life.

“Wal, it sartin was a hunt all right, a hunt with no findin'. We hit his trail an' follered it tew th' identickle big log in th' edge o' th' Big Swamp, whar Old Man Kellogg had lost it afore, an' whar I had lost it afore, an' thar we both on us lost it ag'in. We was both plumb stumpt an' clean mystified. We could not figger it out no sensible way; an', finally, we was obliged tew give up th' hunt.

“‘No use huntin' Old Whitenose without dogs,' Old Man Kellogg said, as we started home, still puzzlin' over th' mystery. ‘An' I'm goin' tew git th' dogs that will dew it. I won't 'low no white-nosed old b'ar tew lug off my pigs an' defy me tew make him pay for 'em. I kin wait; but I'll git him yit.’

“Neither one on us has seen Old Whitenose since; but we've heered tell o' him time an' ag'in from Injun an' white hunters, who've shot at him an' allers missed, an' tried tew trail him an' allers lost th' trail at th' edge o' th' Big Swamp, aside a big log. Th' Injuns call him White-Devil-B'ar, an' say that no mortal kin kill him. I dunno 'bout that; but he sartin does 'pear tew bear a charmed

life. Now Old Man Kellogg's jest got tew more pigs, an', what's more tew th' pint, he's got tew b'ar hounds; an' we figger tew find out for dead sartin next week whether or not Old Whitenose kin be killed. Leastwise Old Man Kellogg vows tew git him, afore he kin git them tew pigs, if 'tis in th' power o' mortal tew dew it," and Silas picked up his pipe and began vigorously puffing the dying fire in it into life again.

"I sure wish I was going with you on that hunt, Si," Big Tom declared, the moment Silas stopped speaking. "I've heard Indians and trappers tell afore of bears and other animals that appeared to be protected in some mysterious way; but I never had any faith in the protection and always wanted to try my old gun on one of those mysteriously protected animals. But it sure was powerful queer that you and Old Man Kellogg should both miss that bear; and powerful queer that he disappeared the way he did without leaving a trail. I sure do wish I was going with you," and Big Tom turned his head half questioningly to Mrs. Clay; but she shook her head firmly.

"And—and do you think we will get Old Whitenose this time?" inquired Gideon, his eyes glowing with excitement.

"Old Man Kellogg will be shore loaded for b'ar; an' he'll have th' hounds with him, so we kin't lose th' trail. Yes, I reckon, we're bound tew git him this time, if th' b'ar's mortal an' not a sperit, like th' Injuns say," answered Silas.

“O, but I wish tomorrow was next week Thursday!” sighed Gideon, whose young imagination had been powerfully stirred by the weird tale of Silas.

“‘Twon’t be long comin’,” and Silas smiled at the boy’s eagerness; “for, accordin’ tew my reckonin’, tewmorrer’s Sunday.”

“Mercy on us! So it is!” exclaimed Mrs. Clay. “And I had my work all planned for tomorrow, forgetting all about its being the Lord’s day. It beats all how forgetful I am getting to be! Well,” and her face softened, “we can keep the day holy out here in this wilderness, just as truly as we could in the finest church in the world.”

“More truly than in any church made by the hands of man, for here we have God’s grandest and most beautiful church all around us—a church of his own building—creation,” Big Tom said, quietly. “Creation, just as He made it, unmarred by man’s hands.”

“I sartin agrees with that,” commented Silas. “I allers feel more religious, when I’m standin’ in a great forest, with big trees liftin’ their hands up to God all round me, or on a broad prairie, with an ocean o’ green grass an’ beautiful flowers wavin’ all round me, or on th’ side o’ a towerin’ mount’in, with other big mount’ins pokin’ their heads up above th’ clouds, like they was tryin’ tew git near tew heaven, than I ever dew in a church; an’ I kin hear God’s voice plainer out alone in th’ woods, or on th’ prairie, or ’mong th’ mount’ins than I ever did from eny church pulpit. Not but what churches

an' parsons are all right for 'em that needs 'em," he added, a bit apologetically. "But out here whar we kin see God all round us, we don't need 'em tew tell us o' God. Now," and he turned suddenly to Mrs. Clay and Ruth, "I shore would like tew hear yew sing 'Annie Laurie' or some good song."

There is something peculiarly fascinating to music, when heard in the midst of the stillness and mystery of the wilderness, especially at nighttime, with the singers and the listeners sitting around a blazing camp fire; and Big Tom and Silas and Gideon sat, like souls entranced, while Mrs. Clay and Ruth sang "Annie Laurie" and others of the beautiful old songs, dear to the hearts of all.

At last Big Tom arose and stretched his long frame.

"Now," he said, regretfully, "I reckon we'll have one more song and then we must go to bed."

"Then sing 'Annie Laurie' once more," begged Silas. "'Pears like I kin never tire o' hearin' that song. I reckon it's 'cause mother used tew sing it tew me when I was a boy; an' yewr voice sounds like mother's."

Mrs. Clay smiled; and then, sitting there in the light of the camp fire, with the stars above her and the darkness and the mystery of the night and the great wilderness all around her, she sang the beautiful old song that so often has charmed the ears and touched the hearts of listeners in all parts of the world.

When the last notes of the song died, all arose;

and, half an hour later, all were sound asleep, having found the new beds so comfortable that sleep had come almost the moment their bodies sank down into their soft embraces.

CHAPTER X

UNEXPECTED GUESTS

ONLY those who are obliged to rise early each weekday morning can know how comfortable and pleasant it is to lie in bed on a Sunday morning, drowsily conscious that there is no necessity of arising until sleep and rest are both satisfied. The next morning our pioneer friends enjoyed to the full this Sunday privilege; and lay, snugly and comfortably, in their beds, until the sun had looked down on their rude shelter for at least a couple of hours. Then Big Tom rolled over in his bed, yawned and opened his eyes.

“Say, but this is comfortable,” he said, rising up on one elbow and looking around the room.

“It shore is,” agreed Silas, who lay in the bed by his side. “I’ve been awake for more’n an hour, jest a-lettin’ th’ comfort o’ this bed ooze into me. Yew shore dew know how tew make a bed that sleeps easy, Tom. That deerskin feels jest like springs aneath me.”

“Say, you lazy men, there, ain’t you never going to get up?” called Mrs. Clay from her bed in the other end of the room. “I’ve been wondering when you were going to wake up for the last hour. If you don’t get right up, you’ll get no breakfast.”

“No breakfast! Great horned bufflers! did yew

hear that, Tom?" cried Silas, in well-simulated alarm. "Now, git right up, yew big lazy hipperpotamus, afore it is tew late," and, suddenly placing both of his feet against the back of Big Tom, he gave so violent and so quick a shove that the huge body of his bedmate was hurled out of the bed and landed sprawlingly on the floor, with a grunt and a shock that, for a moment, knocked the breath out of the big body. Before Big Tom could jump to his feet, the old hunter, chuckling happily, tumbled out of the bed and fled from the room.

"Served you right," laughed Mrs. Clay, as Big Tom rose slowly to his feet. "Now, get a good fire going. I'll be out in a jiffy."

Big Tom grinned and vowed he'd "get even" with Silas; and, hurrying into his clothes, started out. As he passed Gideon's bed, he heard a snicker from that young man; for Gideon had witnessed, with great delight, the manner of his father's getting out of bed.

"Laugh, will you, you young rascal! Laugh!" and one of the big hands of Big Tom suddenly shot forth and caught one of Gideon's legs; and the next thing the boy knew he was jerked out of bed, bed-clothes and all, and dumped, laughing and protesting, on the floor. "Splendid way of getting a fellow out of bed, ain't it? Warranted to take all the sleepseeds out of his eyes afore his feet hit the floor," and, with a grin all over his face, Big Tom hurried out of the house.

Sunday, with our pioneer friends, was a real day

of rest. No work was done, except the necessary choring about the place; and, when this was done, the men shaved and cleaned up and put on their best clothes; and Mrs. Clay and Ruth washed up and dressed up; because, as Big Tom said, it made them all feel a little more respectable and civilized to get into their good clothes once a week, even when there was no one but themselves to look at themselves, and it made the day seem more like Sunday.

Of course there were no church services in that wilderness near enough for them to attend; but, after all were cleaned and dressed, they had a simple religious service of their own; and, after that, all started out on a little tour of exploration around their new home. When night came they again gathered around the camp fire, and talked and sang and told stories, until it was time to go to bed—a simple, wholesome, soul-satisfying way of passing Sunday.

Fortunately for our friends, the weather, up to this time, had been all that they could wish; but that night, just as they were about to enter the house to go to bed, one of those violent rain and wind storms that frequently sweep over the western prairies at that season, appeared with such suddenness that it seemed almost to leap out of the western darkness, and spread over the clear skies so quickly that the stars were blotted out, as if the hand of God had suddenly dropped down a great blanket. Never before had Gideon and Ruth heard such deep

and awful thunder as that which now rolled and rumbled and cracked all around them; and never before had they seen such vivid flashes of lightning as that which leaped and zigzagged across the inky blackness of the skies. It was grand, awe inspiring, terrible.

At first not a drop of rain fell, not a breath of air stirred, only the swift marshaling of the black clouds across the skies told of the dread advance of the storm. Then a sudden gust of wind almost whipped them off their feet, a few big drops of rain fell, and a sound, as if billions of tiny feet were rushing over the grass of the prairie toward them, filled the air.

"Intew th' house!" shouted Silas. "That's th' rain yew hear; an' it's comin' down in bucketfuls. Intew th' house, afore yew git wet tew th' skin!"

And into the house they all hurried, Ruth clinging tremblingly to her mother and Mrs. Clay with an anxious hand on Big Tom's arm, just as the bottom of the clouds seemed to fall out and the rain poured down on the roof above their heads and beat against the sides of the house in torrents. A lighted candle on the table dimly illuminated the inky blackness of the room.

"Mercy on us! What a wind!" exclaimed Mrs. Clay, still clinging to the arm of her husband. "Hope 'twon't blow the house down on top of our heads," and she glanced apprehensively around the little enclosure.

"No danger," laughed Big Tom, confidently. "Si

and I set the corner posts too deep in the ground for anything short of a regular hurricane to pull them out. But just listen to that rain! Sounds as if someone had pulled the plug out of the bottom of the heavenly watertank for sure. Well, if the roof don't leak now, it certainly is rain proof. Let's have a look," and, picking up the candle, he passed slowly around the room, holding the candle above his head and closely examining the roof for leaks.

"Not a leak!" he declared, with triumph, when his survey was completed. "Let her rain! Who cares? We are snug and dry. Blow, you winds, blow, you can't hurt us! Blow and rain, we're dry and safe! Say, but we did do a good job on that roof," and he turned a well-satisfied face to Silas.

"We shore—"

Silas stopped abruptly and instinctively one hand shot out and caught up his long-barreled rifle, which stood leaning against the side of the house near where he was standing.

Big Tom whirled swiftly about and faced questioningly the door's only barricade, a strong blanket, his right hand gripping the handle of an ax.

Mrs. Clay dropped the quilt she was about to spread over one of the beds and turned a whitening face in the same direction.

Gideon seized his rifle and fixed his startled eyes on the blanket-door.

Ruth uttered a frightened cry and ran to her mother and clung tremblingly to her.

For a moment all stood thus, staring at the blan-

ket that shut out the night and the storm and listening intently.

Without, the rain still beat down on the roof and sides in torrents, the wind cried and moaned and shrieked and hurled itself furiously against the house and the heavy thunders rolled and growled in the black distance.

Then, suddenly, there came a flash of lightning so vivid it made the room as light as day, almost instantly followed by a crashing crack of thunder that seemed to jar the very ground on which they stood.

“Gosh!” Big Tom exclaimed. “That must have struck near! I—”

Again, at that moment, from out the darkness and the storm, came the sound that had so startled all, only this time it was louder, nearer, as if it came from just outside the blanket that closed the door—a weird, wailing, and moaning sound that seemed hardly human, coming from out the black mystery of that wild night.

No one stirred. All stood listening, their eyes intent on the blanketed door, wondering what it was that was out there in the blackness and the storm.

Now there came a sudden lull in the storm. The thunders were still and the wind, for a moment, ceased to blow; and, in that moment of silence, from out the darkness of the night, once more came that shrill wail, sounding loud and high in the stillness and ending in a queer gurgling noise that

caused Mrs. Clay to start forward with a cry of astonishment and compassion.

"Mercy on us! A baby, here in this wilderness! And out there in that darkness and storm!" and the good woman started impulsively toward the door.

"Wait," and the hand of Big Tom caught her by the arm and thrust her back. "I will see what it is," and, still gripping the ax in his hand, he strode quickly to the door, loosened the blanket and looked out into the blackness of the night and the storm.

For a moment he stood, his head thrust out through the opening in the blanket, then, with a startled cry, the ax dropped from his hand and he bent quickly downward and lifted up into his arms the closely blanketed form of a woman that lay motionless on the wet ground just outside the door, one hand outstretched toward the blanket that hung between her and shelter.

"Quick!" cried Mrs. Clay. "Lay her on the bed," and she hurried to his assistance, her heart filled with compassion and anxiety. "Help get this blanket off," she said, the moment Big Tom laid the unconscious form down on the bed. "Poor soul, she is soaking wet!" and, swiftly and tenderly she began unloosening the wet blanket that one hand of the woman held tightly gripped about her head and shoulders, while Big Tom lifted the inert body to aid her.

"Mercy! I knew I heard a baby! Quick, Ruth, bring the candle," and Mrs. Clay tenderly lifted

out from under the blanket, where it had been held securely and warmly to the unconscious woman's bosom, a baby not more than two or three months old.

Ruth hurried to her mother with the candle, while Silas and Gideon crowded close to the bed, anxious to see these waifs that had come to them so mysteriously from out the darkness and the storm.

The moment the light fell on the woman's face all started.

"A squaw!" cried Mrs. Clay, in astonishment. "Mercy on us! How came she here, with a little baby in her arms?"

"Is she dead?" queried Ruth, her voice trembling just a little with excitement and awe.

"No, I think not. Here, take the baby," and Mrs. Clay handed the baby to Ruth, and bent anxiously over the Indian woman. "She has only fainted," and she straightened up; "but I fear she must be hurt someway. See, she is coming to her senses."

The Indian woman moved restlessly, moaned; then her eyes opened and stared blankly up into the white faces crowding around her. Suddenly she clasped both hands to her bosom and a wild, terrified look came into her eyes and she started up from the bed.

"Quick, her baby!" cried Mrs. Clay.

Ruth hurried to the bedside, the little Indian baby held tenderly in her arms.

At sight of her baby all the fear and the wild-

ness left the Indian woman's eyes and face and, with a glad mother cry, she stretched out both hands for her child and, clasping the little form close to her bosom, sank back on the bed and lay quiet, snuggling the baby up to her and every now and then lifting her black eyes, questioningly, wonderingly, to the white faces around her. Evidently she was trying to think it all out—how she and her baby came to be in the white man's wigwam, lying on the white man's bed.

“Mercy me! There's not a dry rag on the woman or the baby! Here, you men, get over to the other end of the room,” and Mrs. Clay turned peremptorily to the men folks; “and keep your backs toward us until we tell you to look. I am going to get some dry clothes on this poor soul and her child, before both of them catch their deaths a-cold. Ruth, bring me one of my old dresses and some of baby's clothes,” and, vigorously motioning the men to clear out, the good woman turned solicitously to the stoical woman on the bed, whose bright black eyes had been fixed intently on her face while she had been speaking.

The two men and Gideon at once went to the other end of the room, while Mrs. Clay and Ruth removed the Indian woman's and her baby's wet garments and replaced them with dry clothes. Once they heard a cry of pain, quickly suppressed, followed by the exclamation, “Land sakes! One of her feet and ankles is swollen almost double!” from Mrs. Clay. A moment later she called to Big Tom:

“See if you can’t start a fire. We must have hot water. The poor soul has broken her leg or sprained her ankle something terrible.”

In one corner of the room was a pile of dry fire-wood, brought there for the special purpose of keeping it dry; and it did not take Big Tom long to have a fire burning brightly. Then he drove a forked stick down into the ground on each side of the fire, laid a green pole in the crotches, filled an iron kettle with water and hung it from the pole over the fire.

By this time the Indian woman and her baby were dressed in dry clothes, and Mrs. Clay called to the men to come and have a look at her swollen foot and ankle.

The Indian woman lay on the bed, clothed in one of Mrs. Clay’s dresses, her right foot and ankle uncovered. Ruth, who was charmed with the wee, mahogany-colored mite of humanity, had the baby again in her arms.

Big Tom and Silas stepped close to the bed and examined the swollen foot and ankle.

“Great Moses! I should say it was a bad sprain!” exclaimed Big Tom, the moment his eyes rested on the swollen limb. “How hurt?” and he pointed to the swollen ankle.

“Slip on rock,” answered the squaw, her bright eyes on Big Tom’s face. “No break—sprain.”

Then she went on, in her abbreviated, broken English, to relate how she had started to go to the village of her people, a half-day’s walk to the north,

and had slipped on a loose stone and fallen down a steep bank and hurt her foot; but, for her baby's sake, she had managed to keep moving. When the storm came she was in despair, not for her sake, but for her baby's, and had struggled on blindly, desperately, until, worn out with pain and exhaustion, she would have sunk down where she was, had not her eyes that moment caught sight of the dull glow of the candlelight shining through the blankets that protected the open side of the half-faced camp. She had just strength enough left to reach the camp, where a sudden wrench of her ankle had caused her such intense pain that she had fallen in a faint, her outstretched hand almost touching the blanket that meant safety to her baby. For herself she did not care. She was strong and could stand pain and exhaustion and exposure. But the baby was only "two moons" old and the rain and the chill of the night might kill it—A tale of mother heroism simply told.

"An' yew limpt 'long for hours on that thar foot, a-carryin' that yunk?" and Silas stared down at the swollen foot and ankle. "Yew shore are clean grit, plumb through," and his eyes turned admiringly to the face of the squaw.

By this time the water in the kettle was sufficiently heated, and Mrs. Clay, who was well-skilled in the rude surgery of the frontier, as, indeed, all pioneer women had to be, bathed the swollen foot and ankle in hot water and carefully bandaged them. The moment she ceased her ministering to the hurt

limb, the young mother—she was but little more than a girl—with a sigh of utter exhaustion, sank back on the bed and in a few minutes was sound asleep.

“Now just look at that little tike!” and Mrs. Clay turned from the bed to where Ruth sat, the little Indian baby, dressed in a long white gown, on her lap, his black eyes staring wonderingly straight up into her face, his fat little cheeks and lips puckered up into a smile, and one chubby little fist gripping tightly one of her fingers.

“O Ma, ain’t he cute?” and Ruth lifted a flushed face to her mother.

“He is that,” answered Mrs. Clay, bending and lifting the little form up into her arms. “Now,” and she smiled, “shall we trade little sister for him?”

“No,” and Ruth’s eyes turned quickly and affectionately to the cradle, where her little baby sister lay happily sleeping. “He’s cute and I’d like to keep him, if—if he’d always stay little; but he won’t, and, some day, he’ll grow up into a big ugly Indian, and, maybe, want to scalp me. I could never love him like I do sister,” and she hurried to the cradle and bent and lovingly kissed one of the sweet dimpled cheeks.

“Love him as well as sister! Well, I should hope not!” and Mrs. Clay smiled at the impossibility of the thought of any one, who knew her baby, ever loving any other baby, white or Indian, quite as well. “Now, I’d better lay the youngster

near his mother, so that, if she wakes up during the night, she can find him," and, improvising a crib out of an empty box, she placed it on the ground close to the bedside of the sleeping mother and tenderly tucked the baby away in it.

"I know I've seen her afore," Silas said, when, after Mrs. Clay had placed the Indian baby in his rude crib, our friends had gathered to talk over the strange guests that the night and the storm had brought them. "I kin't 'zackly place her; but I know I've seen her afore. I—" and, suddenly jumping to his feet, he picked up the candle and, going to the bed, bent over the sleeping woman and carefully studied her face for a moment. "I knowed I'd seen her," and he returned to the anxious little group. "She's one of Black Hawk's wimen. Leastwise I saw her in Black Hawk's camp 'bout six months ago. Th' whites called her Bright-eyes. She's from one of th' Indian villages to th' north."

"You don't reckon Black Hawk and his warriors are camped near?" Big Tom could hardly keep his apprehension from sounding in his voice as he turned quickly to Silas.

"No." Silas shook his head positively. "She's jest on her way back tew her folks tew show 'em th' yunk, like she said she was. 'Tain't nuthin' for Indian wimen tew travel short distances alone like that. Now," and Silas yawned, "'sposin' we go tew bed an' dream over it. I'm gittin' powerful sleepy, now that th' excitement is over."

“Reckon you three men’ll have to bunk together,” smiled Mrs. Clay.

“All right,” laughed Big Tom. “We’ll put Gid in the middle, so he won’t fall out.”

“Like you did this morning,” grinned Gideon.

All laughed, and Big Tom shook his fist threateningly at the chuckling Silas, who had already started for the bed in the farther end of the room, whither he was promptly followed by Gideon and his father.

By this time the violence of the storm had passed and had settled down into a steady rain that pattered softly on the roof over their heads. For many minutes after the snores of his father and Silas told him that they were sound asleep, Gideon lay awake, listening to this patter-patter of the rain and thinking over the strange occurrences of the night; but, at last, his weariness overcame him and his tired eyes closed in sleep.

CHAPTER XI

THE TOTEM OF BLACK HAWK

MRS. CLAY was the first one out of bed the next morning.

“Hush!” she cautioned the others. “Be as quiet as possible. She is still sound asleep,” and her eyes turned pityingly to the bed where Brighteyes, the young Indian squaw, lay, one hand outstretched toward the rude crib in which slept and dreamed her baby. “Poor soul, she was completely tuckered out!” and the good woman began to busy herself about her morning’s work, moving around as noiselessly as possible and casting frequent anxious glances toward the bed and the crib where her dusky guests lay sleeping.

The moment Ruth awoke she hurriedly climbed out of bed, vigorously rubbing the sleepseeds out of her eyes as she did so.

“Is—is the little Indian baby still here?” she asked, glancing eagerly around the room; “or did I dream—Oh, it is true!” she cried, joyously, as she caught sight of Brighteyes, still sound asleep on the bed.

“Hush, hush!” warned her mother; “or you will awaken them.”

“O, I just must have a peek at the baby!” and she tiptoed across the room and bent over the rude

crib. In a moment she straightened up, her eyes shining, and beckoned violently for her mother to come.

Mrs. Clay hurried to her side, fearful that something might have happened to her little guest; but the moment she looked down into the crib her face broke into smiles.

The night had been warm and the Indian baby had kicked off all the clothing that Mrs. Clay had carefully tucked around him, and now lay covered only by the white gown, out from the bottom of which peeked two fat little brown feet, while both chubby, dimpled fists lay doubled up on the little bosom. The bright little black eyes were closed in sleep; and, as Mrs. Clay looked, a dream-smile parted the baby lips and wrinkled the plump brown cheeks.

"Oh, but isn't he cute?" Ruth whispered, ecstatically. "I'd just love to—"

At that moment the baby yawned and stretched himself, making a queer little gurgling noise, and, opening his eyes, stared straight up into the white faces above him.

"Can I—can I take him up?" and Ruth's eager arms reached down toward the baby.

"Yes," smiled Mrs. Clay; "but you must be careful so as not to make him cry and awaken his mother. He is not used to being handled by white folks."

The bright little black eyes of the Indian baby fixed themselves wonderingly on the face of Ruth, as

she bent eagerly forward to lift him out of the box. Evidently he was trying to figure out, in his baby mind, whether or not it would be safe to let those advancing white hands touch him; and, evidently, he concluded that it would not, for, just before the hands reached him, the little mouth opened wide and let out an astonishingly loud howl for such a little fellow.

“No take!—No touch!” and the startled Ruth found herself staring into the fiercely glowing eyes of the Indian mother, who had awakened from a sound sleep at the first sound of her baby’s cry and sprung up in bed, and now sat glaring wildly around the strange room. But, in a moment, she remembered what had happened and where she was. The wild, frightened look left her eyes and she smiled and nodded to Mrs. Clay and Ruth and stretched out her arms for her baby.

Mrs. Clay lifted the infant, still yelling lustily, out of the box and placed him in his mother’s arms.

Brighteyes snuggled the baby to her bosom and began chanting a tender-sounding Indian lullaby; and, in a few minutes, the little rascal lay cooing happily in her lap.

Ruth had been badly frightened by the fierce look that had sprung into the Indian mother’s eyes when suddenly awakened from sleep by the cry of her baby; but it did not take the jovial face and winsome ways of Brighteyes long to allay this fear, and soon Ruth was sitting on the bed by Brighteyes’ side, with her baby sister in her arms, and

the two were comparing babies, born under such different circumstances and with such dissimilar racial inheritances.

"More hair," and Brighteyes pointed proudly to the thick crop of coal-black hair on her baby's head. "More fat cheeks," and she tenderly pinched one of them. "He make great warrior when grow big, like my father," and her eyes lighted with ancestral pride.

"Yes-s," admitted Ruth. "He does have more hair on his head and his cheeks are fatter; but sister has two teeny weeny teeth. Look!" and she gently parted the baby's lips and exhibited the precious teeth to the admiring gaze of Brighteyes.

Then they laid the two babies side by side on the bed, and laughed delightedly at their queer antics. Brighteyes was almost as much of a girl in her actions as was Ruth; and, before an hour had gone by, the two were fast friends. The babies had broken down all racial barriers between them.

The morning had dawned clear and bright and clean, after Dame Nature's vigorous washing of the night before; and, when Brighteyes saw that daylight had come and the storm had ceased, she insisted that she must now be on her way to her people. But Mrs. Clay smiled and shook her head. She pointed to the bandaged and swollen ankle and tried to make Brighteyes understand that it would be impossible for her to walk and carry her baby and that both of them were most welcome to stay until she could use her foot in comfort and in safety.

Brighteyes, however, declared that her foot "no hurt much," and that she could walk all right "with stick," and, to prove it, she rose from the bed and, placing both feet on the floor, attempted to stand. But the instant she pressed the weight of her body on the hurt ankle the pain was so great that even her stoical Indian blood could not prevent a sharp cry of agony.

"There, now, what did I tell you?" and Mrs. Clay hurried to her side. "No use trying to walk. Just lie down and keep quiet for a few days," and she helped her back on the bed, "and you will be all right. But," shaking her head emphatically, "no trying to walk on that foot until it is fit to walk on, or you'll be laid up for months."

Brighteyes unresistingly allowed herself to be helped and said no more about going, to the great delight of Ruth, who had been completely charmed by the brown little Indian baby and his girllike mother.

The storm of the night before had left the ground so wet that Big Tom was obliged to postpone the plowing he had hoped to start that morning until the next day.

"Well, it's an ill wind that blows nobody good," he laughed, when he came into the house, after having taken stock of the doings of the storm. "The ground is too wet for plowing, and so I'll make you those brush brooms that you're wanting," and he smiled down into Mrs. Clay's face. "Gid and Si have taken their rifles and have gone on a

hunt for deer meat, so, I reckon, you can calculate on having venison to cook for dinner. How's the foot?" He turned abruptly to the Indian girl, who lay on the bed, with the two babies kicking and crowing by her side and Ruth seated near.

"Heap hurt." Brighteyes glanced up a bit shyly at the big deerskin-clothed man. "No can walk. White squaw make lie on bed. No let go."

"Well, I should say not, not with that foot and that little yunk," Big Tom declared, heartily. "You are welcome to our grub and roof just as long as you can stand white folks' ways of living. They sure are cute," and he grinned down at the two babies. "Want to sell him?" and he pointed one big finger at the brown little Indian baby. "Heap fine boy. Give cow for him."

"No—no! No sell; not for cow; not for gold. He my ba-be!" and the Indian woman's eyes flamed with outraged motherhood.

"Well, no harm done," laughed Big Tom. "I reckon babies, red and yellow and white, are all the same to their mothers. Dad wouldn't sell you for the biggest cow that ever walked, with a wagon-load of gold thrown in, would he, Miss Skeezi?" and he chucked his own baby under the chin.

"Me no like ask sell ba-be," Brighteyes declared, solemnly, still regarding Big Tom doubtfully.

"Don't blame you," grinned Big Tom. "He's a mighty promising chunk of Indian devilment."

For a moment the bright black eyes regarded him questioningly, as if doubtful whether or not the

words should be considered complimentary; then, apparently satisfied, the solemn face lighted with smiles.

“Some day, when grow big, he make great warrior, like my father.” She laid one hand proudly on the dusky forehead of her baby. “Make all his enemies tremble.”

“Hope he never gives this little one cause to tremble,” and the big man bent tenderly over his baby.

“No, no.” The face of Brighteyes shone with gratitude. “He no make friends tremble. Be like strong oak to them—protect.”

“Bully for him,” laughed Big Tom. “Well, just make yourself to home. You sure are welcome. Now I must be getting after that brush for those brooms.” Taking his rifle from its pegs and picking up a small ax, Big Tom hurried off toward the woods to cut the brush for the brooms.

In a couple of hours he was back, with a bundle of straight willow shoots, each a little larger around than a lead pencil and some three feet long.

The construction of the brooms was a very simple task. First he smoothed off a handle out of a straight piece of wood, about four feet long and as large around as a girl's wrist. Then he took a sufficient number of the willow shoots to make a broom-sized bundle, carefully arranged them so that their small ends were even, evened the other ends by cutting, inserted one end of the prepared handle in their center, and tightly bound them to it with

strong thongs of deerskin. The result was a broom capable of doing effective work, when wielded by a strong-armed pioneer woman, especially on dirt floors.

Big Tom, seated on a chair a few feet in front of the house, was working on his third broom when he heard a distant halloo.

"Sounds like Gid," he thought, looking up from his work.

Half a mile away, coming down the side of a little hill toward him, he saw a couple of horsemen, followed closely by two men on foot. It needed but a glance to tell Big Tom that the two horsemen were Indians; but, at first, he could not tell who or what the two footmen were, so closely did they keep behind the horses. Then the shorter of the two ran out from behind the horses and waved his cap and yelled; and he recognized Gideon.

"Company!" he called cheerfully to Mrs. Clay, who was at work in the house.

"For the land sakes, who can it be?" and Mrs. Clay, followed by Ruth, hurried out of the house.

"Indians!" she exclaimed, the moment she saw the two horsemen.

"There's Gid!" cried Ruth, excitedly.

"And Si!" ejaculated Mrs. Clay, as the old hunter stepped out from behind one of the advancing horses where he could be seen.

"And they've got the deer meat," declared Big Tom, with satisfaction. "See that buck on the horse, back of one of the Indians?"

When the little company were within a few rods of the house, Gideon again broke into a run and raced up to where his father and mother and Ruth were standing.

"It's Great Thunder and Storm Cloud," he panted, the moment he reached home. "Si knows them. They've come for Brighteyes. Great Thunder is her husband. They were looking for her when they heard our shots and hurried up to see if we knew anything about her. Oh, Dad, I killed the finest buck you ever saw! Great Thunder has him on the horse back of him."

"Shot him on th' run, tew, by Jinks! As purty a shot as I ever seed fired. Yew're shore born for a hunter," and Silas, who at that moment came up with the Indians, slapped the excited boy approvingly on the back.

The two Indians at once jumped from their horses.

"Where squaw and papoose?" Great Thunder queried, as soon as the brief greetings were over, his eyes turning anxiously toward the blankets that inclosed the open side of the half-faced camp.

"In there." Big Tom pointed to the blankets. "Walk right in. She's busted her ankle and can't walk," and, going to the blankets, he pulled one aside and motioned Great Thunder to enter.

There was a little joyous cry from Brighteyes, followed by a rapid interchange of Indian words, as Great Thunder entered. After some ten minutes he came out, gravely thanked Mr. and Mrs.

Clay, as best he could with his broken English, for the shelter and the care they had given his wife and baby, and informed them that now he would take his family home with him, since Brighteyes could ride on his horse without hurt to her ankle.

“But not until after dinner,” protested Mrs. Clay, hospitably. “You must stay and have some of that fine buck you brought in on the back of your horse. I’ll have the dinner ready in a jiffy. Get a hot fire going,” and she turned to Big Tom.

The two Indians, with grunts of satisfaction, accepted Mrs. Clay’s invitation; and, when the dinner was ready, did ample justice to the white squaw’s cooking, pronouncing all, especially the venison, “heap good.”

After dinner they sat and smoked their pipes and talked with Big Tom and Silas for an hour, while Mrs. Clay rebandaged the sprained ankle of the Indian woman and protected it, as best she could, for the long horseback ride.

Ruth, when it came time for Brighteyes to go, was almost in tears, so deeply had she become attached to the little brown baby and his young mother; and Brighteyes herself showed that she felt strongly the kindness of her white friends. When Great Thunder came in to carry her out and place her on the horse, Brighteyes bade him wait a moment and, calling Ruth to her, unclasped from her neck a small, quaintly-formed silver chain, from which hung pendent a black stone rudely carved in the shape of a hawk; and, after holding the little



“My father’s totem,” she said proudly. “Keep all time on neck”

black hawk up for her husband to see, she placed the chain around the neck of Ruth.

“My father’s totem,” she said, proudly, holding the pendant reverently in the palm of her hand. “He great chief, Black Hawk. No Indian dare harm White Lily” (the name she had given Ruth) “now totem of great chief, Black Hawk, on neck. Keep all time on neck. Brighteyes never forget kindness of white friends.”

For a moment she sat silent on the edge of the bed, both hands uplifted, as if she were invoking the blessings and the protection of the Great Spirit for that household; then, with a final look around the rude room and upon the faces of her benefactors, she turned to Great Thunder.

“Brighteyes ready,” she said.

Great Thunder gently carried Brighteyes, with the baby in her arms, out of the house, placed her on his horse and sprang up on the back of the horse behind her.

Storm Cloud, with a final shake of the hands of his white friends, mounted his horse, and the three Indians rode slowly off, without a backward glance, until they reached the summit of a little hill a mile away. There, clearly outlined against the blue of the sky, they halted, turned on their horses’ backs, and waved a last farewell to their white friends.

CHAPTER XII

THE DAY OF THE FIRST PLOWING

LONG before sunrise the next morning Big Tom was up, getting everything in readiness to begin the plowing of this untamed wilderness soil; and by the time the sun rose above the low hills to the east, the oxen were hitched to the huge plow and all was ready for the start.

That was a great moment for the pioneers, the moment when the sharp point of the plow descended for the first time into the wild soil of the never-before-plowed prairie—their own land! All were there to witness and to celebrate the occasion, even to the baby, held warmly in Mrs. Clay's protecting arms.

Four yoke of strong oxen stood ready, hitched to the plow. Big Tom held the plow handles. Silas, with long-lashed ox whip in his hand, stood a little to the left of the oxen, waiting the word to start. Gideon and Ruth stood just behind the plow, eager to pounce upon the first sod turned by the mold-board, a small bottle held in the hands of each, into which a little of the dirt of this first sod was to be placed and ever afterward kept as a cherished memento of the beginning of their wilderness home. Mrs. Clay, with the baby held close in her arms, stood by the side of her husband.

"Here's to good luck in our new home and a good crop from our new land!" and Big Tom turned quickly and bent and kissed his wife and baby. "Ready, Si!" he called, and gripped the plow handles tightly with his two muscular hands.

"Git up!" yelled Silas, and the long lash of his whip cracked above the heads of the oxen.

The oxen started slowly, their yokes creaking as they were drawn tight against the animals' breasts and around their necks.

Big Tom jerked the plow handles upward and the sharp blade of the colter cut through the thick, tough sod. The plow point plunged downward, and slowly, like a great black snake, the sod curved upward and back along the moldboard and fell to the ground, the rich-looking black soil uppermost. The children both jumped to secure a handful of the dirt first turned. Gideon's fingers struck some hard substance embedded in the sod. He dug it out, and found in his hand a piece of the brainpan of a human skull, with the sharp point of a stone arrowhead piercing the bone and projecting into the brain cavity for half an inch!

For a moment the boy stared uncomprehendingly at this relic of a long-ago prairie tragedy; then, when he realized what it was that he held in his hand, he uttered a yell of boyish surprise that caused Silas to halt the oxen and Big Tom to turn quickly to him.

"Look! See what I have found!" he shouted, "and in the very first sod turned over by the plow!"

Holding the piece of skull up so all could see, he ran to his father.

Big Tom took the bone and examined it and the embedded arrowhead carefully.

"Reckon it's Indian," he said, turning to Silas, who had hurried up and was now standing by his side. "And the Lord only knows how long ago that arrowhead was driven into the living brain. Well, he sure is a dead Indian now; and dead Indians can harm nobody." He handed the bone to Silas.

"Yes, hé shore is dead," meditated Silas, taking the piece of skull and turning it over, and squinting one eye at the arrowhead. "Dead as Methusla, thanks tew that arrerhead. But it sartin is a kurus find tew make in th' fust sod turned over by th' plow. Sort o' symbolic, I reckon, o' th' fate o' th' Injuns an' sech thing as goes with Injuns, now that th' white man has come with his plow tew turn their very bones out o' their graves an' tew plant their huntin' grounds tew corn. Wal, every dog has his day; an' th' Injun, I reckon, has 'bout had his. It sartin is a kurus find! What are yew goin' tew dew with it? 'Taint much o' an ornament," and he turned to Gideon.

"Keep it," declared Gideon, emphatically, "just as long as I live. It's a hundred times better memento of our first plowing than a bottle of dirt would be."

"But it is such a ghastly thing," objected his mother.

“And maybe the Indian’s ghost might haunt us,” warned Ruth.

“Pshaw!” laughed Gideon. “It’s only a piece of bone with a stone arrowhead sticking into it, with nothing ghastly or ghostly about it; and ’twill make a right curious memento and I am going to keep it. Can’t I, Dad?”

“Yes, ’twon’t harm nothing, and it is curious. Take it to the house and hurry back. Now let’s get busy,” and Big Tom turned to his plow handles, while Silas, handing the broken skull bone to Gideon, swung the long lash of his whip around his head and yelled to the oxen.

Gideon ran to the house with the piece of Indian skull and, leaving it in a safe place, hurried back, anxious to see what else the sharp point and mold board of the plow would turn up.

The whole of that day Gideon and Ruth followed close behind the plow, their eager eyes on the furrow, searching for the queer things that this first plowing was constantly turning up. Now it was a snake, wiggling, frightened and startled, out from under the crumbling dirt of the turning sod, or a hideously ugly ground grub, crawling over the black dirt, or the nest of a field mouse or mole, possibly with babies in it, or a queer stone, or the flint head of an Indian arrow—always the plow was throwing up something to keep them interested and excited.

Once it brought to the surface a bumblebee’s nest. Then there were exciting times for all, even the

oxen, for a few minutes, while the heroic bees attempted to repel the ruthless monsters that had invaded their home.

Ruth ran, screaming, away at the first charge of a buzzing bee; but Gideon valiantly jerked off his coonskin cap and beat the bees down with it, one by one.

A detachment of the bees also attacked Big Tom and Silas and the oxen; and, for a moment, there was a bad mix-up of struggling oxen, yelling men and buzzing bees; but, finally, the coonskin caps of the men prevailed and the bees were slain or routed, and the oxen quieted down and straightened out of the tangle into which they had twisted themselves in their efforts to get away from the bees.

The victors now took stock of their injuries. One heroic bee, before death overtook him, had succeeded in reaching the tip of Silas's nose, with the result that Silas's already large nose was beginning to take on monumental proportions. Big Tom had been stung once on the under lip. Gideon had a rapidly swelling right ear, as the result of his having missed a swipe with his cap at one angry bee.

"Don't see why that tarnal bee picked out th' end o' my nose," complained Silas, as he tenderly fingered the inflamed end of that useful organ, when the excitement had quieted down and each was considering his injuries.

"Reckon 'twas because 'twas the most prominent

point in sight," grinned Big Tom, as well as he could with his swollen lip.

"Better not dew eny grinnin' with that lip, or yew'll bust it," retorted Silas. "It's most big enough tew sot down on already."

"Shucks! Neither one of you has got anything on my ear," laughed Gideon. "It feels as big as a barn door."

"Tew th' victors belong th' spiles," suddenly proclaimed Silas, bending down and picking up a brownish, sticky mass, about twice the size of two doubled-up fists, the nest of the conquered bumblebees. "Have a drink," and, breaking off one of the little wax cells, of which the nest was largely composed, he handed it to Gideon.

"Me, too!" and Ruth, now that the buzzing bees were slain, hurried up. "I want some of the honey, too."

"But you did not fight. You ran away," protested Gideon.

"Well, I cheered when the bumblebee stung your ear," laughed Ruth. "That was a sharp bumblebee."

"Yes, one end of him," admitted Gideon ruefully, rubbing his swollen ear.

"But you killed him! And you did not run, not even when he stung you. That was really why I cheered."

"You shall have the honey for that," laughed Gideon. "Pass her a cup, Si."

"Take it all. We've no more time tew suck

honey." Silas handed the sticky cluster of honey-loaded cells to Ruth, and, picking up his ox whip, soon had the sturdy team pulling the plow through the tough sod again.

Ruth took the dirty-looking, sticky mass of honey cells somewhat gingerly; and she and Gideon squatted down on the grass and proceeded to extract their honey by the simple process of breaking open the cells and sucking the honey out of them. The honey was delicious; bumblebees' honey always is, especially if you have helped to rob the nest; and Gideon and Ruth did not move until they had sucked the last cell dry. Then they again hurried after the plow.

Thus, with many exciting, amusing and always interesting incidents, the day, the great day of the first plowing of their wild prairie land, passed.

That black, upturned earth marked the beginning of the end of the wilderness.

The pioneer's rifle, ax, plow! What a debt we of this generation owe to these rude but effective tools of the westward march of civilization!

CHAPTER XIII

THE KILLING OF OLD WHITENOSE

THURSDAY morning, the day Gideon and Silas were to go with Old Man Kellogg on the great bear hunt, dawned without a threatening cloud in the sky. The night before Gideon had cleaned and oiled his rifle, sharpened his hunting knife, filled his powder horn, and helped Silas mold enough bullets to fill both their bullet pouches, so that everything was in readiness to start the moment they had eaten their early breakfast.

“Hope you get Old Whitenose this time,” Big Tom said, as Silas and Gideon arose from the table, pulled their coonskin caps down on their heads, and picked up their rifles. “If you don’t, reckon Martha and I will have to shoulder our guns and go out and get him. Right, Martha?” The grin on his face broadened as he turned to his wife.

“Yes, we certain will,” answered Mrs. Clay, smiling. “And I’m sure no white-nosed bear, or bear with another kind of a nose could disappear right before my eyes, without my knowing where he went. Now, do be careful,” and she turned a bit anxiously to Gideon. “Don’t get too close to the bear until your are sure he is dead. Dad got clawed terribly once by a bear that he thought was dead.”

"All right, Mother," laughed Gideon, as he slung powder horn and bullet pouch over his shoulder. "I'll be powerful careful not to get near enough to Old Whitenose for him to claw me, until I am sure he is dead."

"Better wait 'til yew find Old Whitenose afore yew kill him," admonished Silas, as he hitched up his belt and tightened it another hole. "That thar b'ar ain't no last year's cub; an' I reckon we'll be in luck if we git within shootin' distance o' him. But we're goin' tew try powerful hard, an' Old Man Kellogg'll have his dogs with him. Ready?" and he turned to Gideon.

"Yes," answered the boy, his face flushing and his eyes sparkling with the excitement of the thought that at last he was actually about to start out on the big hunt—and with Silas Wegg!

"Then, for'erd—march! as th' militia captain used tew say," and Silas flung the long barrel of his rifle up on his shoulder. "So-long, folks. Hope tew have Old Whitenose's hide when we see yew ag'in. Come on, Gid." With a final good-by wave of his hand he was off, striding along at a gait that caused the shorter legs of Gideon almost to run in order to keep by his side.

"How far is it to the Little Spouter, where we are to meet Old Man Kellogg?" Gideon asked, when they had waved their last farewells to Big Tom and Mrs. Clay and Ruth and had passed out of sight over the brow of a little hill.

"'Bout five miles," Silas answered.

“And how far from there to the Big Swamp, where we are to begin our hunt?”

“’Bout ’nuther five miles. We otter make it in less’n three hours. Promised Old Man Kellogg I’d be at th’ Leetle Spouter afore th’ sun was an hour high, which means that we’ll have tew jog ’long some lively,” and Silas glanced toward the east, which was beginning to redden with the first rays of the rising sun. “How’s yewr walkers?” Good for th’ present rate o’ speed?”

“Shucks, yes.” Gideon’s face flushed at the idea that Silas thought a little jaunt like this might tucker him. “I’ve walked faster and further than this with dad without getting tuckered. Do you think we can find the trail of Old Whitenose?”

“I reckon we kin, if them dogs o’ Old Man Kellogg are eny good. Now, jest fall in ahind me. Yew’ll find it easier walkin’ through th’ thick grass an’ brush that way. Thar ain’t no reg’lar trail from here tew th’ Leetle Spouter.”

For nearly an hour Silas and Gideon walked on, without slacking their speed or pausing; then, on the summit of a little hill, Silas halted and pointed across the prairie to where a fringe of willow trees grew along the base of a rocky ridge that jutted up above the level of the prairie half a mile away.

“Thar’s th’ Leetle Spouter, right thar in that clump o’ willers,” he said. “An’ I reckon Old Man Kellogg, with his dogs, is in thar right now, settin’ on a log near th’ spring a-waitin’ us. Leastwise

that's whar he said he'd be. Now let's see if th' dogs will nose us afore we git tew th' willers. Th' wind's right. Walk right ahind me an' make as leetle noise as possible. No talkin'," and Silas started off toward the willows, with Gideon following close behind him, both making their way through the thick grass of the prairie as noiselessly as two Indians.

But before they had covered half of the distance intervening between them and the willows, a man, holding back two dogs straining at their leash, suddenly emerged from the willow clump, and stood looking in their direction.

"Gosh! Thar he is!" exclaimed Silas. "Th' dogs did smell us out an' have got sense enough tew keep from barkin'. Reckon they'll dew. Hi-o-oo, thar!" he called, and took off his cap and swung it around his head.

Old Man Kellogg sent back an answering shout; and in a few minutes, Gideon and Silas stood by his side.

"The old thief got another of my pigs last night!" were the first words of Old Man Kellogg, as Gideon and Silas hurried up. "But he won't get another," and he brought the butt of his rifle down on the ground with a jar. "Now, who have we here?" He turned his eyes to Gideon.

"He's th' son o' Big Tom Clay. Yew've heered me tell o' Big Tom Clay, th' feller that purty nigh busted me in tew in a wrestlin' match," explained Silas.

"I certain have," answered Kellogg. "What's he doing in these parts?"

"Goin' tew settle, 'bout five miles north o' here."

"Well, he sure is welcome. So be you," and Old Man Kellogg turned to Gideon. "Come 'long to help Silas and me get Old Whitenose—the thieving old rascal!—have you?"

"Yes," answered Gideon. "Do you think we will get him?" he added eagerly.

"Get him," Old Man Kellogg's jaws came together with a snap. "You're durned right we'll get him. Do you think I'll let him steal every last pig I've got, right from under my very nose, without getting his concerned old hide to pay for them? I'd be ashamed to look another pig in the face if we let that old pork stealer get away from us again. Get him? You can bet your last coon-skin we'll get him, if it takes a month."

Evidently, as Silas would say, Old Man Kellogg was considerably "het up" over the latest depredations of Old Whitenose and intended that they should be his last.

The Little Spouter was famous for its pure cool water; and, consequently, before starting for the Big Marsh, all sought the spring to "load up," as Silas put it, with its water.

As soon as Gideon saw the spring he understood why it was called the Little Spouter. Near the foot of the rocky ridge and about as high as a man's head was a narrow fissure in a huge rock, out of which spouted a little stream of ice-cold water that

fell into a small basin which it had hollowed out of the rock, and then, overflowing the basin, wandered away in a tinkling brooklet fringed with willows.

All drank their fill of the cool water.

"Now," Old Man Kellogg said, as they turned from the spring, "we'll get on the trail at once; and if them fool dogs lose it again, I'll be durned if I don't shoot both of them. 'Tain't far to where the old thief stopped to eat my pig last night. We'll start from there," and, holding the dogs in leash, he led the way.

About a mile from the spring Old Man Kellogg halted near a little clump of bushes. The dogs now began to show great excitement, straining at their leash, jumping excitedly toward the little clump of bushes, and uttering low, wrathful growls.

"Right in there," Kellogg pointed to the bushes, "is all that is left of my pig, just his bones. Durn the old thief! Now, let's get after him like the Day of Judgment," and, still keeping hold of the leash, he followed the dogs into the bushes.

Near the center of the clump of bushes was a little pile of bones, with some of the bloody flesh still adhering to them, plainly indicating the spot where Old Whitenose had stopped to enjoy the spoils of his raid. The dogs now became almost wild with eagerness to be off on the trail of the bear.

"Reckon I'd better hold them back until we get almost to the swamp," Kellogg said, taking a tighter grip on the leash.

"Yes," agreed Silas, who had been carefully examining the spot where the bones lay. "I don't believe th' trail's mor'n half an hour old. Looks as if th' old devil had taken a nap here, atter gittin' his fill o' pig. Shouldn't wonder if yewr comin' 'long with th' dogs had routed him out. We might run on tew him afore we git tew th' swamp. Now, let's git a-goin'. Jest give th' dogs th' lead an' all we'll have tew dew'll be tew foller 'em."

The two dogs needed no urging to take the trail of the bear; and, with noses close to the ground, they hurried along as fast as the restraining leash would allow them to go, pulling Old Man Kellogg after them in a half trot. Silas and Gideon followed in single file close behind him. It was easier to travel thus through the thick grass of the prairie.

For nearly an hour they followed the dogs, whose eager noses had no difficulty in keeping to the trail of the bear.

"Better see if yewr primin's all right," Silas turned his head and glanced back at Gideon. "We're gittin' near tew th' Big Swamp. Th' old rascal's headed straight for th' identickle old log whar I lost him afore," he added a moment later.

"And where I lost him afore," joined in Old Man Kellogg. "But where I won't lose him again, if these dogs are any good—Hi! Look out!"

As he spoke both dogs made so violent a lurch forward that they nearly pulled him off his feet, at the same time giving voice to deep-throated, angry growls.

Silas and Gideon, their rifles held ready to throw instantly to their shoulders, stepped out from behind Old Man Kellogg, their eyes eagerly searching the ground to the front of them.

For about fifty rods the prairie lay level, then rose in a low snakelike ridge, at the base of which grew a fringe of brush and small trees.

“Keep yewr eyes on th’ brush,” Silas warned. “I reckon he’s—”

“Hi! There he is!” cried Old Man Kellogg, as a huge black bear slowly raised himself on his hind legs from behind a low clump of bushes and deliberately turned and looked at them.

Gideon’s heart gave a great thump at sight of the bear, the famous bear with a white nose, and he instinctively threw his rifle to his shoulder; but he did not shoot. The distance was too great to chance a shot.

“Turn loose th’ dogs! Turn th’ dogs loose!” yelled Silas, starting on the run toward the bear.

Old Man Kellogg quickly slipped the leash; and the two dogs, with eager, savage growls, sprang to the chase, followed by Gideon and the two men.

The bear stood for a minute watching them; and then, as the dogs drew near, slipped down unconcernedly on his four feet and ran up the side of the ridge and disappeared over its top, not as if he were frightened, but as if he had satisfied his curiosity and did not care to linger longer.

The dogs were not five rods behind the bear when he passed over the top of the ridge; and a

minute later, their loud yelps and snarls, mingled with the deeper growls of the bear, told our friends that the hounds had caught up with Old Whitenose.

“Hurry, or he’ll git away from th’ dogs afore we kin git a shot at him!” cried Silas, racing toward the sounds of the conflict, his long legs at once placing him in the lead.

Gideon did his best to keep up with him, and so swiftly did the excited boy run that when Silas reached the top of the ridge, he was not ten feet behind.

The ridge sloped steeply downward for a couple of rods. Then came fifty yards of level ground, ending in a second low ridge that separated it from the swamp beyond. Along the side and top of this ridge grew a few scattered trees and thin patches of brush, but the intervening ground was clear.

At the foot of this second ridge Gideon saw the bear, standing on his hind legs, with the two hounds snarling and jumping around him, but being very careful not to get within reach of those powerful claw-armed paws. The bear was facing Gideon and he could plainly see the curious white nose that had given him his name.

“Hurrah!” he shouted, as he raced down the ridge after Silas. “The dogs are holding him.”

But, even as Gideon spoke, the bear, with a glance in the direction of the running men, dropped down on his four feet, turned his back contemptuously on the two dogs and trotted up the ridge, swinging his head from side to side as he ran, the

dogs rushing him so closely that the hunters did not dare chance a shot for fear of hitting one of them.

“Hurry,” yelled Silas, “or th’ old devil will git intew th’ swamp afore we kin git a shot at him,” and he raced across the level ground and up the ridge at a speed that left Gideon and Old Man Kellogg many feet in the rear.

When Gideon, greatly excited and panting from his exertions, reached the top of this second ridge, to his astonishment, he saw Silas standing stock-still near the fallen trunk of a huge tree, staring at the two dogs. The dogs stood growling and whimpering in the edge of a pond of marsh water.

The bear had vanished!

“Th’ identickle spot whar I lost him afore!” Silas turned an astonished face to Gideon and Old Man Kellogg. “When I reached th’ top o’ th’ ridge,” he explained, “thar stood th’ dogs a-whinin’ an’ a-growlin’ in th’ edge o’ th’ water, th’ same as yew see ’em now; but th’ b’ar—great horned buffelers! we ain’t yunks tew let no old white nose b’ar fool us like this!” and he brought the butt of his rifle down on the ground with a thud. “Th’ b’ar’s jest naterly got tew be here, ’less he’s taken wings an’ flyed away or turned intew a fish an’ is a-swimmin’ round under th’ water, ’cause thar ain’t no other place fer him tew be, as I kin see,” and his eyes swept the surrounding country.

Almost directly in front of them lay the pond, its banks fringed with short reeds, while its deeper

waters were clear from all surface vegetation. Beyond that stretched, as far as the eye could see, the Big Marsh. But the pond was far too wide for the bear to have swum across before the hunters came in sight of its waters; and there certainly was not now, nor had there been, the head of a swimming bear showing above its quiet surface. The trunk of the fallen tree was plenty large enough for the bear to have crawled inside of it, but so far as they could discover, there was not a visible entrance anywhere along its huge bulk big enough for anything larger than a coon to enter. The tree had fallen many years before and now the rotting log lay down the slant of the bank that sloped somewhat steeply to the waters of the pond, its lower end extending out into the water. About it the water grass and reeds grew thick, but its trunk showed clear until it seemed to disappear under the water. A fringe of short water grass and reeds grew along the banks of the pond; but it did not seem possible that the bear could have hidden in them. The ground between the ridge and the pond was open, offering no place of concealment for so large an animal as Old Whitenose. Then there were the two dogs, growling and whimpering in the edge of the water. Evidently, from their actions, the bear had plunged into the pond and disappeared; but how, and where?

“Gosh! This gets me!” and the eyes of Old Man Kellogg followed the eyes of Silas, as they slowly searched the still surface of the pond, its

reedy banks, the great rotting log and the open ground between the pond and the ridge. "But, as you say, it stands to reason that the bear must be here, unless he has turned into a fish or a bird. Them tarnal dogs ought to have followed him into the water, 'stead of standing there growling and whimpering, as if they were afraid of getting their toes wet. I've a notion to whale the hide off them. Well, let's see what they are whining about." He hurried down the bank to where the two dogs stood, followed by Silas and Gideon.

It needed but a glance of their experienced eyes to tell them that the bear had plunged into the pond at the spot where the two dogs stood and swam through the fringe of vegetation out into the clear water beyond. But what had become of him then? How had he disappeared so quickly and so completely?

"Th' cunnin' old devil must be lyin' low somewhere in th' reeds an' water grass," declared Silas, when his eyes had searched all the surroundings, "with jest his head above th' water, 'cause thar ain't no other place whar he could be, 'less, as I said afore, he's turned intew a fish or a bird. I reckon if we cut some long poles an' thrash th' reeds hereabouts, we're bound tew rout him out."

"Good idea," agreed Old Man Kellogg.

The narrow fringe of grass and reeds that here lined the shore of the pond did not extend into the water at any place for more than a dozen feet and did not rise above its surface anywhere for more

than a foot. But in places the reeds and the grass grew so thick that it was impossible to see the surface of the water through them, and it was just possible that the bear, by lying with his body under the water, had concealed himself among them. If he had, the poles would soon rout him out.

Silas and Old Man Kellogg each secured a pole about a dozen feet long; and, handing their rifles to Gideon and bidding him keep near them and his eyes "peeled," they both, one following close behind the other, began "thrashing" the reeds and the water grass that grew along the margin of the pond, beginning at the trunk of the big tree, near which the bear had disappeared.

Gideon, who had been greatly mystified and chagrined by the disappearance of Old Whitenose, was now all interest. He felt sure that the bear was hiding in the reeds—indeed, where else could he be?—and every time the hunters whacked their poles down, his heart jumped and his fingers tightened on the rifles. He followed close to the men, keeping as nearly as possible between the two, so that he could hand their rifles to them quickly should the blows of their poles rout out Old Whitenose.

Whack!—splash!—whack! went the poles. Whack!—splash!—whack! again and again and always in vain, until, after an hour's whacking and splashing up and down the bank of the pond on both sides of the old log, the two disgruntled and bewildered men were forced to conclude that Old

Whitenose had not hidden himself in the reeds or the water grass.

“Wal, I’ll be durned if this don’t teetotally git me!” Silas exclaimed in angry disgust, as all seated themselves on the big log to further consider the mysterious disappearance of the bear. “I’m ’bout ready tew agree with th’ Injuns that Old Whitenose ain’t no mortal b’ar, but jest a wicked speerit that takes on th’ form o’ a b’ar tew work out his devilments.”

“Shucks!” protested Old Man Kellogg, “spirits don’t eat pigs; and this is the fourth pig of mine that Old Whitenose has killed and eaten, the old thief! He must have swam across the pond afore you got in sight.”

“No mortal b’ar could have done it,” Silas asserted emphatically. “Th’ fust thing I did atter seein’ them dogs standin’ thar in th’ edge o’ th’ water was tew make sartin thar warn’t no b’ar swimmin’ across th’ pond. Then ’tain’t th’ fust time he’s fooled yew nor me, tew say nuthin’ o’ th’ Injuns, an’ allers right in this identickle spot. An’ thar’s them shots o’ mine an’ yourn tew account for. I sartin never missed no dead-easy shots like that afore an’, I reckon, yew never did neither.”

“I sure never did,” agreed Old Man Kellogg. “That bear warn’t more’n five rods from me; but I’ll be durned if I didn’t make a clean miss; and the bear just shook his head, like he’d heered a fly buzzing by his ears, and slid down ahind this very log, and when I’d loaded my rifle and ran up to

the log, I'll be durned if I could find hide nor hair of him, no more than I can now. It sure is powerful curious, but 'tain't sensible to believe in spirits, and I reckon there's some sensible way of explaining it all when we get the rights of it—"

"Jest look at them tew dogs!" Silas suddenly pointed to the two hounds. They had just risen from the ground, where they had been lying at the feet of the men, and now stood, with hair bristling along their backs and necks, growling and whimpering, their legs trembling so that their bodies shook. "They shore look an' act as if they seed speerits."

"Gosh!" and Old Man Kellogg jumped to his feet, his rifle held ready for instant use. "They sure smell bear!" His eyes swiftly searched the surroundings, but in vain. There was not a sign of a bear anywhere in sight.

For a minute the two men stood staring down at the dogs, completely dumfounded by the strange actions of the hounds; then a sudden and unexpected wild yell from Gideon caused both of them to jump about a foot straight up in the air.

Gideon, who had been keenly disappointed by the failure to find Old Whitenose, had seated himself on the log a little apart from the two men and nearer to the water, and had been trying very hard to think out some way to account for the mysterious disappearance of the bear. But the more he had thought, the more difficult and mysterious the problem had appeared. He could discover no

reasonable way of accounting for the strange disappearance of Old Whitenose, and as he sat there listening to the two men narrating their queer experiences with this same bear and at this same spot, a creepy-crawly, shivery sensation had begun climbing up and down through his spinal marrow.

What if Old Whitenose really were an evil spirit, such as the Indians thought him? He might, at that very moment, be standing, invisible but grinning with triumph, behind him! Gideon, with a shiver, glanced hastily over his shoulder. At that instant the two dogs had jumped to their feet and stood growling and shivering with fright, the hair along their backs and necks standing straight up.

Gideon turned quickly and stared down at the dogs. They appeared to be looking straight at him! What frightful thing did they see? The goose flesh began coming out all over his body. Then, as he thus sat in shivering, questioning dread, the horrified boy heard a deep, hollow, ghostlike, bearish growl, seemingly coming from right under him. This was too much for the excited condition of his nerves and he leaped off the big log, with the yell that had so startled Silas and Old Man Kellogg.

"Whar? What is it?" Both men swung around toward Gideon, their cocked rifles half raised to their shoulders. But all they could see was the white-faced boy, staring wildly at the big log.

The moment the thrill of the sudden fright was past, Gideon, with a violent start, realized what that

low growling sound he had heard coming from beneath him as he sat on the log must mean.

“He’s in there! In the log!” he yelled. “The big log is hollow and he’s inside of it! I heard him growl!”

Both men leaped to the log where Gideon had been sitting and laid their ears down close to it and listened.

“Gosh a’mighty! Th’ boy’s right!” and Silas straightened up, a look of deep satisfaction on his face. “I heered him growlin’ low an’ angrylike, as if them dogs was gittin’ on his nerves. Now, how did th’ old devil git in thar, I’d like to know?” and he turned a questioning face to Old Man Kellogg.

“He sure is in there!” and Old Man Kellogg stood up, his face and eyes glowing with excitement and triumph. “But I don’t care a durned how he got in there right now. What I want right now is to get at the old pig stealer.” His eyes ran swiftly up and down the visible length of the log. “If we had an ax we—”

“We kin burn him out,” broke in Silas. “Th’ log’s dry an’ will burn.”

“Good idea.” Old Man Kellogg’s jaws came together with a snap. “He deserves roasting. Now, let’s get the fire going.”

There was an abundance of dry wood a little distance away, and in a very short time Gideon and the two men had a great pile of dry wood so arranged about the log that its burning would soon

eat a hole through its dry walls. Old Man Kellogg lit the fire.

“Hope it burns every hair off your pig-stealing old body!” he said vindictively, as the fire caught and the flames leaped up.

The fire had been purposely kindled below the spot where Gideon and the two men had heard the bear inside of the log, so as to cut off his escape by way of the water, if that was the way he had entered, and there seemed to be no other way.

The dry wood burned furiously, and in a few minutes the big log itself was blazing.

“See! Look thar!” suddenly exclaimed Silas, pointing to where the log apparently disappeared under the water of the pond.

Gideon and Old Man Kellogg turned quickly and saw, just beyond the point where the log vanished in the midst of a thick bunch of short reeds, a thin column of smoke rising above the surface of the pond.

“Reckon that’ll explain th’ mystery,” continued Silas. “Thar’s a way o’ gittin’ intew th’ log from th’ water—Hi! Ho! Gittin’ tew hot for yew in thar?” and he turned quickly to the log, where angry growling and violent scratching, coming from the inside, told him that Old Whitenose was beginning to realize the desperate nature of his situation.

“Growl, you old pig stealer! Growl and scratch!” and Old Man Kellogg hit the log a violent thump with a heavy club above the spot where the

growling and the scratching indicated the presence of the bear. "We've got your concerned old hide this time sure. You'll never steal another pig." And thus giving vent to his triumph and satisfaction, he continued pounding on the log with the club above the head of the luckless bear that now, doubtless, was beginning to feel the heat of the fire.

The bear responded with angry growls and furious scratchings for a while; then, suddenly, the growling and scratching ceased.

Silas bent quickly and placed his ear down close to the log and listened.

"Th' old devil is turnin' 'round," he said, straightening up. "Reckon he's thinkin' on tryin' tew run through th' fire an' out th' other end o' th' log. Pound on th' log near th' fire. Maybe that'll keep him back," and, seizing a club, he and Old Man Kellogg began pounding on the log as near to where it was on fire as the heat permitted them to go.

By this time the fire had eaten far into the log, and, suddenly, the heavy blows of the clubs of the two men caused a huge piece of the charred shell to tumble in. The next instant, scattering the fire in every direction and sending up a great shower of sparks, out through the opening thus made plunged Old Whitenose, his fur on fire and his wicked little eyes glowing with rage, and sprang straight toward Silas, who was the nearest.

Silas had laid down his rifle while using a club on the log; so had Old Man Kellogg. Gideon was

the only one of the three with his rifle ready in his hands.

Silas had just time to utter a yell of surprise and warning and leap back and swing his club when the bear was upon him. The club fell, but a blow of the great paw sent it flying from the hand of the old hunter and he stood weaponless before the infuriated bear. There was no time even to draw his hunting knife. The bear was too close. He must try to ward off the embraces of those terrible arms with bare hands. But just as the hairy arms were about to close round him, there came the sharp crack of a rifle, a flash of smoke and fire before his eyes, and the bear, with a horrible grunting growl, crumpled up, as if his muscles had been suddenly turned to soft tallow, and fell to the ground, dead, his ugly head lying between the old hunter's feet.

Silas swung swiftly about. Gideon stood directly behind him, his rifle still smoking in his hand, his face white, and his legs beginning to tremble so that he could hardly stand.

"Gosh!" and Silas caught hold of the boy's hand. "Yew got him that time! An' jest in th' nick o' time. Anuther moment an' he'd ben crackin' my ribs. Never knowed a bear tew move so lively afore."

"Blowed the right eye plumb out of him and most of his brains, too, I reckon." Old Man Kellogg lifted up the head of the bear and glanced down at it. "Well, you old pig stealer, we've got

you at last where you'll never steal another pig! But," and he straightened up, "now that we've got the bear, I am some curious to find out how he got into the log so quick and quietlike. Come on. Let's see how he done it." Jumping on top of the log below the fire, he walked along in the direction of the smoke that could still be seen rising above the surface of the pond a little beyond the spot where the log seemed to disappear under the water in the midst of a thick bunch of short reeds.

Silas and Gideon both followed him, equally curious to solve the mystery that had so greatly puzzled them.

"Well, I swun! Just look there!" Old Man Kellogg pointed to where the smoke was rising from just beyond the thick bunch of short reeds that here rose some six inches above the water. "The log's busted right off short and the smoke's coming out of the hollow end!"

"Th' cunnin' old devil!" exclaimed Silas. "He jest swam out ayond th' reeds, an' then, keepin' his head down low, walked intew th' busted end o' th' holler tree an' kept on a-goin' 'til he was safe an dry inside. Thar's jest room inside th' tree for him tew keep his nose above th' water; an' th' bunch o' reeds hid th' fact that th' tree was busted off here, 'stead o' continuin' under th' water, as it looks as if it did. Wal, I'm powerful glad that mystery's solved an' accordin' tew sense and reason. But I shore would like tew know how I come tew miss him twice an' both on 'em dead-easy shots.

Let's have a look at th' old devil," and he started back over the log toward the carcass of the bear.

All now examined the body of Old Whitenose curiously. Evidently, from the appearance of its skin, the nose had once been badly scalded or burnt and white hairs had grown out over the scar, forming the peculiar white mark that had given the bear his name.

"He shore is a whopper," said Silas straightening up, after having satisfied his curiosity regarding the cause of the white nose. "Never seed as big a b'ar in these parts afore. Reckon he'll weigh nigh six hundred pounds."

"Reckon he will," answered Old Man Kellogg. "Now, let's get his hide off," and he drew his knife from its leather sheath and started to work skinning the bear.

Both men were experienced in this kind of work and it was not many minutes before they had the skin off.

"All th' bullets shore didn't miss Old Whitenose," and Silas, bending over the skin, now stretched out on the ground flesh side up, pointed to the scars left by nine bullet holes in the hide. "Reckon I was tew confident in aimin' at his eye, an' he jest happened tew swing his head 'nuf for me tew miss him. Leastwise that's th' only way I kin figger it out."

"Guess you've got the rights of it." answered Old Man Kellogg. "He certain was great on swinging his head. Now—"

“Howd’y, folks. Ben killin’ a b’ar, I see.”

All turned quickly from the bearskin at these words, and saw a long-bearded and long-haired man, dressed in deerskin, standing near, leaning on the barrel of his rifle and regarding them with interest. “Thought I heered a shot an’ reckoned I otter come over an’ see if yew had heered ’bout th’ row in th’ Hawk’s village. He’s—”

“Th’ Hawk! Black Hawk!” The long frame of Silas straightened up with a jerk. “What’s troublin’ th’ Hawk now, Ben?”

“Wal, if I’ve got th’ rights o’ it,” answered Ben Block, the long-haired one, “this’s ’bout how th’ fuss started; an’ I’ll be hanged if I blame th’ Injuns fer gittin’ some riled, I’ll be hanged if I dew! Yew see, ever since th’ Hawk an’ his people come back from their winter’s hunt an’ discovered a lot o’ whites squatted in their village an’ some o’ their houses torn down or burnt up an’ their best land taken from them, th’ Hawk an’ his bucks has been feelin’ ’bout as lovin’ toward th’ whites as a sore-footed bear. An’, jest tew rub it in some more, when ’tother day a Sac, one o’ th’ Hawks own band, found a bee tree, some o’ th’ white squatters claimed that ’twas theirn, an’ took th’ honey away from him an’ plundered his wagwam tew boot. An’ when th’ Injun objected they jest laughed at him an’ told him that he was a lucky dog tew be allowed tew keep his own hide whole. I was in th’ Hawk’s village th’ next day atter this happened; an’ th’ Hawk an’ his bucks looked an’ acted as if they was

jest a-ichin' tew dig up th' hatchet an' bury it in th' heads o' their enemies. I heered th' Hawk made a speech afore th' council th' night afore in which he declared th' Injuns must make war ag'in th' whites, or be driven intew th' far West, without lands or horses or shelter; an' that only slaves would stand fer sech treatment as they were a-gittin', an' that they must dig up their tomahawks, or soon they would all be made slaves. When I heered that an' seed a number o' young bucks lookin' as if their fingers was jest a-itchin' tew git hold o' my scalp locks, I jest said howd'y an' vamoosed. Maybe it will all blow over, but," and his eyes turned to Kellogg, "'pears tew me, if I had eny wimen folks, I'd want tew be with 'em just 'bout now."

"Right," said Old Man Kellogg, an anxious look on his face, and turned to Silas. "Let's be getting home."

"I'm ready," answered Silas, stooping and tossing the skin of Old Whitenose on his shoulders. "But I'm goin' 'long home with Gid. His folks otter know 'bout what Ben's told us. Come on, Gid," and Silas started off, with Gideon hurrying along by his side.

"Come 'long home with me, Ben, and fill up on the wife's cooking." Old Man Kellogg turned to Ben Block. "We'll be powerful glad to have you stay with us until this scare blows over."

"Don't care if I dew," answered Ben Block.

The two old hunters threw their rifles up on

their shoulders and hurried off in almost the opposite direction from that taken by Gideon and Silas.

CHAPTER XIV

DAYS OF SUSPENSE

WHEN Gideon and Silas came to the bottom of the little hill, from the top of which they should be able to see the camp of the pioneers, it was already dark. They had traveled far that day and both were very tired; but neither thought of his weariness. They were too anxious to know how it fared with the little home on the prairie to think of themselves. The words of Ben Block had filled their hearts with dreadful apprehensions. They might portend a terrible sight, when they should reach the top of that little hill.

Gideon shuddered at the possibilities the thought conjured up. He knew only too well the harrowing nature of an Indian outbreak, its sudden, remorseless, deadly sweep that left behind only smoking ruins and dead bodies. During the long walk home he had said little. He had not cared to talk, had not asked even a question. The look that had come on the face of Silas at the mention of Black Hawk's name and Black Hawk's threats, his sudden determination to hurry back home, had told him better than words could tell the fear that was in the old hunter's heart. But now that he was almost in sight of home, now that a few more steps would verify or refute his worst fears, his anxiety became

so great that he could keep silent no longer, and as they started up the hill, he turned to Silas.

"You—you don't really think anything could have happened to dad and the folks since morning, do you?" he asked. "It has been such a little while."

"No. I jest reckoned yewr dad otter know 'bout this latest Injun scare tew onct, so I've hurried back tew tell him," answered Silas. But, notwithstanding these confident words, he quickened his pace until he almost ran up the hill.

"I—I can't wait. I must know. Whatever it is, I must know," and Gideon raced up the hill as fast as his tired legs could carry him.

At the top he stopped, stared over the dark prairie beyond for an instant, then uttered a shout of joy.

"They are safe! Dad and all are safe! I can see the camp fire!" and he turned a happy face to Silas, who, burdened by the heavy skin of Old Whitenose, had just reached the top.

"Wal, I shore am glad tew see that camp fire thar, burnin' so quiet an' peaceful-like," and Silas heaved a sigh of relief; "for I sartin was some worried atter heerin' Ben Block's tale an' knowin' th' temper o' Black Hawk an' his braves. Now, seein' thar ain't no rush, I'm goin' to take a rest," and, dropping the bearskin from his shoulder to the ground, he sat down on it.

"I'll run on ahead and tell them that we are coming with the skin of Old Whitenose." Gideon,

forgetting his weariness in his excitement, started off on the run across the dark prairie toward the camp fire that could be seen burning brightly about a mile away, the half-faced camp showing dimly in the background.

"Don't say nuthin' 'bout th' Injun scare. Leave that tew me," Silas called after him.

"All right," Gideon shouted back, and raced on.

Indeed, now that he knew the dear home was safe, the Indian scare had already taken a secondary place in his excited mind; for had he not killed Old Whitenose? The bear the Indians thought no bullet could kill, had he not killed with one bullet from his rifle? And, in proof of his prowess, was not Silas bringing home the skin of Old Whitenose? No wonder that, for the moment, the dread of the expected Indian outbreak was all but forgotten by the excited boy.

Big Tom sat on a log near the camp fire, busily at work fashioning one of the many household articles needed in their new home. Mrs. Clay was moving about the fire. Ruth, with the baby in her arms, sat on a blanket spread out on the ground at her father's feet. In the dark background rose the rough walls of the half-faced camp. Over all played the red light of the camp fire, a picture, framed by the darkness of the surrounding night, to delight the eyes of an artist.

Even the excited boy felt the swift impress of the beauty of the scene as he hurried toward it through the darkness; but he did not pause to

enjoy it. The moment he came within hearing distance, he uttered a loud halloo that brought Big Tom and Ruth to their feet and turned all eyes in his direction. A minute later he broke into the light of the camp fire and ran up to his father.

"We've got him! We've got Old Whitenose!" he panted. "Silas is coming with his skin."

"Bully for you!" congratulated Big Tom. "But where is Si?"

"He stopped to rest. The skin is so heavy. He'll be in in a minute. And—and—oh, Dad, I killed Old Whitenose!" Gideon looked up, his young face aglow with pride and triumph, into his father's eyes.

"Right," and Silas strode into the light of the fire. "Th' boy shore did kill th' brute an' jest in th' nick o' time tew save my ribs from bein' cracked. An' here's th' hide tew prove it," and he threw the skin of Old Whitenose down at the feet of Big Tom.

Big Tom reached out and gripped the hand of Gideon and pressed it warmly, as he would the hand of a man; but he did not utter a word of praise, and there was no need that he should. Gideon understood and appreciated that hand grip. It told better than words could how his father felt.

Now the happy boy, seated on the log by his father's side and with the others gathered close around him, was called on to tell of the big hunt that ended in the killing of Old Whitenose; and when he had completed the narrative, not without

many interruptions from Silas and exclamations of astonishment and alarm from Mrs. Clay and Ruth, the skin of the bear was spread out on the ground, where the full light of the camp fire shone on it, and was examined and admired by all, especially the curious white nose that had given the bear his name.

“But,” said Big Tom, looking up from the bearskin, “you were not calculating on getting back so soon. You thought it would take at least two days, going and coming. What brought you back so quick?”

The excitement of the home-coming and the telling of how Old Whitenose had been killed had, for the moment, driven all thoughts of the words of the old hunter, Ben Block, out of Gideon’s head; but now the question of his father brought them back with a suddenness that caused him to start.

“We met an old hunter, and he—” He stopped in some confusion, his eyes turning quickly to the face of Silas.

“Well,” and Big Tom straightened up. His eyes had caught the start of Gideon and his swift turning to Silas, and he knew that something was wrong. “What is it, Si?” as he faced the old hunter.

For a moment Silas hesitated and glanced a bit uneasily in the direction of Ruth; then he turned to Big Tom.

“Jest a leetle fresh news ’bout Black Hawk,” he said, “that Ben Block, th’ hunter, who comed up while we was a-skinnin’ Old Whitenose, told us.

'Tain't anything tew git scart 'bout," he hastened to add, as he noticed the start of Big Tom and the whitening face of Mrs. Clay, "but I thought yew otter know 'bout it tew once, so we hurried back. Ben said," and then Silas told, softening its harshness a little for the ears of Mrs. Clay and Ruth, the news that Ben Block had brought from the village of Black Hawk. "Don't s'pose 'twill 'mount tew anythin' serious," he concluded. "But thought 'twas a case whar an ounce o' prevention'd be wuth a ton o' cure. One kin't be tew cautious when Injun devilment is brewin', 'specially when th' Injun is Black Hawk."

For a moment Big Tom stood silent, his eyes studying the face of Silas; then he said quietly: "We must stand guard tonight."

"You don't think—" began Mrs. Clay, and stopped, for what was the use of asking questions? No human being, at least no white human being, could tell, with any certainty, what Indians would do.

"Black Hawk! You said Black Hawk!" and Ruth started, suddenly remembering the words of Brighteyes when she hung the totem of the little black hawk around her neck. "Black Hawk, he's the father of Brighteyes. See, she gave me this," and she pulled out the little black hawk from the bosom of her dress," and told me that it was the totem of her father, the great chief, Black Hawk; that no Indian would dare to hurt me while I wore this around my neck. I don't believe the father

of Brighteyes could be such a terribly bad Indian," and she held the totem up where all could see it.

"So that Injun gal is the daughter o' Black Hawk himself! Wal, that's somethin', but jest how much no mortal kin tell. Injun is Injun; an' 'twould take more'n a daughter's hand tew stay th' tomahawk o' an Injun. But I'd shore ware th' leetle hawk all th' time, jest for luck. It might come in handy sometime. Let's have a look at it," and Silas extended his hand for the totem.

Ruth handed the little rudely carved stone to him and he and the others examined it closely and curiously by the light of the fire. Big Tom returned the totem to Ruth, and as he replaced the chain that supported it around her neck he bent and kissed her.

"Always wear it," he said, "and remember the words of Brighteyes. Now," and he glanced a bit uneasily out into the surrounding darkness, "I reckon we'd better put out this camp fire—its light can be seen too far—and get to bed. You're tuckered, Si, so I'll stand guard for the first part of the night. Now get to bed," and Big Tom began pulling the wood out of the fire and scattering and stamping out the live coals.

Gideon was very tired; but, notwithstanding his weariness, he lay there in the darkness of the half-faced camp for many minutes, pondering over the exciting events of the day and thinking of the dread possibilities of an Indian attack, before sleep closed his eyes. He knew that the silence of the

night might be broken at any moment by the terrible war whoops of the red men.

Not a pleasant thought to take to bed with one; and yet it was a thought that early pioneers had often to make a bedfellow. Rumors of Indian outbreaks were frequent and every rumor carried with it the possibility of these dreadful night attacks to the lonely settlers. There was many a terror-filled night, when many a sleepless lad and many a sleepless maid lay shivering in bed; and for some the morning never dawned.

However, there was no alarm at the Clay home during the night.

Gideon did not awaken the next morning until he was routed out by his father. That day and for the three following days Big Tom and Silas carried their rifles with them wherever they went, and their eyes were continually searching the long line of the woods and the wide sweep of the prairie; but the days and the nights passed without alarm—warm, bright, delightful days and quiet, peaceful nights, when it seemed almost like sacrilege to think that the horrors of savage warfare could threaten a scene so quiet and beautiful.

On the morning of the fourth day Silas, the moment he arose from the breakfast table, picked up his rifle.

“I reckon,” he said, “it would be a good thing for me tew dew some reconniterin’ an’ find out jest what th’ Injuns have been doin’.

This suspense ain’t good for th’ nerves. I’ll shore be back in tew

or three days. Now don't let up none on yewr precautions while I'm away. I reckon th' trouble's been smoothed over this time; but 'tain't wise to run no risks when it's Injuns. So-long. Keep a tight hold on yewr scalps," and, with a grin on his face, he tossed his rifle to his shoulder and was off.

Gideon now took the place of Silas in driving the oxen while his father held the plow. No precautions were neglected to guard against a surprise by the Indians. Gideon and his father carried their rifles with them while at work in the field, and Mrs. Clay's rifle always stood ready loaded near her hand. Ruth was not allowed to go a dozen rods from the house. At night Gideon did his turn at standing guard.

In this way three days passed, and Silas had not returned. What could be delaying him? He had promised to be back in three days, surely, and now the three days were gone. The fourth day passed, and the uneasiness, the fear of all increased. Something must have happened to the brave, kindly old hunter.

On the evening of the fifth day, as they sat in front of the half-faced camp in the darkness—a camp fire, or even a candle, was too risky—as they sat thinking and talking of Silas and wondering what could be keeping him, without daring to put into words the fear that was in each heart, that the Indians had either killed or captured him, there came a halloo from out the darkness that brought them all to their feet with an answering shout of

gladness, and a moment later the tall, gaunt form of the old hunter was among them.

“Start th’ fire. I’m as hungry as a b’ar,” were his first words.

“Glory be, but I’m mighty glad to see you, Si,” and Big Tom gripped his hand. “Thought the Indians had got you sure.”

“Git th’ fire a-goin’,” reiterated Silas. “Ain’t no sense o’ settin’ here in th’ dark. Git th’ fire a-goin’ an’ th’ coffee a-bilin’ an’ th’ meat a-sizzlin’. I’m as hungry as a b’ar; an’ I won’t dew no talkin’ nor explainin’ ’til I’ve chucked somethin’ intew th’ empty spot in my stumick.”

But there was no need of further “talkin’” or “explainin’” to lift the burden of fear from off their hearts. The voice and words of Silas had already done that; and the “explainin’” could wait the filling of that “empty spot.”

In a surprisingly short time a fire was blazing hotly, the coffee “a-bilin’” and the meat “a-sizzlin’” and Silas busily filling the “empty spot.”

The last satisfying mouthful down, Silas drew back from the table.

“Thar, I’m feelin’ kumfertable ag’in,” he said. “I never could talk an’ eat tew once—”

“For the land sakes then do some talking now and set our minds at rest about the Indians,” laughed Mrs. Clay.

Now that the suspense and dread of the past few days had vanished, the reaction put all in the best of spirits and smiles and laughter came easily.

“Wal,” and the face of Silas sobered, “’twas a powerful close shave for th’ settlers. Black Hawk an’ his bucks sartin was some het up—an’ I’ll be durned if I blame ’em! They sartin had cause tew get hot under the collar. If th’ Gover’ment would hang ’bout a dozen o’ them wuthless, land-grabbin’, whiskey-drinkin’ and whiskey-sellin’ whites that is allers dewin’ somethin’ tew rile th’ blood o’ th’ Injuns, ’twould dew more for th’ lastin’ peace o’ th’ country than an army o’ soldiers, an’ be a powerful sight cheaper. That’s what I’d dew, if I had my say,” and he smiled grimly. “Th’ trouble started ag’in ’bout as Ben Block said, over th’ findin’ o’ a bee-tree an’ th’ robbin’ o’ th’ Injun that found it, not only o’ th’ honey, but o’ everythin’ o’ value that he had in his wigwam, an’ then laughin’ at him when he objected, an’ tellin’ him he was a lucky dog tew git off with a hull hide. Black Hawk an’ his bucks, as I told yew afore, was already feelin’ ’bout as good-natured toward th’ whites as a sick b’ar; and when they heered o’ this latest outrage, some on ’em was for diggin’ th’ hatchet up tew once an’ startin’ right in massacin’ th’ whites. When I got tew th’ Hawk’s village, things sartin looked dubious; but good counsel at last won out; an’ last night th’ Injuns an’ th’ whites had a big pow-wow; and some o’ th’ whites talked right good tew th’ Injuns an’ th’ trouble’s smoothed over for th’ present; but it’s still thar, a-smolderin’, an’ th’ good Lord alone knows when some uther fool white will dew somethin’ tew stir it all up

ag'in. That's what delayed me, a-waitin' tew see what way th' cat was a-goin' tew jump. But I did some lively travelin' when I got started. A good sixty miles since sunup! Reckon I've earnt a good night's rest an' sleep an' now I'm goin' tew git it. So-long 'til mornin'," and, without another word, he stretched himself out on one of the beds and in five minutes more was sound asleep.

The anxiety and the suspense of the past few days and the necessity of keeping guard at night had told on the others, and all were glad to follow the example of Silas.

CHAPTER XV

THE WILDERNESS ITCH

BUSY days, days full of hard but wholesome outdoor toil, now followed the excitement of the big bear hunt and the dread of the Indian scare. Twenty acres of the rich prairie land were plowed and made ready for the crops. Big Tom had brought with him seed corn to plant a dozen acres; and corn, since it furnished food for both man and beast, was to be the main crop raised.

Gideon and Ruth, barefooted and happy, with bags of seed tied about their waists, both went forth with their father and Silas to the corn planting; and dropping the large golden grains into the little holes dug with their hoes in the soft black loam, covered them quickly with a hoeful of dirt, pressed a bare foot down on them, and passed on to the next hill, in the meantime keeping up an almost ceaseless clatter of talk that, like the twitter of birds, gave voice to their own happiness.

After the corn planting, came the sowing of a little wheat, enough to make flour for home baking, and an acre or so of oats for the horses. Then potatoes and other table vegetables, sufficient for home use, were planted, and a few berry bushes that they had brought with them were set out.

Silas, during all of these busy days, had remained

with them, working hard every day and eating heartily every meal; but when the crops were all in, the spirit of unrest, the Wanderlust that had made him the adventurous nomad he was, came upon him; and one morning as he arose from the breakfast table he abruptly announced that his legs were just "a-itchin' tew be on th' go." "I've jest gotter go with 'em, or they'll shore be skylarkin' off by themselves," he said.

"Shucks, Si!" laughed Big Tom. "You're old enough now to settle down and live comfortably and not be trapesing all over the country. Supposing you make your home with us. You shore'd be welcome, and you need not do a snitch of work unless you want to. I know Martha and the yunks would be glad to have you."

"I know, I know; an' I thank yew heartily," Silas replied. "But th' spell's on me an' I've jest gotter shoulder my old gun an' live wild for a time, away from all humans an' alone with nater," and his eyes kindled as they swept longingly over the broad prairie and rested on the long line of the distant forest. "I've jest got tew go, Tom; but I'll shore be back afore long. An' I'll be as hungry as a b'ar," he added, with a grin and a wink in the direction of Mrs. Clay.

"You'll be right welcome back, Si," the good woman responded heartily. "But you'd better do as Tom says and stay with us right along."

"Kin't." Again Silas's eyes swept the surrounding prairie and forest. "Th' wilderness itch has got

intew my blood an' I've got tew work it out—but 'tain't no use standin' here talkin'. I'll be back when th' itch gets out o' my blood. So-long," and, tossing the long barrel of his rifle upon his shoulder, he strode swiftly off toward the west.

"Queer how the wilderness does get into the blood," philosophized Big Tom, as he stood watching the retreating form of Silas Wegg. "A house is like a prison to one who has passed his life roaming free and wild through great forests and over vast prairies. Well, it shore is a fascinating life and gets into the blood powerful; but," his eyes passed slowly from the face of his wife to the faces of his children, "'tain't like having a home of your own. Si don't know what he's missing. He shore don't know what he's missing when he misses this," and he bent and kissed the dimpled cheeks of his baby as she lay in her mother's arms.

"He shore don't," agreed Mrs. Clay emphatically. "Poor, lonely old man! I wish he would settle down and live with us."

"Too late to change him now," smiled Big Tom. "Si'll be just Si Wegg, the hunter, as long as he can carry a rifle or follow a trail; and, I reckon, that's just about what the good God intended him to be. In this new country some one has got to go on ahead and spy out the land and learn the trails, so that we settlers can follow, and that is what Si and his kind are doing. They are the scouts of the advancing army of civilization. I reckon it's just God's way of settling up a new

country, slow but sure— Well, I swun, if I ain't been philosophizing! Reckon the philosophizing itch is getting into my blood," he grinned. "But I know what will drive it out. Come on, Gid," and, picking up his ax, he started for the woods, followed by Gideon, ax in hand.

Now that the crops were all in, there was little to do on the "farm" until harvesting time; but this did not mean idleness for Gideon and his father. The log house was yet to be built, and as Big Tom was anxious to get the house up as soon as possible, every moment that could be spared from the crops was spent on the house. Trees had to be cut down, sawed up into logs of the right length, and then hauled to the place where the house was to be built.

Gideon and his father worked hard, but neither cared for the hard work—for was it not on their own house that they were working? By the last of August they had all the logs needed for the house cut and hauled. Now all was ready for the actual house building. But the task of lifting the heavy logs up into their places in the walls of the house was beyond the strength of Gideon and his father to accomplish alone, and therefore Big Tom decided to have a house raising.

In pioneer days, when a house or barn was to be built or any other work to be done that required extra help, it was the pleasant custom of the neighbors to all turn out on an appointed day and help with the work. These helping-days were made

great days by the pioneers. After the work came the feasting, prepared and brought to the gathering by the good housewives of the neighborhood; and after the feasting came the dancing and the rougher sports of the men, such as wrestling, running, jumping, shooting, etc. Pioneer neighborhood gatherings of any kind were few, and when one did occur all made the best of it.

Big Tom's neighbors were few and far apart, but what they lacked in numbers they more than made up in willingness, and a distance of twenty-five or thirty miles did not seem as far for a neighborly visit in those days as it does now. Twenty miles north of them lived Abe Dixon and wife and their brood of ten children; fifteen miles south dwelt Big Ike Conrad, with his motherless crop of girls and boys; while still a little farther south was the home of Old Man Kellogg. There were three or four other neighbors within a radius of thirty miles and all these would be invited to the house raising and all would be quite sure to come, unless prevented by some unavoidable hindrance; for no one in those days willingly missed such an opportunity of meeting his neighbors.

On the evening of the day the last log for the house was hauled, as Big Tom and the others sat in front of the half-faced camp, planning how best to notify the neighbors of the coming raising, all were startled by a low chuckle, seemingly coming from directly behind them, and, turning quickly, were astounded to see Silas standing not six feet

from them, leaning on the long barrel of his rifle and regarding them quizzically.

"Mercy on us!" and Mrs. Clay's hand was the first to clasp the hand of the old hunter. "Land sakes, how you did startle me! But you're right welcome back, Si," and she shook the hand warmly.

"You old Indian! Still up to your old tricks, I see!" Big Tom grabbed the other hand. "Well, you're as welcome as a hunk of ice on a hot day."

"Thought I'd see what sort o' a guard yew was a-keepin'," chuckled the old hunter. "Might have scalped yew all afore one o' yew knowed it."

"Oh, but I am glad to see you!" cried Ruth, catching hold of one of his sleeves. "Now you will tell us some more stories, won't you?"

"Sartin," grinned Silas. "Great Moses, but I shore am glad tew git back whar thar's wimen's cookin'. Ain't had a half-decent meal since I left; an', dew yew know, I'm as hungry as a b'ar right now?" and the grin on his face broadened as he turned to Mrs. Clay.

"Poor man!" laughed Mrs. Clay. "I'll get you something to eat in a jiffy. Gideon shot a fine gobbler this morning and I reckon there's enough left, 'long with some hot johnnycake and potatoes, to fill you up."

"Trot 'em out, then; for I shore am as hungry as a b'ar," and seating himself on a log near the fire, he stretched out his long legs with a sigh of satisfaction.

After Silas had been filled up, "plumb tew th'

muzzle," as he declared, he told the tale of his wanderings; but, as they had nothing to do with this story, we will pass them over, only stating, to show the untamed nature of the man, that he had spent a greater part of the time roaming absolutely alone through the wilderness west of the Mississippi River, "tew git th' itch o' th' wilderness out o' my blood," as he put it. Now he was contented to settle down into a more civilized way of living for a month or two "an' live in a house an' eat three square meals a day."

"We shore are glad to have you back with us," Big Tom assured him, when they were all seated around the blazing camp fire, "more especially since I'm thinking of having a house raising, and you are just the man to take the invitations. We've all the logs needed for the house cut and hauled."

"Jest th' thing," declared Silas, his face lighting up with interest. "I'll start right out in th' mornin'; an' I'll git every mother's son an' daughter, tew, within thirty miles, tew come. Have yew sot on th' day?"

"How'll a week from today do?" Big Tom looked inquiringly toward his wife.

"All right for me," Mrs. Clay answered. "That'll give me plenty of time to do the cooking and get things fixed."

"Then we'll make it a week from today. Now, who shall we invite?" and Big Tom again addressed Silas.

"Let me see, thar's Dixon up on Goose Creek,

an' Big Ike Conrad down at Turtle Lake. Big Ike's done a heap o' braggin' 'bout his wrestlin'. Says he's never seed but one man who could lay him on his back. Wal, I want tew show him anuther man what kin dew it a week from today," and Silas winked one eye at Gideon.

"And dad'll do it, too. I know dad can do it, can't you, Dad?" Gideon turned an excited but confident face to his father.

"I'll shore do my best not to disappoint Si, if I have the chance," laughed Big Tom. "But I've heard that this Big Ike is a holy terror when it comes to wrestling. Last year, down in Sangamon County, he came mighty nigh throwing Abe Lincoln; and the man is powerful good at wrestling who can do that, according to my cousin, who lives in the same town with Lincoln and who thinks Abe Lincoln the most powerful and skillful wrestler that he has ever seen—and he has seen me. So you'd better make no bets on your dad, son."

"Oh, I'm not scared of your getting throwed," asserted Gideon, his confidence in his father's wrestling prowess unshaken. "I know you can throw Big Ike, or Abe Lincoln himself, for that matter. Cousin Bill don't know as much about wrestling as he thinks he does."

"I'm shore not like the prophets of old, without glory in my own family," laughed Big Tom. "Well, if this Big Ike will give me the chance, I'll certainly do my best to deserve your good opinion. It's been a long time since I've had a right good wrestling

bout," and his eyes kindled. "But we've wandered from the subject. Now, who else is there to invite?" He turned again to Silas.

Silas gave him the names of all who lived near enough to come; and it was arranged that he should start out early the next morning with an invitation to each to come to the house raising and bring his family, big and little, with him.

"We'll have jest a rip-rarin' jolly old time," Silas declared, as they entered the house to go to bed, after all the details of the house raising had been settled. "An' I'll have a chance tew see if I've still got my runnin' legs an' if my shootin' eye is all right. Say, yew old hipperpotamus!" and he gave Big Tom a whack on the back with his hand, "if yew don't take th' conceit out o' Big Ike, I'll never make anuther brag 'bout th' wrestlin' skill o' Big Tom Clay as long as I live, so help me Moses! Yew see," and he grinned, "I've been dewin' consider'ble braggin' 'bout th' big Ohio man that came mighty nigh bustin' every bone in my body an' a-jarrin' out every tooth in my mouth th' only time I was ever fool enough tew wrestle with him; an' I'll lose my repertation for truthfulness if yew don't live up tew th' repertation I've give yew for wrestlin'." And, chuckling, Silas crawled into his bed, as happy as a boy over the prospects of the coming house raising.

CHAPTER XVI

BUILDING THE LOG HOUSE

TO Gideon and Ruth the day of the house raising was one of the great days of their lives. From the moment they knew of its coming they could think or talk of little else; and, when at last the great day dawned, they were out of their beds the first ones in the house and rushed outdoors to see how the weather looked.

“Clear as a whistle!” shouted Gideon, joyously, as his eyes swept the cloudless skies. “Hi, there!” He thrust his head in between the blankets that hung in front of the half-faced camp. “Everybody up! This is house raising day! Not a cloud is in the sky and the sun is coming up glorious! Everybody up!”

That was a busy morning for everyone. Big Tom and Gideon worked as swiftly as arms and legs could move, sorting out logs and hewing their ends so that they would fit together when laid into the walls of the house. Mrs. Clay and Ruth hurried hither and thither, getting everything about the place in readiness for the expected guests. All were excited and happy and constantly talking and laughing; for a house raising was an event to awaken enthusiasm even in grown-ups.

Abe Dixon, his wife and all of their ten children

were the first to arrive. Then, a little later, came Old Man Kellogg and his wife. Thus, family by family, they came riding across the prairie from different directions, until by ten o'clock all had gathered about the little half-faced camp of Big Tom Clay.

It was a motley looking crowd of men and women and children. Nearly all the men and boys were clothed in homemade deerskin suits and the women and the girls in homespun. Most of the men allowed their beards and hair to grow long and paid almost no attention to their personal appearance. The women and the girls, however, were neatly and cleanly dressed, though it was in homespun, and seemed to take as much pride in their personal appearance as do their more fashionable sisters of today. Every man carried his rifle; and, in addition, each had brought with him his ax and other tools. The women, according to the hospitable custom of the time, all brought baskets filled with the best products of their cooking skill. This was for the feasting that would sustain and enliven the work. Daddy Jones, a thin, white-haired old man, with a smooth-shaven wrinkled face, carried his old, timeworn violin, or fiddle, as our pioneer friends called it. This was for the dancing that would follow the completion of the house raising. In all, about thirty people, counting men, women, and children, had gathered about the little home of Big Tom Clay.

The men and the older boys at once began work

on the logs. Some, with their axes, hewed them into shape for the walls, others carried them, and still others, the older and more experienced men, laid them carefully and accurately into the walls of the house. Among these last was Big Ike Conrad, a huge, massively built man, a good inch taller and broader than was Big Tom himself, with a red face, red bushy whiskers, and red hair.

The eyes of Gideon turned often to the form of Big Ike. He watched the play of his great muscles, as he helped lift the heavy logs to their places in the wall, with something very much like trepidation. There was no discounting the tremendous strength of the man. In handling the heavy logs he appeared able to lift as much as the two powerful men working by his side.

"He is a little slow and too fat," thought Gideon, "to make a right good wrestler. Looks as if he ate and drank too much. But he shore is a powerful man, and dad'll have his work cut out for him if it comes to a tussle between them."

"Ain't dad strong?" and Hank Conrad, big-framed and red-haired, like his father, who was working alongside of Gideon and had noticed how often his eyes were reverting to the powerful frame of his father, turned to Gideon, aglow with pride. "Dad's th' strongest man in all Illernoie, an' kin lick eny man or throw eny man in these parts." A challenging light came into his eyes, as they glanced swiftly to where Big Tom was at work. "Why, down in Sangamon County last summer, he came

powerful near throwing Abe Lincoln himself, an' Abe's th' champeen wrestler o' th' world, I reckon, from what I've heered tell o' him. Kin your dad wrestle? He's big, 'most as big as my dad, an' he looks strong; but I'll bet my dad could down him as fast as he could git up."

"Your dad throw my dad!" and Gideon tried to inject all the scorn he felt into the tone of his voice. "My dad, back in Ohio, throwed everyone he wrestled with, and, I reckon, he can do the same in Illinois."

"Huh!" laughed Hank, scornfully. "Yew think your dad's some pun'kin, don't yew? Wal, jest wait 'till my dad gits hold o' him. He'll be lucky if he escapes with a hull bone in his body. Why, my dad could throw your dad as easy as I could throw yew. Or, maybe, yew think yew kin throw me!" and he glowered down belligerently at Gideon.

Gideon, during this conversation, had been growing more indignant all the time. From the first sight he had had of him he had taken a dislike to this big red-headed boy of Ike Conrad's, with all the earmarks of an arrogant bully about him, and now his boastful talk and domineering ways had increased this dislike greatly. He flushed and, for a moment, his eyes looked steadily into the eyes of Hank Conrad; but he spoke quietly enough.

"Yes, I might be able to throw you," he said. "I've throwed bigger boys than you. Leastwise, I am willing to try, when the house is up and the sports begin; and I think dad will be right pleased

to give your dad a tussle. You know it takes more than just size and muscle to make a wrestler."

"Huh!" Hank glanced scornfully up and down Gideon's sturdy form. "So yew think yew kin wrestle, dew yew? An' yew'll give me a try, will yew? Powerful kind," and he grinned impudently; "but I don't know as I care to wrestle with leetle boys."

"'Fraid?" Gideon spoke quietly, but his face had become a little white.

"Not on your life!" answered Hank, hotly. "I'll wrestle yew; an' if I kin't throw yew as fast as yew kin git up, I'll eat my coonskin cap, ha'r an' all."

"Hope the hair won't disagree with your stomach, then, for you shore will have to eat it," and Gideon smiled, though his eyes glinted.

"Yew jest wait." The red face of Hank flushed more redly. "I'll—"

"Lively thar, with that log!" suddenly bellowed Big Ike, noticing that the two boys stood idly talking. "We're waitin' fer it. Dew yew think this is a picnic?"

Hank jumped and stopped abruptly in the midst of the sentence he had begun. Evidently the discipline of Big Ike was as severe as his hand was heavy.

The two boys, without another word but with many "eloquent" glances at each other, now caught hold of the short piece of log they were about to carry to the house and hurried with it to where

Big Ike and the men stood ready to lift it into its place in the wall.

There was a great deal of good-natured rivalry among the men and the boys to see who could do their work the fastest; and, under the spur of this rivalry, the building of the house went on apace. By noon the walls were up—the building was to be a story and a half high—and the timbers to support the floor of the upper story were in place.

During this time Mrs. Clay and the women folk had not been idle. They had arranged the big table in front of the half-faced camp, built three or four cooking fires, had broiled great pieces of venison and bear meat and roasted three wild turkeys whole; and now they had placed all these savory meats, together with the pies, cakes, bread, and other eatables, brought in the hospitable baskets, on the table. Mrs. Clay, with a final glance over this tempting array, turned to Ruth and bade her go and tell her father that the dinner was ready.

“Gosh, that’s good news!” exclaimed Silas, the moment he heard Ruth’s message. “I’m as hungry as a b’ar. Dinner! Come on, boys!” and, dropping his tools, he led the way to the spring, to wash.

The men and the boys ate while the women and the girls waited on them. After dinner there was half an hour of smoking, talking, and story-telling, and then to work again with renewed energy.

The roof poles were now firmly tied in their places—no nails were used in the building of this house—and long strips of bark, one overlapping

the other, were laid over these and fastened down, until a water-tight roof had been made. The walls and the roof of the house were now completed. Openings had been left in the walls for the door and a window in each end and in each side, and for the big fireplace with its outside chimney. Clay and water were now mixed, in a small pit dug in the ground, until a sort of mortar was formed, and a man who had been a mason, with this mortar and stones, built a rude but serviceable fireplace. The chimney to the fireplace was constructed outside the house, out of sticks of wood, and thickly plastered inside and out with clay.

There were many holes between the rough logs that made up the walls of the house, and a row of these holes, at the right height, were enlarged and left all around the house, to be used as loopholes in case the building should be attacked by Indians. All the other openings were "chinked up." This was done by driving bits of wood tightly into them. Then all the remaining spaces between the logs, inside and out, were filled in with clay-cats—made by mixing the clay-mortar and grass together into rough bricks—and were smoothly plastered over with clay.

Big Tom and Gideon had split and hewn out of logs enough rough boards to cover the ground floor and the floor to the upper chamber, and these were now laid in their places. This roughly completed the work of the house raising and left the building practically finished.

When the last bit of work was done, Abe Dixon mounted a log and called for three cheers for the new settlers and their new home. Everybody, men, women, and children, cheered.

Then Big Tom stood up on the log and thanked them all for their help and invited all to remain for a little jollification by way of celebrating the occasion and to get better acquainted with one another. This, as everybody knew, meant music and dancing and the more strenuous games and sports of the men, and all began to make ready for the fun.



Everybody present, even Silas Wegg, was dancing



CHAPTER XVII

THE GREAT WRESTLING MATCH

“GET out your fiddle, Daddy Jones, and give us a dancing tune!” one of the young men called, the moment Big Tom stepped down from the log.

Daddy Jones nodded and smiled, his face lighting up, as his long thin fingers hastily opened the case and lifted out his beloved fiddle.

In five minutes more a level spot of ground in front of the new house had been cleared, and Daddy Jones, seated on a chair that had been placed on top of a table at one end of the cleared space, lifted his fiddle to his chin and glanced around.

“Choose partners!” he called, in a shrill, high-pitched voice, and drove the fiddle-bow across the strings.

“Come on! We’ll set the pace!” and Big Tom threw one arm around his wife and swung her, laughing and protesting that she had not danced a step for ten years, out on the dance ground.

A minute more and everybody present, even Silas Wegg, was dancing to the mad music of Daddy Jones, who played as if all the imps of dancing were in his fiddle strings.

For an hour or more the dancing continued; then the older folks began gradually to quit, the

men gathering, as if by prearrangement, around Big Tom Clay and Big Ike Conrad.

"Now we'll see what yewr dad is good fer!" Hank Conrad turned a flushing face to Gideon, whose eyes had anxiously followed the gathering men. "They're goin' tew wrestle, an' yew'd better pray fer a soft spot fer yewr dad tew land on. Dad broke th' arm an' cracked tew ribs o' th' last feller he wrestled with," he added, with a triumphant grin; "an' he's liable tew dew more'n that tew yewr dad."

"If he can," Gideon answered, quietly, though his eyes were beginning to glint. "But it will take more than big words to throw dad; and more than big words to throw me," and his eyes flashed challengingly up into the face of Hank.

"Huh!" Hank scowled, angrily. "Still wantin' tew git yewr neck broke, be yew? Wal," and an ugly light came into his eyes, "I'm ready right now an' right here tew break it fer yew; so shut up or peel off yer coat," and he began jerking off his own coat.

Before he had finished speaking, Gideon's coat was off his back. Hank, by this time, had worked himself up into a great rage and the moment he had his coat off he sprang straight for Gideon, without a word of warning, doubtless intending to take him unawares and to hurl him so violently to the ground that he would not be fit for another bout. But, if such were his expectations, they were doomed to sudden failure; for, as he leaped, a long

arm shot out and an iron hand caught him by the shoulder and he turned to glower up into the face of Silas Wegg, who had quietly stepped up behind the two excited boys.

“Not so sudden, son,” and Silas held the angry boy firmly. “Yew’re a human, not a bull, an’ thar ain’t no rushin’ nor hookin’, accordin’ tew wrestlin’ rules, so far as I know. Now, jest hold yewr hosses ’til we gits things fixed proper, an’ I reckon Gid’ll give yew all th’ tussle yew want. S’posin’ I dew th’ refereein’. Eny objections?” He glanced around the circle of men and boys, the women and girls in the background, that had quickly formed around the three. There were no objections. All knew Silas, and all knew that his decisions would be fair.

“Good. Now,” and Silas turned to the two boys, “two falls out o’ three wins th’ match, catch-as-catch-kin. When I say ‘Ready,’ go to it. Shake hands an’ keep yewr tempers,” and he pushed Hank toward Gideon.

Gideon promptly extended his hand, and, after a moment’s hesitation, Hank took it. The two boys shook hands and stepped back a pace and stood ready, their eyes fixed warily on each other.

At first sight it looked as if the contest would be an ill-matched one, for Hank Conrad was at least a couple of years older than Gideon and had the huge bulk and bull-like strength and build of his father; but, when one studied the well-built and splendidly muscled frame of Gideon, though

far less bulky than that of his antagonist, and especially when one noted the keen intelligence of his eyes and the resolute look of his face, the contest, after all, did not appear so unequal; for brains and grit count in wrestling quite as much as muscle does.

"Now," and Silas glanced around the circle to see that there was plenty of room for the wrestlers, and back to the faces of the two boys. "Ready! Go to it!"

The moment the words were out of Silas's mouth, Hank jumped for Gideon and endeavored to get both underholds; but Gideon, lighter and quicker on his feet, sprang a little to one side, bent down, and the next instant he had both arms around his bulky antagonist and his hands clasped together in a hard knot in the small of his back. A sudden violent squeeze of his two strong arms, his knotted hands pressed tightly into the small of the back, a quick backward trip of his right foot, a thrust forward of his whole body into which he put all his young strength, and, before Hank knew what was happening, he was flat on his back on the ground, with Gideon on top of him.

"Fust fall! Won by Gideon Clay!" shouted Silas, while the surrounding men and boys and even the women and the girls cheered. It was easy to see who was the more popular of the two boys.

"Git up an' git ready for th' next bout," and Silas pulled the still struggling lads apart.

"Yew lunkhead!" muttered Big Ike, his face flushing angrily, as he stepped forward and jerked

Hank to his feet. "If yew let him play that trick on yew ag'in, I'll lick th' hide off yew. Dew yew hear, I'll lick th' hide off yew? Now go in an' win," and he thrust him toward Gideon, who had arisen and stood breathing heavily from his sudden, violent exertions, at the same time flushing redly from his triumph.

Hank's face was pale with anger and he would have sprung at once at Gideon, if the hand of Silas had not again caught him and pulled him back.

"Hold yewr temper! Hold yewr temper, son! Now, all ready for th' second bout," and Silas paused a moment and glanced at the faces of the two boys, who stood, each with eyes watching the other, ready to spring at the word go.

"Ready! Go!" shouted Silas, jumping back so as to be out of reach of the struggling wrestlers.

This time both boys stooped low, so that neither secured an advantageous hold at the first rush. Then began a furious struggle, each endeavoring to get his favorite hold. Suddenly Hank saw his opportunity. He bent swiftly downward, caught Gideon around both legs, thrust his bull-like head and neck between them, and heaved upward and backward with all his strength.

Gideon shot backward over the head of Hank and, turning over, landed on his back with a sickening thud and lay still, the breath, for the moment, knocked out of his body.

"Second fall! Won by Hank Conrad," Silas said, mechanically, and bent over Gideon.

There was no cheering. The fall had been won in the most cruel and dangerous manner allowable in wrestling, a way used only by the desperate and the brutal; and, apparently, Big Ike Conrad was the only one present who approved. He stepped to the side of Hank and slapped him on the back.

"That's th' way tew dew it, son," he declared. "Reckon he won't want no more o' th' Conrad style o' wrestlin'," and, with a coarse laugh, he glanced to where Gideon lay.

But he had counted without considering the Clay grit and pluck; for, as he spoke, Gideon jumped to his feet, refusing the assistance of Silas and Big Tom, who had hurried to his side, and turned promptly to Big Ike.

"Shucks, the fall only knocked the breath out of my body," he said; "and now that I do know the style of Conrad wrestling I am ready for some more of it right now. He won't catch me that way again."

"Bully for you!" and Big Tom, with a glance of pride in his face, laid his hand on Gideon's shoulder. "Now, just keep your temper and your wits and I'll bet on you yet."

"Third and last bout!" called Silas. "Ready, yunks?"

Gideon's face was white and his lips were drawn tightly together and there was a determined glint in his eyes. Evidently he had made up his mind to win that next bout.

The look of confidence had come back on the face

of Hank. He could not resist triumphant glances around the circle. Indeed, his looks and actions seemed to say: "Now watch me. See how easily I'll take the conceit out of this young upstart from Ohio."

Both boys nodded "yes" to the query of Silas.

"Go to it, then!" he called.

With the quickness of a wildcat Gideon leaped forward, and, the next instant, his strong young arms, with his fists knotted together in the small of the back, were again clasped around the bulky form of his antagonist, whose overconfidence had been his undoing and had allowed Gideon again to secure his favorite hold. Before Hank could recover from the impetuosity of the attack, he found himself, in spite of his bulk and strength, lifted off his feet and hurled backward and his shoulders and hips pressed to the ground.

"Third and last fall! Won by Gideon Clay!" shouted Silas, "which gives Gid two falls out o' three an' makes him th' winner o' this here wrestlin' match. Hurrah for Gid Clay!" and he jerked off his coonskin cap and swung it around his head and yelled his hurrahs at the top of his voice; and he did not yell alone.

Hank picked up his coat and slunk back sullenly among the crowd, muttering that he had not been thrown fair. His was not the nature to accept defeat gracefully, no matter how justly deserved.

Gideon quickly put on his coat, a satisfied smile on his face, and turned to his father.

"Now, Dad, it's your turn," he grinned, as he glanced to where Big Ike stood.

Big Ike saw the swift glance in his direction and the grin accompanying Gideon's words, and the scowl on his red face deepened. He could not hear the words, but he understood their purport, for all during the day there had been hints that he would be called on to defend his claim that he was the champion wrestler of northern Illinois. Instinctively, he felt that Gideon's look and words and grin were aimed at him and his championship claims. For a moment he glared back at Gideon, then throwing back his head and swelling out his chest and proudly stiffening his huge frame, he stepped into the opening still formed by the circle of men about the spot where Gideon and Hank had wrestled.

"I'm half buffler, half b'ar, touched with a leetle tiger," he began, after the curiously boastful manner of backwoods bullies of those days, as he flourished his arms and pounded his chest; "shaggy 'bout th' neck as a bull, lively as a painter, strong as a gorriller. I pull up trees by th' roots, push over mount'ins, an' kin squeeze th' ribs o' an elephant till they crack. I kin jump 'cross th' Mississippi, pick my teeth with a flash o' lightnin', an' straddle a hurricane like a hoss. I see red, drink blood, an' kin throw my weight in live wildcats, with a couple o' b'ar thrown in fer good measure. Now, if thar be eny one here that wants his ribs cracked, his bones broke, an' his body crushed till it feels as if

it had been runned over by a forty-ton roller, let him step forth right now and here," and he paused and glared around the little circle of faces, ending with a challenging glance in the direction of Big Tom, who, during this remarkable rhapsody, had stood with a broad grin on his face.

"'Twould be too bad for you to waste all of that big talk," Big Tom said, his eyes twinkling, when Big Ike ceased speaking; "and so, just to give you a chance to show us how you crack ribs, break bones, and crush bodies, I'll give you a little tussle, so be it you are willing," and, taking off his coat and rolling up his sleeves, he stepped into the ring and confronted Big Ike.

Silas was again chosen referee.

Every man, woman, and child now crowded around the two men, some of those in the rear standing upon chairs and tables, for a wrestling match between two such champions as Big Tom Clay and Big Ike Conrad would be a sight to be long talked of around their humble hearths.

Both men were of huge proportions. Big Ike was the taller, and the broader and bulkier of the two, with massive shoulders and huge arms and pillarlike legs, wrapped round with knots and bands of iron muscles—a veritable giant in size and strength. But, as the keen eyes of Gideon had noted, he looked heavy, his eyes were red and the flesh under them puffed up, as if he ate and drank too much. Big Tom, on the other hand, although not so massively built, was all clean, hard muscle,

strung on a solidly boned and splendidly proportioned frame. His eyes were clear and keen and his face firm-skinned. He drank no liquor and ate only to satisfy his hunger. Without question, Big Ike had the strength and the bulk. It remained to be seen if he had the skill, agility, and endurance. These Big Tom had; it needed but a glance into his clear eyes and at his lithe, muscular frame to tell this. Man to man, they were a rare match; it would be a contest of Titans.

The long arms of Silas promptly cleared ample space around the two men.

"Catch-as-catch-kin, tew falls out o' three wins th' match," he announced, after a moment's consultation with the principals. "Git ready," and he turned to Big Tom and Big Ike.

The two big men now stood facing each other, a yard apart.

"Shake hands," commanded Silas.

The two hands gripped promptly.

"I'm goin' tew break yew in tew," muttered Big Ike, an ugly look in his eyes, as he gave Big Tom's hand a violent squeeze.

"Shore," grinned Big Tom, returning the squeeze, "if I'll let you."

"Ready!" warned Silas.

The two men crouched and fixed their eyes each on the other.

"Go to it!" shouted Silas, springing back out of the way of those two big bodies.

Big Tom, quicker on his feet, jumped at the word.

Big Ike, warily awaited his attack.

Then, for a few moments, the arms and the bodies of the two men bent and twisted swiftly, each striving to seize the other advantageously. Suddenly Big Tom clinched, with his right arm thrown around the bull-like neck. He gave a terrible wrench and a violent shove against the bulky body.

The muscles on Big Ike's neck stood out like red-hot bolts of iron, his huge arms gripped themselves around the body of Big Tom, until the straining muscles lay like knotted ropes; and then, with a sudden hip and knee movement and an upward thrust with his right arm, he broke the crushing, choking hold around his neck, swung his right foot behind the foot of Big Tom, and the two men went to the ground, Big Ike on top; but, even as he fell, Big Tom gave his body a swift, twisting whirl and landed on his hands and knees, saved by his wonderful agility.

Big Ike had the skill!

For the next few minutes the evolutions and the contortions of the two men were so swift that no eye could follow them. Now one was on top, now the other.

Suddenly — no one could see how it was done — Big Tom's feet flew out from under him, and, before he could recover himself, Big Ike had whirled him over on his back and forced his shoulders and hips to the ground.

"Fust fall!" called Silas, jumping forward and

laying his hands on the two men. "Won by Ike Conrad. Git up an' git ready for th' second bout."

The two men arose slowly to their feet and eyed each other with increased respect. Each had found a foeman worthy of his muscle and skill. Both were breathing heavily, but it was easy to see that the violent exertions had told most on Big Ike.

Silas gave them a couple of minutes breathing space.

"I'll git yew quicker next time," boasted Big Ike, the moment he had recovered his breath sufficiently to talk. "I know your tricks now."

"And dad knows yours," promptly retorted Gideon, who had hurried to his father the moment the bout was over.

"So I do," grinned Big Tom. "And, I reckon, it's up to me to win the next bout. But you shore are a powerful wrestler," and his eyes dwelt in honest admiration on the huge frame of his antagonist.

"Time's up!" called Silas. "Git ready."

"Now do your durndest, Dad. I know you can throw him," and Gideon gave his father's hand a quick squeeze and darted back to the edge of the ring.

"Didn't I tell yew my dad could throw yewr dad?"

Gideon turned quickly to find that he had chanced to stop in the edge of the ring directly by the side of Hank Conrad.

"Now jest watch him break yewr dad in tew,

same as I'd done yew, if my foot hadn't slipped," and the scowl on Hank's face deepened.

"Shucks, your foot didn't slip and dad'll —"

At that moment Silas gave the word for the bout to begin and Gideon, in his anxiety to see its beginning, never finished that sentence.

The crowd around the two men were now almost breathless with interest. Never before had they witnessed two such powerful men so equally matched in a wrestling contest. They did not yell. Their excitement and interest were too great, their eyes too intent in following every movement of the men, to yell. And the struggle now taking place was well worth their watching!

Big Tom, from the word go, had taken the offensive, and never for an instant did he allow the strenuous pace he had set to slacken. One moment he would be down and the next instant Big Ike would be putting forth all his strength and skill to keep his shoulders and hips from touching the ground. For ten minutes this furious struggle continued, without either man gaining any decisive advantage. Then, suddenly, Big Tom got the hold he wanted, a hold similar to what is known as the half-Nelson. In vain Big Ike struggled, struggled until the muscles and cords of his neck and back showed beneath the hot skin like bands of hot iron. He could not break the hold. The strength of Big Tom was too great for that. He could not resist the killing pressure on his back and neck, and, slowly at first, then with a sudden flop that brought

a grunt out of his body, his shoulders and hips were forced to the ground.

"Second fall!" shouted Silas, a jubilant note in his voice. "Won by Big Tom Clay. Break away!" and, jumping to the still struggling men, he pulled them apart.

"I knew you could do it, Dad! I knew you could do it!" Gideon, who had again run to his father's side the moment the bout was over, caught hold of one of Big Tom's hands and shook it excitedly.

"I shore had to work to do it, son," panted Big Tom, a happy grin on his face. "You are the most powerful man I ever wrestled with," he said, generously, turning to Big Ike. "I feared I'd have to break your neck afore I could get you to flop over."

"An' I thought yew was a-goin' tew," responded Big Ike, while an ugly look came into his eyes and his face flushed angrily. Evidently he was no better a loser than was his boy. "But thar's an-uther bout comin' an' I'll show yew that tew kin play at that game."

"You are welcome to, if you can," answered Big Tom, his face hardening. "The hold was a fair hold and if you can get it on me you won't find me growling about it afterwards."

"I ain't growlin'," and the angry flush on Big Ike's face deepened; "an' yew needn't insinerate I be, or I'll—" he doubled up a hamlike fist and shook it. "I kin lick yew or eny uther man from

Ohier that ever wore boot leather th' best day yew or he ever seed. I—”

“Hold yewr temper, Ike,” and the long arm of Silas suddenly reached out and caught the threatening fist; “an’ save yewr wind. Now git ready for th’ last bout; and remember”—a dangerous glint came into his eyes—“no eye-gougin’, nor kickin’, nor buttin’. Git intew position!” he commanded, sharply, as he noticed that Big Ike was about to answer. “An’ may th’ best man win! Go to it!” He leaped out of the way of the two men, who rushed each other the moment the word was uttered, like two mad bulls.

Big Ike, as he jumped, suddenly bent his head.

“Look out!” yelled Gideon, who remembered the trick Hank had played on him.

But his warning came too late, or was unheeded, for already the bull-like neck was between Big Tom’s legs and the ironlike arms were gripped about his knees and the great body was heaving upward, with all the force that rage could give the muscular back and arms.

Gideon uttered a cry of alarm as Big Tom shot upward over the back of Big Ike, and the cry was echoed by all standing near, for it did not seem possible that so heavy a body could be thus hurled through the air to the ground without serious hurt.

It was the same brutal trick that Hank had played on Gideon, but, to the surprise of all, the result was not the same.

Evidently the act of Hank had put Big Tom on

his guard against a similar one on the part of Big Ike, for, at the instant of the heaving of his body upward, he clapped his legs tightly together around the bull-like neck and under the red-whiskered chin, with the result that the momentum of his body, his legs catching and holding under the chin, jerked Big Ike violently over backward and downward to the ground, Big Tom falling forward on his hands, his legs still about the neck of Big Ike.

So sudden, so unexpected was this result, that, almost before the startled onlookers had caught their breath, Big Tom had whirled about and had pressed the shoulders and the hips of the half-stunned Big Ike to the ground; and the great wrestling match, a match that was talked of for a generation, was over.

“Gosh, I never seed enythin’ like that afore! Yew old bull elephant!” and Silas, the moment he had announced his decision, gripped the hand of Big Tom.

“I knew you’d win, Dad! I knew you’d win!” and the delighted Gideon gripped the other hand of his father, while all the others crowded around to congratulate him and to tell him how astonished they had been at the sudden and unexpected ending of the match.

Big Ike rose slowly to his feet, an ugly scowl on his red face, and, grumbling and growling something about its not being a fair fall, slunk off, followed by Hank. A short time afterward he gathered his family together and started for home,

notwithstanding the cordial urging of both Mr. and Mrs. Clay for him to stay and "see the day out" with them.

Running races and jumping and shooting matches were now held, and, when it became dark enough, some of the men tried their skill at "snuffing the candle" with their rifle bullets at thirty paces.

Silas, to his chuckling delight, won at running, jumping, and shooting, Big Tom ranking next. Gideon proved to be the best shot and the fastest runner among the boys, and Mrs. Clay won the woman's shooting match, to the very evident satisfaction of Gideon and Ruth.

As soon as it became dark the young men and the boys built a huge camp fire, and all gathered around it to talk over the exciting events of the day, swap experiences, sing songs, tell stories, and have a general good time.

Among the stories, Big Tom told of the coming, the night of the big storm, of Brighteyes, the Indian girl, with her little baby; and how the next day, when her husband, Great Thunder, and Storm Cloud came after her, they found out that she was the daughter of Black Hawk himself.

"And," broke in Ruth, her eyes dancing with excitement, "she gave me a little black hawk and told me to wear it always around my neck, and that no Indian would dare hurt me if I had it on, because it was the totem of her father, the great chief, Black Hawk; and here it is," and she pulled the little black stone, rudely carved into the sem-

blance of a hawk, out from under the bosom of her dress and held it up where all could see.

"Let's have a look at it," and Old Man Kellogg eagerly stretched out his hand and, taking the totem from Ruth, examined it closely.

"It shore is Black Hawk's totem," he said. "I've seen it afore. Indians have a powerful lot of faith in their totems. Think they bring them good luck, ward off dangers and such things. Besides they sort of look upon them as sacred emblems of their tribe or chief and consider all who wear them as under their special protection and are ready to defend them with their lives. Howsomever," and his face sobered, "I hope you'll never be called on to test its worth. Black Hawk and his Indians have settled down for the summer, but they are as touchy as a bear with the itch and there ain't no telling when some fool white will do som'thing to rile them again."

"Right," assented Abe Dixon, Big Tom's neighbor, twenty miles to the north. "Black Hawk and his Indians sure are some irritable and there's bound to be trouble atween them and the whites afore long, that only the tomahawk and the rifle can settle. I heered the Hawk had vowed that he'd never be driven out of his village at the mouth of the Rock River, where he was born and where his ancestors were buried, across the Mississippi, without a fight; and the whites are wanting that identickle village right now and they are a-going to take it, Black Hawk or no Black Hawk; and then," an anxious

look came on his face, "we settlers will have to stand the brunt of the trouble. You sure are wise," he said to Big Tom, "to make your house good and strong, with plenty of loopholes for your rifles all around it. But what's the use of looking for trouble afore it comes? It shore will come plenty soon enough. Now," and he turned to the women folks, "you girls just give us another song and then we must be going. 'Twill be after midnight now afore we get home."

The song was sung, the men joining in on the chorus, with the spirit and feeling possible only under such circumstances, and then the merry company broke up, all declaring that never before had they been to a house raising where they had had such a good time; and each, as he drove off, giving Big Tom and family a warm invitation to come and see them.

House-raising day had, indeed, been a great day for Gideon and Ruth; and when at last, after all the company had gone, they went to bed for their last night's sleep in the old half-faced camp, they were two very happy children, whose tired bodies hardly touched their beds before their eyes closed in sleep.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE COMING OF THE DEEP SNOW

THERE was still considerable work to be done about the log house. The door had to be made and hung, the window holes protected in some manner that would not shut out the light—they had no glass—the bedsteads moved from the old half-faced camp and set up in the new house, and other details of house building attended to. Consequently the days immediately following the house raising were unusually busy ones for Big Tom Clay and his family.

Planks three inches thick were split and hewn out of logs, and then doubled and tightly pinned together with wooden pins, until they were one solid piece, and sawed into shape for the door. The door was hung on two huge iron hinges that Big Tom had brought with him, and held shut by a heavy wooden latch, fastened to the inside of the door. A latchstring ran through a hole bored in the planks just above the latch. One end of this string was fastened to the latch; the other end hung a few inches outside the door. A pull on the string outside lifted the latch inside and unlocked the door. To lock the closed door all one had to do was to pull in the latchstring. In addition to this, the door was fitted with two stout wooden bars, run-

ning across its top and bottom and slipping into heavy sockets fastened to the logs. This made the door, when locked and barred, almost as strong and unyielding as were the walls of the house themselves.

Heavy swinging wooden shutters were made for the windows, to be closed in case of a violent storm or an Indian attack; and strong paper was oiled until it was semi-transparent and used in place of glass for window panes.

The rudely made bed frames were taken out of the half-faced camp and set up in the new house, in the same manner they had been before, two of them below and the other "upstairs" for Gideon to sleep on. A hole cut through the floor alongside one of the walls gave Gideon access to his bedroom. There were no stairs, but strong and long wooden pegs driven deep into holes bored into the solid log walls of the house at the proper distances apart, enabled him to climb up easily and pass through the hole into his room.

Mrs. Clay made a small bedroom out of one of the corners of the room by hanging blankets and skins from a buckskin string, stretched from an upright pole fastened to the floor and the ceiling, and had her bed set up in there.

Holes were bored into the log walls and hanging-pegs for clothes, cooking utensils, etc., were driven into them. A narrow lounge was made along one side of the room, in much the same manner the beds had been constructed, and covered over with bearskins and other furs. A number of shelves

were fastened to the walls, and a long wooden mantel was built over the fireplace.

Thus, in the course of a few weeks, with no skilled help and only the rudest of tools, growing trees of the forest had been transformed into a comfortable and pleasant home—a thing worthy of your stopping a moment to consider, even in this marvelous age of accomplishments.

The old half-faced camp was now turned into a barn, where the horses and the cattle could be sheltered during the cold months of the winter, by poling up the open side, all but a space large enough for a doorway.

These busy days passed quickly, and, almost before it was realized, the summer months had gone and fall was at hand. This was the harvesting time. The wheat and the oats yielded abundantly, and Big Tom declared that he had never before seen such corn and potatoes as the rich, virgin soil of the prairie had produced.

Big Tom dug an outdoor cellar in the side of a little hill near the house and stored the potatoes and other vegetables that freezing would harm in its dark depths. The house was banked around its bottom to the depth of three or four feet with closely packed cornstalks and grass, to shut out, as much as possible, the bitter cold of the long winter months; and the barn was protected in the same manner, and by placing a large stack of hay, that had been cut for the horses and the cattle, against one of its sides. A great pile of firewood, cut and

drawn from the near-by woods, stood near the door of the house, in readiness to feed the big fireplace within.

Thus everything was made snug and comfortable for the cold and stormy months of the coming winter, which, Silas had informed them, was cold enough "tew freeze th' ha'r off a b'ar's back in these parts."

During these busy summer and fall months Silas had come and gone as fancy pleased, but the greater part of his time had been spent at the log house of his friends. They had little other company. Once a passing emigrant, bound for the lead mines to the north, had stopped over night with them; and one Sunday Abe Dixon and his family had come down to visit them. They had been too busy to go anywhere themselves. Winter, when the snow lay deep on the ground and there was little work to be done, was the pioneer's visiting time; and Big Tom, in preparation for those days, had made a rude sleigh, with bent tree trunks shaped into runners, sufficiently large to carry them all.

The snow that winter came late. Not until early in January did it fall in sufficient quantities to make good sleighing; but, when it did come, it was like a thick, almost impenetrable blanket of whiteness that fell from the sky to the earth, and hung there all one night, and all one day, and all another night and day and night.

Gideon was the first one up on the morning after the big snow-storm. As he dressed in his low, gar-

retlike room he wondered a little at the dimness of the light that came through the one small window in each end of the house, for he felt certain that it was past sunrise. He also wondered why he had not heard his father and mother moving about below and at the strange, gravelike stillness that seemed to have settled down over everything in and about the log house. Shivering a little with the cold, he hurried into his clothes and climbed down the pegs to the floor below. A dull glow from the fireplace alone lighted the room.

"Is that you, Gid?" called his father, as he stumbled against a chair in the semi-darkness.

"Yes," answered Gideon. "Why are you not up? It must be long after sunup."

"Reckon not, son. Leastwise there ain't no daylight shining through the cracks in the shutters, though it shore does seem like a powerful long night. Just poke up the coals and throw on some fresh wood, and then have a look out and see if the storm is over. The wind certain must have gone down. It's as still as the grave outside."

Gideon stirred the smoldering coals in the fireplace until they glowed brightly and threw on top of them a number of dry chunks of wood that lay near-by. Then he went to the door and, unbarring and unlatching it, drew it open.

In front of him, barring his way out, rose a solid, impenetrable wall of white!

"Oh, Dad, Dad!" he called, and stood still, staring at the white wall.

Big Tom bounded out of bed and hurried to his side.

"Gosh!" he cried, as his eyes fell on the white wall that barricaded the door, "if the house ain't snowed under!"

"Good land!" and Mrs. Clay, who had followed close behind him, threw up both her hands. "What on earth will we do now?"

"Why, dig ourselves out, to be sure," laughed Big Tom. "The snow is soft and Gideon and I can shovel our way through it like a house afire. Wonder how high up the snow goes," and, picking up one of the brush brooms, he thrust its long handle upward through the snow. "Pretty nigh to the eaves," he declared, as he withdrew the handle and glanced upward through the little round hole that had been left in the slightly damp snow. "Well, we shore must get busy with our shovels, Gid, or there'll be some hungry and thirsty stock in the barn afore we can dig our way to them," and his face sobered.

Ten minutes later, Big Tom and Gideon, both armed with strong wooden shovels, home-made mittens on their hands, and their heads and necks well protected, approached the snow-barricaded door.

"First off we'll dig a hole up through the snow alongside the house and you can climb up on the roof and see what it looks like outside," declared Big Tom, driving his shovel into the soft snow. "Reckon we'll have to throw the snow into the

house, until we can dig our way through, because there ain't no other place to throw it," and, with a laugh, he deposited his first shovelful of snow at the feet of Mrs. Clay.

In a very short time the active arms of Gideon and his father had dug a large hole up through the snow alongside the house. Then Big Tom boosted Gideon up through this hole and bade him climb on top of the roof, and take a look around, and report just what the situation was.

"The snow is banked clean up to the eaves all around the house and, in some places, 'most up to the top of the roof," Gideon reported, the moment he reached the top of the roof and had looked around. "But it don't look near so deep away from the house. I can just see the top of the barn sticking up about a foot above the snow."

"How's the weather?" called up Big Tom.

"Clear as a whistle," called back Gideon. "And the sun is more than an hour's high. Say, but this is a great sight! The snow's as level as a floor, and white and sparkling as new marble. But it's co-old, terrible cold and windy up here."

"Well," laughed Big Tom, "slide down and get to work and you will soon be warm enough."

Gideon "slid down," and he and his father went to work on the snow with a will that soon had tunneled a way through the deep bank of snow piled up against the house out to where it lay level on the prairie.

"It's over five feet deep right out here on the

level!" Big Tom declared, as he paused to measure, with the handle of his shovel, the height of the side of the snow canyon that their shovels had cut through the white mass. "Now," and his eyes glanced a bit uneasily toward the barn and over the snow-covered surroundings, "we shore have some digging to do, son. Wish Si was here to help. His long arms and iron back would come in powerful handy right now. But," and he grinned, "reckon this snow'll cure his wilderness itch sudden and bring him back fast as he can get here. 'Twon't be none comfortable camping out in five feet of snow. Howsomever, talking'll never dig a way to the barn," and he drove his shovel deep into the soft snow.

Silas, as the words of Big Tom suggested, had left the little log house only a few days before, driven forth by one of his periodical attacks of wilderness itch, as he called them, and had expected to be gone for a couple of weeks or more; but, as Big Tom said, the deep snow would, probably, send him hurrying back.

Indeed, Big Tom and Gideon had "some digging to do"; but, by working hard all day, they succeeded in shoveling narrow paths to the barn, the spring, the outdoor cellar, and the woodpile, and in clearing away enough of the snow in front of the house to enable them to open the shutters and let in the daylight.

The weather, as it often does after a big snow-storm, turned bitterly cold that day; but, fortu-

nately, they had an abundance of wood for fuel, and, even more fortunately, the house and the outdoor cellar were well stored with food for themselves, while there were corn, oats, and hay for the horses and the cattle in the barn. Consequently they had nothing to fear from the deep snow, and, snugly ensconced in the log house, with a great fire roaring up the wide-mouthed chimney of the fireplace, they could defy the cold.

On the second afternoon after the fall of the deep snow, just as they were about to sit down to the supper table, they heard a halloo coming from over the wide expanse of snow outside.

“A coonskin against a rabbit’s hide it’s Si!” Big Tom cried, jumping to his feet and hurrying to the door, followed by the others.

As he threw open the door and started out, Silas Wegg tumbled, headlong and almost on top of him, into the excavation made in the snow in front of the house, and, getting upon his feet, staggered blindly toward him.

“Great guns, Si! What has happened?” and Big Tom leaped to his side and pulled him into the house.

“Mercy on us!” and Mrs. Clay hurried to the side of Silas, her startled eyes on his face. “What has happened to your eyes?”

“Snow-blinded, till I couldn’t see a flock o’ white houses,” Silas answered, covering both of his badly swollen eyes with one of his hands. “Th’ glare of th’ sun shining on th’ white snow an’ up intew

th' eyes is somethin' terrible. Thought I would go stone-blind afore I could git here; an', if I'd had anuther mile tew go, I sartin would. As it was, I could jest git a squint through 'em every now and then. Je-rusalem! but that was a snow-storm! 'Most six feet on th' level! Never seed th' like o' it here afore," and, kicking off his snow-shoes, without which it would have been impossible for him to have traveled over the deep snow, he groped about for a chair.

Ruth quickly pushed a chair to his hand.

"Good land! but I'm glad tew be in here, 'stead o' out thar a-wanderin' round on that eternal whiteness, stone-blind an' gittin' colder every moment till I drapped. Wal, I shore am tuckered. Forty mile since mornin'!" and he sat down in the chair near the fire. "Say, but I'm as hungry as a b'ar," and he turned a face, twisted into a grin, toward Mrs. Clay.

"Supper is all ready. We were just a-going to set down to the table, when we heard your call. But, afore you eat, you must let me bathe your eyes. They are swollen something terrible," and Mrs. Clay, bustling swiftly about, soon had a soothing lotion prepared, with which she bathed Silas's inflamed eyes, every now and then audibly thanking heaven that he had found their house before his eyes gave out entirely.

And, indeed, Silas had had a fortunate escape, for, if he had gone stone-blind out there alone on that vast snow-covered prairie, with a bitterly cold

night coming on, he certainly would have frozen to death before morning.

The big snowstorm had found him encamped in a little wood, some forty miles from the log house, and he had remained there snug and warm in the rude shelter that his woodcraft had enabled him to build, until that morning, when, his larder running low, he had started back for the log house on snowshoes that he had cleverly fashioned out of bent willow branches, tightly strung with deerskin thongs cut from his hunting coat.

Forty miles on snowshoes in one day! No wonder that Silas was tuckered! The glare of the sun on the white level of the snow had been more than human eyes could stand, and by the middle of the afternoon his eyes were so badly inflamed that it was almost impossible for him to see out of them; and, for the last half hour, he had been forced to pull the lids apart in order to see at all.

Yes, indeed, Silas had had a narrow escape from a horrible death! It was nearly a week before he fully recovered the use of his eyes, so badly had they been inflamed by the glare of the sun reflected up from the white snow.*

* In northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin, the winter of 1830 and 1831 was long known as "The Winter of the Deep Snow," when the snow is said to have fallen to the depth of nearly six feet on the level.—AUTHOR.

CHAPTER XIX

BESIEGED BY WOLVES

THE Big Snow Storm, unprecedented in its depth, even in that country of deep winter snows, was followed by a long "spell" of bitterly cold weather that lasted until late in February. Of course, during this time, the Clays were confined to the purlieus of the little log house, the deep snow making the trail impassable to all heavy animals, except to the man on snowshoes. Consequently there was little visiting done back and forth between neighbors that winter. Nevertheless the weeks passed quickly.

Almost every day Gideon and his father and Silas would tie on their homemade snowshoes, shoulder their rifles, and go gunning in the near-by woods; and it was seldom they returned without a wild turkey, a brace of partridges, or a couple of rabbits, or other wild game to grace their larder. Quail were so plentiful and so tame that they could be killed with clubs. Deer, on account of the depth of the snow, were difficult to find, but, when found, were easily killed. Accordingly the larder was always abundantly supplied with fresh meat; and this, with cornmeal mush, milk from the cow that had given birth to a calf that fall, hot johnnycake and butter, pancakes, bread, potatoes, and the other

edibles of their own raising, enabled them to fare, so far as wholesomeness and savoryness went, far better than many families of wealth in their homes of luxury in the great cities.

Fortunately, all kept well. So far not one of them had had even a day's sickness since coming to their new home. The cold, pure air, the vigorous outdoor life, and the wholesome food kept the machinery of their bodies in the best of working order and enabled it to defy disease. But not all of their neighbors were as fortunate. Abe Dixon lost his wife, and the two youngest children of Big Ike Conrad died during the Deep Snow, so they learned afterward.

Sickness, and possible death, and burial of a loved one under these circumstances of isolation, away from all neighborly sympathy, or help, or doctor's care, were terrible, but had to be faced and endured as best they could be, by the lonely pioneers; and, usually, to their credit be it said, they were faced bravely and endured with Spartanlike fortitude.

The wolves, during the continuance of the deep snow, were exceedingly troublesome and threatening. As soon as a hard crust, strong enough to bear their weight, had formed on top of the snow, they swept over the prairie and through the woods in great packs, ravenous with hunger and ready to chase and pull down and devour man or beast so unfortunate as to fall into their power. Their numbers gave them courage and their hunger made them desperate.

There were two kinds of wolves, the large, fierce timber wolf and the smaller and more cowardly prairie wolf; but, when crazed with hunger and hunting in large packs, both kinds were dangerous enough. During the night their howlings could be heard almost continuously, and, frequently, the soft patter, patter of their padded feet on the snow outside, as they hungrily circled the house, sounded in the ears of Gideon and Ruth as they lay safe and warm in their beds. Once, while the men folks were away in the woods on a hunt, Mrs. Clay shot a big gray timber wolf that was prowling about the barn in broad daylight, and the very next day she killed another within a dozen rods of the door of the house.

The great bank of snow that had piled up against one end of the house to within two feet of the sill of the little window in Gideon's attic room had been left undisturbed by their shovels. This window had no wooden shutter and was protected only by oiled paper.

One night, as Gideon lay in his bed drowsily listening to the howlings of the wolves outside, he was startled to hear the paper that covered this window suddenly crack and the next instant to see the sharp nose and the glowing eyes, followed by the hairy head of a big timber wolf, poked in through the opening. For an instant he lay, too startled and horrified to move, watching the wolf struggling to squeeze his body through the narrow opening. Then, with a thrill of satisfaction, he

remembered that two feet above his head, on pins driven into holes bored into the logs of the house, lay his loaded rifle, and all dread of the wolf left him. Cautiously raising himself up in his bed, he seized the gun and shot the wolf dead.

The body lay half in and half out of the window all night, effectually blocking the opening to any of his venturous companions; and the next day, you may be sure, Big Tom and Gideon fastened strong wooden bars across the two attic windows, so close together that no wolf could possibly thrust his head in between them.

Big Tom, at the approach of winter, had made a strong door for the barn and had strengthened every weak part of the building; and it was fortunate that he had done this, for scarcely a night passed that a dozen or more hungry wolves did not attempt to break into the barn in their efforts to get at the stock within. The barn could be plainly seen from the house and, on bright moonlit nights, Big Tom and Silas and Gideon took turns throughout the night, watching the barn and shooting the wolves; and, presently, there started a lively rivalry between the three to see who could kill the most wolves while on the watch. Gideon, to his unbounded delight, won, with a score for the winter of twenty-nine timber and seventeen prairie wolves.

But their most exciting experience with the wolves was one night late in February, only a few days before the coming of the big thaw that rapidly melted the snow away, when a great pack of half-

famished timber wolves actually besieged and attempted to carry by storm the little log house and the barn.

Gideon was on watch that night from nine o'clock until twelve. A half-moon hung in the sky, dimly lighting the surrounding expanse of snow. Up to eleven o'clock he had not seen a sign of a wolf, but he had heard them howling in the distance. A few minutes after eleven he heard a loud, prolonged howl, sounding as if the lone wolf that uttered it could not be over a dozen rods from the house. Gideon was sufficiently well versed in the ways of the wolf to know that this was a signal howl from one of the wolf scouts, sent out from the main pack in search of prey; and he listened intently for the answering howls. He did not have long to wait. Almost before the last quaver had died in the air, it was taken up by another and more distant wolf, then by another, still more distant, ending finally in a chorus of howlings so far away that Gideon could hear them but faintly.

He hurried quickly to a loophole in the side of the house whence the howlings came and looked through the opening, his rifle ready in his hand. At first he could see nothing but the white expanse of the snow, stretching as far as his eyes could reach. Then, as he scrutinized the surface more carefully, he distinguished, faintly outlined in the distance, the gaunt, shadowy form of a wolf, sitting up on his haunches on the white snow. A moment later the lone wolf gave voice to another signal

howl, which was almost instantly answered by another, and another, and finally by the chorus of howlings, this time sounding nearer and louder to the ears of the waiting boy. Possibly two minutes passed; then the lone wolf was joined by two other wolves, and the three sat on their haunches on the snow, waiting in the dim moonlight—waiting for what?

In three minutes Gideon knew. First a long line of shadowy forms appeared, coming swiftly and silently over the snow. A moment later the shadowy line took shape and the startled eyes of the boy saw a great pack of big, gaunt wolves sweeping swiftly, but still silently, down upon the lonely little log house. Now he could hear the soft fur-muffled patter, patter of their feet on the hard crust of the snow, sounding weirdly through the silence of the dim moonlit night. On they came, stretching out in a ragged line a dozen rods wide and many wolves deep, on until they reached and swept in among their number the three watchers on the snow, and still on toward the little log house, making no sound save the patter, patter of their many feet on the crust of frozen snow, a strange, almost uncanny sight to the watching boy.

Gideon stood motionless, almost breathless, hardly believing his own eyes, so weirdly and silently had the great pack glided over the white snow from out the mystery of the dark night, until the leaders were within a half-dozen rods of the house; then, with a startled exclamation, he thrust the barrel of his

rifle through the loophole, took quick aim at the nearest wolf, and fired.

“Dad! Si!” he shouted, in great excitement, whirling about from the loophole and starting to reload his rifle. “Out with you quick! All the wolves in creation are a-rushing down on us! Hurry! Out with you!”

“What?—Indians!” and Big Tom, awakened out of a sound sleep by the report of the rifle and the shouts of Gideon, leaped out of bed, sprang for his rifle, and jumped to a loophole, and, not two steps behind him, came Silas, rifle in hand.

“Great guns! if 'tain't wolves, slathers and slathers of them!” and Big Tom stared through the loophole.

“Better a million wolves than a dozen red devils!” declared Silas, as he stepped to a loophole by the side of Big Tom and looked out. “Gee-willikins, if 'tain't a reg'ler convention o' teeth an' tails! Wal, let's open th' ball for 'em,” and he thrust his rifle out through the loophole and fired at a wolf not more than a dozen feet from the muzzle of his gun.

At the same moment Big Tom and Gideon fired. At the first yelp of the wounded wolves, bedlam broke loose; for, before the smoke had cleared away from the muzzles of their guns, every wolf within reach had leaped, snapping and snarling and fighting, upon their stricken comrades, and all that Gideon and the two men could see for a time was a whirling gray mass of bodies and tails and flashing

white teeth. In three minutes nothing was left of the three wolves but their bones.

By this time the half-famished beasts were racing wildly around the house, jumping up against its sides, scratching furiously at the heavy door, and howling and whining and yelping, until it sounded as if all the imps of pandemonium were holding mad revel outside. But the heavy logs and the thick door and the closed shutters defied the utmost they could do with teeth and nails.

Again and again the three rifles were emptied into the howling mass outside, but with no apparent effect, except to increase the yelping and the snarling at each shot, as the wounded wolves were pounced upon and devoured by their hunger-crazed companions.

“Gosh a’mighty!” and Big Tom whirled about suddenly and jumped across the room. “If we ain’t forgetting the barn! If they break into that, they’ll kill ever last critter in it. We must try to keep them off the roof. That’s the weakest spot. Let them scratch and bite and howl around the house all they want to, they can’t break in; but the barn— Quick, Si, Gideon! There’s half a dozen on the roof now, a-tearing at it like mad!” and he thrust his rifle through a loophole and fired.

Gideon and Silas each sprang to a loophole by his side, and, in a few minutes, their rifles had cleared the roof.

Fortunately the roof was so high that only the unusually strong and agile wolves could reach it

by springing; but, unfortunately, the light was so poor that at that distance its defenders could not be sure of their aim; and, in spite of their utmost efforts and the help of Mrs. Clay, who had seized her rifle and was now shooting with them, a hole was torn through the roof and a big wolf was seen to drop down through it before a rifle bullet could reach him. Even above the horrible din of the yelping animals they heard the bellows of the fear-crazed oxen and the scream of a horse.

“Reckon the critters can attend to that one,” Big Tom said, grimly. “But we must not let another wolf get into that hole. Keep cool. Don’t all fire at once. Take turns. We’re wasting too much powder.”

From now on they managed to keep the roof cleared. Indeed, in a short time the wolves seemed to take warning from the fate of their comrades and only a few even attempted to reach the roof of the barn, and those that succeeded were quickly shot.

Suddenly Ruth, who sat in the middle of the floor, the baby held tightly in her arms, uttered a dreadful yell and pointed upward to the narrow hole in the thick floor of the ceiling, through which Gideon climbed to his room above, where the gleaming eyes of a huge wolf were glaring down upon them.

Somehow the wolves had managed to reach the roof of the log house and had broken through it, unheard and unnoticed in the din and excitement.

Almost as one rifle sounded the reports of the

four guns, so suddenly did all whirl and fire at this imminent peril, and the body of the wolf tumbled through the hole and lay dead on the floor.

"No danger!" Big Tom shouted. "They can't break through the thick floor and I can 'tend to all that try to get down through the hole. Just keep your eyes on the barn," and, dropping his rifle, he shoved a heavy bench under the hole, seized an ax, leaped upon the bench and stood ready to strike the first wolf head that appeared.

They could now hear on the floor above their heads the thud of the bodies of other wolves, as they dropped through the hole in the roof, and the soft patter, patter of their feet as they ran about the room. But only a few of the strongest and most agile of the wolves were able to reach the roof at all; and Big Tom, as he had promised, had no trouble in taking care of these whenever one ventured to thrust a head down through the hole.

"Save your powder. Only shoot when it is necessary to keep them from getting into the barn. We've got them now where they can hurt nothing," Big Tom called from his station on the bench, and the next moment swung his ax at the head of a venturesome wolf. The body dropped dead to the floor below.

This was the last wolf killed that night. There seemed to be no more wolves able to reach the roof of either the barn or the house. They could hear the patter of feet on the boards over their heads and knew that there must be a couple of wolves left

in the room above, but they did not venture down within reach of Big Tom's ax. Evidently, from their uneasy running about the room and their frightened whinings, they were even more anxious to get out than they had been to get in; but could not, the hole in the roof, through which they had entered, being so situated that they could not get out through it.

All the remainder of the night the defenders stood guard, but at the first rays of the morning sun, at some concerted signal, the great pack gathered itself together and swept swiftly off across the snow, leaving behind them many little piles of bones and the two prisoners up in Gideon's room.

As soon as it became light enough to see clearly, Gideon, rifle in hand and with Big Tom standing on the bench near him ready to hand him another rifle, climbed up the pegs and, thrusting his head and shoulders through the hole, quickly shot the two cowed wolves that, at first sight of him, had slunk away in deadly fear to the farthest corner of the room.

When the two wolves had been killed, Big Tom and Silas and Gideon hurried to the barn. Inside they found the carcass of a wolf, trampled and kicked and gored until there was not a whole bone in the body. There was not a mark of teeth or claws on any of the animals, except a long scratch on the back of one of the horses. Evidently the wolf, in jumping through the hole, had landed on the back of this horse, had been quickly thrown

off and almost instantly trampled on, or kicked, and killed.

“Well, no special harm has been done,” Big Tom said, after all the animals in the barn had been examined and found safe and sound; “but it shore was some exciting while it lasted. Now,” and he turned to Mrs. Clay, who had hurried out to the barn after the men, “just get back into the house and see how quickly you can get us something to eat. I’m almost starved.”

“Right-o,” grinned Silas. “I shore am as hungry as a b— wolf, I mean,” and the grin broadened.

Gideon and Ruth never forgot that night of terror, and long years afterward, when a thriving little city stood on the site of the log house and the pioneer farm, their grandchildren never tired of hearing them tell of that long-ago night, during the Winter of the Deep Snow, when the great pack of famished wolves attacked their home.

Now, to the present generation living in this peaceful and favored region, it seems almost impossible that such a thing could have occurred less than a hundred years ago, so swiftly has the wilderness been transformed into the prosperous farms and populous cities of today.

CHAPTER XX

THE HAWK THREATENS TO STRIKE

THE last week in February the weather suddenly moderated and the snow melted away so rapidly that by the beginning of March it had nearly all gone and there was the first feel of spring in the air. The warm weather continued, with now and then a sharp rally by the retreating forces of winter, all through March; and by the first of April all the frost was out of the ground and the warm, balmy air and the invigorating sunshine of spring had come, vivifying all nature.

Never before had there been such a spring for Gideon and Ruth. They lived outdoors, and each day they discovered some new beauty in blossoming flower or singing bird or growing shrub.

And never before had there been such a spring for Mr. and Mrs. Clay. All about them were blossoming the beauties of nature, as God made them, unchanged by the hand of man. But most of all, they joyed in their home-building. Each day the little log house and its surroundings grew more homelike, dearer, more beautiful to their eyes; and often as the two stood together and looked out over the quiet, peaceful surrounding prairie, beautiful with the blooms of spring, at the long line of the forest, now a living wall of green, and thought

of the richness of the glorious promise all this held for them and theirs, of the home to be, when the hardships and the dangers of pioneer days had gone, when they could live in contented peace and plenty, surrounded by their happy, prosperous children, their eyes would fill with tears—tears that tell of joys too deep for tongue to utter—and they would turn and clasp hands tightly and stand for minutes, each looking into the face of the other, without uttering a word.

Ah, who would not dare much, endure much, to be the makers of such dreams come true!

Silas, with the coming of spring, had again left the little log house, the wilderness itch once more in his blood. Big Tom and Gideon were happily busy with the spring work, making ready the ground for planting and sowing. Ruth, the baby in her arms, lived outdoors, sometimes with her father and Gideon in the field, sometimes wandering joyously over the near-by flower-covered prairie, picking the glorious blooms and resting, when weary, fairylike, on the fragrant couches of flowers and grass that everywhere invited her to repose. Mrs. Clay sang at her work about the house; for all that she did was being done for those that she loved best; and what greater happiness can come to woman than this? Indeed, the hardships, the dangers, the loneliness of pioneer life had their compensations!

With the spring came that wondrous migration of the passenger pigeon, when the skies themselves

were frequently darkened by the vast flocks of these birds, flying northward to their summer feeding and nesting places, to return in the autumn in equally vast flocks, to their winter rendezvous in the south. Now the Audubon societies of America are vainly offering five thousand dollars for a single living pair, male and female, of these birds, so greedily, so ruthlessly, so thoughtlessly has the hand of civilized man wrought against this timid, gentle creature.

Big Tom had an old large-bore shot gun; and during the migratory period of these birds all that Gideon had to do to get an abundance of flesh food for the day was to load this gun with fine shot each morning, step outside the door of the little log house, wait until a flock of pigeons, flying low, passed over, and fire up into it, almost without aim. Usually one shot would bring down enough birds to supply the larder for the day; and, to the credit of Big Tom and Gideon be it said, they never killed harmless wild game for the mere pleasure of killing. That brutal sport belongs to a later and, possibly, a more civilized day.

Then there were great flocks of wild geese and ducks passing north and now and then stopping to feed or rest in neighboring ponds or streams or fields. They could be had in abundance for the killing; but the pigeons furnished a more savory and tender meat and the geese and ducks were allowed to pass unharmed as long as a supply of the more appetizing birds could be had.

All the year through, deer, wild turkeys, prairie chickens, partridges, quail and other game birds could be found with little hunting, and were easily killed. Indeed, it was a glorious day for the hunter, the day of the pioneer; and fortunate for the pioneers that it was, for many of their larders would have been frequently empty had it not been for the wild game with which they could so easily fill them.

Thus the busy April days passed peacefully and swiftly, without a single interruption from the world outside. So far as seeing other human beings went, they might have been in the world alone, for not a fellow mortal, white or red, had come to their door from the great world beyond their little wilderness home. But this peaceful isolation, this modern Eden, did not, could not, last.

One evening, about the middle of May, while they were seated at the supper table, the door wide open, they heard a step outside and the next moment the tall form of Silas Wegg glided into the room.

"Glory be, but I'm jest in time!" were his first words, as his eyes rested on the table. "Wal, I shore am as hungry as a b'ar!"

"You old race horse!" and Big Tom jumped to his feet and gripped the hand of the old hunter. "You're a sight to make sore eyes well!" and he shook the hand warmly, while Mrs. Clay grabbed hold of the other hand and gave him an equally hearty welcome, and Gideon and Ruth shouted their joyous greetings and tried to get hold of him.

"Now, what is the news?" Big Tom continued,

the moment the hand-shaking was over. "Haven't seen a soul since you left. All the kingdoms of the world might have been blowed off the face of the earth for all I know! Set right down and tell us the news, Si."

"Yes, do," urged Mrs. Clay. "I'm just dying to know the latest Paris fashions," and she smiled.

"No, yew don't, yew inhospitable critters!" and Silas shook them both off, grabbed up a chair and, seating himself at the table, seized a knife and fork and began cutting huge slices off the venison roast that stood on the big pewter platter near the center of the table. "I told yew I was hungry as a b'ar," and he began loading a plate with slices of meat and potatoes, "an' here yew be a-wantin' me tew put off th' eatin' an' tell yew th' news an' show yew th' latest wrinkles in wimen's gowns! I shore am plumb ashamed o' yew, tew be obliged tew teach yew good manners in this here way," and he started shoveling the meat and the potatoes into his mouth; and not another word could the laughing and protesting man and woman get out of him until he had satisfied his hunger and pushed himself back from the table.

"Mother o' men!" and Silas clasped both hands over his well-filled stomach and stretched out his long legs comfortably, "but it is good tew eat wimen's cookin' ag'in, 'specially yewrn," and his eyes turned to Mrs. Clay.

"Sometimes I think you must be mostly stomach inside, Si," laughed Big Tom. "But now that that

important department of your body politic has been attended to, supposing you give us the news. And first tell us about Black Hawk and his Indians. I've been some anxious to know about what's been going on down at the Indian village, spring being the time trouble appears to be most apt to break out down there. Anything gone wrong this spring, Si?"

"Yes," and the old hunter's face clouded. "That's why I'm here," and he straightened up in his chair.

"What's the trouble now?" Big Tom's eyes fixed themselves anxiously on the face of Silas, while the smiles faded from the faces of Mrs. Clay and Ruth, and Gideon started and moved his chair up nearer to Silas.

"Wal, if I have th' rights o' it," began Silas, "it's mostly th' old trouble still sizzlin', aggervated by th' government's failure tew furnish th' Injuns with th' promised supplies, th' Injuns bein' powerful hard up for food, seein' that th' hard winter an' th' deep snow prevented 'em from dewin' as well as usual on their winter hunt. Then, tew, th' whites are tryin' ag'in tew force th' Injuns tew cross th' Mississippi, so that they kin take possession o' th' fertile land around their old village at th' mouth o' Rock River, accordin' tew treaty, th' whites say. But Black Hawk says th' treaty ain't bindin', 'cause th' Injuns that signed th' treaty had no power tew sign it; an' he's vowin' ag'in that he'll fight afore he'll be driven 'cross th' Mississippi; an' his bucks are gittin' uglier an' more threatenin' every day.

Th' settlers all round here are gittin' powerful uneasy; an' some on 'em are leavin' th' country, an' others, so I've heered, have sent a petition tew Governor Reynolds, askin' him tew send troops tew drive Black Hawk an' his bucks 'cross th' Mississippi. When I heered that, I thought it was time tew let yew know 'bout what was goin' on, so as tew put yew on yewr guard; for, I reckon, when Black Hawk learns that troops have been sent for tew drive him 'cross th' river, as he soon will, thar's bound tew be a rumpus. I thought yew otter know 'bout this, Tom, an' so I'm here."

"Right, Si; and I'm much obliged to you," Big Tom answered, his face showing the deep concern that he felt. "But, if I understand you, there has been nothing but threats so far, same as there was last year, no actual hostile acts."

"Not as I knows on, or I wouldn't be a-settin' here calmly talkin' tew yew; but I'm countin' on somethin' hostel happenin' sudden, as soon as Black Hawk discovers that troops have been sent for tew drive him 'cross th' Mississippi; an' when it does happen, yew want to be ready to act sudden. This," and Silas glanced around the little log house, "won't be no safe place for wimen folks an' yunks."

"I know," Big Tom answered slowly. "I've heard that the settlers have built a strong fort on Apple River; and I've been planning to take the wife and the children there the moment the danger becomes real. God knows I do not want to run any unnecessary risks when their lives are at stake;

but I can't desert this, the house and the crops and everything, just because the Indians are threatening. They threatened last spring, and nothing came of it. The trouble, in the past, has always been straightened out in time to avert bloodshed. But you know the situation better than I do, Si. Now, what would you advise me to do? I'll do just as you say, Si. If you think the danger is real this time and that there is no time to waste, we'll start for Apple River Fort this very night; but I certain hate like sin to leave all this," and Big Tom arose and strode to the door and stared out gloomily into the gathering shadows of the early evening.

Mrs. Clay was quickly by his side, her hand on his shoulder.

"It is only threats so far, Tom," she said; "and surely you won't desert your home because of Indian threats. I'll be ready to go the moment the danger is real; but," she turned to Silas, "it ain't real enough for that yet, is it, Si?"

"I dunno, I dunno," and the old hunter shook his head. "Injuns are as unsartain as fleas. Yew think yew've got 'em, but yew ain't. They might go on th' warpath eny moment; an', ag'in, they might not go right now; but it's bound tew come sooner or later; an' yew sartin otter tew be ready tew move sudden when it does come. Now, jest let me think a spell. Nuthin' was ever spiled by thinkin'," and his brow wrinkled and he stared down at his moccasined feet, as if they might be the source of some mysterious inspiration.

Big Tom and Mrs. Clay stood at the door, their hands clasped tightly together and their anxious eyes fixed on the face of the old hunter. Ruth had hurried to her mother and now stood close by her side, one hand tightly clutching her dress. Gideon sat still in his chair, his eyes on the face of Silas. No one spoke or hardly moved. Their home, their very lives might depend on the wisdom of the words of the old hunter.

After, possibly, two minutes of steadfast gazing at his feet, Silas lifted his eyes.

"I reckon," he said, speaking slowly, "that that plan o' yourn tew start for Apple Fort th' moment things begin tew look real dangerous is 'bout right. Now, this is th' way I've figgered out th' present situation. Th' Injuns may or they may not go on th' warpath right now; but yew want tew be ready no matter which way th' cat jumps. So, if I was yew, I'd put sech things as I wanted most tew take with me in one of th' wagins an' keep th' tew hosses always harnessed an' tied near th' wagin, so as tew be ready tew jump right in an' be off at a moment's notice; an' durin' th' day I'd keep a sharp lookout, an' at night I'd stand guard. Now, that's what I'd dew, if I was yew, pervided I wanted tew stand by th' home as long as possible, same as yew dew," and Silas paused.

"We'll do it, Si," Big Tom declared. "We'll do it this very night."

"Good," and Silas straightened up his long frame and came and stood by the side of Mr. and

Mrs. Clay. "'Twill be some risky, but I reckon I'd chance it, Tom, if I stood in yewr boots, 'specially with sech a wimen tew back me up," and his eyes turned in honest admiration to Mrs. Clay. "Now, I'll start right back early in th' mornin'," he continued, "an' keep an eye on Black Hawk an' his bucks, an' th' fust hostel move they make, I'll light out for here, as fast as th' good Lord'll let my legs go; an' if eny Injuns kin git here afore I dew, they'll shore have tew fly."

"You old war horse!" and Big Tom turned and clapped Silas heartily on the shoulder. "You shore have lifted a big load off my back. Now we can stay and feel about as safe as humans can feel under such ticklish circumstances, knowing that we've got you to warn us if trouble starts our way."

"But be on yewr guard all th' time jest th' same," admonished Silas. "Don't fergit for a minit that it's Injuns that yew are a-dealin' with, led by 'bout th' smartest an' th' cunnin'est chief that ever wore moccasins. Asides, somethin' might happen tew me, so I couldn't git here; but I'll shorely come if thar's real danger, 'long's I have a leg under me tew come on."

"I know you will, Si," Big Tom answered, gripping his hand and holding it tightly. "And the good God knows that we are obliged to you. Now," and his lips came together, "we'll get the wagon and the horses ready and then we'll go right to bed, all but the guard."

For nearly an hour all were busy. The wagon

was pulled up to within a few feet of the door, the horses were harnessed and staked out within a few feet of the wagon; and their most precious possessions and such things as they would need most, if they were suddenly called on to abandon their home, were stowed away in the wagon. But they were very careful not to overload the wagon. Their lives might depend on the speed of their horses, and it would not do to hamper that speed with a heavy load.

When the wagon had been loaded to the satisfaction of all, Big Tom insisted that the lights should all be put out and that all should go to bed at once, except Gideon, who was to stand guard for the first four hours of the night. Then he was to awaken Big Tom, who would stand guard for the remainder of the night. Big Tom was to awaken Silas at the first sign of the dawning day, and he would be off at once on his mission to the camp of Black Hawk.

CHAPTER XXI

THE COMING OF BEN BLOCK

WHEN Gideon awoke the next morning—he was allowed to sleep late on account of the guard duty he had done the night before—the sun was two hours high and Silas had long been gone. His father was out in the field at work, and as soon as he had eaten his breakfast he hurried out to him, rifle in hand.

“Seen anything suspicious, dad?” he asked, the moment he came to where his father was at work.

“Not a thing,” Big Tom answered. “Reckon it’s only another Indian scare; but, as Si says, when it’s Indians it’s always best to be on the safe side, so we’ll just continue to keep our rifles with us and a sharp lookout for redskins until Si gets back. He will be sure to hurry back, as soon as he knows for certain what the Indians are going to do. God grant that they be kept from going on the warpath! It would be terrible to have all this beautiful country ravaged by murdering, destroying savages.” His eyes roamed solicitously over the peaceful surrounding prairie, beautiful with the blooms of many-hued flowers and melodious with the songs of birds. “Well, we can only hope for the best and keep our rifles handy,” and he turned to his work.

That day, and all the succeeding days for a week,

passed in the same quiet, peaceful manner; but not for a moment during this time did the vigilance of our friends relax. Big Tom and Gideon carried their rifles with them wherever they went, Mrs. Clay's rifle always stood loaded near her hand; the wagon, loaded ready for instant flight, was always near the door, with the harnessed horses tied near by, and some one did guard duty during every hour of the night. Still another week of watchfulness and suspense passed with no signs of Indians, no sign of Silas, not a word of any kind from the world outside our pioneer's little home. Then, late one afternoon, Ben Block, the long-haired and long-bearded old hunter, suddenly walked out of the woods and hurried to where Big Tom and Gideon were at work in the field. Gideon was the first to see him.

"Dad, look!" he cried in great excitement. "Some one is coming!" Then, after a moment's keen scrutiny of the advancing man, he added, his voice showing his disappointment, "but it isn't Si. It's—it's—I know! It's Ben Block, the old hunter, the man who told us of the Indian trouble last year, that day we killed Old Whitenose. You—you don't suppose anything could have happened to Si and he has come in his place?"

"I shore hope not; but we'll soon know," and Big Tom, dropping the hoe with which he was at work, hurried off to meet the old hunter, followed by Gideon.

"I've come right from th' village o' th' Hawk,"

Ben Block said, the moment the greetings were over; "an' from Si Wegg, tew tell yew tew be ready eny moment, night or day, tew git up an' git fer Apple Fort. Si's stayin' ahind tew watch th' Hawk an' make dead shore that th' Hawk's a-goin' tew carry out his threats tew fight, afore he legs it tew yew; an' he wants yew tew be ready tew git a-goin' quick when he does come, 'cause thar won't be no time to lose; an' he told me 'specially tew warn yew not tew let up any on yewr guardin'. Th' trouble shore is gittin' hot. Governor Reynolds has jest sent out a call fer volunteers an' General Gaines, with th' reglers, is hurryin' up, an' Black Hawk is a-vowin' that he'll fight afore he'll be driven 'cross th' Mississippi River. He says that he'll not be forced off his own land, th' home of his ancesters, where his fathers are buried; that he's not afeard o' th' Americans; that he's able tew fight 'em an' drive 'em intew th' sea, if necessary. It shore looks as if there was a-goin' tew be war this time; an' then God pity yew lone settlers!" Ben Block paused and allowed his eyes to dwell on the beautiful scene around him.

"But," Big Tom questioned, his face white with apprehension, "there's been no actual bloodshed yet?"

"No, nobody has been killed yit, if that's what yew mean. But th' Hawk an' his warriors are a-gettin' ready fer war, th' Governor has called fer volunteers, th' reglers are a-comin', an' that is enough tew scare most o' th' settlers white an'

they're leavin' th' country or flyin' tew th' fortified places jest 'bout as fast as th' good Lord'll let 'em. 'Course it's none o' my business; but if I was yew, I wouldn't risk anuther night in that lonely log house. What could yew dew if fifty or a hundred Injuns should attack yew? Keep 'em off fer a leetle while maybe; but long afore help could reach yew, yew'd— God, man, you've got a wife an' children!"

"No man need tell me my duty to my wife and children," Big Tom answered, the lines on his face hardening. "I know my duty; but," and his eyes swept over the plowed fields, beginning to show green with the growing crops, over the surrounding prairie, and finally rested on the little log house, above which the smoke of the supper fire was floating lazily upward, "this is all that I, that my wife and children have in the world. It is our only home. Have you stopped to think that our going might cost us all this? and we can't afford to lose it. Yes, I know it is risky to stay here, but we are not running the risk blindly. Some one is on guard every moment night and day. Everything is ready for instant flight. Si has promised to keep an eye on the Indians and to warn us in time to reach Apple River Fort; and a fellow can depend on Si; and he has only warned us to be ready, as yet; and we are ready. Now, under these circumstances, should we risk the loss of all this just because Black Hawk and his warriors threaten terrible things? He has threatened terrible things before, only last

year; and nothing came of them — But, you must be tired and hungry. Come 'long with me to the house. Supper must be nigh ready. I want to talk it all over with Martha."

"Much obliged, but I kin't," answered Ben Block. "I've got tew make Big Ike Conrad's tewnight. He has not been warned yit. Jest stopped tew bring Si's message tew yew. Reckon yew're right 'bout stayin' here, come tew look at it through yewr eyes an' seein' that yew've got Si Wegg tew watch out fer yew. I'd sartin hate tew leave all this myself. But be durned watchful. Injuns is worser than smallpox. When they breaks out, they breaks out sudden. Sorry I kin't wait tew give my respects tew th' missus; but I must be gittin' on," and, with a good-by grip of the hand to Mr. Clay and Gideon, Ben Block started off in the direction of Big Ike Conrad's distant home.

For a minute or two Big Tom stood, watching the retreating form of the old hunter, then he turned abruptly toward the house.

"I'm going to the house," he said. "Your mother must know at once about this message from Si. You stay out here and keep guard," and he hurried to the house, leaving Gideon alone to do sentry duty.

Mrs. Clay was busy cooking supper. Ruth sat on the bearskin-covered lounge playing with the baby. The moment Big Tom entered the door Mrs. Clay turned a startled, inquiring face toward him.

"What — what is it?" she asked, her face whit-

ening a little, for a glance at the face of Big Tom had told her that he had news of some kind to tell; and news might portend terrible things during those dreadful days of suspense.

“A message from Si,” Big Tom answered, “brought by Ben Block, the hunter, to warn us that things are about ready to come to a head between the Indians and the whites, and to be ready to start for Apple River Fort at a moment’s notice.”

Then he went on and told her in full the words of Ben Block.

“Now,” he ended, “the question is, what shall we do? Ben Block evidently thinks that we are foolhardy to stay here another moment, that we ought to pull out at once for Apple River Fort, and not wait for further words from Si. He seems to think the outbreak is certain to come soon; and that, when it does come, it will come so sudden that lone settlers like us will have mighty little chance of getting away before the Indians are down on them. God knows, Martha, I don’t want to expose you and the children to any unnecessary risks, and we will start for Apple River Fort this very night if you think we ought to, and not wait for any further word from Si. We can leave a notice on the door of the house for him, so that when he comes he will know where we have gone. What do you say, Martha?” and the eyes that Big Tom turned to the face of his wife were full of anxiety.

For a minute or two Mrs. Clay stood silently

regarding the face of her husband, then she turned and looked slowly around the homelike little room and out through the open door and over the peaceful prairie beyond.

“What would happen to the house and the stock and the crops, if we left now?” she asked quietly.

“If the Indians came, the house and the crops would be destroyed. We could take the stock with us, if we were not in too much of a hurry. The crops, if we were away any length of time, would perish anyway for want of care, and the house might be destroyed during our absence. But I ain’t thinking of the house and the stock and the crops. I’m thinking of you and the children.”

“I know, Tom,” and Mrs. Clay laid a hand on Big Tom’s shoulder. “But you and I and the children and the stock must be fed next winter, and, if we raise no crops, how can we do that?”

“Reckon we could get along somehow.”

“We might; but the oxen and the cow and the horses would starve, and we have no money to buy others. Tom, it would be terrible hard to be obliged to start all over again.”

“I know, I know,” and one of the big arms drew the brave little woman to him. “But we could do it. With your help, I’d be ready to begin all over again tomorrow.”

“So we could, if we had to,” she answered, smiling bravely. “But we don’t want to do it unless we have to; and, according to both Si and Ben Block, Black Hawk is just threatening again,

the same as he did last year, and maybe it will turn out again the same as it did last year. Then we would wish we had stayed at home and attended to things. I've lived through too many Indian scares to be easily frightened by just threats. Then there's Si. He is right there, and will know the moment the real danger begins; and he will be sure to get here in time for us to fly, if we must. No, Tom, under the circumstances, I don't think it foolhardy for us to remain until Si tells us to go or we know that the Indians have actually started out burning and murdering. Now, I know that you really agree with me about staying, don't you, Tom?" and she looked up into the face of her big husband with an encouraging smile.

"You are right, little woman, I do want to stay," and the big arm drew her close to his side. "And we will stay and trust to Si and our own watchfulness. We've got a pretty stout fort right here." Big Tom's eyes turned to the thick log walls of the house, pierced with numerous loopholes. "And, if the worst comes to worst, I reckon we could stand quite a siege by the Indians. Now that that matter is settled, we will just go on as we have been going on and depend on Silas and our own watchfulness to warn us in time." He picked up his rifle, which he had laid down on a chair, and went out where Gideon was.

Anxious days and nights followed the coming of Ben Block. His words of warning and caution had renewed and strengthened their fears, fears

that the peaceful days following the going of Silas had tended to lull. Every unusual noise startled them. At night their sleep was often broken by strange sounds coming from the darkness without, and they would start up from their beds and listen, shivering with the dread of what might be coming. On two different nights, when Gideon was on guard, Big Tom had become so uneasy at the stillness of the night outside that he had arisen from bed and gone out to assure himself that everything was all right with the boy. Once, during the day, while Gideon and his father were at work in the field, they had heard a distant rifle shot, coming from the direction of the woods, and both at once had hurried to the house, and had climbed to the roof, whence they could see for a long distance in every direction. There they sat all the rest of the day, their eyes watching anxiously the surrounding prairie and the line of the distant woods, hoping that the shot had come from the rifle of Silas, yet fearful that it might mean the coming of the Indians. They never learned to what woodland tragedy that rifle shot gave voice.

Thus, day after day of this dreadful suspense passed, without a sign of Silas, without a word from the outside world, where so many terrible things might be taking place. The dread of the Indian outbreak had depopulated the prairies and the forests. Not a traveler passed the little log house; and, of course, Big Tom did not dare leave home long enough to go to the distant fort on

Apple River, the nearest point where he could be sure of learning what was happening, since his nearer neighbors, doubtless, had fled the country or gone to the fort for protection. Consequently they were obliged to wait and watch and hope, with the terrible fear of the sudden coming of the murderous savages always present, uncertain and fearful of what the day or the night might bring forth.

This long waiting, under such circumstances of suspense and danger, was harrowing to the nerves, dreadful to endure; but the pioneers, from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans, had to endure many days and many months of such suspense and peril before our great country could be wrested from the savage and the wilderness; and we, who now sleep quietly in our beds at night and go about our work peacefully during the day, should sometimes stop to think of this and to honor the memories and recount the deeds of those brave men and women and children, who made possible all that we now enjoy.

One night, late in June, when Gideon stood on guard near the loaded wagon and the harnessed horses, and the others all lay in their beds in the house, he heard, or thought he heard, the sound of a light step out in the darkness. The sky was so overcast with clouds that he could not see a rod into the surrounding darkness.

“That was no wolf!” he thought, as his blood began jumping through his veins. “Sounded like a human being,” and, quietly cocking his rifle, he

stood motionless, listening intently and straining his eyes in the direction whence had come the sound that had awakened his suspicions.

Again and nearer this time he heard the sound of a step, seemingly not more than two or three rods away. He was sure now that it was made by a human foot; and he held his cocked rifle ready to throw instantly to his shoulder.

If it should prove to be an Indian, creeping up on the lonely log house, he must fire at sight and rush into the house and shut and bar the door. Such were his instructions.

Now, as Gideon stood there in the darkness waiting, watching, he swiftly reviewed just what his actions should be. He mentally calculated exactly where the door was and how long it would take him to get there. He wondered if there would be more than one Indian, and, if there were, if he could get the door safely shut and barred before any of them could reach it.

Once more he heard the sound of a step now close at hand; and then, from out the near-by darkness, there came, with such suddenness and unexpectedness as nearly to cause his heart to jump out of his mouth, a loud halloo; and the form of a tall man stepped out of the darkness not a rod away and repeated the halloo.

By this time Gideon had his wits back sufficiently to recognize the voice of Silas Wegg; and, with a yell of joy, he fairly hurled himself upon the old hunter.

“Jumping bobcats!” and Silas leaped about a dozen feet to one side.

“Gosh, but yew shore did startle me!” he said, a moment later, as he gripped Gideon’s hand. “I ’most jumped out o’ my britches.”

“Dad! Oh Dad!” and Gideon dropped the old hunter’s hand and rushed into the house. “Si, Silas Wegg has come!” he shouted.

In two seconds Big Tom and Mrs. Clay and Ruth were all out of their beds and shouting joyous greetings to Silas, as they dressed.

In the excitement of the sudden coming the dread of the Indian outbreak had been forgotten for a moment. Big Tom was the first to remember.

“Si,” and he gripped the arm of Silas tensely, “what about Black Hawk? Are we in danger of a—”

“No.” There was a joyous note in the old hunter’s voice. “Light th’ candles, start th’ fire, git th’ coffee a-bilin’ an’ th’ meat a-sizzlin’ an’ some johnnycake a-bakin’. I’m as hungry as a b’ar. Kin’t talk on an empty stumick. Asides I’m plumb tuckered. Runned most of th’ way from th’ Hawk’s village tew here, so powerful anxious was I tew git th’ good news tew yew tewnight, so that yew could all sleep calm an’ peaceful once more. Black Hawk an’ his warriors have crossed the Mississippi River an’ have signed a treaty, promisin’ not tew recross it ag’in tew this side, without permission o’ th’ government. Thar, that’s all yew are a-goin’ tew git out o’ me till I gets some food intew me, so

git busy," and he threw himself down on the skin-covered lounge that stood against one side of the room and stretched out his long legs with an audible sigh of comfort and satisfaction.

All was now joyous bustle in the little log house. Candles were quickly lighted, wood was thrown on the glowing coals in the fireplace, until a great fire was roaring up the chimney; and, in half an hour, so swiftly did Mrs. Clay and Ruth work, a feast fit to serve a healthy king was on the rough table—hot johnnycake, with plenty of fresh butter, wild honey, broiled wild turkey, potatoes, and milk gravy, all to be washed down with steaming hot coffee.

"It shore does seem powerful good tew sot down tew a table ag'in an' eat wimen's cookin'," Silas said, as he drew his chair up and began stowing the food away where it would do him the most good.

After he had "filled up" to his satisfaction and had again stretched himself out comfortably on the lounge, he told his impatient and interested listeners the story more in detail of how the trouble with Black Hawk had been averted and the chief and his warriors prevailed on to cross to the other side of the Mississippi.

"When I sent Ben Block tew warn yew," he explained, "I felt mighty nigh sartin that it wouldn't be more'n a day or tew afore Black Hawk an' his bucks would be liftin' white scalps. They was all het up 'bout th' soldiers comin' tew drive 'em out

o' their homes 'cross th' Mississippi; an' Black Hawk was a-threatenin' tew dew terrible things. General Gaines got thar afore th' militia did; an', I reckon, 'twas powerful lucky that he did, 'cause he tried tew reason with th' Injuns an' didn't dew enything tew rile 'em more. Fust off he had a big powwow with all th' Injuns an' got 'bout a third on 'em tew cross th' Mississippi peacefully. But th' Hawk an' th' rest o' th' Injuns refused tew go an' defied Gaines tew make 'em go; an' when General Gaines tried tew arger with 'em, Black Hawk, who was painted an' armed fer battle, proudly told him that th' Sacs an' th' Foxes were not cowards, tew be driven from th' homes o' their ancesters like deer, an' boasted that they were not afeared o' th' Americans, an' bade 'em come on an' they would drive 'em back intew th' Great Water; an' even th' squaws runned round 'mong th' warriors, callin' on 'em tew fight for their homes an' th' graves o' their ancesters like men. I shore thought then that th' war was a-comin' sudden, an' was ready tew light out tew warn yew at th' fust move o' th' Injuns; but I knowed I could be most help tew yew by stayin' right whar I was an' keepin' an eye on Black Hawk an' his warriors, so long as they remained in camp at their village.

“Wal, four days ago th' militia reached th' village, sixteen hundred on 'em, 'long with six companies o' reglers, 'bout tew thousand fittin' men in all. Black Hawk couldn't muster more'n four hundred warriors at th' most.

“Tew thousand ag’in four hundred was tew big odds fer even Black Hawk tew buck; an’ that night, atter takin’ a good look at th’ size o’ th’ army ar-rayed ag’in him, he an’ his warriors, with their wives an’ yunks, hurriedly paddled ’cross th’ Mississippi; an’ yisterday th’ Hawk an’ his chiefs signed a treaty, agreein’ tew give up all their land this side o’ th’ Mississippi an’ not tew cross th’ Big River ag’in, without th’ government’s say so; an’ th’ government agreein’ tew supply ’em with food until they got settled in their new home an’ could raise crops.

“Naterly th’ Hawk’s feelin’ ’bout as pleased over th’ way things has turned out as a b’ar caught in a trap—but what could he dew? Four hundred ag’in tew thousand! Howsoever, if th’ government treats him honest, I reckon he’ll stick by th’ treaty; but he shore is a mighty sore Injun an’ ’twouldn’t take much tew start him raging ag’in.”

Silas was too tired and sleepy for the talk to be prolonged that night, and, declaring that the lounge felt so comfortable that he was going to sleep right there, he bade them all good night, stretched out his long legs on the lounge and, almost as soon as he closed his eyes, was sound asleep.

CHAPTER XXII

THE FLAMING RED DEATH

THE long, quiet, peaceful days of summer that now followed those dreadful weeks of suspense were days that brought many quiet joys to the pioneers. The weather, the greater part of the time, was delightful. They were surrounded by all of the beauties of growing nature. Wonderful flowers bloomed in profusion on the prairies and in the woods. Birds were constantly flitting hither and thither over the grass, and the flower-covered prairies, and among the green boughs of the trees, filling the air with their music. And over all hung the mystery and the quiet and the peace of the wilderness.

During the early part of summer an abundance of rain had fallen; but, with the coming of fall, a long drought began. For nearly six weeks not a drop of rain fell and hardly a cloud passed over the face of the blue skies. Fortunately for the Clays, however, the drought came too late to do serious harm to the crops; but it brought them face to face with another and a more serious peril than even the loss of crops.

The protracted dry weather, with the hot rays of the sun beating down day after day on the thirsty earth, soon burnt the life out of growing

vegetation and left the grass and the flowers, all the beautiful verdure of the prairies, standing dead and almost as dry and as easily ignited as tinder.

Big Tom, as day after day went by without rain and the grass withered and dried up under the fervent heat of the sun, became more and more uneasy; a worried look came on the face of Mrs. Clay, and the eyes of both turned frequently to search anxiously the surrounding horizon.

“If the dry grass should catch fire,” Mrs. Clay said, one morning, as she stood by the side of Big Tom near the open door of the log house, looking out over the parched prairie; “and if the wind should be in the right direction, the fire would sweep down upon us with the speed of a race horse; and—and—Tom, I’m afraid the prairie will get afire. Can’t we do something to guard against its harming us, if it should? It would be terrible to have all this,” and she glanced toward the homelike little log house, the barn, the surrounding stacks of grain and hay, and the other conveniences and comforts that their busy hands had gathered about them, “go up in flames and smoke; and, if it came sudden, it would be dangerous. Father had a sister, Aunt Melinda, who lost two little children, a boy and a girl, in a prairie fire,” and she shuddered. “Seems to me we might back-fire the grass around the house or do something to prevent it from reaching us.” She turned her troubled eyes to the face of her husband.

“Yes,” Big Tom answered, “you are right. It

is risky, too risky to go without protection longer. The grass is as dry as tinder. A spark would set it afire. Concern it all, why don't it rain? A good shower would remove all danger. I've been thinking every day for a week that we'd do something, but have kept putting it off, hoping it would rain. Howsoever, we'll put it off no longer, but start right in back-firing this very day. We sure don't want to get caught in a prairie fire. Confound it, why did I let Si and Gid go off on that hunt down to Grass Lake today? They won't be back until late and they'd be a powerful lot of help keeping the back-fire under control. Now, I'll need your help and Ruth's, too; for we've got to be powerful careful and not let the fire get away from us. We don't want to start a fire that will burn out our neighbors. The wind," and, picking up a handful of the dry grass, he tossed it up in the air, "is coming straight from the east, so we'll start the fire just west of the house. Now get Ruth and arm yourselves with brush brooms. Bring along a broom for me," he called after Mrs. Clay, as she hurried into the house. "I'll get a couple of pails of water to stick the brooms in, so as to keep them wet," and, picking up a couple of wooden pails that stood on the bench near the door of the house, he hurried off with them to the spring.

The object in back-firing was to surround the building, or whatever it was desired to protect, with a sufficiently wide area of burnt-over ground to stop the fire, for lack of fuel, or, at least, to stop

it in that immediate vicinity and turn it aside. This was done by starting fires at the right points and then being very careful to keep them under control, by beating them out where necessary, until sufficient ground had been burnt over to furnish the needed protection.

Leaving the baby asleep in its cradle, Mrs. Clay and Ruth hurried out to the appointed place with the brooms, where they were joined by Big Tom with the two pails of water.

“Reckon this is as good a spot as any to make the start,” he said, as he set down the two pails. “Now be ready to beat it out on the side next to the house.” Stooping down, he gathered a bunch of dry grass into a little pile, took the lighted pipe he was smoking out of his mouth and, carefully dropping the glowing coals out of its bowl on the little pile of dry grass, blew on them until they burst into flames. A moment later the fire caught in the surrounding grass and began to spread in an ever widening circle.

Big Tom and Mrs. Clay and Ruth now thrust their brooms into the pails of water and beat the fire out on the side next to the house, allowing it to burn in the opposite direction.

“There, that’ll be about as much as we can safely manage at once,” Big Tom said, when a strip of grass about four rods wide was burning briskly. “Now, you keep it from spreading at one end,” and he turned to Mrs. Clay, “and Ruth at the other, and I’ll keep it from getting too rambunctious

along the front and be ready to help either one of you, if you need me. It will be slow work, but it will be the only way we can be sure to keep the fire under control all the time; and we must keep it under control, for only God Almighty could stop it if it once got away from us."

The fire, carefully guarded at both ends and beat down in front with the wet brooms wherever it began to blaze too hotly, was now allowed to burn along this narrow strip of ground for a distance of some twenty rods.

"That will be far enough," Big Tom declared, when this point had been reached. "No prairie fire can jump over a strip of bare ground twenty rods wide. Now we'll beat the fire all out and then go back and fire another strip alongside of this one; and thus, strip by strip, work our way around the house. It will be slow work, as I said before, but it will be safe; and, when we're done, we'll have a strip of burnt-over ground twenty rods wide surrounding the house, and I've never seen the prairie fire yet that could jump that distance," and he began beating out the fire.

When the last spark had been put out, they returned to the starting point, and, firing another four-rod wide strip, guarded it in the same manner as before until the twenty-rod limit had been reached; and then, putting the fire out, went back and fired another strip. They worked hard and by noon they had lengthened the strip of burnt-over ground until it half encircled the house.

“We’ve done fine,” Big Tom said, pausing and measuring the long stretch of burnt-over ground with his eyes. “About half done I should think. Now we’ll stop and get something to eat and rest up a spell.”

An hour later they were again hard at work.

About the middle of the afternoon, when the burnt-over strip of ground extended nearly two-thirds of the way around the house, Big Tom suddenly straightened up and stood staring anxiously off over the prairie to the southwest, where a low, dark line of smokelike clouds hung above the hills.

“What is it, Tom?” Mrs. Clay’s eyes followed the direction of his eyes. She started and her face whitened at sight of the low line of dark clouds, that, somehow, did not look exactly like ordinary clouds. “You don’t think,” and her eyes turned quickly to the face of her husband, “that it can be that the prairie is on fire?”

“Looks like it,” Big Tom answered. “But,” he added, quickly, “we are safe. We’re protected on that side. And before the fire can get here we can have the rest of the back-firing nearly done, if we work lively, so the best thing we can do is to keep busy,” and he returned to his work with renewed energy.

For half an hour they worked on, as swiftly as hands and legs and fire permitted, frequently turning their eyes in the direction of the dark line of smoke that was constantly and swiftly drawing nearer. Then a heavy black cloud was seen to

shoot up over the top of a distant hill, followed almost instantly by a dull red glow along the line of the hilltop.

There could no longer be any question as to what the clouds of smoke meant. The prairie was on fire, and the fire was driving swiftly straight toward them.

"Great Moses, what if we had put off the back-firing for another day!" Big Tom exclaimed, as he watched the rapidly lengthening line of dull red creep along the tops of the hills. "But, thank God! we are safe now. Hurry, and we can come mighty nigh finishing the back-firing before the fire can reach us. We will make the strips only ten rods long now. That'll be long enough, seeing that the fire is coming from the other side."

All now worked at their utmost speed.

Suddenly Mrs. Clay dropped her broom and straightened up, a look of horror on her face.

"Tom!" she cried, excitedly, catching hold of Big Tom's sleeve. "What direction is Grass Lake from here?"

"About due southwest," Big Tom answered. "Why—? God A'mighty!" and his face blanched. "That's where Gid and Si went hunting. They'll be right in the line of the fire! But," he added, quickly, as his eyes caught the look of horror on Mrs. Clay's face, "it will take more than a prairie fire to catch Si Wegg napping. Don't worry. They'll come out all right— No use back-firing any more. We're safeguarded, thank God! But

we'll have to keep a sharp lookout for sparks. Come on to the house. We'll fill up all the pails and kettles with water and get ready to fight any fire that starts," and he ran toward the house, followed by Mrs. Clay and Ruth.

The moment he reached the house he caught up a couple of pails, ran to the spring, which was well within the protected area, quickly filled them with water, and ran back to the house. Mrs. Clay and Ruth, with pails and kettles in their hands, were only a few feet behind him. In five minutes they had everything that would hold water filled.

Fortunately the stock were all safe in the barn. Each night all were shut up to protect them from the wolves and the bears; and that morning Big Tom had not let them out, on account of the back-firing, being afraid that the fire might frighten them and drive them too far from the house.

All was now done that could be done to safeguard their little home, and, standing very close together, they could only wait and watch and hope.

By this time the red line stretched across the full width of the prairie and deep into the woods. It was not more than three or four miles away and was advancing with the speed of a race horse.

Already, frightened birds, uttering wild cries, were flying through the air above their heads and terrified animals were fleeing for life from the Red Death. Deer sped swiftly by within a couple of rods of where they stood, without so much as a glance in their direction. They were followed in

rapid succession by the less speedy animals, wolves, rabbits, foxes, raccoons, all the startled wild life of the prairie, and all fleeing from the red terror behind. A black bear, followed by two half-grown cubs, lumbered by so near that Big Tom could have reached out and almost touched them with the broom he held in his hand. The air over head was almost filled with flying birds, quails, prairie chickens, partridges, owls, hawks, and thousands of smaller birds. Some flew silently, others were constantly uttering frightened cries. A huge flock of wild turkeys, racing madly over the ground on their long legs, aided by the flapping of their wings, almost ran over them in their race to escape the red line of death behind. All the wild birds and animals had lost their fear of man in their greater fear of the burning death. And, even the three human beings, standing there with their eyes fixed anxiously on the swiftly advancing line of fire, gave no more attention to the flying birds and fleeing animals than did the birds and animals to them.

By now the fire had approached to within a couple of miles, and they could see distinctly the eager, leaping advance of the red flames, as they rushed, like a charging army of fiery coursers, over the prairie and through the woods, where every now and then great pillars of flame shot high above the tree tops. Above the red flames rolled the black smoke, through which the sun shone red and angry.

It was an awesome, a dreadful, and yet a wondrously beautiful sight, that swift advancing line

of flames, plumed with black smoke, and Big Tom, with Mrs. Clay clinging to one arm and Ruth tightly gripping his hand with one of hers while she clung to her mother with the other, watched it with fascinated eyes and rapidly beating heart, a look of dreadful apprehension on his face. He feared to look into the face of his wife, for he knew that he would see the same apprehension pictured there.

What had happened to Gideon and Silas? Were they safe? Had they escaped unharmed? Already the fire had swept over the region where they were to hunt. If they only could do something to set at rest their doubt, to break this terrible suspense, this constantly growing fear! It was torture to stand thus idly by while dear ones might be perishing.

"We might set a back-fire to meet the prairie fire," Mrs. Clay said, at length, turning her white face to the face of her husband. "It could do no harm now, and it would make us a little safer."

Before answering, Big Tom jumped upon a log and, holding both hands to his eyes, carefully scanned the prairie intervening between them and the fire, now not more than a mile away.

Mrs. Clay watched him with her heart in her eyes. She knew that he was looking to make sure that no human being was out there on the prairie to be caught between the two fires, should they start the back-fire to meet the prairie fire.

"Yes," and Big Tom jumped down from the

log, "it will be safe to start the back-fire now. I would have started it before, but I wanted to make sure there were no humans out there to be caught between the two fires." Hurrying into the house, he filled a shovel with glowing coals from the fire-place and started on the run for the outer edge of the burnt-over ground that surrounded the house, with Mrs. Clay and Ruth racing after him.

The moment he reached the edge of the dry grass he began scattering the live coals of fire. The wind quickly fanned them into flames, and in ten seconds the dry grass was ablaze in a dozen places; and, in a minute more, a thin line of flames was racing across the prairie toward the coming fire.

At that moment, over the brow of a low-lying hill, not more than half a mile away and lying directly between the two racing fires, the figures of three men staggered into view and ran stumblingly down the hill toward the house. Two of the men were pulling the other along between them. The Flaming Red Death was not more than a quarter of a mile behind the men, and the constantly widening line of back-fire was rushing eagerly forward to meet them. They were caught between the two!

Mrs. Clay was the first to see the three runners.

"Tom! Tom!" she screamed, and stood for the moment speechless with horror, pointing with her finger.

Big Tom uttered a hoarse cry, hardly human in its anguish, tore off his deerskin coat, flung it into the arms of Mrs. Clay, and, yelling: "Quick! Try

to beat out a way through the back-fire! It's Gid and Si and some one they're trying to save!" ran, with all the speed of his long legs, straight toward the three men. When he reached the line of back-fire he leaped through it and over it and, with a loud shout to call the attention of Gideon and Silas to him, he sped on.

The hurling of Big Tom's coat into the arms of Mrs. Clay seemed to galvanize her into sudden action, and, yelling to Ruth to pull off her outer skirt and come to her aid, she rushed toward the now furiously blazing line of back-fire and began frantically beating out the flames with the deerskin coat. In a moment Ruth was by her side and aiding her with the skirt of her dress.

At first, so great was the headway of the fire, they made no impression on the flames. Then, seizing upon a weak spot in the line, they assaulted it so vigorously with coat and skirt that in another instant they had beat the fire out for a couple of feet—three feet—four feet—a dozen feet; but, to do their utmost, they could not widen the breach another inch.

In the meantime Big Tom was running as he had never run before; and he had need—he was now racing with death—for the prairie fire was gaining rapidly upon Gideon and Silas, hampered as they were by the almost helpless man they were pulling along between them. Twice they stumbled and fell to the ground, but they staggered again to their feet and, still pluckily clinging to the man

between them, struggled blindly, desperately on, with the fire now not twenty rods behind them.

Unaided they could never reach the oasis of the protected ground, unless they deserted their helpless companion; and Silas Wegg and Gideon Clay were not the kind to desert a companion in misfortune, however great their own peril.

A third time they stumbled and fell to the ground, with the fire so close that it was scorching their backs and sparks were flying all around them; and, as they staggered to their feet and again attempted to lift their companion, a pair of huge hands reached down and caught the helpless body up, as if it had been suddenly deprived of all weight.

"Run, run for your lives!" shouted Big Tom, as he flung the now inert body up over one shoulder, like a bag of grain, whirled about and ran, almost as if unhampered, back toward the breach that Mrs. Clay and Ruth were still desperately keeping open in the line of back-fire.

Silas caught the hand of Gideon, who was staggering, and the two ran together, their tongues protruding out of their panting mouths, their breath coming in gasps, putting every ounce of remaining strength into this last desperate effort to escape from the open jaws of the Flaming Red Death. Sparks of fire fell on their clothing, in their hair, long arms of flames reached out to grab them; but still on they ran, blindly, dazedly, following close behind the giant form of Big Tom Clay. And then, just as it seemed as if all their muscles were turning

into melted tallow, just as the jaws of the Red Death were about to close down upon them, Big Tom, with a great shout, whirled about, caught hold of both and, despite the burden already on his back, dragged them through the breach in the wall of fire and on to the safety of the burnt-over ground beyond, while hungry arms of flame reached far out after them. In a minute more Mrs. Clay and Ruth, crying and laughing almost hysterically, were helping drag them toward the house, away from the blistering heat of the fiery furnace now roaring and crackling all around them.

The moment the safety of the house was reached, Big Tom lowered his burden to the ground. Then, for the first time, he saw that the rescued man was an Indian, a boy, but little older than Gideon. A glance told him that he was not seriously hurt, only completely exhausted by his long race for life.

"You 'tend to him," he said, turning quickly to Mrs. Clay. "I've got to watch out, or some of those falling sparks will start a fire," and, seizing a brush broom and a pail of water, he ran to where several small blazes had already started in the dry grass near the house and quickly put them out.

Silas and Gideon were too exhausted to utter a word or make a move for a few minutes, but their faces showed more eloquently than words could have told, how thankful they were to have escaped the fire. Both had lost a little hair, and a number of holes had been burnt in their clothes, but, otherwise, they were unharmed.

The Indian boy lay where Big Tom had left him, breathing heavily, but showing no other signs of life; and Mrs. Clay, as soon as she had assured herself that Gideon was unhurt, hurried to where he lay on the ground.

“Bring me some water,” she bade Ruth, as she bent over the young Indian. “He don’t appear to be hurt. Just completely tuckered. Land sakes, but that was a narrow escape! Another minute and the fire would have got you sure.” She shuddered and glanced toward the flames that by now nearly encompassed the house.

For a few minutes the heat from the encircling fire was almost unbearable, and the flames stretched out long arms hungrily toward them, but they could not jump or reach across the twenty rods of burnt-over ground; and in ten minutes the fire had swept by, so furiously, so swiftly did it burn, and rushed on, leaving behind the home of our pioneers unharmed, but surrounded by a black and smoking prairie.

Silas was the first to recover his speech.

“Gosh!” he said, turning a pair of twinkling eyes to Mrs. Clay, who was bending over the Indian boy bathing his head, “that thar race has made me as hungry as a b’ar. Dew hurry an’ git somethin’ tew eat.”

“Reckon, Si,” laughed Big Tom, who had just returned to the house, after putting out the last spark of fire, “that when Gabriel blows his trumpet and you jump up out of your grave, the first thing

you say will be: 'Gosh, Gabe, I'm as hungry as a b'ar! When dew we eat?'"

"Reckon I will," grinned back Silas, slowly rising and stretching out his long legs, "'specially since I'm apt tew be powerful hungry atter lyin' in a grave ten thousand years or more. Say, but that was a hot fire! I thought shore it was a-goin' tew scorch th' shirt off my back!"

This rude interchange of wit broke the tension, and all laughed. A faint smile even played around the lips of the Indian boy, who, under the administrations of Mrs. Clay, had recovered consciousness, but was still too weak to make an effort to move.

That was a night of general rejoicing and thanksgiving; and, after the bountiful supper that Mrs. Clay fairly outdid herself in preparing, Silas and Gideon told of their race for life with the prairie fire and how the young Indian came to be a sharer in their peril.

They had finished their hunt and, on their way back, had stopped to rest, both being quite heavily loaded with deer meat, under the shade of a little clump of trees that grew in the midst of the prairie. The day was hot and they were in no hurry, so they sat there under the trees talking for, perhaps, an hour. Suddenly, just as they were about to start again on their way back home, the young Indian, his eyes wild with fright, came tearing through the underbrush and almost stumbled over them. Evidently he had already run far, for he was panting violently. At sight of Gideon and Silas he

paused long enough to shout: "Fire! All prairie on fire!" and sped on. Hardly had the words left his mouth, when Silas and Gideon were on their feet and speeding after the running Indian, leaving the deer meat where it lay on the ground.

The prairie on fire! They knew too well what that meant to waste a moment in delay.

As they ran they glanced back. At first the trees and the underbrush hid the fire from them. Then, as they reached the top of a little hill, they saw the whole horizon behind them glowing red with flames and black with smoke.

"Make straight for home!" Silas shouted. "We've got a good three miles th' start o' th' fire, an' it's not more'n tew miles tew th' house. We kin make it before th' fire kin git us."

It did not take them long to catch up with the young Indian, who was beginning to stagger from exhaustion and was gasping for breath.

"Kin't leave him tew burn, even if he is Injun!" shouted Silas, as they came abreast of him. "Kitch hold!" and he caught hold of one of the Indian's arms, while Gideon seized the other, and together they ran with the Indian between them.

For a time the young Indian, stimulated by their help, held out bravely and was of little hindrance to their speed. But before they had covered a mile he gave out almost entirely.

"No good. Can't run longer," he panted. "No can save all. Indian not afraid of Red Death. Let Indian go. Save white brothers," and he attempted

to withdraw his arms from the grip of Silas and Gideon.

The fire had gained rapidly on them; a backward glance showed them this. Hampered as they were now by the almost helpless Indian boy, it would gain even more rapidly, and the log house, their only hope of safety, was still a mile off! They might reach it ahead of the fire if they dropped the Indian—with him, it seemed impossible. But neither hesitated an instant.

“No,” panted Silas, tightening his grip on the Indian boy’s arm. “Jest keep yewr legs a-goin’ an’ we’ll save yew yit. Th’ house is jest ayond that leetle hill ahead.”

And both, almost carrying the Indian boy between them and with the fire roaring close behind, pluckily, desperately, struggled on, up the hill and over its top, and on into the oasis of refuge, as has been already described, saved by as narrow a margin as ever spared life to the pluck and the courage of man.

CHAPTER XXIII

BEN BLOCK AGAIN

THE next morning, when Big Tom awoke, he started and sat up quickly in bed and listened.

"Great Moses!" he exclaimed, in angry disgust. "If 'tain't raining! Now, why couldn't it have rained yesterday, when it was so badly needed?"

"Don't know," grinned Silas, who was Big Tom's bedfellow; "an' I don't care now," he added, philosophically. "Yisterday is gone an' tewday is here; an' I never worry 'bout what's gone, an' I allers try tew make th' best o' what's here. I reckon th' good Lord knows his own business best enyhow; an' so I allers let Him 'tend tew it in His own way, without eny remarks from me. If he had wanted it tew rain yisterday, 'sted o' tewday, it would have rained yisterday, an' that's enough fer me. Now I'm goin' tew git up. Must be long atter sunup, by th' way that calf's been a-bellerin' out tew th' barn for the last hour," and he crawled out of bed, followed by Big Tom.

The muscles of all were somewhat sore and lame from their exertions of the day before; but, otherwise, the excitement and the peril of their fight with the prairie fire had left no bad results. Even the Indian boy had fully recovered his bodily strength and vigor by his long night's rest and sleep.

"How you feel?" Big Tom greeted him, heartily, as he climbed down the pegs from the room above, where he had slept, and dropped to the floor.

"Bully!" gravely responded the young Indian. "Me feel bully!" and he drew his lithe form up very straight. Evidently he was just a little proud of his use of the word "bully."

"Bully for you!" retorted Big Tom, with a laugh. "Now, just make yourself to home. Come, Gid, we must do something to stop that calf belling, or he'll bust his gullet," and, followed by Gideon, he hurried to the barn to attend to the "critters."

It rained all that day and far into the next night, a steady, soaking rain that the thirsty earth had been long craving; but the next morning dawned clear and bright.

The Indian boy had been prevailed on, by much urging, to remain in the shelter of the log house until the storm was over. But he was ill at ease in the white man's wigwam and had sat for the greater part of the time in a corner of the room almost motionless, watching every act of his white friends with his keen black eyes, wonderingly, curiously; but never asking a question or speaking, unless spoken to.

Ruth and Gideon had vainly tried to enter into conversation with him. But his English was too limited or his reserve too great; for he answered, when he answered at all, only in discouraging monosyllables. However, they did find out that his Indian name was Kar-ray-mau-nee, which, he said,

meant Walking Turtle, and was given to him when he was a baby, on account of his peculiar method of creeping. "But," he had proudly added, "when Kar-ray-mau-nee warrior, he have warrior name, not papoose name."

Now, however, that the storm was over and the morning had dawned clear and bright, he insisted, as soon as he had eaten his breakfast, on going.

"Wigwam long way. All day walk," he said, by way of explaining his haste, as he arose from the table and prepared to go.

At the door he paused and, for the first time, his feelings broke through his Indian reserve. For a moment he stood looking from the eyes of one to the eyes of the other, his fine young face showing that he was struggling with feelings he did not know how to translate into words or acts. Then, suddenly, he stepped quickly to Gideon and Silas, who stood close together, side by side, and, catching hold of the right hand of each, lifted them and laid them palm downward on the top of his head.

"You saved Kar-ray-mau-nee from the Red Death," he said. "Kar-ray-mau-nee never forget. He your brother as long as sun shines. His wigwam your home," and, lowering the two hands from his head, he gravely and yet with a dignity that seems to come naturally to these untutored sons of the wilderness, bowed, after the white man's fashion, to Mr. and Mrs. Clay and Ruth, each in turn, and, holding his young head erect, turned and glided from the house without another word.

In ten minutes more he had passed out of sight in the forest, without one backward glance, save that, just as he was about to enter the woods, he turned and waved a last farewell to his friends of the little log house.

The grass and the flowers came up quickly again, after the long soaking rain that had so closely followed the fire; and, in two weeks' time, it seemed hardly possible that the verdure-covered prairie could have been swept bare by hot flames so recently.

Winter came early that year. The first week in November a snowstorm left a sufficient depth of snow on the ground to make good sleighing, and the snow lasted all winter. Consequently Big Tom had an abundance of opportunities to try out his homemade sleigh.

Once he drove as far as Galena, a thriving little town that had grown up in the midst of the lead mines to the northwest; and, when he came back, he brought with him three half-grown pigs and half a dozen pullets and a cockerel. Twice they visited Abe Dixon to the north, and once they drove as far south as Old Man Kellogg's; and, in return, they were visited by the Dixon and the Kellogg families.

Thus the long months of the winter passed quickly and pleasantly for the pioneers in their little log house on the prairie, and spring came again, with its warm winds and growing grass and flowers and singing birds.

Never before had the prairie seemed so beautiful

or so peaceful as it did this spring of 1832. The grass and the flowers were unusually luxuriant, probably on account of the fire of the fall before, and the birds, somehow, seemed to be more numerous and, to the ears of our friends, to sing more sweetly and happily than they had ever sung in the past. Possibly it was their own happiness, their own joy in living, that gave this golden tinge to all of their surroundings.

Silas, with the first coming of the warm weather, had again succumbed to an attack of the wilderness itch and had shouldered his rifle and departed. Big Tom and Gideon, during the daylight hours, were always hard at work in the fields. Mrs. Clay and Ruth and the baby, now just learning to walk, were happily-busy in and about the house. Indeed, every waking hour was a busy hour and all the hours were happy ones during these quiet, peaceful days of early spring.

"It seems almost too good to be true," Big Tom said, one morning toward the last of April, as he stood in the opened door of the little log house and looked out over the peaceful prairie. "We've been here now pretty nigh two years and not a real misfortune of any kind has happened to any of us. No sickness, no crop failures, no bad luck of any kind; and the future full of smiles and promises."

"Yes, Tom," Mrs. Clay answered, coming to the door and standing by his side. "God has been very good to us, and I have been very, very happy helping build this wilderness home for you, for

you and the children. I do hope our good fortune continues," and she glanced a bit anxiously around the peaceful scene. "But, somehow, I've been feeling lately as if it was all too good to last, as if our good luck could not continue much longer. It—"

"Shucks!" and Big Tom smilingly clapped one of his big hands over her mouth. "Now quit your trying to borrow trouble, just because you don't happen to have any of it at home. We can get along without it splendid for quite a spell yet. Just look up. Our skies are as clear as the skies above us," and he glanced upward. "Not a cloud anywhere in sight and the sun shining glorious and the birds singing all around us. Reckon it's just Clay luck," and he laughed. "I've always been called a lucky dog. Well, this won't do the spring plowing! See, Gid has the oxen yoked, so I'll be off," and he hurried to where Gideon stood, with the oxen ready yoked together.

Mrs. Clay's eyes tenderly followed his big form for a moment, and then, with a smiling face, she turned and went about her work, all her doubts and fears dispelled by the cheery words of Big Tom. During the day she smiled often to herself, as she moved about the house; and, when at night she went to the door to call Big Tom and Gideon to their supper, there was a happy light in her eyes and the smile was still on her lips.

"Land sakes!" she exclaimed, the moment she looked out of the door, "if there ain't some one

with Tom and Gid, and they've started for the house already, so I need do no calling. Now, I wonder who it can be? Don't look like anybody I ever saw before. Ruth!" and she turned to where Ruth was playing with the baby on the floor, "set another plate on the table. We've got company."

"Who?" and Ruth jumped excitedly from the floor and ran toward the door.

"Don't know. Never saw him before. Do your work before you do your looking," and Mrs. Clay pushed the excited and curious girl back from the door. "Mercy me! I'll surely have to bake some more johnnycake!" and she hurried to a pan of cornmeal dough that set on the bench near the fireplace and began to make ready another batch of johnnycake.

"Saw you coming," she smiled, from where she was bending over the fireplace, as Big Tom and Gideon and the "company" entered; "and I've already got another batch of johnnycake baking."

"Martha!"

Something in Big Tom's voice caused her to straighten up and glance quickly and apprehensively up into his face.

"This is Ben Block, the hunter, who brought us news of the Black Hawk trouble before."

"Mercy on us! That old trouble-maker ain't been stirring up any more trouble, has he?"

"Yes," Big Tom answered. "He—but I'll let Ben tell the story," and he turned quickly to Ben Block. "Set down, please, and tell us all about

the matter. Supper can wait," and he motioned Ben Block to a chair.

Ben Block seated himself on the chair, and, holding his coonskin cap in his hands and nervously twirling it about as he talked, proceeded to tell of this latest trouble with Black Hawk.

"Th' Hawk's been feelin' uglier than a sick b'ar ever since he was driven 'cross th' Mississippi last year," he began; "an', as near as I can figger it out, it's mostly that ugly feelin' left over from last year, aggravated by th' government's failure tew furnish his people with th' food they need, accordin' tew agreement, that's caused this sudden outbreak on th' part o' th' Hawk. Enyhow, he crossed the Mississippi, sudden, 'bout a week ago, with somethin' like five hundred warriors an' his women an' children, an' headed straight fer th' Winnerbeggars village on th' Rock River, where that lyin' prophet, White Cloud, holds forth. I ain't much use fer that old repteel, White Cloud. He's got tew much o' th' snake in his black eyes an' crawlin', glidin' ways. But th' Hawk 'pears tew think he's some pumpkin o' a prophet an' has gone tew him fer counsel. Wal, this crossin' o' th' Mississippi by th' Hawk, ag'in' treaty an' ag'in' orders look so hostile that th' Governor has ag'in called fer volunteers, an' th' regelers are a-comin', an' th' settlers are 'bout scart out o' their wits an' are a flyin' tew th' fortified places an' buildin' stockades an' gittin' ready fer all th' horrors o' an Injun war. I knowed that Si Wegg had gone 'cross th' Mississippi on a

hunt; an' I feared that nobody had warned yew o' th' trouble, seein' that yew are so far off th' regler trail, an' every one is so busy lookin' atter his own scalp; so I thought I'd better come round an' make shore yew knowed 'bout it. Of course, 'taint sartin that th' Hawk means war, but it looks a powerful lot like it an' every settler otter be on his guard," and Ben Block's eyes turned hungrily toward the table. Evidently, now that he had told the news, he was anxious to begin the eating.

For a moment Big Tom sat silent, staring down gloomily at the floor. Then he quickly raised his head and turned to Ben Block.

"You are sure Black Hawk had his women and children with him?" he asked, his face brightening a little.

"Yes; seen them myself."

"That don't look much as if he meant war. Indians don't usually take their women and children with them on the warpath."

"Sartin not. But his crossin' th' Mississippi at all, ag'in' treaty an' ag'in' orders, is a hostel act, an' th' government an' th' state is bound tew drive him back; an' that old reptel, White Cloud, has been fillin' him up with talk 'bout th' British helpin' him with arms an' food, an' that th' Winnerbeggars an' th' Pottawattomies tew th' north are only waitin' fer him tew dig up th' tomahawk tew join him. Now, all this 'pears tew me tew look as if th' war was bound tew come, 'though, maybe, th' Hawk didn't mean war when he crossed th' Mississippi.

As fer th' wimen an' th' yunks, what's tew hinder th' Hawk from sendin' 'em tew one o' th' friendly Injun villages tew th' north, when he starts out on th' warpath?"

"Nothing," answered Big Tom, the gloom coming back on his face. "Only why didn't he leave them on the other side of the Mississippi, where they'd have been sure to have been safe, if he really meant war? Well, Martha," and he turned to his wife, "what do you think about this latest Indian scare?"

"About as much as I did of the scare last year and the scare the year before," Mrs. Clay answered. "As you say, if Black Hawk intended to make war, it seems sensible to suppose that he would have left his women and children on the other side of the Mississippi. Now, I don't mean that I think there is no danger," she added quickly. "There always is, when it's Indians, especially if they're feeling ugly. But I don't think the danger is anywhere near as real as most of the settlers seem to think it is, judging from what Ben Block tells us; and I don't think anything is going to happen, unless the whites themselves do something to spill all the fat in the fire and force the Indians to fight. I—land sakes!" and she made a jump for the fireplace, "the johnnycake is burning up!

"Now," and she looked up from the smoking johnnycake a moment later, "you'd better set right down to the table and not wait until everything gets cold. I'll get another batch of johnnycake baking

right away. The Indian talk can wait until after supper," and she bustled about, making ready another batch of johnnycake dough, while Big Tom and the others pulled up their chairs to the supper table and began eating, much to the satisfaction of Ben Block.

Big Tom and Mrs. Clay were more loath than ever to abandon their prairie home, now that, after having overcome so many difficulties, they were beginning to feel as if they were getting firmly established. Then they had much more to abandon now than they had had last year or the year before. The log house had been made more comfortable and homelike, the stock had increased and the area of ground under cultivation had been greatly enlarged. If they left all this now, right in the midst of the planting and cultivating season, it would mean no crops of any kind that year; and, in all probability, the loss of the greater part of their stock and the destruction of the house and the other buildings. This, to Big Tom and Mrs. Clay, seemed like too big a sacrifice to make on the chance of an Indian outbreak, especially since neither of them really believed that Black Hawk had crossed the Mississippi River with the intention of going on the warpath. Hence, at the family council that gathered after the supper had been eaten, it was determined not to abandon the little log house; at least not yet, not until something more decisive than at present was known, Ben Block agreeing, now that Silas was away, to be on the lookout and

to warn them if the Indians should actually begin hostilities.

“We’ll keep a constant guard, night and day, and have everything ready to start at a moment’s notice, the same as we did before,” Big Tom said, when the final decision to remain had been made.

“An’ I’ll be off early in th’ mornin’ an’ keep scoutin’ ’round,” Ben Block promised. “An’ at th’ fust real hostel move, I’ll light out fer here like a streak of greased lightnin’.”

Accordingly, one of the wagons was again drawn up near the door of the house and such things as would be needed most in case of a sudden flight were placed in it, and the horses, ready harnessed, staked out near by.

“Oh, dear!” Mrs. Clay complained, as they were about to go to bed that night, leaving Gideon to do guard duty during the first hours, “I’ll be powerful glad when this Indian trouble is settled once for all and we can live in peace. Seems to me that ever since I was born there has always been a threatening Indian outbreak hanging over my head, like the sword of Damocles it tells about in the school readers; and—and—” her face whitened —“and twice the sword fell. God grant that I may never have to live through such scenes of terror and horror again!” and she shuddered. “I had begun to think that the trouble was all over at last, and that we could live in peace in our new home. And now we’ve got to go through all the dreadful suspense and weary watching again, and

try to sleep with one ear always listening for the terrible war whoop of the Indians; and be ready to jump out of our beds any moment and fight for our lives!"

"There, there," and Big Tom laid a hand on the agitated woman's shoulder. "It sure is hard, little woman; but worrying over it won't make it any easier. We've always pulled through in the past all right, and, I reckon, we will this time. Besides, it all comes in the day's work out here on the frontier. Now," and he smiled cheerily, "remember I've always been a lucky dog, and go to bed and dream of the time thirty years from now, when we will be old and happy and contented and living right here on this land that we have wrested from the wilderness and the savage, surrounded by our prosperous children, yes, and maybe by our grandchildren. It's worth it all, Martha, all that we are enduring now!"

"You are right, Tom," and a tender light came into the brave woman's eyes. "It is worth it all; and I was foolish and weak to complain. We'll just make the best of everything that comes, for the children's and—and the grandchildren's sakes."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE HAWK STRIKES

THE sun was just showing above the eastern horizon the next morning when Ben Block arose from the breakfast table and made ready to leave the little log house on the prairie.

“I’ll keep a sharp lookout,” he promised, as he threw powder horn and bullet pouch over his shoulder and tightened his belt, “an’ let yew know tew once, if th’ Injuns start on th’ warpath. But don’t let up none on yewr watchin’, ’til yew hear from me or know fer sartin that th’ danger is over. Kin’t be tew keerful, when it’s Injuns, an’ one o’ their scalpin’ parties might git th’ start o’ me, or somethin’ might happen tew delay me. Now I must be goin’,” and, with a good-by shake of the hand of each, he tossed the long barrel of his rifle up on his shoulder and hurried off, with the free and easy stride the wilderness gives its devotees.

Long, weary days of suspense and watchfulness—days when the eyes of some one of them were on guard every hour, night and day, and the wagon and the harnessed horses always stood ready for instant flight—now passed without the sign of a break in the peaceful quietness of the surrounding woods and prairie.

“Reckon it will turn out to be just a scare, the

same as the other did," Big Tom said, one evening, as he came into the house after the day's work was done, leaving Gideon on guard outside. "According to Ben Block, Black Hawk must have crossed the Mississippi the first week in April—more than a month ago! I don't believe a real Indian outbreak could hang fire that long, without something happening to touch it off. I've a notion to let up a little on this eternal watching. I— Why, Martha, what is the trouble?" and he started quickly toward Mrs. Clay, who had just turned a worried, anxious face in his direction.

"The baby is sick, Tom," Mrs. Clay's voice trembled, and her eyes turned to the bed, where the baby lay with Ruth sitting by her side, fanning her. "She was taken terrible bad about the middle of the afternoon, but is resting easier now. Tom, I'm afraid baby has that same dreadful sickness that my sister Ann died with, when she was little. Baby acts and looks just as sister did when she was coming down with it. Tom, if it is that dreadful fever, what will we do?"

Big Tom's face whitened; for a serious illness, in their present situation of isolation and peril, far from a doctor, would be terrible; and he hurried to the side of the bed and bent anxiously over the baby.

No need of a second look into the unnaturally bright eyes and on the hot, feverish cheeks and flushed forehead to tell him that his baby was a very sick child. She lay on the bed, moaning softly

and turning restlessly from side to side. The moment her eyes caught sight of her father's face she uttered a glad little cry, and, reaching out, caught one of his big fingers in her hot little hand and pulled him down close to her.

"Baby sick. Baby sick," she said, as she reached up with the other hand and arm and pulled his head down. "Papa kiss baby. Kiss poor sick baby."

"Yes, yes." Big Tom's voice was so husky he spoke with difficulty. "Papa kiss baby. Make naughty sick go way," and he pressed his lips to the hot cheek and tenderly laid one of his big hands on the flushed little forehead and gently smoothed back the soft, moist hair. "Baby will soon be well, now that papa has come. Baby shut eyes and go to sleep."

The child smiled confidently and obediently closed her eyes; but almost instantly opened them again, with a cry of pain that went through the father's and the mother's hearts like a sharp knife.

There was no supper eaten that night; and Ruth's and Gideon's eyes were the only ones that closed for a moment in sleep. All night long the baby lay moaning and crying, and all night long Mrs. Clay and Big Tom bent anxiously over her, doing everything that love and their rude knowledge could suggest to ease her suffering, and doing it all vainly.

With the first light of dawning day, Mrs. Clay turned a white, haggard face to Big Tom. "Tom, Tom, I'm afraid baby will die. Oh, if we only

could have a doctor! He might do something to save her. Isn't there a doctor somewhere that we can get?" and she caught hold of Big Tom with both of her trembling hands. "Do—do something, can't you, to save our baby?"

For a moment Big Tom stood silent. His baby lay sick, dying, it might be, for want of a doctor. His home was threatened by murderous Indians. If he went for a doctor—there was, doubtless, one stationed at Fort Armstrong on Rock Island, a good day's journey from there, although a fast horse might make it in less time—the Indians might attack the lonely log house during his absence and kill all. If he did not go, and the baby should die—But the baby was there, suffering, before his own eyes; and the Indians were only a possibility! His strong jaws came together and he straightened up his big body.

"God helping me, Martha, I will get a doctor," he said, quietly. "There must be a government doctor stationed at Fort Armstrong. Now get me a snatch to eat, while I'm saddling the horse and giving Gideon his instructions," and he hurried out of the house.

Ten minutes later Gideon held the saddled and bridled horse ready at the door, while Big Tom quickly ate his hastily prepared breakfast.

"I'll be back just as soon as the good Lord'll let me," he said, as he jumped up from the table, "and I'll bring a doctor with me if I have to hog-tie him and bring him on the horse in front of me," and

his strong jaws came together with a snap that boded ill for the doctor who would have the temerity to refuse to come with him.

The baby had now fallen into a troubled, restless sleep, and even in her sleep she moaned and was constantly turning from one side to the other and moving her little limbs about.

“Good-by, little sweetheart,” Big Tom said, as he bent over the bed and kissed her. “Papa—” His voice choked and he turned abruptly from the bed and hurried to the door. He knew that that might be the last time he looked upon his baby living.

At the door he turned and threw an arm around Mrs. Clay and Ruth.

“Keep up your courage,” he said, as he drew them close and kissed them. “God surely will not desert us altogether. I’m sure the baby is better this morning. Trust to Clay luck to bring us out all right,” and he smiled.

“And God,” Mrs. Clay added, reverently.

“And God,” repeated Big Tom, bowing his head.

As he mounted the horse, he turned to Gideon.

“Son,” he said, “I’m leaving them in your care. Guard them, as I would guard them, were I here, with your life.”

“I will, Dad,” and Gideon’s voice choked.

“I trust you, son,” and Big Tom reached down and gripped the hand of Gideon and the two looked deep for a moment into each other’s eyes. Then, without another word, Big Tom struck the horse a

blow with his whip, and the animal sprang off, as if he understood the great need of haste.

Fort Armstrong was a small fort that the United States had established on Rock Island, an island in the Mississippi at the mouth of the Rock River, and was some forty miles distant from the house of Big Tom. He hoped to reach the fort a little after noon, secure a fresh horse, and, with the doctor, start back at once and reach the log house a little before midnight of the same day.

He rode fast, and by noon he had covered considerably over half the distance to the fort.

So far he had not seen a human being, but had passed a number of abandoned houses. As he hurried by he could see evidences of the haste with which the houses had been left, as if under the stress of a great danger; and the sight aroused his own fears and increased his anxiety to get back to the lonely log house on the prairie.

About one o'clock he reached an eminence from which he could see the waters of the Mississippi, still some ten miles away, and the sight cheered his heart. He was nearing his journey's end. He paused for a few moments on the hill top to breathe his panting horse and had just started down the hillside, when a man suddenly jumped up from under a small clump of trees a few rods away, where he had been lying in the shade, and shouted excitedly and ran swiftly toward him.

Big Tom, at sight of this man, pulled up his horse with a violent jerk and sat in the saddle

staring at him as if he could hardly believe the evidence of his own eyes, for the running man was Silas Wegg. As he came nearer, Big Tom could see that the old hunter was greatly excited.

“Mother o’ men!” he panted, the moment he came up. “What yew doin’ here! Whar yew goin’? What has happened? Quick! Don’t waste no words,” and, in his excitement, he caught hold of the bridle rein, as if he were fearful Big Tom might try to get away from him.

In as few words as possible, Big Tom told him what had happened at the little log house and why he was on his way to Fort Armstrong; and, before he had finished speaking, Silas had whirled his horse about and had headed him homeward.

“Now, git right back home,” he cried, “as fast as the good Lord’ll let yew. Black Hawk is on th’ warpath, murderin’ th’ whites an’ headed right yewr way. I was on my way tew warn yew.”

“But, the baby—the doctor—I—”

“Th’ baby won’t need no docter, if th’ Injuns git thar afore we dew,” Silas interrupted, impatiently. “Asides, no sane docter would stir a step with yew in that direction without a regiment at his back. ’Twould look tew much like suicide.”

“But—” again Big Tom began.

“God A’mighty, man! Th’ Injuns may be attackin’ yewr home this very minit. Git a-goin’ tew once,” and Silas struck the horse a violent blow with his hand, caught hold of the stirrup strap, and ran alongside the horse.

Big Tom made no further resistance, but rode on grimly and silently, his anxious eyes fixed on the ground to the front of him and his mind busy with dreadful apprehensions.

The horse, already tired by his long ride, responded nobly to this new call on his strength and energy, as if he understood the necessity of the sacrifice he was making. For fifteen miles he needed little urging; then his strength and his breath both began to fail him. Now Big Tom was remorseless. He plied him with the whip without mercy, and for five miles more the noble brute struggled on, with Silas, marvelous old man, holding fast to the stirrup strap, running pantingly along by his side. Then, while going down a hill, the horse stumbled and fell, struggled to rise, but could not, and, with a groan almost human in its anguish, fell back again.

Big Tom had jumped from his saddle as the horse fell. Now he gave one look at the fallen animal, caught up his rifle, which had been jarred from his hand, and sped on, on foot, letting the horse lie where he fell.

The two men, for Silas still ran by the side of Big Tom, settled down into a steady, doglike trot, that experience had taught them was best for a long run such as they were making. They ran silently and grimly, each intent on conserving all the powers within him to the one end of reaching the little log house in the shortest time possible.

At the end of half an hour they paused for the

first time on the top of a little hill for a few moments' breathing space.

"We kin make it in less than an hour more," Silas panted.

"Yes," Big Tom assented, as he threw himself down on the ground. "God grant that we are not too late!"

"I kin see no signs o' Injun devilment," and Silas's eyes searched the surrounding horizon. "No smoke from burnin' houses, no—look thar!" and he raised a long arm and pointed to where a heavy column of black smoke could be seen rising skyward some ten miles to the southward.

"That must be the home of Big Ike Conrad," Big Tom said, half-raising himself from the ground. "God grant that he was warned in time to get away!— My God, Si!" and he jumped to his feet, a look of horror on his face, at the sudden thought the sight of the smoke so far to the south had given him. "That means that the Indians must have already passed my place! Come on," and he started off on the run.

Without a word, but with a grim, set look on his leathery face, Silas hurried after him and caught him by the hand.

"Slow up a leetle," he warned, "or yew'll give out afore yew git thar."

"My wife, my baby, my sick baby, my boy, my girl! And you tell me to slow up!" Big Tom turned, almost furiously, on Silas, jerked his hand away and raced on. But, in a few minutes, he

recognized the wisdom of Silas's warning and slowed down to the steady, doglike trot.

Silas soon caught up with him and again the two men ran side by side.

The sun had already set when they drew near the spot where the little log house had stood that morning, in the midst of its peaceful and pleasant surroundings.

"God grant that all are safe!" was the prayer in the heart of each, as he sped desperately, staggering with weariness, up the hill from the top of which the home place could be seen not more than a mile away.

Big Tom was the first to reach the summit of the hill. One look, and, with a groan, he sank down on the ground, where he had stood, and covered his eyes with his hands.

It was still light enough to see across the prairie, and, where the little log house had stood only that morning, there was now to be seen nothing but a pile of smouldering ruins, from which thin columns of smoke were rising lazily.

For full five minutes Silas stood like a statue, leaning heavily on the long barrel of his rifle, his eyes fixed on the faint red glow of the smoldering ruins and his leather-like face drawn into deep lines of suffering and horror. No one but he knew how deeply Mrs. Clay and the children had worked their way into his lonely bachelor heart. He felt the horror of this dreadful thing almost as much as did Big Tom himself. At last, with a grim tight-

ening of the lines around the mouth, he turned to where Big Tom crouched on the ground and laid a hand on one of the heaving shoulders.

"Tom," he said huskily, "Injuns sometimes make prisoners o' wimen an' yunks, an' if they've been made prisoners, we must rescue 'em. Come on. Let's investergate," and he started toward the ruins.

"If they're dead I'll kill that murdering villain, Black Hawk, with my own hands!" and Big Tom leaped to his feet, a wild light in his eyes, and savagely gripped his rifle and hurried after Silas.

The Indians had been thorough; house, barn, wagons, everything, had been completely destroyed; and all the live stock driven off or killed. All that was left was the smoking ruins. But, although they searched until late at night, not a vestige could they find of Mrs. Clay and the children.

"No use lookin' eny longer," Silas at length said. "They're not here, which means th' Injuns have got 'em, an' thar's hope in that," he added, his face brightening. "We'll git on their trail th' fust thing in th' mornin'. Now we must git all th' rest an' sleep we kin," and he stretched himself out on the ground where he had stood and was soon sound asleep.

Big Tom waited a few minutes, grim and silent, staring dully around at the ruins of his happy home; then he, too, lay down on the ground by the side of Silas, to get what sleep and rest a pitying God might send him.

CHAPTER XXV

MIKE GIRTY

GIDEON, as soon as his father had ridden off for the doctor, on that fateful morning, attended to the few chores that yet had to be done and then went to the door of the house.

“Dad said I was to work in the potato patch today, so as to be near the house,” he said, thrusting his head in through the open doorway. “If you want me for anything, just go to the north window and call. How’s the baby?”

“She’s asleep now, thank God!” Mrs. Clay answered from her place by the bedside, a note of encouragement in her voice. “The dreadful pains seem to be all gone; but the fever is as bad as ever. And—and, Gid, baby didn’t know me, know her own mother, when she awoke a few minutes ago, but stared up at me in such a dreadful wild-looking way that I was glad when her eyes closed again in sleep. Oh, I do hope your dad can get a doctor at Fort Armstrong! It is terrible to have baby so sick and not know what to do to help her. Now,” and she rose softly from the bedside and came quickly to the door, while her eyes swept swiftly and anxiously over the surrounding prairie, “my boy, don’t forget that you are the only man about the place and that we, Ruth and baby and I, are

depending on you to keep guard. It would be terrible to have the Indians attack us now that your dad is away and the baby is so sick!" and again her eyes searched apprehensively the peaceful surrounding prairie.

"Don't worry, mother. I'll keep my eyes open. No one can get to the house without being seen from the potato patch. Just forget all about the Indians and take good care of the baby. Dad'll be back before morning, and he'll surely have a doctor with him. Now I must be getting to work," and, taking a hoe, which hung against the side of the house, in one hand and his rifle in the other, Gideon started for the potato patch, while Mrs. Clay returned to her place by the side of the sick baby.

About nine o'clock that morning, Gideon, who every few minutes paused in his work long enough to take a quick searching look over the prairie and along the long line of the woods, was startled to see the solitary figure of a man step out from among the dark shadows of the trees and walk swiftly and confidently toward the house. Gideon at once dropped his hoe and, picking up his rifle from the ground where it lay near him, started also for the house, keeping his eyes on the advancing man and the dark line of the woods behind him. As the man drew nearer, he could see that he was white, a large, burly-looking fellow, roughly dressed in deerskins and armed with a rifle, tomahawk, knife, and pistols. He swaggered a little

in his walk, and Gideon's first impression of him was one of dislike and distrust.

"Howd'y!" the man called out the moment he came within hailing distance, throwing up both hands, after the manner of Indians when they wish to signify their friendliness. "I'm th' bearer of good news. Th' Hawk an' his braves have ag'in been driven 'cross th' Mississippi, an' all's as peaceful an' as quiet as a funeral, so yew kin hang up yewr rifles an' sleep quiet in yewr beds once more. Thought yew'd like tew know 'bout it, so I stopped on my way tew Old Man Kellogg's," and he grinned until two fanglike teeth showed through his shaggy beard.

"That is powerful good news to us right now," Gideon answered, all his dislike and distrust of the man vanishing in his joy over the message he bore. "Dad is away; but mother'll be right glad to see you and to hear your news. You see, we've got a terribly sick baby and dad's gone to Fort Armstrong after a doctor. Come right in and tell mother the good news. She's been afraid the Indians might attack us while dad was away, and it will do her a lot of good to know that that danger is over," and he started eagerly toward the house, anxious for his mother to hear the good news as soon as possible.

"So yewr dad's away," the man said as he hurried along by the side of Gideon; "an' gone fer a doctor fer a sick baby. That's terrible bad, an' I'm powerful sorry 'bout th' baby; but I'm glad

I kin ease yewr maw's mind 'bout th' Injun scare. Now," and he started a little and looked keenly into Gideon's face, "when might yew be expectin' yewr dad back?"

"He didn't start until this morning," Gideon answered frankly. "But dad won't waste no time and he'll sure be back before morning."

A look of relief passed over the face of the man and again he showed his two fanglike teeth in a smile.

"Pleasant an' kumfertble home," he said as they came up close to the house. "It shore would have been tough tew have had all this destroyed by th' Injuns," and again he smiled. Then, noting that Gideon's eyes wère turned from him, he suddenly and swiftly lifted his right hand high above his head and allowed it to fall straight downward.

The unsuspecting boy saw nothing of this movement, evidently a signal, and hurried on toward the house.

"Good news! Good news, mother!" he called out joyfully, the moment the door of the house was reached. "Here's a man come to tell us that the Indian scare is over and that Black Hawk and his warriors are safe across the Mississippi again, so we needn't worry any more over that. Now, come right in," and he turned to the stranger. "Mother'll be right glad to welcome the bearer of such news," and he entered the house, followed closely by the man.

Mrs. Clay, at the sound of Gideon's joyous voice

and words, jumped up quickly from the side of the bed and hurried to the door, her face a-light with the relief his words had brought her. She started slightly at sight of the man's face; evidently she did not like his looks at first any more than Gideon had, but any sort of a looking man would be welcome, coming with such news.

"Mercy me, but that is good news! I could welcome the devil himself if he brought such news, that is, if I knew it were true," and she extended her hand hospitably to the man.

The man started at Mrs. Clay's words and glanced sharply into her face, and then, as if reassured, grasped her hand and shook it heartily.

"I shore am glad tew be th' bearer of sech news tew yew at this time," and he glanced toward the bed, where Ruth sat, fanning the baby, her eyes on the face of the stranger. "Yewr boy tells me that yew have a sick baby an' that his dad has gone fer a doctor. Sickness is shore trouble enough, without eny Injun scare on top o' it; an' I'm glad tew be able tew set yewr mind at rest 'bout th' Injun scare."

"I sure am right glad to have it set at rest," and Mrs. Clay smiled wanly. "Now set right down and tell us about it," and she motioned him to a chair. "The baby, poor little thing," and the anxious look came back on her face, "is asleep; but 'twon't disturb her, if you speak low."

The man seated himself near the open door, where he could give frequent glances outside and

where his bulky form would prevent the others from seeing what was going on outside.

“Seems that th’ Hawk only wanted tew go tew th’ village o’ th’ Winnerbeggars tew raise a crap o’ corn tew keep his people from starvin’,” he began; “an’ had no intentions o’ goin’ on th’ warpath; an’ when he found out what a rumpus his crossin’ th’ Mississippi had stirred up, he was some surprised an’ scart, not being ready fer war, an’ so, gatherin’ his warriors an’ squaws an’ papooses together, he hurried back ’cross th’ Mississippi, afore th’ soldiers could git tew him. That’s ’bout all thar was tew this latest Injun scare; but it shore was a powerful big scare, while it lasted,” and he chuckled and hitched his chair still a little nearer to the door.

“Well, I certain am glad the scare is over,” and Mrs. Clay heaved a sigh of relief. “The suspense, not knowing what is a-going to happen, is terrible wearing on the nerves. Now, if baby only will get well, I sure would be a happy woman. Excuse me,” and she hurried to the bed and bent anxiously over the baby, who had begun to show signs of awakening.

Gideon, on sitting down, had laid his rifle across his knees. The man now reached out and placed his hand on the gun.

“That’s a mighty fine weapin yew have,” he said, as he lifted the rifle from Gideon’s knee. “A powerful fine weapin, jest ’bout th’ right heft an’ balance —”

At that moment the soft call of a quail, twice

repeated, came from outside. The man paused for a moment, as if listening, Gideon's rifle held in his hand.

"Jest 'bout th' right heft an' balance," he repeated, "an' comin' tew th' shoulder quick an' easy," and he stood up and suddenly threw the cocked rifle to his shoulder and pointed it straight at Gideon's head.

At the same instant Ruth uttered a scream of terror and jumped to her feet and stood, staring in a fascination of horror at the open window directly over the bed, through which protruded the long barrel of a rifle, behind which showed the horribly painted face and the glittering eyes of an Indian. At the same instant other rifles were thrust through the other windows and back of each was the hideous face of an Indian, while through the open doorway glided, as noiselessly as snakes, the nearly naked and horribly painted forms of half a dozen others.

Gideon, at the scream of Ruth, had leaped to his feet, to find himself looking straight down into the muzzle of his own rifle, held not three feet from his head, and into eyes that flamed like the eyes of a wolf in the dark.

"Quiet, quiet," chuckled the man behind the gun. "We ain't aimin' tew spill no blood, not right now, so jest take things quiet an' easy. Fooled yew good an' plenty, didn't I?" and he laughed tauntingly; but the muzzle of the rifle never lowered an inch and the flaming eyes never left Gideon's face

for an instant. "Wal, yew're not th' fust white idjits Mike Girty has fooled."

Gideon stood like one in a horrible nightmare, weaponless, helpless, speechless, while two Indians glided to his side, pulled his hands backward and swiftly tied them together behind his back.

Mrs. Clay, with a gasping cry of horror, caught the baby up in her arms at the first sight of the Indians, and stood, white and trembling, her burning eyes flashing from the face of one Indian to the face of another and finally resting, with a look of inexpressible contempt and loathing, on the face of Mike Girty, the white renegade.

The moment Gideon's hands were safely tied behind his back, Mike Girty lowered the rifle and turned and advanced toward Mrs. Clay, chuckling and grinning with brutal satisfaction over the cunning manner with which he had betrayed and trapped the people of his own race and color.

"Keep back! Don't you dare come near me, you cur, you contemptible cur! If you lay one of your dirty, poison, blood-stained hands on me, I'll tear your eyes out, if I die for it the next moment!" and Mrs. Clay, all the fury of her outraged humanity in her eyes, turned so threateningly on the advancing renegade that he abruptly stopped and took a quick step backward. "These Indians are at least human," she continued, "acting according to their race and light. But you are inhuman, accursed, base betrayer of your own blood and kind; and I'll not have you laying one of your

dirty fingers on me," and she contemptuously turned her back on the white man and, taking Ruth by the hand, walked up to a tall, masterful-looking Indian, evidently a chief, who stood near by, and signified that they were his prisoners.

Mike Girty's face had flushed angrily at the biting scorn of Mrs. Clay's words, looks and acts, and the moment she turned her back toward him he started furiously toward her; but the tall Indian to whom she had appealed lifted his right hand and held it over the head of Mrs. Clay.

"My prisoners," he said calmly, and sternly motioned the enraged man back.

Girty stood glowering at the Indian for a moment, then, whirling angrily about on his heels, caught Gideon roughly by the arm, gave him a violent jerk and, with a guttural command to two of the Indians, turned the boy over to them. At least no one could dispute his right to do as he pleased with the boy, his own prisoner!

Gideon was now taken a short distance from the house, roughly thrown to the ground and his ankles bound tightly together. A few minutes later Ruth and Mrs. Clay, the baby still held close to her bosom, were brought to the spot where Gideon lay bound, and left under the guard of two ugly-looking Indians.

All the other Indians now began plundering the house of everything of value to them. This done, they set fire to the house and the barn and the two wagons, shot the hens and the pigs and, gathering

the cattle and the horses together, hurried half a dozen Indians off to the north with them.

The feelings of our pioneer friends, as they sat in helpless agony and watched the utter destruction of all that had taken them so many months of patient, loving work and care to build, need no describing. You can imagine the rage of Gideon, all the greater because of his utter helplessness; the sorrow and anguish of Mrs. Clay, and the misery and terror of Ruth, better than words could tell. For the moment they even forgot the horrors of their own peril.

Gideon, at the coming of his mother and Ruth, had started to say something to cheer them up, but instantly one of the Indian guards had indicated most emphatically and savagely that he was to keep his mouth shut, consequently they had been obliged to sit through all the terrible scenes of destruction in silence.

The baby, during these scenes of horror, had lain in her mother's arms in a heavy sleeplike stupor that made her insensible to all that was going on around her, and it was fortunate that she had, for Indians when on the warpath never bother long with a screaming child. If the child is too young for fear to silence, the tomahawk is used.

As soon as the work of destruction was completed the Indians all gathered in a circle not far from where the prisoners sat and held a brief council, evidently, from their actions, over the disposition of the captives. First Mike Girty stood up and



Captured by the Indians

spoke vehemently and angrily, frequently pointing to where the white prisoners sat. Then Leaping Deer, the Indian to whom Mrs. Clay had appealed for protection from Girty and who was evidently the chief of the band, arose and spoke briefly but emphatically, once placing his hand on his tomahawk and scowling threateningly at Girty.

The result of the council was that Leaping Deer detailed five warriors to take charge of the prisoners, while he and Girty and the remaining Indians, some twenty in number, hurried off on another expedition of pillage and murder.

The five Indians thus detailed at once approached the captives, cut the thongs of deerskin that bound Gideon's hands and ankles, ordered all to stand up; and then, with one Indian walking ahead, two behind and one on either side of our unfortunate and miserable friends, started off toward the north.

"Just wait until dad gets back and finds out what has happened," Gideon whispered hurriedly to his mother, as they fell in line. "He'll start on our trail at once; and—"

Here a brown hand shot out and landed heavily on Gideon's mouth. The hint was sufficient. Gideon said no more.

Mrs. Clay and Ruth and Gideon, as they reached the brow of a little hill, turned for a last look at the spot where they had passed so many happy hours, now, alas, covered with smoking ruins, and then passed on over the hill top, whither and to what fate they knew not.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE YOUNG CAPTAIN OF VOLUNTEERS

BIG TOM and Silas Wegg had been completely exhausted, both physically and mentally, by the tremendous exertions of that long race back to the log house and the harrowing suspense and the dreadful fears that the peril of Mrs. Clay and the children had aroused; and when they stretched themselves out on the ground near the ruins of the log house after their vain search for some clue that would throw light on the fate of the missing ones, it was to sleep like two logs, notwithstanding the uncertainty that still harrowed their minds. Tired bodies and tired brains and tired hearts must have rest, or break; and, therefore, God has given us sleep.

Something cold and soft, pressing against one of his hands that lay uncovered, awoke Big Tom the next morning. With a shivering chill of dread, he instinctively clutched his rifle, even before he had opened his eyes; and, looking up, saw in the dim light of the early morning, standing over him and pressing his nose to his body, Black Ben, the horse that had so nobly served him the day before and which he had left exhausted on the prairie ten miles back.

Big Tom, with a cry of welcome and joy, sprang

to his feet and threw both arms around the neck of the horse. Wife and children and house and stock, all were gone, all but the faithful animal by his side; and the thought of this brought tears to his eyes and a choke in his throat.

"Wal," and Silas stood by his side and laid a caressing hand on the neck of the horse, "this is what I call brute faithfulness, atter th' way yew abused him yisterday, tew foller yew up an' tew come nosin' 'round yew this mornin', like he loved yew more'n ever. Reckon he knows yew run him so hard an' licked him so hard yisterday only 'cause yew had tew. Now," and Silas straightened up and his face hardened and his eyes swept swiftly over the prairie, smiling so peacefully under the warm rays of the morning sun, "we must get somethin' tew eat an' git on th' trail tew once. Yew start a fire an' I'll git one o' them deer feedin' over yonder," and he pointed to where half a dozen deer stood quietly browsing near the edge of the forest.

In half an hour Silas was back with one of the deer hanging from his back, and in another half hour they had eaten their breakfast and were ready to take up the trail. At first the departure of the Indians in three separate parties delayed and confused them; but the keen eyes and reasoning of Silas soon read the meaning of these divisions.

"Reckon," he said, "that one party was hurried off tew some place o' safety with th' stock an' another party was placed in charge o' th' prisoners,

tew take 'em tew some agreed-on rendezvous, so that th' remainin' an' larger party o' warriors would be free tew start out on anuther expedition o' pillage an' murder. That would leave th' prisoners with this small party goin' north," and he pointed to the trail left by the five Indians who had been given charge of Mrs. Clay and the children. "Leastwise that's th' way I reason it out; an' I'm for followin' that trail. Now, how dew yew figger it out?" and he turned inquiringly to Big Tom.

"About the same as you do," Big Tom answered. "Come on. We've already lost more time than we should. We'll take turns riding Black Ben and hurry along as fast as we can follow the trail."

"Yew fust on th' hoss, then," and Silas started off on the run, his head bent slightly forward and downward and his eyes fixed on the almost imperceptible trail left by the Indians and their prisoners as they had hurried northward over the prairie.

Big Tom sprang to the back of his horse and followed close behind him, keeping a sharp lookout in all directions, so that Silas could give his undivided attention to the following of the trail.

For some two miles they hurried along in this manner, then Silas suddenly stopped and, with an exclamation of satisfaction, threw himself down on his hands and knees and began carefully examining the footprints left in a moist, bare spot of ground on the margin of a small pond. In a few moments he stood up and turned a joyful face to Big Tom. "We shore are on th' right trail," he

cried; "for thar are th' footprints o' Mrs. Clay an' Gideon an' Ruth, 'long with th' hoof marks o' th' Injuns. I'd know 'em enywhar, 'cause they are wearin' th' moccasins I made for 'em last winter; an', I reckon, from th' way she walks, Mrs. Clay is carryin' th' baby."

Big Tom at once jumped off the horse and bent and examined the footprints and almost immediately straightened up.

"Yes," he agreed, "those are their tracks; and now that we know that we are on the right trail let's get a-going and keep a-going as fast as we can," and he leaped back in the saddle and hurried after Silas, who was already running along the trail.

Suddenly Silas stopped again and bent quickly and picked up something from the ground and, without a word, turned and handed it to Big Tom and sped on his way.

It was a very small moccasin, made for a baby's foot and decorated with loving care with beads and embroidery.

Big Tom seized it hungrily, and, pressing it to his lips, thrust it in under the bosom of his shirt. Well he remembered the making of those little moccasins, and the loving hands that had so tenderly beaded and embroidered them during the long nights of the winter just past, and the delight on the face of the baby when for the first time they were tried on her pink little feet. Alas, alas, would he ever see those dear faces again? He ground his teeth together and the grip on his rifle

tightened and his eyes searched eagerly the long stretch of lonely prairie to the front of them. But not a sign of a human being, other than themselves, was anywhere visible on the wide expanse of the prairie. The Indians had had nearly twenty-four hours the start of them and evidently they had made good use of their time.

For an hour longer they hurried on; then, with hardly a pause, Silas mounted the horse and Big Tom followed the trail.

About ten o'clock they came to a secluded little valley, through which flowed a small stream of water. In a grove of trees near the banks of the stream they came upon the unmistakable evidences of a large Indian encampment that had been hastily abandoned only a few hours before, probably that very morning, since some of the ashes of the camp fires were still warm.

This was a disheartening sight for Big Tom and Silas, for it told them that now they would have to contend with a whole village of Indians, instead of the few they had been following.

"Durn th' luck!" complained Silas. "I was in hopes we could catch up with th' red devils afore they reached th' main camp. Reckon thar won't more'n five or six Injuns with th' prisoners; an' we could have done for 'em; but now— Wal, no use cryin' for butter atter th' cream is spilt. We jest have tew make th' best o' it an' keep on th' trail. They kin't be more'n five or six hours ahead o' us now," and his face brightened.

“Yes, we’ll keep on the trail,” Big Tom declared grimly, “whether it is made by one or a thousand warriors, as long as Martha and the children are with them. Come on. We want to catch up with them before night, sure,” and he started off along the well-marked trail on the run, followed by Silas on the horse.

An hour later, on reaching the top of a small hill, Big Tom stopped abruptly and, with an exclamation of warning to Silas, crouched down low in the grass and looked out intently over the prairie beyond. In a moment Silas was off the back of the horse and by his side.

An almost level stretch lay in front of them, extending for some four or five miles before it rose in low-lying hills. Some three miles to the right, a long line of woods skirted the prairie, and riding out of these woods and coming directly toward them was a large band of horsemen, a hundred or more. In advance rode a couple of scouts.

“Indians?” questioned Big Tom the moment Silas crouched by his side.

“Looks like it; but I dunno for shore,” Silas answered, his eyes intent on the advancing cavalcade. “Th’ scouts don’t look jest like Injuns, though; an’, by jiggers, they’re not!” he almost shouted a moment later. “One on ’em’s got whiskers; an’ who ever knowed of an Injun with whiskers! Must be a company o’ state volunteers. They sartin are not reglers. But we’ll make shore afore we show ourselves.”

For five minutes longer they crouched low in the grass, then both of them arose, and taking off their caps, waved them around their heads and shouted. They were sure now that the advancing horsemen were whites.

Both scouts heard them, started, turned quickly in their direction, stared at them for a moment, then whirled their horses about and started back for the main body as fast as they could make their mounts go.

"By jinks! if they don't take us for Injuns," chuckled Silas, "same as we did them."

The band of horsemen halted at sight of their flying scouts and awaited their coming in considerable confusion and excitement. Then, after a few minutes, a company of some twenty-five men rode out from the main body and, followed more slowly by the others, galloped toward the spot where Big Tom and Silas still stood, waving their caps. Not until this company of horsemen were within one hundred yards of Big Tom and Silas did they seem to feel sure that the two men were whites; then their leader pulled off his cap, swung it excitedly around his head and yelling: "They're whites, boys!" dug the spurs into his horse, and galloping at full speed up the hill, jumped off the horse in front of Big Tom and Silas and grabbed a hand of each.

"Thought sure you were Indians, trying to lead us into ambush," he laughed, as he shook their hands warmly, his keen, deep-set eyes, eyes that

neither Silas nor Big Tom ever forgot, searching their faces.

"Wal, I dunno as I blame yew," grinned Silas. "We shore thought yew were Injuns till we seen one o' yew had whiskers. Volunteers, I reckon?" and he glanced at the men, who by now were crowding around them. "Captain?" and his eyes turned inquiringly to the tall, lank, big-boned young fellow that had gripped his hand.

"Yes. Captain Abraham Lincoln, the handsomest man in the army, at your service," answered the big-boned young fellow, drawing his tall, gaunt form up to its full height and making an awkward bow, while his eyes twinkled merrily.

Silas looked into the angular, homely face before him and grinned; and the longer he looked the broader became his grin.

"What you grinning about?" drawled Lincoln, the twinkle in his eyes deepening.

"Wal," answered Silas, "I was tryin' tew figger out what th' homeliest man in th' army must look like if yew're th' handsomest, an' I came mighty nigh bustin' my imagination."

The men around them broke into loud guffaws; but Lincoln, dolefully drawing down the corners of his mobile lips, laid his hand on Silas's shoulder.

"My friend," he said solemnly, "you have touched upon a melancholy topic. The homeliest man in the army died last night from fright. He wanted to shave and I loaned him my looking-glass. But," and the waggish look on Lincoln's

face instantly changed to one of solicitude and his eyes turned to the face of Big Tom, "I see that you are in trouble. Anything we can do for you?"

"Yes," answered Big Tom. "The Indians have burnt down my home and have run off with my wife and three children. I want you to help me get them back. We are on their trail now."

The faces of all sobered instantly and they crowded close around Big Tom and Silas, while Lincoln laid one of his hands on Big Tom's shoulder.

"We will do all that we can to help you," he said. "Tell me the needed facts as briefly as possible, so that we will lose no time."

By now the main body of the volunteers had arrived at the spot and all crowded as closely as possible around Silas and Big Tom, anxious to hear their story.

They were a motley crowd of men, this company of Western volunteers recruited from the rough frontier settlements of the state, and had little of the looks or the discipline of a military organization. Each of the men had procured for his outfit what he could get, with the consequence that no two were equipped alike. They had no uniforms, but each wore his usual clothes, buckskin breeches, coonskin cap, or whatever chanced to be his ordinary dress. They carried their beds, coarse blankets, behind their saddles on their horses' backs. Nearly all of them were armed with flintlock rifles; and over the shoulder of each were

slung his powder horn and bullet pouch. They cared little for appearance and scorned all military discipline. Each considered himself a free independent American citizen; not a cog in a military machine, to be run according to orders. If a command seemed reasonable to them they obeyed it; if it did not so seem, they were more apt to jeer than to obey. They had come out with the one purpose of driving the Indians back across the Mississippi, and they had little respect for any order that did not seem to them to bear directly on this mission.

Their young captain was as picturesquely rough in his dress and appearance as were the men, but there was a masterful something about him that the others lacked. There had to be for him to be the leader of such untamed manhood. He was unusually tall, six feet and four inches in his moccasins — “when my backbone is straight,” so he said — big-boned, lean, and muscular, with somewhat thin and narrow shoulders for so great a height. His face was strong and angular, with deep-set eyes, rather high cheek bones, large nose and mouth and a high forehead — an exceedingly homely face, and yet a very likable face, one that attracted at first sight and whose homeliness was soon forgotten.

Such was Abraham Lincoln, or Abe Lincoln, as he was called by his men, at the time he galloped up to our friends so unexpectedly and opportunely, out there on that lonely Illinois prairie, on that May morning of the year 1832.

Who then would have thought that history would soon be called upon to write down this great, uncouth, awkward young captain of a little company of rough Illinois volunteers—he was but twenty-three years old—as one of the few really great men of the earth? There is inspiration for every boy, however simple his birth and early surroundings, in the life of this wonderful man. But to get back to our story.

In as few words as possible Big Tom told of what had happened to his home and his wife and children and how he and Silas had followed the trail of their captors thus far.

“Come,” Lincoln said, the moment Big Tom had finished his story. “We will go at once to the commanding officer. I am sure that he will give you all the help he can,” and he at once led the way to where that officer sat on the back of a big black horse.

The officer, as soon as he heard the story of Big Tom’s misfortunes, turned quickly to him.

“You say that you were on the trail of these Indians?” he asked.

“Yes,” answered Big Tom; “and they can’t be only a few hours ahead of us, for the ashes of their camp fires were still warm when we got to them this morning. Si and I can do little against so many Indians. We need your help to save my wife and children. Will you give it?”

“You are durned right we will,” and the officer’s eyes glinted. “That’s what we are here for, to

get after the Indians; and if you can show us the Indians, then you are just the men we want. So far we've been chasing all over the country without getting a sight of an Indian. Now, point out their trail and we'll get after them as fast as our horses can take us. Captain Lincoln, see that the scouts are properly thrown out in advance and go with Clay and Wegg. I'll give the necessary orders to the men at once."

A half hour later the little army was in rapid motion, with Silas Wegg, now mounted on a horse loaned him by the volunteers, and Big Tom Clay galloping in the van along the trail of the Indians; and between them rode Captain Lincoln, his homely face full of sympathy, solicitude, and anxiety.

CHAPTER XXVII

ON THE TRAIL OF THE HAWK

THE trail left by a moving Indian village, as the camp of a large number of Indians, when including men, women, and children, is called, is so plainly marked that even a novice would have no difficulty in following it; and Big Tom and Silas, with Captain Lincoln riding by their side and the volunteers following close behind, were able to ride at nearly full speed along the trail of the savages. A double line of scouts had been thrown out a half-mile or more in advance and along both sides of the main body, so that they had no fear of sudden surprise or ambush, and could give all their attention to following the trail as speedily as their horses' legs could take them.

"'Pears tew me like th' Injuns are a-makin' straight for Lake Koshkonong," Silas said, after they had been following the trail for an hour or more. "Reckon they're calkerlatin' on findin' a good hidin' place in one o' th' swamps thar'bouts an' leavin' their wimen an' yunks an' prisoners thar, while th' bucks take th' warpath. I was never tew Lake Koshkonong but once; an' then, I'll be durned! if I didn't git lost in one of th' big swamps an' come mighty nigh starvin' tew death afore I got out, atter wadin' all day through water 'most up tew my armpits. If they git tew Lake Koshkonong

afore we cotch 'em, 'twill be worser than lookin' fer a needle in a hay stack tew find 'em, so we'd better keep a-goin' 'bout as fast as horseflesh will take us."

At noon the little army halted for an hour in the shade of a little grove of trees that grew along the bank of a small stream of water to rest and eat.

Captain Lincoln invited Big Tom and Silas to share his "snack" with him; and as the three sat round a little camp fire, over which a pot of coffee was boiling, eating their rough food, two of the scouts, who had been left on guard, came in with a wounded white man that they had found hurrying southward as fast as his partially disabled condition allowed him to go, to warn a lonely settler, so he said, of the outbreak of the Indians. The scouts brought the man direct to Captain Lincoln.

The moment the eyes of Big Tom and Silas fell on the man both jumped to their feet with exclamations of surprise.

"I'll be durned if 'tain't Ben Block!" and Silas hurried to the man and grabbed his hand.

"It surely is!" and Big Tom caught hold of the other hand.

"Say, but I'm shore glad tew see yew." The eyes of Ben Block turned eagerly and a bit anxiously to Big Tom. "I was on my way tew warn yew o' th' Injun outbreak. I'd have got tew yew afore if an Injun bullet hadn't laid me up fer a few days. Hope I'm not tew late?" and he glanced apprehensively from the face of Big Tom to the face of Silas.

"Yes, you are too late," Big Tom answered. "The Indians have burnt my home and run off with my wife and children. We are on the trail of their captors now."

"I'm powerful sorry," and Ben Block's face showed the anguish he felt at this dreadful news. "But I'd got tew yew afore th' Injuns did, like I promised, if one o' their bullets hadn't hit me."

"I know you would," Big Tom answered. "I'm not blaming any one but myself. I ought to have hurried the wife and children away to a place of safety the moment I heard that Black Hawk and his warriors had crossed the Mississippi, and not taken any chances. But I wanted to save the house and the stock and the crops—and now I've lost all, wife and children and home and stock and all!" and the unfortunate man sank down on the ground and bowed his head in his hands.

"Sit down, won't you, and share grub with us?" Lincoln said, turning his eyes, now moist with sympathy, from the bowed head of Big Tom to the contrite face of Ben Block. "And after you've eaten and rested a bit we will be glad to hear where and how you got your wound."

Ben Block, who was both tired and hungry, gladly accepted Captain Lincoln's hospitable invitation and soon had done ample justice to the eating part of it.

"Now," Lincoln said, as he stretched out his long legs at ease on the ground, after the "grub" had been dispatched, "we're ready to hear your

story; but be as brief as possible, for we must be on the trail again soon."

"Wal," Ben Block began slowly, "atter leavin' th' home o' Big Tom an' promisin' tew hurry back an' tell him if th' Injuns should start on th' warpath, I joined a body o' three hundred an' forty rangers under Major Stillman, 'cause they was actin' as sort o' scouts an' goin' on ahead o' th' main army that had now started out in pursuit o' Black Hawk; an' I calkerlated they'd be th' ones tew discover any trouble, if thar was eny tew discover—an' I shore was right!

"Wal, so far th' Hawk had done nuthin' real hostile, 'ceptin' tew cross th' Mississippi ag'in orders an' ag'in treaty, tew go, so he said, tew th' Winnerbegger village tew th' north tew raise a crap o' corn tew keep his people from starvin', 'cause th' government had failed tew live up tew their part o' th' treaty an' supply 'em with food; an' th' most on us thought it would only take a show o' force, backed by a leetel reasonin' an' food supplies, tew cause th' Hawk tew see th' error o' his ways an' tew git back 'cross th' Mississippi, long with his warriors an' wimen an' yunks, same as he had th' year afore. Consequently we was a-marchin' ag'in him with as big a show o' force as possible.

"An' I reckon that's jest 'bout th' way it would have turned out if a lot o' cussed whiskey had not got intew camp an' turned decent men intew cowards an' brutes! Beats all creation how good

men will let liquor make sech fool-brutes out o' 'em! It otter be outlawed, like pisen, an' sold fer pisen, an' th' men that sells it tew their feller humans otter be treated like pisen sellers! But now, jest 'cause o' th' acts o' a few drunken brutes, this hull country has got tew suffer all th' dreadful horrors o' an Injun war an' homes be burnt tew th' ground an' men an' wimen an' inercent children murdered!" and the face of the old hunter showed the angry disgust that he felt. "'Cuse me, but when I think on it, it shore gits me riled," and he glanced a bit apologetically around the little company that had gathered about him to hear his story.

"Yes, yes, you are right, you certainly are right. Liquor is at the bottom of the most of human troubles; and it would be a blessing to the human race if it all, lock, stock, and barrel, were dumped into the ocean; but durned hard on the fish! Now," and the eyes of Lincoln turned anxiously to the face of Ben Block, "what particular kind of devil did it raise in this case?"

"Injun!" Ben Block answered tersely. "'Bout five hundred on 'em; an' if th' Lord ever made enything worser'n an Injun, when th' devils o' lust an' murder an' pillage gits intew him, I've never heered on it. But tew git back tew my story. As I was a-sayin', I went 'long with Major Stillman's men, so as tew be whar th' trouble'd be most apt tew start, an' it started thar all right!

"One day we heered that a body o' Injuns, under Black Hawk himself, was camped not more'n twelve

or fifteen miles from us; an' Major Stillman asked if he might not take his men an' go on ahead tew look fer th' Injuns. He was given permission, an' so we started off in great sperits.

"Black Hawk, if he ever meant war, by now must a-been a-gittin' some discouraged, not gittin' th' help he expected from th' British an' th' Potterwattomies an' th' Winnerbeggars an' hearin' o' th' size o' th' army that was a-marchin' atter him, an' was wantin' tew make peace with th' whites. Leastwise, that night, while we was in camp, three Injuns, carryin' a white flag, came intew sight an' made signs that they wanted tew hold a parley. But th' men, who, somehow, had got hold o' a lot o' whiskey an' were half-drunk, when they saw th' Injuns, rushed out in a wild mob, payin' no 'tention tew th' white flag they was a-carryin', an' drove 'em intew camp, threatenin' an' cussin' 'em some-thin' terrible. 'Bout this time th' whites caught sight o' five uther Injuns, that th' cunnin old chief, not havin' much confidence in th' honor o' th' whites, had sent out tew see what happened tew his truce-bearers; an' th' mob, mad with whiskey, started atter 'em an' killed tew on 'em afore they could git away; an' then th' hull on' 'em started out in search o' more Injuns.

"Wal, they found 'em, they sartin did find 'em, fer they hadn't gone far when th' Hawk with his warriors ahind him, tew mad on 'count o' th' killin' o' his men under a flag o' truce tew think o' th' difference in numbers, he havin' but forty braves

an' we havin' three hundred an' forty armed men, suddenly came a-rushin' an' a-yellin' like fiends out o' a leetle woods tew th' front o' us an' charged straight fer us; an', I'll be durned! if them whiskey-soaked cowards didn't turn tail an' run like scart sheep—three hundred an' forty on 'em—from forty Injuns! An' they didn't stop runnin', leavin' camp an' guns an' everythin' ahind 'em, till they got tew Dixon, twelve miles away, all but eleven on 'em that th' Injuns killed or that got drowned or lost in th' swamps. Th' fust on 'em tew git tew Dixon reported that th' Hawk, at th' head o' two thousand warriors, had suddenly swept down on th' camp o' Stillman an' killed everybody but themselves. Howsomever, I know that th' Hawk had only forty braves with him, 'cause I counted 'em as they came chargin' out o' th' woods, an' tried tew rally enough o' men tew drive 'em back; but they was drunk with whiskey an' fear an' jest drapt everythin' an' run fer their lives. If that's th' kind o' fightin' courage whiskey gives a feller, then I'm powerful glad I never drank a drap o' it!" and again his face showed his disgust and wrath.

"A shameful deed! A disgraceful rout!" Lincoln declared, his young face flushing with indignation. "But you have not told us yet how you got your wound."

"I was jest a leetle tew slow in follerin' th' runnin' cowards," Ben Block answered; "an' an Injun spotted me an' put a bullet intew one o' my shoulders afore I could git him; an' when I got

tew Dixon I was so nearly done fer that I couldn't crawl off my blanket fer tew days. That's why I couldn't git tew yew afore," and he turned to Big Tom; "fer o' course I knowed that this disgraceful affair would drive all thoughts o' peace out o' th' Hawk's head an' send his warriors ragin' all over th' frontier; an' I wanted tew git tew yew afore th' Injuns did. Sorry I was tew late, powerful sorry," and he laid a hand on Big Tom's shoulder. "I shore did th' best I could."

"I know you did, Ben," and Big Tom arose and straightened up his big body. "Hadn't we better get a-going?" He turned anxiously and a bit impatiently to Captain Lincoln.

"Yes," answered Lincoln, springing to his feet.

Five minutes later the little army was again hurrying along on the trail of the Indians.

About the middle of the afternoon one of the scouts came galloping back in great excitement and reported the sounds of distant firing and a column of black smoke rising above the hills some five miles ahead.

"That means more Injun devilment!" Silas exclaimed. "Let's git a hustle on us an' maybe we kin be in time tew take a hand in it," and he turned anxiously to Captain Lincoln.

Before Lincoln could answer, an orderly galloped up with instructions for him to take twenty-five men and hurry on ahead and find out what the firing and the smoke meant.

In five minutes the twenty-five men, including Big

Tom and Silas Wegg, were ready and were off as fast as their horses could carry them in the direction whence the firing had been heard and the smoke seen; but they were too late. They found the Indians fled, leaving behind them the burning home and the mutilated corpses of a settler and his wife and three children, two young girls and a baby boy.

“What bloody fiends these savages are!” Captain Lincoln said, as he sat on his horse looking down on the ghastly scene. “They could not even kill the baby mercifully. Boys, when we get the chance, we will pay them back for this, especially for the baby.”

“We will,” answered the men.

For a couple of minutes all sat silent on their horses, their heads uncovered and their eyes fixed on those terrible relics of Indian savagery, the lips of some moving as if in prayer. Then Captain Lincoln jumped off his horse.

“Boys,” he said, “we must pay them the last honors of the living to the dead, and give them decent burial.”

By the time the main army came up the graves were dug and the bodies ready for interment. One of the officers read the services for the dead, while all stood with uncovered heads, and the bodies were lowered into the graves and the graves filled up.

Unknown, unmarked, the pioneer family lay in the soil they had given their lives to rescue from the savagery of the wilderness!

The sight, especially of the mutilated baby, had made the soldiers furious and all were anxious to get on the trail of the red murderers as speedily as possible. But immediately after the completion of this outrage, the cunning Indians, apparently learning of the large force that was on their trail, had divided into small parties and fled in every direction, doubtless to reunite at some agreed-on place, leaving behind them so many trails that it would be useless to try to follow any of them. The officers were now in a quandary and gathered for consultation, while Big Tom and Silas and Ben Block circled around in all directions in an effort to discover, among the confusion of trails, the one taken by Mrs. Clay, the children and their captors. But all their efforts were vain. There was something like half a hundred different trails, each going in a different direction; and it was impossible to tell which one of these had been made by the prisoners and their captors.

“No use lookin’ eny longer,” Silas at length declared. “Th’ cunnin’ devils have seen tew it that th’ prisoners left no signs ahind ’em tew tell which trail they took. I reckon th’ best thing we kin dew is tew jest keep ’long with th’ volunteers. We kin’t dew nuthin’ by ourselves, an’ they’re bound tew hit th’ Injuns afore long.”

“I guess you are right, Si,” Big Tom answered. “But this suspense, not knowing what has happened or is happening to my wife and children, but always dreading the worst, is terrible.”

"I know, Tom," and Silas laid a hand on the big shoulder. "But it is a lot to know that they are prisoners an' alive an' not like—" and he shuddered and pointed to the newly made graves. "Come," and he turned abruptly away, "let's find Captain Lincoln and find out what the officers are goin' tew dew now."

They found Lincoln back from the officers' meeting, where it had been decided to head the little army straight for Rock River. Colonel Zachary Taylor (afterward president of the United States), in command of a regiment of regulars and volunteers, was reported to be marching up Rock River, and they expected to fall in with him and unite the two commands. Accordingly the little army started at once for Rock River, where they arrived shortly before sundown and immediately went into camp.

Captain Lincoln again invited Big Tom and Silas and Ben Block to join his mess, and they had just sat down around the little camp fire to begin eating when a sudden commotion among the men caused all to jump to their feet.

"Great Moses! Look thar!" and Silas pointed excitedly to where the figure of a man was seen slowly approaching the camp. "It's an Injun an' alone! God have mercy on his soul when th' men git hold o' him! They're bilin' atter what they've seen tewday an' won't listen tew sense nor reason. Thar they go!"

As he spoke the excited and maddened men made

a rush, like a pack of hungry wolves, for the Indian.

"See, he is old, almost helpless with age! They must not harm him!" and Lincoln's face hardened and his tall form stiffened and he started on the run for the men who had already begun seething angrily around the old Indian and were yelling: "Kill him! He's a spy! Kill him!"

"God A'mighty!" and Silas leaped forward and caught hold of Lincoln's arm. "Yew ain't a-goin' tew interfere an' try tew save th' Injun, be yew? If yew dew, they'll shorely tear yew tew pieces, 'long with th' Injun."

"I am," and the flash in the eyes of Lincoln turned on Silas startled him, even in that moment of excitement. "They are my men. The Indian is old and helpless and has thrown himself upon our mercy. They shall not harm him, shall not repeat the disgrace of Stillman's cowardly men." He broke away from the detaining hand of Silas and, in a moment more, he was vigorously elbowing his way through the press of men raging round the old Indian, who was shaking with fright and calling out: "Me good Indian. Me friend of whites."

"Men!" and Lincoln sprang in front of the old Indian, and with an angry sweep of his long arms knocked up the leveled guns. This must not be done. He must not be shot and killed by us."

The Indian, seeing that a friend had arrived in his dire need, now thrust a hand under the folds of his blanket and pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to Lincoln.

The mob fell back for a few steps, quelled, for the moment, by the fire in their young captain's eyes; then they again pressed forward.

"Stand aside, Lincoln!" they shouted. "He is a spy, and we are going to kill him. Remember the baby! Stand aside, Lincoln!" and again the guns were leveled at the Indian.

"Men, listen!" and once more the long arms swept the guns aside and one hand held up the paper given him by the Indian. "This is a safe conduct for this old Indian, signed by General Cass himself, who declares him to be a good Indian who has done good service for the government. Let him be. I will take him at once to the commanding officer," and he laid a hand on the Indian's shoulder.

An angry roar answered him and the circle around Lincoln and the old Indian narrowed ominously.

"The paper lies!" yelled one.

"Shoot him!"

"Hang him!"

"Burn him alive!"

"Remember the baby!"

"Stand aside, Lincoln, and let us get at him!"

But Lincoln did not stand aside. He stood immovable, his tall form erect, his great fists clenched and his eyes flashing, in front of the old Indian, who was chanting his death song.

"The man that shoots this helpless old Indian must first shoot me," he cried, his voice rising above the curses and yells of the mob. "He is old



“Who'll be the first to test Abe Lincoln's courage?”

and helpless. He has surrendered himself to our mercy. He shall not be killed."

"This is cowardly on your part, Lincoln," yelled one of the men angrily. "He is a spy. He ought to be killed, and we are going to kill him."

"If anyone thinks I am a coward, let him test it," and Lincoln raised his fists threateningly. "But you are not going to kill this old Indian until you have killed me."

"You are larger and heavier than we are," protested another. "And it's only an old Indian anyway. Stand aside, Lincoln, and let us get at him."

"You can guard against my size and weight. Choose your own weapons. I'll fight you all, one at a time or all together, before I'll let you harm a hair of the head of this old Indian, who has come to us trusting to the white man's mercy. Now, who'll be the first to test Abe Lincoln's courage?" and his eyes swept the crowding circle of angry men, bent on the murder of the Indian.

By this time Big Tom Clay and Silas and Ben Block had managed to jam their way through the closely packed crowd pressing around Lincoln and the old Indian, and they now took their stand by his side, their rifles held threateningly and their eyes defying the mob.

But the young volunteer captain had no need of their help, for already his dauntless courage and firmness had quelled the cowardly spirit of the mob, and one by one, as if ashamed of the part they had

taken, they were beginning to slink away, leaving Lincoln to do as he pleased with the old Indian.*

"Gosh, but I thought one time yew shore was a goner!" Silas gripped the hand of Lincoln. "We'd a got tew yew sooner, but that gang was worsen than a herd of millin' buffalers tew git through. Howsomever, yew didn't need none o' our help," and his eyes rested in honest admiration on the flushed face of the young captain. "Yew've got th' real grit." Silas gave the hand that he held a vigorous shaking.

"I was too mad to think of getting scart," laughed Lincoln, and thanked the three men for coming to his assistance. "Now," he touched the old Indian and bade him follow him, "I must take my prisoner to the commanding officer," and he strode off with the Indian, who proved to be a good Indian who had never harmed the whites, trotting along trustingly behind him.

"That young man'll make his mark an' make it pretty high up some day," Silas said, as Lincoln hurried off with his man. "He's got th' right pluck in him."

"He certain has," Big Tom answered. "I never saw a man look more desperately in earnest than he did when he stood facing that wild mob, and I reckon that's what cowed them. They knew that he'd die, just as he said he would, before he would allow them to harm the old Indian. I don't believe any other officer in the army could have saved him."

*A true incident that occurred practically as described here.

“Nor I, but now that th’ rumpus is over, s’posin’ we git back tew th’ grub. I’m as hungry as a b’ar,” and Silas hurried off toward the camp fire that they had left so hastily, followed by Big Tom and Ben Block.

Late the next day the little army succeeded in joining the army of Colonel Taylor, and the united forces moved up the Rock River in pursuit of Black Hawk.

But it was like chasing a shadow. The Indians purposely confused their trail. At one place it would be a broad path, then abruptly it would break up into many small trails, radiating in all directions. The army divided itself into companies and pursued the Indians along these diverging trails, but in vain. They never overtook a single Indian, although they frequently came upon terrible evidences of the presence of the savages — a pioneer’s home, deserted, burnt to the ground, the cattle slaughtered and sometimes scalps hanging where they could not fail to see them.

This fruitless warfare, this everlasting chasing of something never overtaken, exasperated the volunteers. They became restless, threatened to leave and finally, when they reached the borders of their own state and Colonel Taylor ordered them to cross over Rock River to the Indian country beyond, some of them rebelled and refused to cross, declaring that they had only volunteered to defend their own state and that no officer had the right to command them to cross over its borders.

"Now what dew yew reckon Colonel Taylor'll dew?" Silas asked Captain Lincoln.

The two men, together with Big Tom and Ben Block, were near where Taylor stood quietly listening to the rebellious men.

"Do?" and Lincoln's eyes glinted. "What can he do, if he is fit to command, but make them cross, if necessary at the point of the bayonet? And I'll bet my old hat against your coonskin cap that he'll do it. He has the look of a man that will not stand for this sort of thing. Now, listen, he is going to answer the mutineers."

Colonel Taylor had quietly heard the rebellious soldiers to the end, standing stiffly erect. He now took a couple of steps toward them and lifted his hand for silence.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I feel that all here are my equals; in reality, I am persuaded that many of them will, in a few years, be my superiors, and perhaps, in the capacity of members of Congress, arbiters of the fortunes and reputations of humble servants of the republic, like myself. I expect then to obey them as interpreters of the will of the people, and the best proof that I will obey them is to observe the orders of those whom the people have already put in the place of authority to which many gentlemen around me justly aspire. In plain English, gentlemen and fellow citizens, the word has been passed on to me from Washington to follow Black Hawk and to take you with me as soldiers. I mean to do both. There are the flat-

boats drawn up on the shore, and here are Uncle Sam's men drawn up behind you on the prairie."*

That was all, but it was sufficient. The volunteers took one look at the regiment drawn up behind them, another at the stern face of Taylor, and crossed the river without any help from Uncle Sam's men.

"Thar," and Silas turned to Big Tom, "stands anuther man that'll make a pretty high mark some day, or I kin't tell real manhood when I see it. He's got th' right sort o' pluck."

"Yes," agreed Big Tom, "he knows how to handle men, and I'm hoping he knows how to find Indians, instead of how to chase them all over the country. Si," and the face of Big Tom brightened, "isn't it about time we heard something from that old Indian Lincoln saved? He promised to find Martha and the children if the Indians held them prisoners, and to give them the message I wrote and to hurry back and let me know. Seems like I could not stand the suspense much longer. They've been prisoners now for more than a week and—and so many terrible things might happen to them!—Come on. We'll get across the river. I must do something to keep from thinking about them or I'll go crazy," and he hurried down the bank of the river and on board one of the flatboats, followed by Silas and Ben Block, Captain Lincoln having already departed to see to the embarking of his own men.

*A true incident.

CHAPTER XXVIII

TIED TO THE STAKE

IT WAS early in the afternoon when the five Indians, with their prisoners, left the smoking ruins of the pioneers' home and hurried northward across the lonely prairie. For a few miles all went well. Mrs. Clay and the children gave their captors no trouble. The baby, still in a sleeplike stupor, lay quietly in her anxious mother's arms, and Gideon and Ruth plodded on in stoical silence, their feelings partially benumbed by the sudden unexpectedness and the completeness of their misfortune. But physical strength and endurance, even when backed by the strongest of mother-love, will grow weary when overtaken, and soon the strain of carrying the child, in spite of her utmost efforts, began to tell on Mrs. Clay. Gideon was quick to notice her weariness and anxiously offered to carry the baby, but not until her arms began to feel as if they could not support the child another moment, would the poor woman surrender the precious little form, so fearful was she of what might happen should the Indians discover that the baby was becoming a burden.

Now again for a few miles all went well, the baby lying quietly in Gideon's arms. But the child was over two years old and large for her age, and

soon her weight began to tire even the sturdy arms of Gideon and his feet began to lag a little.

One of the Indians, noticing this, stepped quickly behind him and, suddenly drawing his knife, pricked him sharply with its point.

Gideon gave a violent start and whirled angrily around, and in the sudden heat of his rage only the baby in his arms prevented him from foolishly striking the Indian with his clenched fist.

The Indian grinned, then scowled darkly.

"Hurry. No time waste," and again he threatened with his knife. "Papoose heavy. Leave on grass. Make nice meal for wolf," and he stretched out his arms as if he were about to take the baby and put his threat into execution.

Mrs. Clay, her face as white as death and her eyes shining like points of light, snatched the baby from Gideon's arms and turned on the savage so furiously that he took a quick step backward and raised his knife threateningly, an ugly glitter in his cruel little black eyes.

Ruth screamed and clung, frantic with fear, to her mother's dress.

Gideon, his muscles tense as steel springs, crouched, his eyes on the eyes of the Indian, ready to spring to his mother's aid.

But before a threatening move could be made a brown hand caught the uplifted wrist of the Indian and jerked the hand that held the threatening knife downward, while a guttural voice uttered a quick angry command in the Indian tongue; and the

leader of the little band of savages pushed the angry Indian aside.

"No hurt," and he turned to Mrs. Clay and Gideon. "Leaping Deer say must not hurt white squaw and papooses, but take safe to village of Black Hawk. Leaping Deer great chief. Now hurry. Village two hours fast walk," and he motioned all to continue on their way, he himself keeping by the side of Mrs. Clay.

At the end of half an hour Mrs. Clay, although she tried her best to show no signs of weariness and to keep pace with the others, was again almost completely exhausted.

Gideon turned to take the baby once more, but at the same moment the big Indian by her side suddenly reached out his naked arms.

"Me carry white papoose," he said. "No hurt," he added quickly, as he saw the startled look that came on Mrs. Clay's face.

For a moment Mrs. Clay looked steadily into the eyes of the big Indian, then she handed the baby to him.

"Sick, baby sick," she said.

The Indian looked down at the flushed face of the child.

"Sick, bad," he grunted and nodded, and then, holding the baby easily in his great arms, he strode on, with Mrs. Clay hurrying tremblingly along by his side, her eyes constantly on the little form held close to the dusky breast.

A short time before sundown they came to a

secluded little valley, through which flowed a small stream of water.

“Village of Black Hawk,” and the big Indian by the side of Mrs. Clay pointed to a grove of trees that grew near the center of the valley and not far from the little stream of water. “Now, take papoose,” and he handed the baby to Mrs. Clay and, throwing back his head, uttered a wild halloo.

Almost instantly the little grove was swarming with life, and hardly had the echo of the wild halloo ceased its reverberations when fifty or more young bucks and squaws, followed by a string of youngsters, were racing out to meet the Indians and their prisoners. A couple of minutes later and the prisoners found themselves surrounded by an excited throng of wildly gesticulating and talking Indians, who crowded threateningly close to them. But the big Indian who had befriended Mrs. Clay, and the four warriors with him, kept the crowd at a safe distance, although a sharp stone, thrown by a boy, did hit Gideon on the cheek and cut it so that the blood flowed. As they approached nearer the village the crowd increased and pressed closer and more threateningly around the captives.

Cruelty to prisoners is a part of the war code of Indians. They believe that an enemy, in surrendering, forfeits all his rights, and that therefore he is theirs to torture, kill, treat as they please, according to the mood and the temper of those into whose hands he has fallen, and unfortunately the followers

of Black Hawk just at this time were in a particularly ugly temper. Added to a long list of wrongs, or fancied wrongs, was the recent butchery of their emissaries of peace. Then they had already tasted blood, had already killed and been killed; and all their savage passions, dormant for many years, had been suddenly aroused. Consequently, when the five Indians entered the village with their prisoners there was great rejoicing, for now all felt that they would have the opportunity to wreak their savage vengeance on the hated enemy. They were sorry that the prisoners were not all men, but even white squaws and papooses were not to be despised. Besides, Gideon was almost a man.

Mrs. Clay, as they were hurried along into the village, noted all these terrible signs of savage hatred and vengeance with a sinking heart; but she was wise enough and brave enough to hide her fears from the Indians.

"Keep up a bold front," she hurriedly whispered to Gideon. "Don't let them see that you are afraid, and—and Gid," she cautioned, "keep tight reins on your temper. In their present excited frame of mind, it would not take much to make them do terrible things."

"I—I know," Gideon answered, his voice trembling just a little; "but it is terrible to stand all this," and his eyes glanced around at the yelling mob, pressing close on every side, "and not be able to hit back. I think I could die happy if I could smash two or three of them in the jaw first."

“But, don’t you do it!” and Mrs. Clay placed a quick hand on his shoulder. “Whatever they do, don’t you dare to hit back. It would mean certain death to you and, maybe, to all of us,” and she shuddered and hugged the baby close to her bosom.

“I’ll not forget, Mother,” and Gideon’s face hardened and his young lips tightened across his teeth. “They can do what they please to me, and I’ll stand for it; but if—”

Here a violent blow alongside of his head caused Gideon to whirl quickly about and almost to forget the promise he had just made his mother, and the next moment a shove separated him from Mrs. Clay, while some one, reaching over the heads of the others, struck him on the back with the long limb of a tree.

The squaws, mostly old hags, were now pressing close around Mrs. Clay and Ruth and the baby, and stretching out skinny, talon-like hands in vain efforts to grab hold of them; but their guards shoved them roughly back and really seemed anxious to protect Mrs. Clay and Ruth and the baby as much as possible.

In this manner, with the squaws and the papooses—the warriors took no part in this wild, undignified squabble to get at the prisoners—surging tumultuously around them, the unfortunate captives were conducted to an opening near the center of the woods, about which were ranged the rude wigwams of the savages. Here a strong guard was placed over them, and the squaws and the papooses

were given most emphatically to understand that, for the present, they were to let the prisoners alone.

Black Hawk, it seemed, was away with a band of warriors, and the captives would have to await his return before learning their fate.

The baby, during the greater part of this time, had remained in the sleeplike stupor into which she had fortunately fallen a short time before the capture; but now she awoke and began to cry in a pitifully weak way, and all the anxious comforting of her mother and Ruth could not quiet her. Gideon was held prisoner some two rods away from his mother and Ruth and was not allowed to hold any communication whatever with them. Consequently, he could only look his sympathy.

The Indians regarded the crying baby with stoical indifference. It mattered not to them whether the child lived or died, except it would be a little more pleasant to have those disagreeable sounds stopped—and death would stop them.

Food and water were brought and placed before the prisoners, but not one of them could eat a mouthful. The horrors of their situation seemed to have killed their hunger. However, all were very glad to get the water, especially on account of the baby, who at once became easier and ceased crying after she had drunk and her hot face and head had been bathed, and lay quiet in her mother's arms again, still in the semi-stupor of exhaustion and disease.

About an hour after sundown, when it had be-

come quite dark outside the circles of light around the camp fires, there suddenly arose a great shouting and commotion among the Indians; and, a few minutes later, Leaping Deer and his warriors entered the encampment, proudly bearing with them a number of bloody evidences of their prowess and also the bodies of two of their braves, who had been killed in their fight with the settler and his family whose scalps now graced their home-coming.

Mike Girty was still with them, and the moment he entered the village his eyes sought out the prisoners. He grinned when he saw them, and, as he passed Gideon, he cried: "Keep up yewr sperits. I'll be back soon tew claim my prisoner." He scowled vindictively at Mrs. Clay as he hurried by, but said nothing to her. Evidently he had not forgotten her biting words of contempt and would not forget them.

Some four or five rods from where the prisoners were stationed and in front of the largest wigwam in the village, was a great fire, around which a number of buffalo robes and bearskins had been spread out on the ground.

Leaping Deer and his warriors, bearing the two dead bodies with them, went direct to this fire, laid the two corpses down on the ground in front of the wigwam, and seated themselves on the skins ranged around the fire, the other warriors of the village falling in back of them, while the squaws and the older papooses crowded as near as possible to the rear rank of the warriors.

The skin flap that covered the entrance to the big tent was now pushed aside and White Cloud, the Winnebago prophet and medicine man—inveterate enemy of the whites—stepped out. He was dressed in the full regalia of a medicine man of his tribe, with a feathered headdress that trailed on the ground behind him. In one hand he carried his richly decorated and mysterious medicine bag and in the other a large tobacco pipe, quaintly carved and having a long stem. A step in front of the tent entrance he paused dramatically and stood very straight, with both hands upraised, head thrown back, and eyes lifted skyward, as if he were invoking the blessings of the Great Spirit; but, although his lips moved, he uttered no audible sounds.

White Cloud was a tall, well-built man, with a strong, thin face, hawklike nose and foxlike eyes, and made a very imposing and somewhat awesome appearance, as he stood there, with the red light of the fire falling upon his tall, weird figure.

For perhaps a couple of minutes he stood thus; then, with a slow sweeping gesture, he lowered his hands and walked to the spot where the dead warriors lay. By the side of the dead he again paused and, slowly inserting the hand holding the bowl of the pipe into the medicine bag, drew it out with the bowl filled with tobacco. Now, lifting the medicine bag, he shook it gently over the bowl of the pipe, and almost instantly the tobacco within began to smoke, as if it had been lighted in some mysterious

manner by the shaking of the medicine bag over it. For a moment White Cloud stood, holding the smoking pipe in his outstretched hand, then he raised it high above his head and, lifting his eyes skyward, suddenly called out a half-dozen Indian words, in a loud, shrill voice. The ceremony of the uplifted pipe completed, he slowly lowered the pipe, placed its stem in his mouth and drew in a mouthful of smoke. Then he bent over the body of one of the dead Indians and blew the smoke slowly over the dead face. This rite was repeated over the face of the other dead Indian.

White Cloud now straightened up and, striding into the middle of the circle of warriors, handed the pipe in silence to Leaping Deer, who received it in silence, slowly drew in three puffs of smoke, and then passed the pipe to the warrior sitting at his right. This warrior, in turn, took three puffs of the smoke and handed it to the Indian sitting at his right. Thus, in absolute silence, the pipe was slowly passed around the circles of warriors; and not until the last warrior had taken his last puff and the pipe had been returned to White Cloud was the silence broken.

The moment the pipe was back in the hand of White Cloud his whole demeanor changed. His eyes kindled. His form dilated. He took a couple of quick steps, until he stood by the side of the bodies of the dead warriors; and then, raising both hands in a commanding gesture, he began to speak, at first slowly and deliberately, but soon increasing

in vehemence, as if swept along by the whirlwind of his thoughts, until the words poured from him in an angry torrent of wrathful denunciations.

Mrs. Clay and Gideon and Ruth could not understand a word that he said; but there was no need that they should understand in order for them to comprehend the import of what he was saying. His face, his actions, his angry gestures, his whole bearing, showed that he was denouncing the whites and calling upon the warriors to avenge their wrongs and the death of their comrades. He pointed to the wounds in the bodies of the dead warriors, he extolled their bravery and patriotism; and then, suddenly turning, he took a couple of quick steps in the direction of the prisoners, and, extending a denunciatory hand in their direction, spoke with such an angry vehemence, such impassioned eloquence, that in two minutes he had half the warriors standing upon their feet, their right hands gripping the handles of their tomahawks, their eyes fixed on the white faces of the prisoners, their muscles tense, like the muscles of hounds in sight of their prey, yet held back by the leash.

A word would set all that raging humanity upon the prisoners.

Mrs. Clay saw the storm that was coming and stood upon her feet to receive it. Ruth clung tightly to her mother. Gideon stepped swiftly to his mother's side, and, in the excitement of the moment, no hand was raised to stay him.

"Mother," and he laid a hand upon her trembling

shoulder, "they will not harm you and Ruth and the baby. Show no fear and keep quiet; whatever happens to me, keep quiet. I will draw their attention to me. Tell dad that I did my best — Mother, good-by," and, suddenly throwing his arms around her neck, he pressed a quick kiss on her face, whirled swiftly about and sprang, with astonishing quickness and force, upon the nearest guard, hurling him violently to the ground, and leaped off, like a wild deer frightened by the bound of a panther.

The heroic boy had determined to give his life in an effort to save the lives of his mother and sisters, reasoning that, if he gave the Indians sufficient cause, they would vent all their fury on him. He had no hope of escaping. He only hoped to so anger the savages that all the frenzy and wrath that he saw was about to burst forth would break and spend itself on him.

For the brief fraction of a second all the Indians stood as if paralyzed by the sudden unexpectedness, the wild daring of the act of Gideon, then all their pent-up fury burst bounds and men, women, and children were after him, like a pack of hungry wolves after a wounded deer.

The chase was of short duration. From the first there had been no hope for Gideon. He made a swift run, a brave, strong fight, for a boy; but, before he had gone twenty rods, he was overtaken by a dozen warriors and pulled to the ground, still fighting with every ounce of strength in his vigorous young body, and, before he was completely sub-

dued, there were many warriors who would carry on their faces and bodies for many days the marks made, during his brief but furious struggle, by his hard fist, or the club he had caught up.

Leaping Deer had taken no part in the chase of Gideon. The boy was not his prisoner and he cared little what became of him. He was Mike Girty's prisoner. Let Mike Girty take care of his own. But Mrs. Clay and Ruth and the baby were his prisoners. They had surrendered directly to him, and the appeal of their surrender had touched the rude chivalry of his wild nature. He had no intentions of deserting them now, and, consequently, he took advantage of the confusion and the excitement caused by the sudden outbreak of Gideon to hurry to their sides.

Mrs. Clay stood, clasping the baby tightly to her bosom, her eyes fixed in horror and anguish on the mass of yelling savages surging around the spot where she had last seen Gideon. She did not see the approach of Leaping Deer; did not know that he was near, until he spoke.

"No afraid," he said, drawing his tall form up in front of Mrs. Clay and Ruth. "Indians no hurt. You prisoners of Leaping Deer."

Mrs. Clay, at his words, turned quickly to him, and, when she saw who he was, she caught him frantically by the arm.

"My boy! Save my boy!" she cried, pointing to the mass of still struggling Indians that surged around Gideon.

"He no my prisoner. He prisoner of Mike Girty. Leaping Deer can do nothing," the Indian answered, stoically.

At this moment the struggling jam of Indians parted, and Gideon, with nearly every stitch of clothing torn off his body and his face bruised and bleeding, but still standing erect on his two good legs, with a powerful warrior gripping tightly each arm, was dragged forth, Mike Girty walking triumphantly in front of him and the mob pressing close behind.

Straight to where Mrs. Clay stood Girty conducted his prisoner. He frowned when he saw Leaping Deer standing protectingly near her.

"My prisoners," Leaping Deer said, lifting his hands and holding them over the heads of Mrs. Clay and Ruth and the baby, and calmly confronting Girty and the Indians back of him. "He your prisoner," and he pointed to Gideon. "Do with him what you will, but my prisoners you shall not touch."

"Who is wantin' tew touch yewr prisoners?" and Girty grinned until the fanglike teeth showed through his red beard. "We're jest a-goin' tew build a fire an' roast a leetle white meat right thar," and he pointed to the straight trunk of a young tree that grew a little apart from the others and not twenty feet from where Mrs. Clay stood; "so that a white wimen kin see how Mike Girty repays th' taunts an' insults o' those who hate him 'cause he loves th' Injuns an' despises his own race," and

the grin broadened and the little red eyes turned gloatingly on the whitening face of Mrs. Clay.

It was a moment before the anguish-stricken woman comprehended the full import of Girty's words, and then, with a moaning cry of outraged mother love, she threw herself at the feet of Girty and begged him to spare her boy.

Girty grinned down at her for a moment in vindictive triumph, and then he deliberately drew back his foot and kicked her, hard enough to tumble her over backward.

At the sight of this brutal act the blood surged hot through Gideon's veins. At the same moment he felt the grips on his arm relax a little; and, suddenly throwing all the strength of his muscular young body into the effort, he wrenched his arms free from the holds of the two warriors, and, before a hand could stop him, leaped at Girty and struck, with all the might of his powerful young arm, straight at the red, grinning face.

Gideon, although but a little over sixteen years old, was unusually large and strong, and now rage doubled his strength. His fist struck Girty squarely in the right eye, and the man went down like an ox hit with an ax in the hands of a strong man. The next instant a dozen warriors had leaped upon Gideon and had borne him to the ground; and, before he was again allowed to stand on his feet, his hands were securely bound behind his back.

Mike Girty, at first hardly comprehending what had struck him, arose dazedly and slowly to his

feet and glared wildly around. His eyes fell on Gideon, who, with his hands bound behind him, had just been jerked to his feet—and Mike Girty knew what had hit him!

For a moment he looked as if he were about to spring upon the boy and tear him to pieces, and he took a couple of swift steps toward him. Then he stopped and grinned. He knew a better way to avenge the blow!

“Tie him tew th’ tree,” he commanded. “Pile th’ wood up high ’round him. I’ll light th’ fire with my own hand,” and he strode to the tree and saw that the unfortunate boy’s body and arms and legs were firmly bound to the trunk, and superintended the placing of the wood brought by the willing hands of squaws and boys, in the meantime taunting and insulting Gideon in every possible way that his fiendish ingenuity could suggest.

Gideon never answered him a word, but a gleam of satisfaction came into his eyes every time they caught sight of the rapidly swelling and blackening eye of Girty.

CHAPTER XXIX

BLACK HAWK

TORTURE, to test the courage and the grit of the victim, with the American Indian usually preceded the burning at the stake, and no exception was to be made of Gideon. He had shown the courage and the pluck of a warrior, and, although but a boy, all the honors due a warrior were to be his. Consequently, as soon as he was properly bound to the tree, with thongs of green rawhide, so that they would not catch fire easily, and the wood had been placed at just the right distance from him, so that the heat of the fire would not kill too quickly, the warriors gathered in front of him to begin the dreadful ordeal; and back of them crowded the youths, who were not yet warriors, and the squaws and the papooses.

In vain Mrs. Clay had appealed to Leaping Deer to save her boy from the stake. He had only reiterated: "He Girty's prisoner. Leaping Deer can do nothing." And now, when she saw that the harrowing tortures were about to begin and she helpless to hinder or even to mitigate, she sank, sobbing and moaning, down on the ground and covered her eyes with her hands to shut out the horrible sight.

Ruth, up to this time, had clung frantically to

her mother, hardly comprehending what had happened or what threatened to happen; but now, when she saw Gideon bound to the stake and the firewood piled up around him and the warriors gathering for the torture, she suddenly realized what it all meant. For a moment she stood, her face whitening, her eyes growing big and round with horror; and then, forgetting everything but the peril of Gideon, she uttered a piercing scream and sprang wildly toward him, her long hair flying out behind her as she ran. She eluded the quick hand of Leaping Deer, she dodged two other Indians that tried to stop her, and had just reached the ring of firewood surrounding Gideon when the strong hand of a warrior caught her by her long hair and jerked her violently backward—the same warrior who had threatened to leave the baby on the grass for the wolves.

Like a young wildcat, Ruth whirled furiously about, and, before the Indian could stop her, she dug the nails of both hands in long red scratches down each side of the painted face.

The warrior, yelling with pain and rage, dropped his hold on her hair, caught hold of her dress, tearing it nearly off her body and exposing her white bosom, and, seizing his tomahawk with the other hand, swung it high above his head, his eyes burning with savage rage and the lust of blood.

Leaping Deer uttered a loud command and sprang toward the savage, but he was too late.

The tomahawk descended, and, the next instant,

it would have been buried in the head of Ruth, if the bloodshot eyes of the warrior had not suddenly caught sight of the little black stone, rudely carved into the semblance of a hawk, hanging from its silver chain and showing distinctly against the white bosom, and stayed the tomahawk within six inches of the child's head. For a moment he stood staring down wonderingly; then the tomahawk dropped from his hand, and, reaching out, he lifted the little black stone and held it up where all the excited crowding warriors could see.

"The Totem of Black Hawk! The Totem of Black Hawk!" he cried, and yet again he cried: "The Totem of Black Hawk!" and stared, blank with amazement, around.

The warriors, with many exclamations of astonishment and wonder, now pressed close around Ruth, their eyes fixed on the little black hawk held dangling from the hand of the Indian above her bosom.

At first Ruth was at a loss to comprehend how this seeming miracle had been wrought in her behalf. The talismanic properties of the little black hawk, given to her so long ago by Brighteyes, had been almost forgotten; and not once had she thought of the little black stone, hanging so quietly above her bosom, during the rapidly succeeding horrors of that day of horror, until she saw it held up in the hand of the Indian. Then she remembered and her face lighted with hope, for had not Brighteyes told her that no Indian would dare do her harm

while she wore the Totem of Black Hawk, the great chief, her father?

"Yes, see," she cried, taking the totem from the hand of the Indian and holding it up. "It is the Totem of Black Hawk, and was given to me by Brighteyes, his daughter, who said that no Indian would dare harm the one wearing it," and then the quickwitted girl, suddenly darting from the side of her captor and slipping the chain over her head, sprang to the side of Gideon and, flinging the chain around his neck, turned, and defiantly faced the surrounding Indians.

"Now, harm a hair of his head, if you dare!" she cried.

At that moment Mike Girty, his face distorted and his one visible eye—the other had been closed by the fist of Gideon—bloodshot with rage, sprang toward Gideon and was about to tear the totem from his neck, when a lithe young Indian, who had just made his way through the encircling warriors, leaped with the quick spring of a panther to his side and caught his arm. Pushing Girty violently to one side, he turned and, laying a hand on the head of Gideon, faced the startled and amazed Indians.

"My brother," he said. "No one shall hurt my white brother while Kar-ray-mau-nee lives," and his eyes defied the glowering eye of Girty and his right hand gripped threateningly the haft of the long knife in his belt.

At the same moment a young Indian woman, who

had followed close behind the Indian lad, sprang to the side of Ruth.

“She my sister,” she said, “the sister of Bright-eyes. My father, the great chief, Black Hawk, will kill one who dares hurt my sister or stain with blood his totem,” and she touched the totem of Black Hawk, now hanging above the bosom of Gideon, and turned and proudly and defiantly faced the astounded Indians.

The encircling warriors, who, during these rapid and unexpected happenings, had been too dumfounded to make a move, now, when they saw themselves about to be cheated out of the victim of their lust for blood, began to growl like hungry dogs whose prey has been suddenly torn from them.

Mike Girty was quick to take advantage of this discontent, and at once began an impassionate appeal to all that was brutal in their savage natures; and soon had the more excitable and bloodthirsty of the warriors demanding that their prey be not taken from them, that Gideon be surrendered to them to do with as they pleased, and threatening to burn him at the stake in spite of the totem of Black Hawk, in spite of Kar-ray-mau-nee and Brighteyes. At the close of his harangue, Mike Girty turned suddenly and, pointing to Gideon, called on all in whose veins flowed the red blood of Indians and not the white milk of squaws to seize their lawful prey and not allow a squaw and a papoose to wrest it from them.

A sound, the most dreadful in all nature, the

cry of human beings in whose veins the blood-lust runs hot, answered him; and a hundred warriors, their faces inflamed with passion, surged toward the tree where Kar-ray-mau-nee and Brighteyes stood by the side of Gideon and Ruth. But, before a hand could reach them, a distant shouting was heard, taken up instantly by the squaws and the papooses and the warriors; and, above the wild tumult, Gideon and Ruth heard the name, Black Hawk! Black Hawk!

The onrushing Indians stopped at the sound of that dread name, hesitated; and, in that moment of hesitation, Leaping Deer sprang in front of Gideon and Ruth and called on the maddened savages to await the coming of Black Hawk, their chief, and to abide by his decision. As he spoke, the shouting became louder and nearer; and then the mob of Indians in front of them parted, and down the open lane thus made strode an Indian dressed and armed and painted for war, closely followed by a dozen other heavily armed warriors.

He was a tall man, this Indian, with a spare, steel-strung frame, thin, hawklike features, and eyes that glowed in their sockets like black diamonds. All the hair had been plucked out of his head, save a single scalplock, to which was fastened a bunch of eagle feathers. He walked swiftly, the spring of youth in his step, although a man over sixty years old, and looked straight ahead.

A striking, a terrible figure he appeared to Gideon and Ruth, as he strode toward them, down through

the long lane of savages, the red light of the camp fire lighting up his stern face and tall form.

In front of the prisoners Black Hawk paused, his eyes turning swiftly from the face of one to the face of the other, and then passing to Leaping Deer and Kar-ray-mau-nee and Brighteyes and to the glowering face of Mike Girty.

"Black Hawk," and he turned and faced the near-crowding warriors, "would know the meaning of this," and his eyes glanced from the form of Gideon, still bound to the tree, to the faces of the surrounding warriors.

Mike Girty at once took a quick step toward the chief and opened his mouth to speak. But, with an imperious gesture, the chief silenced him.

"Black Hawk will hear the tongue of an Indian speak first," and, with a look of contempt, he turned his back on Girty. "Let the tongue of Leaping Deer tell Black Hawk why the Sacs were about to burn a prisoner during the absence of their chief," and his eyes sought the face of that chief.

Leaping Deer at once, briefly and clearly, narrated the happenings of that day, so far as they concerned the prisoners, from the time of their capture to the present moment.

Black Hawk listened to him in silence, without an emotion showing on his stern face and with hardly a movement of his rigidly erect body. The moment he ceased speaking the chief turned to the young Indian, who still stood by the side of Gideon, his right hand still on the haft of his knife.

“Why does Kar-ray-mau-nee call the white prisoner brother?” he asked.

Kar-ray-mau-nee's fine face flushed and his black eyes lighted. He took a step toward Black Hawk and replied.

He told of the day of the Big Fire, of his race for life with it; of how, when his strength failed him and the jaws of the Red Death were about to shut down on him, the white man and the boy had come to his aid, and of how they had refused to desert him, even when they could feel the hot breath of the Red Death blistering their backs, and had half-dragged and half-carried him to safety, at the peril of their own lives. “He saved Kar-ray-mau-nee from the Red Death. Now Kar-ray-mau-nee save him, or Kar-ray-mau-nee die with him. Kar-ray-mau-nee has spoken,” he ended, and stepped back to the side of Gideon.

Immovable, expressionless, as before, the stern chief had listened to the words of the young Indian; and now, without a word, without a sign to show whether he approved or condemned, he turned to Brighteyes.

“Why does the daughter of Black Hawk hold the hand of the white girl and call her sister?” he asked.

Brighteyes, still holding the hand of Ruth, stepped close to the chief.

“Brighteyes is the daughter of Black Hawk,” she answered, proudly. “Black Hawk has taught his daughter to return good for good, service for

service. This is the white girl, whose father and mother saved Brighteyes and baby on the night of the Big Rain, gave her and baby shelter and food, cared for them as if they were their own, until Great Thunder came and took them home. She is the white girl around whose neck Brighteyes hung the totem of Black Hawk, and Brighteyes called her sister. Shall the daughter of Black Hawk forget one she has called sister? Will the great chief, Black Hawk, deny his totem? See, it hangs on the neck of the white boy, the white boy the warriors of Black Hawk were about to burn, to burn with the totem of Black Hawk hanging about his neck," and she pointed to the bared bosom of Gideon, on which lay the little black hawk.

Black Hawk's face had remained as expressionless as before, while Brighteyes was speaking, until she spoke of the totem and of its threatened desecration; then an angry flash came into his eyes. The moment she completed her story, he strode to the side of Gideon, lifted the little black hawk in one of his hands, examined it closely for an instant, and then, straightening up proudly, turned to Kar-ray-mau-nee.

"Free the prisoner," he commanded. "Black Hawk will protect his own," and he turned and faced the encircling warriors.

As the knife of Kar-ray-mau-nee came from its sheath and began cutting the thongs that bound Gideon to the tree, Mike Girty, his face inflamed with baffled hate and rage, started to voice an angry



“ Silence, dog of a white man, Black Hawk has spoken ”



protest; but, before he had spoken ten words, Black Hawk turned imperiously upon him.

"Silence, dog of a white man!" he commanded. "Black Hawk has spoken."

Girty, for an instant, looked into the chief's glowing eyes and then slunk back and disappeared behind the crowding Indians.

For a minute Black Hawk stood facing his braves, waiting to see if there were any others to question his decision, but not another voice was raised in protest.

"It is well," he said, and turned to Brighteyes. "The daughter of Black Hawk did right in calling the white girl sister, in giving her the protection of the totem of Black Hawk. Black Hawk would see the mother of the white girl and boy. Bring the white woman here," and he turned to Leaping Deer.

Leaping Deer hurried to where the muscular arms of two warriors had been forcibly detaining Mrs. Clay during these exciting scenes, and bade them release her.

The instant Mrs. Clay was free she ran to Gideon, and in a moment mother and son were in each other's arms.

A milder light came into the eyes of Black Hawk and the hard lines on his face softened as he watched this affecting union of mother and son, who, a few minutes before, thought never to meet again in this life.

When Mrs. Clay turned from Gideon to thank his preservers, Black Hawk stood in front of her.

Briefly the chief thanked her for the care she had given his daughter and her baby, bade her fear no longer, since now she and her children were under the protection of Black Hawk, and promised, at the first opportunity, to restore them all to the anxious father and husband.

The moment Black Hawk ceased speaking, Mrs. Clay attempted to thank him, but the chief drew himself up haughtily.

“Black Hawk wants not the thanks of the white woman,” he said. “The white people are his enemies; they have robbed him, have driven him from the home of his fathers, from the graves of his ancestors, have shed the blood of his warriors—and the heart of Black Hawk is heavy and full of hatred for the whites. But an Indian never forgets a kindness. Black Hawk is an Indian and remembers. He pays his debts. He scorns to be under obligations to the whites. He wipes out the obligation, so that there will be only hatred in his heart. You are free; and the heart of Black Hawk is satisfied. He can now hate all whites,” and the chief turned abruptly from Mrs. Clay, spoke a few words of command to the surrounding warriors, and strode off.

During this scene the sympathetic eyes of Bright-eyes had turned often to the sick child in Mrs. Clay's arms, and now she stepped to her side.

“Ba-be sick?” she asked.

Mrs. Clay nodded and glanced anxiously down into the wan little face.

"Come," and Brighteyes touched her arm. "Brighteyes knows squaw who is very old and very wise. She will cure ba-be. Come," and, motioning Gideon and Ruth to follow, she led Mrs. Clay to her own wigwam.

Gideon, before he followed, turned and gripped the hand of Kar-ray-mau-nee and tried to tell him what he thought of his coming so bravely to his rescue; but the words choked in his throat and he was forced to turn and abruptly hurry after Ruth and his mother, to keep the Indian boy from seeing the tears in his eyes. But the face of Kar-ray-mau-nee showed that he understood what the white boy wanted to say.

On the skin-covered floor of the wigwam of Brighteyes played a healthy, copper-colored youngster, of about the same age as the child in Mrs. Clay's arms, who, the moment they entered, turned on them a pair of black, curious eyes.

"You remember. My ba-be," Brighteyes said, proudly. Then she turned to a squaw, who sat crouched near a small fire that burned in the center of the wigwam, and spoke a few words in the Indian tongue to her. The squaw at once, with a glance toward the baby in Mrs. Clay's arms, hurried from the wigwam. In ten minutes she was back, and with her came a withered and wrinkled old squaw, who looked as if the summers and the winters of more than a hundred years might have passed over her head.

The old squaw went at once to the sick baby,

now lying on a bed of soft skins, laid a withered hand on her forehead and looked down long on the wan white face, muttering to herself. At last she lifted her head, nodded vigorously once or twice, arose and, turning to Brighteyes, spoke a few words. Brighteyes at once filled a small clay vessel with water and handed it to her. The old squaw now took little handfuls of leaves and stems and roots of plants from a number of small bags that she carried under her blanket, fastened to a belt around her waist, and, dropping the various herbs into the vessel of water, placed it over the fire; and, crouching down by the side of it, stirred it with a wooden spoon until it boiled, muttering to herself as she did so. When the concoction boiled, she took it off the fire and drained it through a piece of cloth into another vessel. As soon as it was cool enough to drink, she poured a little of it out into a small cup and gave it to the sick child to drink.

Almost instantly the white face flushed with red and the long-closed eyes opened and the little hands were lifted to her mother.

With a cry of joy Mrs. Clay started to raise the baby to her bosom, but the old squaw stopped her and began tightly wrapping a number of heavy skins around the body of the child; and, before she had completed the wrapping, the baby lay in a deep, natural sleep.

“No uncover till morning. Now let sleep. When wake, give more,” and the old squaw pointed to the bowl of medicine. “She soon get well,” and,

without waiting for the thanks Mrs. Clay attempted to give her, she hobbled out of the wigwam accompanied by the squaw of Brighteyes.

For a few minutes Mrs. Clay sat watching the sleeping child, her heart too full for utterance; but, now that her mind was at rest, the utter weariness of her body made itself known.

“Sleep,” and Brighteyes pointed to the skins by the side of the baby. “Brighteyes watch ba-be.”

With a grateful smile, Mrs. Clay sank down on the soft skins and almost immediately was sound asleep.

Ruth, at a motion from Brighteyes, lay down by the side of her mother, and Gideon by the side of her — and the most terrible, the most strenuous day in the lives of these pioneers had ended.

CHAPTER XXX

AU REVOIR

FOR two weeks Big Tom Clay and Silas Wegg and Ben Block remained with Captain Lincoln and his company of volunteers, without once getting a sight of the Indians, although they were constantly following trails and chasing rumors.

This sort of warfare did not please the volunteers. Every day they became more discontented, and finally, on the twenty-seventh day of May, Governor Reynolds mustered out Lincoln and his company. Lincoln, two days later, re-enlisted, as a private, in Captain Elijah Iles' Company of Independent Rangers.

"We'll go along with you, if Captain Iles is willing," Big Tom said, as soon as he heard of Lincoln's re-enlistment.

"Glad to have you," Lincoln responded, heartily. "And, I reckon, Captain Iles will be glad likewise. It's not every day that he can pick up three such men as you are. Come on. I'll take you to him right now."

Lincoln proved a true prophet. Captain Iles, as soon as he had heard the story of Big Tom, welcomed him and his two companions to his command and promised to do all that he could to get on the trail of the Indians who had abducted Mrs. Clay and the children.

Another week passed, a week of fruitless, exasperating searching.

Black Hawk knew that the forces marching against him overwhelmingly outnumbered his little army of warriors, that it would be folly for him to attempt to face them and give them battle; and, cunning old fox that he was, he divided his men into small bands and sent them out to pillage and massacre, wherever opportunity offered, always fleeing before a large force of the enemy, always ready to spring upon a small detachment, or a lonely settler. Thus the wily old chief managed to keep the whole region in a constant state of terror and several small armies of regulars and volunteers busy chasing his bands through the then wildernesses of northwestern Illinois and southwestern Wisconsin.

Big Tom, by this time, had become despondent, had begun to fear that the worst must have happened to Mrs. Clay and the children. For a time he had been buoyed up by the hope that the old Indian, the one Lincoln had rescued from his men, would find his wife and children and give them his message and bring a message from them to him in return. He had faithfully promised to do this, if he could find them. But now three weeks had passed since his departure and still not a word or a sign had come from him.

Big Tom knew the rage that Black Hawk and his warriors were in. They were constantly coming upon terrible evidences of this. And it seemed

hardly possible that, under such circumstances, Mrs. Clay and the children, if spared at all, would be spared for long. And yet he could not give up all hope, never would give up all hope, until he had been assured beyond all possible doubt that it was useless to hope longer.

One day they found in a deserted Indian camp the bodies of a white woman and her baby that had been mutilated beyond all recognition. The sight had nearly unmanned Big Tom. They might be his wife and baby for all he knew. That night he was in a particularly despondent frame of mind.

Lincoln and Silas Wegg and Ben Block tried in vain to cheer him up, to get his thoughts off the terrible thing he had witnessed that day. He seemed to resent their efforts, and, suddenly arising from the camp fire around which all were sitting, picked up his rifle and, without a word, started off gloomily into the darkness of the night.

For a moment the three men sat staring after him, hardly knowing what to do. Then Lincoln turned to Silas.

"Better follow him," he said, anxiously. "He is feeling desperate tonight."

Without a word, Silas picked up his rifle and hurried off in the direction taken by Big Tom.

Ten anxious minutes passed; then, suddenly, a rifle shot broke the stillness of the night. Lincoln and Ben Block leaped to their feet. The shot had come from the direction taken by Big Tom and Silas. What could it mean? The report of the rifle

was followed by a moment of intense silence. The whole little army appeared to be listening apprehensively, their rifles in their hands.

Then a loud cry, a shout, and a woman's shrill voice were heard, and the next instant the long form of Silas Wegg broke into the light of the camp fires, running as if for life, and swinging his cap wildly around his head, and shouting something at the top of his voice.

The officers yelled with excitement and commanded their men to fall into line of battle and be ready to withstand the expected attack by the Indians.

Lincoln and Ben Block leaped toward Silas Wegg.

"What is it?" they both shouted, the moment they reached him. "Indians?"

"Great Moses! Dew I look like Injuns? No; it's Mrs. Clay an' th' yunks, all safe an' sound! Whoop-pa! Hurrah! Hurrah!!" and he flung his cap up madly into the air.

At that moment, from out the darkness of the night into the light of the camp fires, walked Big Tom, the baby in his arms, Mrs. Clay clinging to one arm and Ruth and Gideon both trying to monopolize the other; and a little behind them came the old Indian.

Big Tom had come suddenly upon his wife and children and the old Indian, just as they were about to make themselves known to the camp; and, in the excitement of the moment, as he sprang forward to clasp his wife and children in his arms,

he had dropped his rifle and the fall had discharged his gun.

That was a night of rejoicing for the whole little army. Men were constantly crowding around the camp fire, where the Clays held court, until long past midnight. But, at last, the stories were all told, the hands all shaken, and all had stretched themselves out on their blankets, Big Tom to enjoy his first unbroken and restful sleep for many a long day.

Early the next morning the old Indian, his duty done, said good-by to his white friends and returned to the camp of Black Hawk.

Two months later the cruel and shameful war was ended by the complete overthrow of Black Hawk and the half-starved remnants of his warriors at the Battle—or, more correctly, Massacre—of the Bad Axe. A short time after this Black Hawk himself surrendered to the whites at Prairie du Chien.

Big Tom had taken his wife and children to Fort Armstrong, there to await the end of this cruel and needless war.

On the day that the news of the final victory over Black Hawk reached Fort Armstrong, Silas Wegg, who had mysteriously disappeared a few days before, returned. He at once hurried to the rude shelter occupied by the Clays, who, greatly as they rejoiced over the end of the war, were seriously troubled by their own unfortunate affairs. The war had robbed them of house and stock and

tools, everything but their bare hands and stout hearts.

“We were just talking over what we would do now,” Big Tom said, the moment the greetings were over. “The Indian trouble is ended, and, I reckon, it is ended for good; but it has robbed us pretty much of everything except our skins, and we’re powerful thankful to have them left,” and Big Tom grinned. “I reckon I’ll have to leave the wife and children here and go to work at something until next spring. I ought to get enough ahead by that time, with what I can borrow back home, to buy stock and tools and a wagon and the needed supplies to start over again. We certain can’t go back on the land right now, with nothing but our bare hands and winter coming on,” and he turned for confirmation to Silas.

“Shucks!” grinned Silas. “I know a way that’ll beat that all holler, asides from makin’ me ’bout th’ happiest mortal that ever wore moccasins.” Thrusting one hand under the bosom of his deerskin coat, he drew out a small buckskin bag, and, stepping to the table, poured its contents out on its top, forming a little pyramid of bright yellow gold pieces.

“Thar,” he said, turning his shining eyes to Big Tom and Mrs. Clay. “I reckon th’ good Lord knowed all th’ time what He was a-dewin’ when He put th’ notion in my head tew save that thar gold. Now, that that thar is settled,” and he roughly brushed one sleeve of his coat across his

eyes, "git some food a-goin'. I'm as hungry as a b'ar."

There is little more to write, for with the ending of the Black Hawk war ended all the more serious troubles of our pioneer friends, the Clays. With the gold thus opportunely furnished by Silas, they were enabled to build a strong log house and barn that fall and the next spring to buy stock and tools and seed, and to begin the battle with the wilderness again where they had left off, this time with such success that a few years brought them all prosperity and happiness.

However, there was one thing over which Gideon and Silas could never feel quite satisfied and concerning which Big Tom always laughed, whenever they broached the subject to him, and declared: "He'd have thrown me sure. He had the brains and the muscle both." Big Tom had not wrestled with the young captain of volunteers, Abe Lincoln; and, consequently, the wrestling championship of Illinois still remained unsettled in their minds, although both of them stoutly affirmed that, had the matter come to a test, they were positive that Big Tom would have won, even from so skilful an antagonist as Abe Lincoln.

In closing, it is pleasant to record here that the pioneer's dream came true, that both Big Tom and Mrs. Clay lived to see all of their children prosperous and happily married, to hold their grandchildren on their knees and to behold the wilderness that they had helped to wrest from the savage and

the wild beast develop into one of the richest and most prosperous regions of our great nation.

Silas, thereafter, made his home with the Clays until his death in his ninety-seventh year.

The Clays have many descendants today, and, among all the heirlooms in their possession, the most cherished is a little black stone, rudely carved into the semblance of a hawk and attached to a quaint old silver chain—The Totem of Black Hawk.

THE END





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THE TOTEM OF BLACK HAWK CHICAGO



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