

Red Knives

by Ernest Haycox, 1899-1950

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Table of Contents

Chapter I ...	To Detroit.
Chapter II ...	Ambush.
Chapter III ...	Ouiatanon.
Chapter IV ...	Detroit Town.
Chapter V ...	Outside the Stockade.
Chapter VI ...	The Surprise.
Chapter VII ...	A Lie for Vengeance.
Chapter VIII ...	Beneath the Paulin.
Chapter IX ...	Maelstrom.

Chapter X ...	The Benefit of Learning.
Chapter XI ...	Dan Fellows.
Chapter XII ...	Showdown.



Chapter I

To Detroit.

GEORGE ROGERS CLARK was making his last camp on the Ohio, and the four weary companies of buckskin militia stretched their legs at the end of a hard day. The flame of the squad fires illumined the dark water of the river and outlined the thicket of the unknown back country, while the men drowsed before the grateful heat, sitting cross-legged. A monotone of talk broke the rustle of the wind and the lap of the water. A sentry emerged from the woods for a moment to survey the clearing and plunged out of sight.

"Jet Bonnett, dum ye, whar's thet twist of 'baccy I guv ye yeste'day?" a throaty voice called from one fire to the other. "I'm done fer a thaw, danged if I ain't, now." A milder voice answered, and the peaceful drone went on. Near the foot of the encampment some Tennessean chanted softly the Seminole corn ritual.

By the fires came a tall, lean man who stopped momentarily at each blaze to scan its circle of men. The light revealed a tanned, aristocratic face marked above all else with lines of arrogance and sullen humor which seemed to intensify with each fire the man inspected. At last, near the end of the line, he found the object of his search and broke into an impatient exclamation.

"Cheves!"

"Yes?" A figure rose to sitting posture.

"Why don't you stay by your own fire? Been trailin' you like a puppy dog. Clark wants to see you right off."

A chuckle swept the circle, and a massive-shouldered, bearded fellow gravely rebuked the messenger.

"'Pears like you ain't been doin' nawthin' but grouse this hull trip. Kind of spilin' fer fight. Ef I was Cheves, clanged if I moughtn't risk a fall with ye, Danny Parmenter."

Cheves rose and came from the fire. "Thanks," he said, walking toward the head of the camp.

Parmenter shifted his feet, cast a swift glance of anger at the bearded fellow, and hurried after his man. Striding up the roughly formed street, they appeared

typical sons of the Old Dominion who in that year of 1778, during the Revolutionary War, had cast their lot in the newer country west of the Blue Ridge. Both showed lean and wiry frames beneath the buckskin, and both possessed the sensitive features and proud carriage of native Virginians. Cheves was the more solidly built. He swung along with the gliding step of an experienced woodsman, while his bronzed face, molded by hard adventure, lacked any line of petty spite.

In the darkness between fires Parmenter began to grumble again. "General sends for you pretty often! Seems like you stand mighty close to him. Policy for you to make up, eh? Sending me out to fetch you like an Indian trailer! Damn but that's fine! There's some things I can't stand in a man, Cheves, an' toadyin' is one of them! Lickspittle!"

"Wouldn't get so steamed up. Ain't to help you," Cheves drawled in response to this irritable attack.

"Don't you use that patronizin' way on me!" Parmenter turned, furious. "All I been doin' lately, seems like, is flunkyin' between you and Clark. I didn't join for that, and I won't stand it any longer." He stopped and pulled at Cheves's jacket. "Put up your fists and we'll have it out."

But Cheves broke away in a gust of impatience. "Don't be a fool! You've been an idiot ever since we left Wheeling. If Clark had sent me to look for you, I'd have done it and kept my mouth shut. Take what comes to you."

They strode on, but soon Cheves spoke again. "I don't know what you came on this expedition for...but I'm mighty tired of being ragged. I don't want any more of it. We can't get along, so just keep away from me. I'd have killed you long ago if it wasn't for a reason."

"You needn't use her for an excuse," Parmenter sneered. "I don't hide behind her skirt. I'm not afraid of you!" An incredible harshness, a vitriolic bitterness tainted his next words. "You don't win all the good things in this world. You didn't get her! She's seen through you. Hear that? She's mine...promised to me!"

"All right." Weariness filled Cheves's voice. "All right. Lower your voice, man. If she's promised you, then be satisfied. Now shut up."

The other subsided, yet for a man who had conquered a rival he seemed to lack any trace of generosity. His success appeared only to have sharpened his hatred, and he would have continued the quarrel had they not arrived at the largest fire. Around it were four men—Clark and three captains of the party, Helms, Harrod, and Bowman. Clark was broiling a chunk of deer meat over the coals while the other officers shared a faded and creased map in which they found great interest.

"Here he is," grunted Parmenter.

"You want me, sir?" asked Cheves. The discipline between men and officers in this brigade was of the rudest sort. No officer commanded, save by the downright merit within him, and no man followed unless urged by confidence and respect. The tall Virginian stood at attention only because he held a full measure of loyalty to the stern figure in front. It was a good soldier honoring a good soldier.

"All right, Parmenter. Won't need you any more." Clark nodded.

Parmenter's mouth cursed. He scowled at Cheves and flung himself away.

Clark shrugged a burly shoulder. "That lad's spoiling fast," he commented. "Here, Helms, you finish this meat for me. Sit down, Cheves."

Captain Bowman glanced toward the rear. Directly back of them the water maples and osier bunched to form a thick bit of wood, with the underbrush winding around the tree trunks. Clark caught his captain's eye and nodded.

"I know," he agreed. "Trees have ears, but this is as safe a place as we'll ever find. Hand me the map, Bowman.

"Now, Cheves, the brigade is leaving the river at this point. Can't go down the Ohio farther without some British ranger or French voyageur seein' us. Soon as they did, immediately Kaskaskia would be warned...which would ruin my surprise party. I've decided to cut straight across country from here. It's five days' march. Hope to take the enemy completely off guard.

"But capturin' Kaskaskia's only a part of the campaign. I'm plannin' other things...and I've got to know what Hamilton is doing in Detroit. Last I heard he was to bring some companies of regulars down to Vincennes as a part of the reinforcements to this country. They may be on the way now. I've got to know. And I've got to know what he plans to do this fall and winter. He's been distributing red-handled scalping knives right and left. But how many tribes has he got under his thumb? How many war parties will go out this fall? How many men are in the Detroit garrison? And are the French habitants contented or rebellious? A lot depends on that last, Cheves. And, most important, how many rangers are in the whole lake region? They stir up more danger than anybody else. You see what the job is, Cheves?" He leaned forward and tapped the Virginian's knee. "I want you to go to Detroit and find out these things."

"Yes, sir," said Cheves.

"Good!" Clark leaned back. "Now look at this map. Take a good impression of it in your mind. It's all we know of the trail between here and Detroit. This was Croghan's route in 1765 when the Kickapoos and Mascoutines carried him off to Fort Ouiatanon. It's seventy-five miles from here north to Vincennes. Two hundred and fifty to the bend of the Wabash that's by the Twigtree villages. After that, I don't know. You'll be forced to stay off the Wabash most of the time, and you'll have to circle Vincennes and Ouiatanon. After that you'll be in Ottawa and Twigtree country along the Maumee. Beyond these are the Pottawotomies and the Wyandotes, and they're the worst Indians on the border."

At this remark Harrod, veteran of a thousand Kentucky fights, raised his voice. "There ain't a friendly or neutral Injun the hull way," he declared. "Travel light an' fast. Don't light many fires or shoot much game."

"When you get to Detroit, play the part of an independent trader and use your head," Clark advised. "That's why I picked you. Find out what I've got to know and come right back. Pull out tonight. Tell the boys you're off on a small scouting party."

The wind threw a sudden puff of air into the clearing; the fire blazed higher and veered sidewise. At the same moment the distinct snapping of a twig came from behind them. Bowman whirled as though bitten by a snake, and the lines of his face turned suddenly savage.

"I knew it!" he ripped out.

"Maybe it's the wind," suggested Helms.

"Wind doesn't crack twigs with that sound," said Clark, shaking his head. "Stay fast, Bowman. Don't shoot. Won't do to scare up excitement now. But there's spies

in this outfit! I've known it since we left Wheeling. I think that slew-nosed Sartaine is one of them."

"Wish I could ketch him at it," muttered Bowman.

"Get your outfit," continued Clark to Cheves. "Travel fast. When you return, I'll be at Kaskaskia, or I won't be alive." The slate-gray eyes caught fire, and the stubborn, long-jawed face lightened to the flare of his ambition. "Good luck!"

Cheves strode down the line of fires. Half way Parmenter intercepted him.

"What's up?" he growled.

"Nothin'," said Cheves, speaking loudly enough for the adjoining group to hear. "Just goin' on a little scoutin' trip."

Parmenter's eyes sought the other man's face and slowly the blood crept into them and his mouth curled back after the fashion of a vicious horse. "Damn you!" he breathed, "I'll not stand that!" and before Cheves could jerk away a flat palm had struck him on the cheek with a report loud enough for all men at the nearby fire to hear.

It dazed Cheves for a bit. After that, he moved forward. "I've stood plenty," he said. "You've picked a fight."

He moved into action quietly. A straight-armed jab threw Parmenter's head back, and before he could parry another blow caught him on the temple. But Cheves left an opening, and Parmenter's fist found it, leaving a crimson streak.

Both fought in silence, with their whole hearts. There was no avoiding punishment. Each tried to batter the other into submission. Parmenter's grimaced face mirrored quite plainly his purpose to injure or maim without scruple. Cheves caught him on the mouth, and he grinned through the hurt of it—grinned and seemed to slip, twisting his body, raising a knee and driving it full into his opponent's stomach. Cheves saw it barely in time, jumped sidewise like a cat, and took the blow on his hip. That trick thoroughly warmed him. A wild anger sent him forward, taking punishment unheeded and battering down Parmenter's guard weakly to his hips. With a kind of sob the latter met the final blow on the chin and slid to earth like a dummy relieved of props.

Cheves stood over him, angrier and angrier. "When will you learn to fight fair? Next time we fight, bucko, I'll kill you! I'm tired of using my fists, too. Remember that."

Parmenter raised his head, wiping away the blood, immeasurable rage in his eyes.

"All right," he answered, almost in a monotone. "I'll take that challenge. Anything goes, my friend."

Cheves turned on his heel and went the length of the clearing to get his equipment. Around the waist of his hunting shirt went the leather belt holding shot pouch, powder horn, game bag, provision pouch, and hunting knife. Last of all he picked up the long-barreled gun and his broad-brimmed hat.

"I'm off for a little cruise," he said. "Dan, you take care of the blanket. I can't pack it." He turned away from the fire and strode along the edge of the brush to the opening of a deer run. At this point he stopped to survey the clearing. Clark was busy with his venison, and the captains studied at the ancient map, but farther down the clearing a more sinister sight caught his eye. Parmenter had gone to his fire. A short compact figure slid out of the dark and gestured to him. The

two met on the edge of the light and, as the second man turned, the Virginian saw him to be the slew-nosed Sartaine. Both turned from the clearing and disappeared.

Cheves squared himself and plunged through the brush. His only guides were the North Star, hanging over his right shoulder, and a mental picture of Croghan's map.

IT was Dan Fellows, wrapping Cheves's blanket around him for extra comfort, who explained the sudden quarrel to his companions. "Me now, I've watched them two families...Cheves and Parmenter...since a boy. They've allus fought. Once in a while a black 'un breaks out in the Parmenter strain. This Danny's like that."

"You-all know 'em?" The circle paid him attention.

"Yep." The speaker crushed some leaf tobacco in his pipe and lit it with a flaring brand. "Cheves's blood is good. My folks run with them many a generation. These two young bucks always scrapped. Fought and kicked since they was knee high to a grasshopper. And always it was a case of Parmenter tryin' to git unfair advantage. There's a wild cast in his eyes.

"Lately they've fought on account of a mighty sweet girl, for the two bucks have run nip an' tuck with her judgin'. But it seems like she don't know her own mind when it comes to men, which ain't strange. Anyhow, it goes along like that until the night there's a great fight atween 'em and, at dawn next day, there was a duel. I snuck up and saw that duel from beyond some willows. Me and another Virginia man, both with guns, to see there warn't any foul play ag'in' Dick Cheves. Way to fight is ball an' ball, God helpin' the best man.

"Well, He did. There was two shots all bunched of a sudden an' Parmenter's gun dropped from his arm an' he fell. Next thing was unexpected. Cheves had turned an' was welkin' to his horse. More anybody could say Sam Bass, Parmenter had licked another little gun from his coat an' taken a fresh shot. Didn't hit Cheves, by Jo! Dick didn't even turn until he got a-horse. Then he speaks up in right smart voice like this, 'Danny,' he said, 'if it warn't for one thing, I'd sure kill you.' And then he rides on."

The circle hung on every word. Only one man of the crowd saw Parmenter and the guide slip back to their fire, gather their guns and belts and hurry again to the shadows only Fellows saw it, from the corner of his eye. Unhurried he finished the tale.

"'Twas the next day an' I was standing with Dick when he gits a note from the Ralston plantation...that was the girl's name...brought by a nigger. Dick's face just went ter black when he read it. All he said was, 'Dan, I'm goin' away.' Well, I just ketched me a horse an' here we are. 'Twas later in the trip as you boys know that Parmenter joined. Knowin' what I do, I guess none of you saw what I did. But there's one less man comin' back from this party, darn me now if he ain't."

A gust of rage roughened his voice. He drew on his belt and kicked away the blankets.

"Jed Bonnett, you keep these things," Fellows commanded—and strode, rifle a-cradle, into the shadows, following Sartaine and Parmenter over the same trail Cheves had taken a short half hour before.

Chapter II

Ambush.

IN the afternoon three days later, stubbled and sweat-smeared of face, Cheves was on the far end of his great circle around Vincennes with the broad river sparkling at him through the meshwork of the trees. The day had begun full and warm, but as the sun started down westward the heat, sullenly stifling since the Virginian had started his solitary trip, gathered into clouds. Flat and detonating claps of thunder broke in the sky, and by four or five o'clock all light was gone. A patter of rain fell on the leaves, and Cheves raised a fold of his hunting shirt to cover the powder horn.

Passing Vincennes was a nerve-tightening affair, for here were gathered the Piankeshaw Indians, and here centered the power of the British on the lower reaches of the Wabash. By rough calculation he had detoured the town at a distance of ten miles, but even at that interval the traces of scouting parties were plainly visible. He had passed five trails leading to the old settlement, and each bore the marks of recent travel.

Once at noon of the day before he had gone off trail to a thicket and was munching jerked venison when a silent file of ten Indians hurried by. Their bodies, bare to the waist, were daubed with yellow and red pigments, and from each hip was slung the belt with its burden of powder horn, shot pouch, knife, and tomahawk. Three warriors carried each a scalp dangling from the tomahawk. Cheves gritted his teeth. Those scalps meant slaughtered American backwoodsmen.

That night he forded a creek, swam a river, and camped deep in a tangle of grape vines. The patter on the leaves broke to a swift torrent, and in the darkness Cheves had difficulty in finding his way. Once a crack of brush sent him off the path, but it was only the falling of a tree. Again, the waving, sighing saplings so resembled advancing people in the darkness and drizzle that he abandoned the path for a hundred yards or more.

He took note of every forest sign, for he had learned two days ago that someone hung to his trail. In the dark of one night there had been the swish of brush, and only yesterday he had seen tracks of an Indian party doubling back around him. It looked as if a general alarm of his presence had reached Vincennes through some spy in Clark's outfit.

The rain increased its fury, and the bushes bent and twisted across the trail so that in the semi-darkness he could scarcely push his way on. The path had become a small waterway, and he was wet to the skin. But the physical discomfort didn't matter. Such a storm erased the marks of his trail and allowed him relaxed vigilance.

A curve shut off his view and some sleeping monitor, plus the cloak of the storm, let him forge ahead without reconnaissance. When he again faced the straight path, it was to find a bowed figure in buckskin rapidly advancing. The

latter saw Cheves immediately and threw up his arm. The Virginian swore, but it was too late to take cover. Coming to a halt, he dropped the butt of his gun and waited.

"How," returned Cheves. He placed the man instantly as one of the many British rangers abroad in the forest who went from tribe to tribe and from fort to fort. No other man would march through the woods so carelessly.

"Hell of a day for travelin'," offered the ranger. "Where from?"

"Vincennes," Cheves answered after a rapid estimate. "So? Was there two days ago an' didn't see you."

"Just come in from Kaskaskia. In a hurry to reach Ouiatanon."

The ranger took a sudden interest, shaking the water from his dripping face. "What's up?"

"Spanish at Saint Louis tryin' to stir the Kickapoos against us. There's somethin' in the wind, and it ain't for our health."

The ranger cursed the Spanish volubly. "Never did trust any of 'em further'n I could throw a bull by the tail. I'm all for wipin' 'em off the Mississippi. Never any peace in the Illinois country till we do."

"Where you from this time?" inquired Cheves.

"Ouiatanon. Hell's a-poppin'. Couple hundred Saukee renegs broke away from their people an' won't have nothin' to do with the other Nations. Killed some Twigtwee bucks and are headin' this way now. Wouldn't be surprised if they was right on my heels." The thought made him cast a sharp glance about. "I'm on my way to get the Piankeshaws to cut 'em off. Can't have 'em buckin' British authority. Bad example. You'd better keep an eye skinned. No tellin' what they'd do to a ranger."

"How're the other Nations?"

"Fine as prime fur. Scalpin' party goes out every week from Detroit. Make it all hair, I say. Sooner we kill Americans off the better it'll be. If you're for Ouiatanon, hang to the Wabash an' the bottoms. Bone dry elsewhere. But you'd better watch for them Sauks."

Cheves picked up his gun. "Well, I've got to move. So long."

"So long. Tell Abbott I got through."

The bend separated them, and once more Cheves ploughed through the rain. He swore bitterly. It was an unfortunate meeting in the most dangerous of places. The ranger would soon enough find he had been duped, and Vincennes was but twelve miles back. Cheves was going to be vigorously pursued.

From any viewpoint his position was precarious. The storm would cover his traces for a while but, when the rain stopped, he would leave a trail that any savage in North America could follow. There was only one expedient left, and he adopted it as soon as the idea occurred. Grasping the rifle tighter, he broke into a dog trot. The water splashed over his head, but it made him only a little more miserably cold.

On and on he ran, slipping and sliding, picking a way where the brush had fallen across the path, gaining speed where drier ground permitted it. The gray light faded before a tempestuous night; the way grew less and less discernible and finally was altogether blotted out. The dog trot slowed to a snail's pace. The trail was worse than anything Cheves had ever experienced. The wind howled savagely,

and the rain poured down until the trace became a torrent, and he no longer could pick his direction. It was utterly black. Time seemed remote. A thousand demons howled, and the bitter cold cut through to the bone. In such a state he fought his way on until the expense of energy was greater than the progress made. At that point he turned into deeper brush and, hollowing out a rest among the vines, crouched down and spent the night.

At break of day he was up and on again. He had gained during the night, he knew, but would lose by day, for the Piankeshaws could trace him by a hundred short cuts with the common adeptness of all woodland tribes. Toward noon the wind fell off, and the rain abated. By mid-afternoon the sun forced its way through the dreary clouds, and shortly the earth was a vast rising mass of steam. To Cheves it was a great comfort, drying and warming his soaked body, but with that comfort came a new necessity. He must leave the trail and seek the forest where his footprints would not be so plainly revealed.

He was on the point of turning off when, from directly ahead of him, there came rolling through the forest the report of a gun, followed by a series of short, bouncing crashes. Cheves drew up, nerves on edge. It sounded like a hunter—possibly from Vincennes. But no, a hunter from the Fort would have small necessity of traveling so far afield for game. Perhaps, then, it was some independent British trapper.

The Virginian was about to step into the brush when a stir from behind whirled him about. He stopped, half turned. Twenty yards away stood a half-naked, paint-daubed Indian buck. Out of the corner of his eye Cheves saw another advance from the brush in front. He was trapped! For a moment the idea of resistance surged over him. A step and a shot and he would have at least one of them. But the idea passed swiftly. That rifle report meant a larger party nearby. He lowered his gun and threw up a hand in token of peace.

The Indians closed in, rifles advanced. The foremost one uttered a monosyllable grunt and jerked away the Virginian's rifle. He was given a push and turned down the trail. Thus marching, they went through an open glade, turned off the trail to deeper forest and, after ten minutes' weaving, came to a clearing of some eighty or more yards across.

In the center were several small fires around which were gathered a war party numbering fifty or sixty young braves.

Cheves was shoved into the middle of the encampment toward an Indian who, by physical fitness and bearing, seemed to be the chief. He was fully three inches taller than any other man in the clearing save Cheves. His chest was broad and deep, and his face carried the bitter lines of discontent which only accentuated his authoritative bearing. He heard the speech of his scout, nodded his head, and suddenly sprang forward with a savage gesture. "Breetish?" he demanded.

Instantly it came to Cheves that these were not Piankeshaws. This party was a detachment of the renegade Saukee people. So, in commingled relief and consternation, he simulated a deep disgust, wrinkling his nose.

"No... no!" He switched to French which once had been the universal tongue of the forest: "*Je suis americain.*" The chief was puzzled. "Eh?" he grunted.

Cheves tried another word, one commonly used to describe Americans around the Ohio and Mississippi villages. "Not British. I Bostonnais."

The circle around him moved in recognition of the word and broke into voluble conversation. Then the chief made another of his swift moves, thrusting forward his hand and ripping back the Virginian's hunting shirt. Beyond the tanned V was white skin. The chief ran his thumb over it, shuffled his fingers through Cheves's black hair, stared at his eyes, tweaked his nose, and finally fell to examining his apparel with minutest scrutiny. His fingers tested everything before he muttered something that sounded to the Virginian like acceptance. "Bostonnais," he grunted, and the circle dubiously nodded.

At that moment a scout ran into the glade and threw out a guttural warning. The men about the central fire sprang up. There ensued a rapid parley, with the scout swinging his arms in a wide circle toward Vincennes. Another scout ran in from a different angle and made a quick report. Cheves, watching closely, saw some new turn of event had disturbed the Indians. The tall chief chanted a brief word, and the clearing became animated. The scouts slipped back into the brush. Even as the Virginian wondered, the main body shuffled into single file, with himself among them, and went quietly down to the overgrown trace. There they followed it, away from Vincennes.

Away from Vincennes was toward Detroit! Cheves relaxed. Their destination he did not know, but any destination to the north meant the closer approach of his own goal. So, for the time being, he could float with the tide, secure from ambush. When the Saukee trail forked away from Detroit, then must he commit himself to a different policy. Not before.

All night they traveled as if sorely pressed by an enemy to the rear. Cheves decided the ranger he had met had succeeded in calling out the Piankeshaws in such large numbers as to repulse the Sauks. Once in the small hours a ripple of warning passed down the file, and it halted off the trail for a moment. They resumed march in complete silence, each man slipping forward as the figure ahead dropped out of sight. There was nothing to disturb the swift shuffle of moccasined feet save the rhythmic breathing of Cheves's immediate neighbors.

At daybreak they camped in another secluded grove and Cheves, dead tired from forty-eight hours of constant travel, fell to a troubled sleep that seemed to last only a moment. Again they were up and on.

There was, Cheves saw, an undercurrent of uneasiness in the column. Scouts went off on the dog trot and came rushing back later with brief reports, to go off again on the run. Thus far the trail had led away from the Wabash, but the new day's march had only been started when the party, apparently because of news brought by a scout, slanted northwesterly, gaining the stream again. At the same time the pace quickened, and Cheves's aching muscles cried for relief. But he dared not falter. In such a situation a white man's scalp was much easier to carry than his body.

They reached the Wabash at noon, plunged across, rifles held arm high, and climbed the farther bank. Topping the ridge, Cheves saw a long undulating plain, smiling under the afternoon sun, luxuriant in vines and hemp grass. The forest was behind; they were entering a new country with a new dress. Ahead was the suggestion of the Illinois River blending with the indefinite mists of the distance, and at that moment Cheves knew they were turning away from the road to Detroit.

Set as he was on this definite goal, the turn of fortune gave him a bitter taste of defeat. It had never been in his nature to accept defeat calmly and now, lightning quick, his thoughts turned to escape. But the Indians were already far beyond the river, crossing the hot flat land, and there was no possible avenue by which he might get clear in daylight. The nearest route to safety was through a thousand yards of open country exposed to fifty rifles. When night came, he might break away and run back for the river, but not before. So he accustomed himself to the swifter pace and said nothing.

The uneasiness seemed to grow stronger. Cheves could feel it in the braves about him and, when night came and they camped in a small copse, an increased number of scouts and sentries was sent out. No fires were lit, and a somber silence sat upon every coppered face. Cheves shared the sense of impending trouble. It was nothing definite, but rather an aura caught from these nomadic men who read their destiny in the leaves and smelled it in each puff of the wind. Some disturbing sign had warned them, and now they were straining every muscle to reach a secure haven.

With this foreboding Cheves dropped to a fitful slumber in the protection of a thicket, waking from time to time as warriors arrived and departed. On each waking it seemed the tension had increased and that he was the sole sleeper. He did not know at what hour of the night a rough word brought him up. His guide slipped by the trees, coming to a deeper tangle of the brush, and here stopped. Cheves dropped a hand to his belt and felt for his hunting knife. All about he saw the darker shadows of the Sauks, seeming in station for a definite attack.

Though he was prepared for this attack, the fierce, sudden gust of rifle fire surprised him. In a general way he thought the storm would break from northeastward, but the attackers were cleverer than that. So quietly as to be without opposition they had encircled the wood and now poured fire from all sides. The leaves pattered and brushed as from a heavy rain. Cheves, unarmed, threw himself flat on the ground. There was no safer place in that doomed wood, and the Virginian knew it to be doomed after the first volley. For, from the sound, fully five hundred rifles were speaking. It seemed only a matter of time before the renegades were annihilated, and Cheves took thought of his own chance to escape. Presently his guide, finding himself too deep in the thicket to be of any aid, left Cheves and crawled toward the firing. It was the last Cheves saw of him, or of any of the Sauks, alive.

The engagement settled to a stubborn rattle and patter of shots, with the occasional war cry catching and going around the attacking ranks. There was no answer. The renegades preserved grim silence, doing damage while they could. For a half hour it continued this way, dying down, flaring up, and at last settling to a deceptive calm. It seemed to Cheves as if all the fighters were holding their breath, waiting for the last act of a bloody drama.

It came presently, heralded by a full concerted war-whoop from five hundred throats, a lusty baying, a throaty snarl, a feverish yelping, which turned the Virginian's blood to ice. Then the attack closed in, rifles cracking.

The Virginian could mark each successive advance, could hear, almost, each individual battle, so strategically located was he. As the assault beat back the first line of defense, the ring narrowed and its edge came nearer to the covert where he

rested. The last defiant cry of the defeated going down before knife or club, the last death rattle, the grunts and labored breathings of hand-to-hand conflicts—all mingled to form the welter of massacre.

No sound of mercy was given or of pity asked. Grim and stark and relentless. And above all this the Virginian heard, of a sudden, commands in a broad Celtic brogue.

"At 'em, me pretties! No mercy for the renegs! Bring me back sixty scalps! Hunt 'em down and stemp 'em out! I want topknots! No more renegs in this territory! Rum an' wampum, boys! Oh, ye red, murtherin' divvils, grind 'em out an' bring me the hair!"

Chapter III

Ouiatanon.

IT was so unexpected! One moment the entire woods reverberated with sounds of death, with the gurgle and snarl of human throats uttering exclamations of anger and fear, with blows given and blows taken, with the noise of a surging, vindictive advance toward the heart of the brush. So furious was it that the Virginian had given up hope, resolving only to account well for himself in the last mortal struggle. Then it was all changed. The raucous, commanding voice of the Irishman was the respite of a sure death sentence.

"After 'em, my children! No prisoners! Bring in the hair! Go on through the woods! Get every mother's son!"

He came directly toward the covert, a heavy, aggressive body knocking the brush aside, fighting, swearing furious black oaths, and chanting the shibboleth of frontier war: "No prisoners! Bring in the hair!"

Cheves crouched, ready to spring. The last bush parted and the dark figure bulked dimly to view.

"Any of them damn' renegs here'?" he bellowed.

The Virginian, slightly to the rear of the Irishman, catapulted forward, pinioned his victim by the arms and threw him to earth. They rolled over and over, the surprised man heaving and kicking. His rifle fell aside.

"Shut up," breathed Cheves. "I'm a ranger... got caught by these Saukees. Easy, easy! Call off your dogs!"

"Holy mither, ye were onexpected!" exploded the Irishman. "Walked right into your arms, I did. I'm a blind fool! If 'twere an Injun, my top piece would be airin' now." The thought of his position enraged him. "All right, man, ye needn't hang on so tight. Leggo, or I'll be forced to gouge." Cheves laughed and released his grip. The Irishman got up, still swearing. "A damn' uncivilized way o' shtoppin' a man! Who might ye be an' whare did ye get them gorilla arms?"

"Ben Carstairs, Kaskaskia. Who are you?"

"Jim Girty," growled the Irishman.

The fighting had died out. Now and again a rifle shot or war-whoop reached the two, but the skirmish was practically over. Already fires were burning on the plain

and the Indians, cooling from the fever of killing, numbered their slain and counted scalps.

"Well," said Girty, "let's get out of this. Stay by me while I set 'em right. It's a ticklish business when Injuns are in heat. I was too damned careless! If it had been a Saukee, now!"

They passed into the clearing together, and Girty threw out a guttural word here and there. Cheves found himself the focus of glittering, blood-shot eyes but with his companion felt reasonably safe. What interested him most was the Irishman's stature. He was a short man with barrel-like shoulders, jet black hair, and a beard which seemed to cover every exposed bit of skin. Above it were mournful, suspicious eyes which, like those of the Sauk renegade chief, sought every detail of Cheves's apparel.

"Ye're a long, lean scantlin' of a man," he grumbled, "but I take off my cap to those arms. Now what's your story?" Cheves sat by the fire and told the same tale he had invented for the ranger near Vincennes. Its effect was much the same.

Girty slapped a legging and cursed fluently in three tongues. "Those hellish Spaniards! Never saw a good 'un, an' never expect to. I've told Hamilton many a time he should go south an' wipe 'em out. By an' by there'll be hell a-poppin' an' more dirty work for the likes of you an' me. Arragh! Hamilton's weak-kneed, and he don't use his head. What sort of man is that?"

The Indians gathered about the huge central fire on the plain and were uttering a low rhythmic chant which ebbed and flowed in celebration of victory. Girty swayed with the chant.

"What sort of man is that?" he repeated. "It's dog eat dog out here. Many a time my scalp's teetered because some Tennessean cuddled his rifle too close. Raise hell with 'em, I say. When I plug one, I say: 'Girty, that adds another day to your life.' Darn me if I don't."

"Why worry?" asked Cheves. "We've got things sewed tight. Although I do hear there's Shawnees near the falls waverin'."

Girty turned his head and looked fully at Cheves, the black eyes dilating like those of a cat. "Ye talk mighty like a Virginian. I've heard that drawl afore."

"Man, you would, too, if you lived in Southern country."

"How come ye be a British agent, then?"

"A man's politics, Girty, don't always bear looking into."

Girth nodded. Yet like an animal who has smelled the taint in the wind he could not be immediately quieted. "Whare's your papers if you're from Kaskaskia? Rocheblave'd be sendin' some on to Detroit."

"Saukees got 'em and put 'em in the fire. It's all in my head."

Again Girty nodded. "Well, ye may be right," he admitted. "I've no cause to pick at a man's politics. Maybe I'm over shy. Niver met a man I'd trust save me brother, Simon. The trail does that."

The dance of victory was over, with a final shout and leap and insult at the Saukee gods.

"'Tis a hard tomorrow and I think I'll sleep," said Girty. "We're goin' on to Weetanon where there'll be a party for Detroit." He fell asleep almost instantly.

Cheves remained awake longer, thinking over his next move. Clark had advised him to assume the role of independent trader but that had not seemed to promise

as much information as he could pick up while masquerading as a British ranger. If he should meet anybody from Kaskaskia in Detroit, he could clear himself by posing as a new arrival in the Northwest, having come by the way of the Ohio, or he might say he was a special agent through from Tennessee, or that he had made a long circle at the behest of Haldimand, Lieutenant Governor of Canada. By these means he could gain inside councils. It meant a far more dangerous role, and it demanded swifter action. Already the ranger he had met near Vincennes constituted an awkward obstacle. He must get his information quickly and pull out. With that decision he fell asleep, utterly exhausted.

They were on the trail again in the gray of morning, pushing northeastward. Midnight brought them to Ouiatanon. Girty, impatient and overbearing, found the Detroit party gone on. He tore around the stockade like a madman, roaring curses.

Girty and Cheves slept that night in a far part of the fort and, relieved of watchfulness, they slept deep, not hearing the quiet entry of another party. Before daylight Girty was up, growling at Cheves that it was time to be on their way.

The newcomers were stretched on the hard ground of the court. Cheves, looking at them, saw only the blur of a white face raise up and turn toward him. No word was said. The man dropped back to his blanket again. Cheves followed Girty beyond the fort wall. The sentry banged shut the door and thrust home the bolt. On trail once again.

Thus far did Cheves and Parmenter miss each other at Ouiatanon, for it was the latter who had raised and stared, unknowingly, at the two men passing out of the fort not ten feet from him.

Up the long narrowing bend of the Wabash Girty hurried, following the river as it slanted eastward. Two days' march brought the rangers to the main column in the Twigtwee country. It was rougher going now, but the lure of the capital drew them on and instilled tired legs with renewed vigor. They crossed the Maumee portage, borrowed Pottawatomie canoes, and floated down the river to the lake. Fifty miles across open water brought them within sight of the gray, heavy palisades of Detroit town.

Chapter IV

Detroit Town.

THE canoes brought up at the King's Wharf, a structure built of heavy logs split in half and covered by planking adzed smooth. Gray and weather worn, it stood solidly in the river. For nearly eighty years it had seen the departure of the fur brigades into the North and had witnessed them come sweeping back, singing their lusty free songs of river and wine, with the gunwales of their craft slipping low to the weight of hundreds of bales of priceless fur gathered west and north of Michillimackinac. The party ascended the embankment, went through the huge timbered door, and were within the town.

Detroit had started with a small stockade by the river. Each additional house and each additional alley stretched the walls until now the town inside the

palisades contained about sixty houses and more than two thousand people, mostly French-Canadian. Outside the palisades the Frenchmen had long, narrow farms extending back from the river. It was natural that Detroit should start with a large water frontage and taper as it proceeded toward the forest, with the houses giving way to a large parade ground beyond which was the fort. There was scant regularity to the crooked alleys. The palisades could be entered by gates at the east and west and also at the two wharfs, King's and Merchants'.

Girty led the party single-file through the alleys. Small, low-hanging houses made of logs and rough board fronted the street. Cheves caught sight of piled counters and shelves, while at intervals the proprietors came to the doors and threw effusive greetings at him. They passed a wine shop, and Girty suppressed a bolt.

"You keep them whistles dry until we reach the fort!" he growled.

Winding and twisting, they crossed the parade ground worn hard by many tramping feet and arrived at the fort gate. The fort formed a part of the town wall, yet was itself palisaded from Detroit by a bastioned barrier. A sentry challenged the party.

"Hell, I'm Jim Girty!" answered the agent. Restraint of any kind angered him. "Party from Weetanon. Put down that stabber an' let us by!"

They passed into the yard, flanked by officers' quarters, barracks, and general store rooms. Girty seemed to know his way, striding across the square and through a doorway where Cheves, entering, found himself in a guard room. A lieutenant rose as they entered.

"Girty. You're back early. What luck?"

"Found 'em and took hair," the agent reported, drawing a significant hand across his neck.

The officer slapped the table. "Good! The governor will want to hear that right off." Girty nodded. The officer turned to Cheves. "Don't believe I know you," he said, a professional mask dropping across his face.

"Carstairs is my name," said Cheves, "from Kaskaskia."

"Lieutenant Eltinge," explained Girty to the Virginian. The two shook hands.

"From Kaskaskia?" Interest thawed the lieutenant. "Been looking for word from there for more than six months. Place might have been sacked for all we know. What's up?"

No news from Kaskaskia for a half year! The talkative young subaltern had unwittingly taken a great load from the Virginian's mind. He was safe until dispatches did arrive from that distant outpost.

"Bad news," he returned. "I had dispatches."

"Saukees got him," interrupted Girty. "Was headin' him straight for the Illinoy when I come up." He grew restless. "Go in and tell the governor we're here, will you?"

The lieutenant, checked in his gossip, rose with reluctance and disappeared through the door.

"He's harmless," said Girty, ranging the small room. "Not snobbish like most of 'em. Got a lot of book learnin', I hear. Hell of a lot of good it's doin' him here!"

Cheves was preoccupied with the coming interview. Luck had played with him so far, save in one instance. The thing that would most establish his position was

the corroborative testimony of Girty, a trusted agent. And Girty had a good tale to report. He had pumped and cross-questioned the Virginian all along the Maumee River until finally he confessed himself satisfied.

"It sounded fishy at first," he told Cheves. "I know most rangers hereabouts, that's what got me. Can't take anybody on their face. If I'd been convinced you was Virginian, you wouldn't ha' lived five minutes." And the Irishman's sullen eyes flashed with a diabolical humor.

The masquerading had been far easier than Cheves had dared to expect. Too easy, he thought.

Eltinge came out. "Go right in," he directed, holding open the door. "Governor's very anxious to see you both. Mind stopping on your way out, Carstairs, for a little chat? Been trying to get down to that country on brigade for a year."

Cheves assented and passed down a dark corridor. At places store rooms broke the hallway like bayous in a creek, and they opened and closed three different doors before coming to the entrance of the governor's office. Girty strode boldly through.

"Back again," he announced gruffly.

The very contrast of the place astounded Cheves, unused as he was to seeing luxury in any western building. Coming from undressed timber and split puncheons, he now stood in what was undoubtedly the finest, most pretentious room in the west country. The stained walls were covered with furs and an incalculable array of Indian blankets, beadwork, and weapons. Immense polar and grizzly bear hides covered the floor. Around two walls ran a shelf of books four tiers high. A couch held place in one corner, draped by a silver fox robe. In the center stood a mahogany desk, from behind which the governor had but recently risen.

As for Hamilton, Cheves found him to be one of those indeterminate persons who seem never to possess a striking characteristic by which they may be remembered. Medium in build, tending to corpulence, no great amount of expression on his face in repose, but showing traces of latent nervous excitability, hair graying, possessing an English shopkeeper's features—he seemed, of all men, to be the least fit for governing his wild dominion and the least capable of carrying out a ruthless frontier war. And yet he was doing just that. He was the man whose name spelled anathema to every border settler.

"Glad to see you, Girty," he said in a short, hurried voice.

Cheves introduced himself. Girty broke through formalities in his restless way and delivered his news. Hamilton's eyes lit with animation.

"You got them all, Girty? Good... very, very good! Now we sha'n't be bothered by insurrection for a while. It must have been an affair."

"'Twas!" replied the ranger in a sudden flash of pride. "Wish to God you'd do the same with the Americans. Saw half a dozen prisoners in the yard. Prisoners ain't no good. Use the knife. That'll make 'em cringe!"

The governor's face set with determination. "You can't scalp a helpless man, Girty."

"Better if you did," growled the agent.

"Damn it, man!" exploded Hamilton. "I won't have my hands dipped outright in blood. The world calls me murderer as it is. Understand?" He saw dissent in the

ranger's face and turned impatiently to Cheves. "Now, sir, tell me of Kaskaskia. Where are you from? I haven't met you before."

"From my Lord Carleton. I had some documents for you, but the Saukees got them."

"Carleton... Carleton! What has he to do with you?"

"I came by way of New York, toured the Pennsylvania country, got to Fort Pitt and enlisted in a flat-boat company down the Ohio as far as the falls. From there I went to the Holston country. Strayed into Saint Louis as an independent trader and then made my way to Kaskaskia," Cheves explained.

"What's the news from east of the mountains? I never hear a thing. No dispatches from New York for a month."

"The rebel, Washington, has reached the end of his tether."

"Ah, they grow weak!" Hamilton exulted. "Now Kaskaskia?"

Cheves unfolded his perfected tale of intrigue and plot—of Spanish designs, of a thousand details which kept the governor on the edge of his chair. Cheves played the man for double purposes. Above all he must get the governor's confidence and secure an exchange of vital news. What were Hamilton's designs on the far southern corner of the Illinois triangle? What schemes were they harboring against Ohio and the Pennsylvania frontier? Of late there had been whispers of a great Indian uprising. What truth to it? And above all things—what of Detroit's vulnerability? So Cheves spread his web of words. He cherished the wild plan of working Hamilton to a state where a detachment of troops might be sent down to Kaskaskia from Detroit, thus weakening the main garrison. He, Cheves, would go along, run ahead to warn Clark, and ambush them. Detroit would be wide open then.

When he had finished, Hamilton leaned back and closed his eyes. For a long period he seemed to be thinking. Of a sudden he startled Cheves by observing: "Carstairs, you sound like a Virginian."

Cheves forced a smile and turned to Girty.

"Your same suspicion," he said and was further alarmed to see the sudden hardening, the sudden freshening of suspicion, in the ranger's sullen face.

"Damned if I didn't think so, Governor. But he's got a good yarn."

"It's nothing, perhaps," said the governor. "That's all, Carstairs. Stay in the fort until I get my correspondence ready for return. Girty, I've got something for you."

Cheves acknowledged the dismissal and went down the hall. He would have given much to have overheard the rest of Hamilton's talk to Girty. At the door he found Eltinge shuffling disinterestedly through a book. He dropped it quickly.

"Ah, back to chat with me," the British officer welcomed. "Have a real Virginian cigar. Pretty rare nowadays. I've a friend who smuggles them through. Let's take a turn about the yard."

The smoke was a luxury and Cheves said so.

"I'll get you a handful after a bit," rejoined Eltinge. "Wanted to talk with you. Minute I heard your voice I spotted another University man. I think I'm the only Oxford chap west of Montreal. I get very tired hearing jargon. What's your school?"

"William and Mary's," answered Cheves truthfully. It was a ticklish business, this mixing of truth and fiction, but it served his purpose, and he saw by Eltinge's

face that he had established another contact within the circle he most needed to move during the next few days.

Eltinge launched a storm of questions, and Cheves began a description of the Ohio country which lasted for many turns about the yard. A bugle call brought the stroll to a halt.

"First mess call," said Eltinge. "Come to my quarters and we'll clean up. You're my guest at officers' table tonight. Anybody arranged to bunk you. No? I'll attend to it."

A second call drew them to an inner part of the fort where Cheves was admitted to a low, heavily rafted room lit by innumerable candles. A blazing fireplace dominated the scene, and in the center of the chamber was a long table around which some ten officers were gathered. Eltinge directed Cheves to a seat.

"Gentlemen, Mister Carstairs, on the King's business from Kaskaskia," he announced.

After that the Virginian found himself busy detailing his tour for the officers' entertainment. When the meal was over, he left the hall and returned to the open court.

"I believe I'll take a swing around the town," he told Eltinge. "It looks interesting."

"Would go along were I not on guard," Eltinge replied. "But be a little careful. We don't have entire harmony in Detroit. Too many French-Canadians... and there's a small group of American sympathizers we can't lay our fingers on. Three weeks ago a ranger who'd just come in from Little Miames disappeared, and we never did find him. So watch the dark alleys."

The Virginian strolled through the main gate as the late twilight faded into dark. Winking lights gleamed across the parade ground over which he walked, gradually approaching the mouth of a narrow alley. Somewhere a bell tinkled, sounding clear and full in the quiet evening air. To Cheves it was blessed relaxation after the weary travel. Here for a brief time he might loiter.

The alley enveloped him with its darker shadows. Once he flattened against the wall to permit a horse and cart to pass. The driver, probably late in his return home, urged the weary animal forward with unwonted grunts. The outfit creaked and clattered into the night. Cheves went on and came to an intersection, then drifted aimlessly to a new alley, absorbing the sounds and sights and vagrant smells of this far-famed western capital. Sounds of violins came from many houses. Windows of dressed oilskins drawn taut over frames let out yellow shafts of dim light. The door of a wine shop opened suddenly in the street and Cheves walked in, seating himself at a vacant table. The low-ceilinged room was filled with smoke and the babble of many men. A buxom girl of twenty or so came up for his order.

"Wat you 'ave?"

"A glass of port," returned Cheves.

He was aware of being keenly inspected by the men of the place. A natural thing, he decided, for here were typical Frenchmen, while he was labeled from head to foot an Anglo-Saxon. Well, let them inspect. He did not care. Perfect serenity pervaded him this one evening. Surely he could drop his guard for a short time.

He did not see four men slip quietly from the door, for his eyes were fixed on the glint of light through the dull red color of his wine. It was excellent port and felt tremendously good on the flat of his tongue. After the second glass he paid his bill and walked out.

At first it was utterly dark and he stood in the middle of the street, arms slightly forward for protection, while his eyes became accustomed to the night. His ears, always sharp and attentive, caught a scraping of feet nearby. For a moment he thought of Eltinge's warning, but his guard was relaxed and he could not bring himself to realize danger. He groped forward.

It was absolutely dark. Only the faint lights through the oilskin windows guided him. The alleys gave way to another intersection, broader and lighter. He paused, deciding to return to the fort. It was useless to grope through the town. He would see it under the better light of day. Turning, he reentered the alley.

Behind the wine shop he heard the scraping of feet for a second time, now closer by. He could not disregard this, and instinct threw him against a wall. Two shadowed figures advanced through the blackness and stopped before him. Cheves could not distinguish their faces.

"Pardon, *m'sieur*, but is it that you know the way to King's Wharf?" one of the men requested. "We 'ave just come in by *bateaux*. Thees town is strange."

"I think it's down this alley," returned Cheves.

He turned unsuspectingly to point the way. It was a fatal move. In some manner two men had slipped along the wall behind him. When he turned, they were upon him. A club came down on his head with the force of a ton of lead. A streak of pain and red light shot through his brain. Falling forward, he had this last thought, too late to help him: *Ambushed again!* Oblivion closed over him.

Chapter V

Outside the Stockade.

THE awakening of Cheves was by far the most painful event of his life. A thumping headache was his memento of the attack, and his whole body caught up and repeated the throb. A musty smell filled his nostrils, and he seemed to be tossing back and forth in space. He tried to wet his *lips* and then was aware of being gagged. As his senses flooded back, he determined to rip off that impediment but, when he moved his arms, he found them trussed to his body. A kick of the feet revealed them likewise bound.

"*Ehu, ehu*," came a tobacco-cracked voice. *Nom du nom, allez.*

The grunt of the cartwheels, the grumble of the driver—and he, Richard Cheves, bound on some unknown journey beneath a pile of straw. The cart hit a rut and climbed out with a jar; the pain became too great, and the Virginian dropped away to a far land, hearing the stentorian cry of a sentry:

"Halt there!"

The next thing he experienced was the teetering of the cart on a dirt road and the plock, plock of the horse's feet. A fresher air filtered through the straw and his

head felt immeasurably better. If he might only relieve his chafed wrists of the rope and his cramped mouth of the gag...

"Get on, François, prod that beast! We can't be all night on the road!" a second man said.

"Eh? W'at you t'ink dat horse can do?" responded the gruff voice. Cheves recognized it now as belonging to the same man who had passed him in the cart earlier that night. "He ees no race horse. Wat you t'ink?"

"I know, I know. But prod him along." The second voice was that of an Anglo-Saxon; Cheves could not be mistaken about that. "We've got to get under cover before some sort of general alarm goes out."

"By gar, dat's right," assented a third voice. "Dat sentry, he look ver' close on us w'en we pass by dis time. I t'ink mebbe he got suspicions of men w'at travel by de night time. Speak to dat animal, François."

Thus encouraged, the driver lustily cursed the horse in fluent Gallic patois, using tongue, hands, and feet to express his purpose. The animal must have long been acclimated to its driver, for Cheves could feel no appreciable difference in the gait. At last the old man grew angry, and the Virginian heard him climb off the vehicle, run ahead in his clumsy sabots, and strike the horse on the withers. The cart gave a quick jump forward.

"That's it, François. Prod him along. Work that animal more and give him less oats. He's overfed and lazy."

It was becoming insufferable on the bottom of the awkward contrivance. Cheves could endure it no longer and, summoning the whole of his energy, he gave a desperate heave and raised up. The hay cascaded about him, and the blessed star-spangled sky broke clearly overhead. Simultaneously the two men remaining on the cart turned about.

"Hah, de fish he 'ave flopped," observed the younger Frenchman. His face broke into a sardonic grin.

Cheves was not so much interested in him as in the other man, a young, clean-cut fellow evidently not over twenty-five, dressed in homespun which fit snugly over a compact, muscular frame. His not unhandsome face, plainly visible in the clear starlit night, surveyed Cheves with a somber noncommittal gaze.

"You have a heavy clout, Pierre," he observed. "More than you needed to!"

"Bah!" said the younger Frenchman in disgust. "Dees Engleesh 'ave ver' strong heads. No t'ing can bodder dem. Eet was just a liddle tap *d'amour*."

"We're not midnight assassins," the leader frowned, surveying the Virginian's face carefully. "You look dashed uncomfortable there, my friend. Also you appear to have some kind of intelligence. Most British rangers don't," he continued. "Now, if I take off that gag, will you promise to keep your mouth shut. On your honor?"

Cheves nodded vigorously.

"No!" said Pierre. "Don't take no trust in any of dem killers!"

"I have your promise?" persisted the other man.

Cheves again nodded his head. Pierre gave a sigh of disapproval and turned away. His partner moved forward and relieved the Virginian with a few deft turns of the bandanna. The latter could not have said a word at that moment if he had so desired. His jaw muscles were half paralyzed. Carefully he twisted his mouth to

lessen the pain, wetting bruised lips and tentatively biting them lightly to massage back the blood.

"Better, isn't it?" asked the man in homespun.

Cheves nodded, essaying a half inaudible, "Thanks."

The road they were following kept close to the river, winding through sandy fields and many orchards. Whitewashed houses and barns showed in the distance along the route, resembling so many sheeted ghosts marching across the countryside. A mile or more behind the cart Cheves made out the palisades of Detroit. Suddenly the horse turned off the main river road and went along a ruttier, less traveled way.

"You'll have to lie down," was the curt order.

Cheves obeyed promptly. He had no mind to be obstinate now; it was futile, and moreover he had given his word. For another quarter hour he watched the sky, while the cart jostled and bumped through an unusually large orchard. The outlines of a barn showed over the sideboards, and finally the elderly Frenchman trudging by his horse gave a brief grunt. The cart stopped; the men dismounted, and Cheves waited the next move.

A few whispered words reached him; the head of the cart dropped as the horse was unhitched and led away. Pierre crawled over the sideboard and cut the rope with a swift slash.

"Climb out, *m'sieur*, but don' try to run off," he directed. A long-barreled, unwieldy pistol appeared from beneath his coat.

It required some effort for the Virginian to reach the ground. He stamped his legs and swung his long-fettered arms to restore circulation. The exercise set his head to throbbing more painfully, and he desisted. Running a hand over his face and head, he was surprised to find the amount of blood caked there. The blunt weapon had cut the scalp badly, and the furrow lay open to the touch of his finger. A gust of anger swept him, and he turned to Pierre.

"I'd like to have an even break with you some time with my fists, my friend," he said. "I think I'd pay you back for this."

A sardonic grin was the reply. "Any time, *m'sieur*," the Frenchman promised.

"That's enough of that," the leader of the party cut in. "Shut up, Pierre. As for you, Mister British Ranger, you're devilish lucky to get off with a plain blow." For the first time Cheves heard heat and bitterness creep into the voice. "Your cursed cut-throat Indians use scalping knives. I guess you shouldn't be bellyachin' over a little tap. All right, bring him along, Pierre."

An orderly pathway bordered by whitewashed stones led from the barn to a house sitting amidst a grove of trees. They came by this house, went to the rear, and opened a trap door to the cellar.

"Step down," Cheves was invited. "At the foot of the steps you'll find yourself between two bins. Go straight ahead ten paces or so and there'll be a roll of tarpaulin. That'll be your bed for the night, Mister British Ranger. I wouldn't bother about looking for ways to get out. There's no windows and only two doors. The one up to the kitchen is locked. This one will be also. I suspect that Pierre or François will be nearby most of the night. Both are good shots."

Cheves accepted the situation without a word of protest. Throughout his whole life he had pursued one plan of action: be a good Indian until the breaks of luck

came. If none came, then there would still be plenty of time left for desperate action. He had emerged victorious from many a straitened and grim situation by this method. Just now his muscles hardly obeyed his will, and in his enfeebled condition he eagerly embraced the opportunity for rest. Slowly he descended, bending his head to pass the sill. The doors closed over him and a hasp fell audibly on a staple lock. It was pitch dark.

Following directions, he crept along a dirt floor, hands touching parallel bins. He found an apple in one and took it. Farther on, his foot struck the tarpaulin and he knelt down to smooth out a fold of the stiff, tar-scented fabric, making a rough bed. Into this he crept, and dragged a lap of it over him as best he could, munching the apple. Finally he fell into a fitful sleep, miserable and cold, and with this one thought haunting him: his pursuers were doubtless nearing the city. The messenger from Kaskaskia might come in at any moment—and here he shook and shivered in a dank cellar while his chances in Detroit grew thinner and more desperate.

Chapter VI

The Surprise.

HE did not see dawn come, but the shuffling of feet overhead heralded breakfast and the new day. After a while heavier steps tramped across the floor; a scraping of chairs and feet ensued. It all whetted the Virginian's appetite and made him sorely conscious of his hurts. Yet, for all the buffeting he'd received, he found himself clear of head and lacking only some kind of food to be stout and fit for service. He rose and groped to the apple bin. Apples helped, but it was hot tea he needed to thaw out the cramped muscles.

A trap door opened from above. "Come up," a voice commanded.

A shaft of yellow candle light revealed the way. He got through and stood in the kitchen. The two Frenchmen of the night before were there and in addition a buxom mulatto presided over the kettles hung on the hearth.

Pierre held the same clumsy pistol. With it he motioned toward the kitchen table, where Cheves sat down without a word and ate what came before him. The meal performed wonders for him, restoring his strength and refurbishing his self respect. This latter quality had fluttered low in the night. Now again he could wait with smiling confidence for his turn in the swift, uncertain passage of events. Meanwhile he had figured out for himself one puzzle. These Frenchmen were probably servants of the young leaders—not servants in the usual sense, however, inasmuch as the man had allowed them considerable freedom of speech. A closer bond of interest held them together, and that bond, Cheves guessed, was a common hatred of the British. Well, they had gone to a lot of trouble and hazarded their lives to kidnap a Virginian who wanted nothing so much as to be back inside the walls where he might do some good to their common cause.

But did he dare tell of his true identity? A thousand prying ears might overhear and carry the news to town. There might be counter spies. Would they believe him? He doubted it.

He drank the last of the third hot cup of tea and leaned back. That was a signal for François, who had watched him like a cat, to disappear through a door. Presently he returned and directed at Cheves the single word: "Come!"

The Virginian followed with alacrity, for he hoped now that he might get to the core of this mystery. A hallway opened into a large, well-furnished living room. The breakfast table had been recently abandoned and drawn aside, the dishes still on it, while two men sat before a fireplace and smoked morning pipes. Cheves, giving first a casual glance to the younger, knew him as the leader of the previous night. Then he turned his eyes to the elder and received a great shock.

The man had risen and stood supporting his spare, bent frame on the back of a chair. His white unpowdered hair, his blue-gray eyes, his thin aquiline nose, his whole proud, redoubtable carriage—Cheves recognized them all in one astonished wave of joy and relief.

"Colonel Ralston!" he exclaimed.

"Richard Cheves! I'm not mistaken, by gad!" The man fumbled for his spectacles. "My old eyes have been going back on me, Dick. Come here, man, and let me see you! Hardly knew you under all that gore," Ralston continued angrily. "That slugger, Pierre, came near bashing in your skull. I shall have to cane him, by gad! You've hardened, Dick... I see it! But you're Richard Cheves, of Cheves's Courthouse, Virginia. Three years since I've seen you. By gad, it's a wonderful thing to see your own kind after mixing with the *breeds and puddin' eaters!*" Of a sudden the old man's fingers dug into Cheves's arm. "What are you doin' in that British garrison and movin' around through the country with James Girty?" he asked fiercely. "Don't tell me you're a turncoat. I'll not believe that of a Virginian."

"I imagine, Colonel, we are both playing the same game, after the same ends," Cheves retorted shrewdly. "You went to a lot of trouble to catch one of your own fowls."

"Best catching John has done for a long while," said Ralston. "Dick, let me introduce John Harkness. I think we two are the only white American men left in Detroit." His voice grew sad. "They've weeded us out mighty fast. Were I not such an old and rickety and helpless-looking fellow, I think my turn would have come long ago. But they don't suspect me."

"How did you know I was with Girty?" queried Cheves.

"News travels fast," replied Ralston, sitting down. "I know more about Hamilton's business than he does himself." His eyes snapped with a quick fire. "I've got an organization that'll drain his little well dry some of these days. Oh, if I only had force to back up my information! Information my men get from right under his nose. We know every last one of his precious secrets. That bit of a dishrag, Hamilton! Pah! And that lumbering, barbarous, conceited Dejean! They can't down us, no matter how many men they line up against the wall or export from the country. They haven't been able to discover the leak yet. We've been too clever."

"I heard you did away with a ranger a short while ago," Cheves remarked.

Ralston smiled gently. "We play for high stakes, Dick. Can't always be too nice about the means. But a little gold found this fellow's heart. We didn't have to go farther. He's alive and safe and a good many hundred miles from here."

"Do you think it wise to tell so much," Harkness broke in quickly. "It may be that he..."

"What? Doubt a Virginian I've known since he was born?" said Ralston with irritation. "Why, I'd trust him with my life, as I do right now." He sighed. "Dick, if only I had something to strengthen my hand," he sighed, and turned to Cheves with a fresh interest. "You've come from the Illinois country. Tell me, what's goin' on down there? A bit of gossip came out from the Pennsylvania settlements last spring about George Rogers Clark going down the Ohio for some purpose. What's it mean? What'd he do?"

"That," returned Cheves, very soberly, "is why I'm here."

Excitement caught both men at once. "What for? Why?" queried Ralston, throwing the questions after each other. "I've heard mutterings and whispers and guesses and all manner of things come out of the lower country, but never any definite fact I could base hopes on. What is it?"

"I left Clark at Massac, seventy-five miles from Kaskaskia. He told me I should find him there, or that I should find him dead. He has a mind to take Detroit, if ever a fair chance comes. That's why I'm here, to find what Hamilton's plans are."

It seemed as though twenty years dropped from the colonel in the single jubilant gesture of his hand. "By gad, I can help then! My work hasn't been for nothing. My coming here was of use." He got up and strode around the room. "You've come for facts? I can give you nearly all you'll want. We'll scourge 'em out of the country! Did I tell you why I came here? All because, two years ago, Washington rode over from his winter camp and met me at Chester in the Red Lion Tavern... a few miles out of Philadelphia, that is... and asked me to come. He only said a word or so, but it uprooted me from Virginia and sent me here to do what I could. I worked a long line of alleged English connections, got into New York, rode into the Provinces as a loyalist and came here. I'll always remember one thing Washington said. 'It's possible that nothing may come of the venture, sir,' he warned me. 'But someone must be in Detroit, for it may be that a force can get through. Then we shall need your information.' That's the thing which has heartened me to the task. And now it's to be used!"

"Well," returned Cheves, "it may come to pass. I've come eight hundred miles, and I've suffered a few times on the way. But that's no matter. If we can get hold of the Illinois forts and Detroit, that will be the end of the British in the Northwest."

Gray dawn had given away to the first approaches of the sun. Another fair day came, with its burden resting heavier on these men. They sat, each inspecting the other, hope struggling to overcome the odds of fear and sad experience. Throughout the talk one great question had been uppermost in Cheves's mind, and only pride kept him from asking it. He hoped that the colonel himself would let slip what he was most anxious to know.

"It would be months before Clark could get here," mused Ralston. "That would mean a fall campaign, snow, and privation, I'm afraid."

"You don't know Clark," returned Cheves, his mind only half on the conversation, for he was recalling the bitter memory of an ill-starred day when a

duel and a note from a girl blotted out his dreams of happiness. Well, all that was now behind him forever. Doubtless she was managing the Ralston plantation, after the manner of the Virginia women, while her father struggled here in Detroit. Waiting at home with her heart set on that dog, Parmenter. An unreasoning wave of fear and jealousy ran through Cheves at the thought. No matter. As long as she chose to doubt him unjustly, he would never try to correct the error.

A light step sounded behind him, a door closed. He turned and on the instant had jerked himself out of the chair, standing very erect, ice and fire running through him. There stood Katherine Ralston. She had come from upstairs and was but recently risen; sleep still clung to the lids of her eyes, and the lusty blood of day had not yet filled her cheeks. But beyond all that she was beautiful. Yes, she was beautiful! Cheves, looking at her with a kind of pride-ridden, hungry despair, knew that whatever came in the years to follow he could not scourge the sweet vision of her from his heart. So he stood, irresolute, wishing he were gone, wishing he had the courage to take her into his arms, wishing he had not so much pride, wishing he had more.

For her part, a moment's inspection of this strange, bearded, blood-smeared man had not revealed his identity but, when he made the short bow and she saw the curl and color of his hair and recognized the mannerism of his movement, she knew. The flush of blood stained her cheeks, and a hand went up toward her heart. A dark mass of hair, done up in a loose knot, set off the sweet oval of her face, on which many contrasting emotions mingled—a high courage, pride, sympathy, and a sudden concern. Her father rose, his voice trembling just a bit as he spoke. "Katherine," he said, "do you recognize our visitor? The Lord never brought us a more welcome one."

She extended her hand.

"Richard, I... we are glad to see you here." The tone of the greeting, low and sweet, went to his heart like the barb of a Shawnee lance. With a remnant of old-fashioned courtesy, he took her hand and bent over it.

"I am glad to be here," he stammered.

She gave him a quick gasp. "What have they done to you! Your head!"

"Oh, that confounded Pierre!" Ralston's voice filled with anger. "John, you must watch that always. I've told you many a time there's no need for undue violence. We are not common sluggers, Dick. I hope you'll pardon us for the heavy blow."

Cheves laughed, and found himself surprised at the lift of his spirit.

"I've endured worse things," he replied.

Harkness flushed. He had been an interested spectator of this scene, his eyes seeking first the girl's face, then Cheves's. Now he turned to the window.

"It's as the colonel says," he explained shortly. "A fortune of war. How was I to know?"

"'Tis nothing," assured Cheves.

Katherine turned to the kitchen. "Richard, come with me," she directed. "We must fix that cut before it gets worse."

Cheves followed her out, with the unsmiling eyes of Harkness staring at them both. By the time the Virginian got to the kitchen, she had already filled a basin with hot water from the tea kettle. From some small closet she drew tattered bits of linen and cotton cloth, ripping these into regular strips.

"Sit in that chair," she commanded. "All night with your head in the cold. What a savage, unkind country this is... even with men like my father and John. I wish I had known!"

His heart jumped at that and, the next moment, sank. After all, she would have felt the same pity toward the worst, most degraded man in the Northwest. His face drew tighter.

"Do I hurt you?" she asked.

"No. I was thinking of other things."

She sponged the last of the caked blood into the pan and began wrapping the bandages about his head.

"You are always thinking of something far off, Richard. It has always been that way." A trace of sadness came to her words. "Am I so depressing as all that?"

Depressing! Good Lord! Cheves thought. "I was only thinking," he replied aloud, "of why you did this for me since I am what you believe me to be... what another man said I was. Why do you do it?"

"Let's not quarrel again, Dick. Time changes so many things. So many, many things." She started to say something else but stopped. Cheves, wrapped in his own thoughts, struggling with his own desire to utter his grievance, did not note the implication of the unspoken words.

"Time!" he said bitterly. "Time doesn't do a thing save score the old wounds deeper. Never tell me that time softens anything. I've sat awake a hundred nights, trying to puzzle things out...and can't."

"Dick..."—her voice fell low—"there isn't so much to puzzle over."

"Parmenter," he broke in. "You believed him, let him paw around your sympathies, and never listened to a word from me."

"Richard, you never came to explain! What was I to think? I saw you knock him down like a street bully. The next day you nearly killed him in a duel. I heard people whisper. Nobody told me a thing. I grew angry at what you had done to him and wrote you that note... and you never came back! Oh, that was the thing which hurt me so much! You never came back to explain! I would have listened!"

The mulatto had left the kitchen long before. They were alone, fighting out the battle so very, very old, stumbling across new facts that seemed to change the whole face of the quarrel, trying desperately to be fair, to tell all without hurting, trying to keep pride from spoiling everything again.

"And then Parmenter came to you, and you believed all he said...that I was a bully and a liar," Cheves charged.

"For a while, Dick, just for a while. Then I knew him better and sent him away, to tell you to come back. And you didn't come!"

"Sent him away?" Cheves turned swiftly.

She nodded, eyes clear and brilliant. "To tell you to come back."

He took a deep breath. "He never told me that. When I saw him at Wheeling, a year ago, he never told me that. He said you had promised to marry him, after the war. He came down the Ohio with me from Fort Pitt... and told me you had promised him..." A great overwhelming weight seemed to be slipping from Cheves, and a new hope came in its stead. "Oh, what a mess I made of it!" he groaned. "I didn't know."

"Time... time does so much," she said wistfully. "Richard, while you were gone, I found... I found..." and again she failed to say the thing within her. But now he heard the pause, sprang up, and came closer.

"Found what?" he insisted.

She summoned her courage, keeping her eyes upon him in the mute hope that he might not misunderstand. "That there never was any man, Dick, save you. It doesn't matter now, I guess. But whatever happened, I didn't care what you had done. There never was a place in my heart for Danny Parmenter."

She was in his arms the next moment, crying in small, stifled sobs. As he kissed her, she whispered, "It has been so long."

The mulatto's footsteps drew them apart.

"We had better go back to Dad now," she said, and in the hallway she leaned up to him and whispered, "you queer, dear man! Never leave me like that again. Don't you understand a woman?"

Chapter VII

A Lie for Vengeance.

NIGHT, and the whitewashed farmhouse again bulked vaguely through the soft summer night. Within Cheves was ready to start on a return trip to the town.

"It will not be difficult," he reassured Colonel Ralston. "I'll find a way. By the river, I think."

They had spent the day exchanging notes. Cheves told of the events beyond the Alleghenies. Ralston revealed a store of strategical secrets concerning Detroit. Privately, to Katherine, the Virginian had disclosed the main items of his western pilgrimages since they had quarreled, but one thing he did keep from her—the full extent of Parmenter's defection. If she did not know the depths of that gentleman's character, Cheves decided, then he would not tell her.

"Be careful of the river's undertow," warned the colonel. "If you swim around the stockade, stay close to the shore. It's a dangerous river. I wish," he continued regretfully, "you'd stay here and let my agents get what little you need to know now. It's risky for you to be inside those walls. My men'll know as soon as any decision is made. You can start back to Clark from here. Won't be the danger of running into the real Kaskaskia messenger then."

But the thought of hiding out from danger, the thought of shirking first-hand sources, was distasteful to Cheves, and he shook his head. "I'd best do this myself. You've told me things that will make Clark everlastingly grateful," he insisted. "Now I must go and see with my own eyes and hear with my own ears."

"Very well," sighed Ralston, "but above all things remember Detroit is weak. Only a handful guard it. A hundred determined men could take it easily, with a little surprise. And once it's taken, there'll be no more Indian raids on the frontier."

Cheves rose and shook Ralston's hand. He only nodded to Harkness who stood nearby, for some inexplicable and mutual dislike animated these two men and edged their words.

"You, sir," said Cheves, "I wish luck, and I hope you'll keep these people from danger."

"I will," Harkness nodded shortly.

Cheves turned to the door and found Katherine Ralston there, waiting for him. Together they stepped out into the night and walked down the pathway, past the barn. Midway they came upon the two Frenchmen who stepped from their path and touched a hand to their caps. Next moment they had disappeared into the night. Katherine shivered and gripped Cheves's arm more closely.

"Oh, Dick, this is a cold, cold, deceiving place in which to live. I'm not sure...not sure," she whispered.

"Not sure of what?"

"Many queer things happen, Dick. One never knows who is a friend and who is not. Many things have happened to make me distrust even those men. And I sometimes find John looking at me with a queer stare that makes my blood run cold. It's like having a knife forever at your throat."

A wild impulse swept Cheves to turn and tell this lovable girl he would not go back to the town, that he would stay here and fend for her, be some comfort to her in a grim and suspicious country. He smothered that impulse with a savage, silent reproach. There was work to do. He had followed his duty through a thousand weary miles and must continue on until that duty was done.

"I wish," he said gently, "that I could stay. I can't though."

She held his arm and forced a brave little laugh. "Oh, it's just that I get terribly nervous. It's all right, Dick. Nothing's wrong, and I wouldn't keep you back. That would be selfish. But some day, some day..."

"Yes," he said.

They had got by the barn. Suddenly she turned and drew him off the path to a nearby tree.

"I can't help feeling strange, Dick. Do you see this rock?" It sat at the foot of the tree, just small enough to move with some effort. "Well, if anything should happen... if something should go wrong...I'll leave a little note under it for you. Remember."

"What do you expect to go wrong?" Cheves asked.

"I don't know! I wish I did. There's just two people in the world I can trust, father and you. The country seems to breed suspicion into my bones. There's things I feel but can't understand. But it's just womanish fancy, I guess. You mustn't worry about it, Dick."

He stood, looking ahead at a winking light which came from a farmhouse, a half mile distant.

"I'll come back on my way south," he promised. "I'll see you again. And as long as I live..."

He turned and kissed her, held her for a moment, then with a whispered word started down the pathway. A soft "good bye" reached him as the darkness blotted out the outline of the barn.

His path was much the same as that by which he had come, following a rutty byway through an orchard, turning and twisting a dozen times in its course to the larger river road. Setting foot on this broader, more substantial highway, he struck directly toward Detroit town, paralleling the river.

A world of doubt and misgiving rose to worry him on the trip down that dark and silent road. After all, Ralston was an old man, while Katherine was a woman, lovely and appealing and because of that a greater bait for some ruthless individual in this land of physical force. About these two people were doubtful henchmen. Perhaps—spies.

Cheves, inured to the frontier, trusted no one until reason for trust had been evidenced. And now he doubted Harkness. True, he was forced to admit that jealousy perhaps played a part but, setting that aside, he could not read sincerity or loyalty into that somber face. He gritted his teeth. More of this reasoning and he'd turn back. Resolutely he banished it.

The sudden shuffle of advancing feet threw him off the road and flat on his stomach—a file of six Indians went by. He got up and resumed his journey, shortly to make out the wall. Now he left the road and struck diagonally across a meadow, touched with the solid bulk of the wall and followed it down a hundred yards to the river bank. The heavy logs marched on out into the water for a dozen feet or more.

The boil and eddy of the midstream current came clearly to his ears, the backwash rolled up and lapped against the shore. He went to the bank's edge and tried to discern his path, but all he might see was the stockade wall marching out into the murky water and losing itself in the night. He knew that once beyond the wall he had to swim four or five hundred yards before reaching King's Wharf—that was the total sum of his knowledge. Well, there was nothing to do but go ahead.

He stripped off his hunting shirt and ripped the bandage from his head. When he was found, it must not be apparent that he had received any care. He waded forward into the cold water, walked off a bench of the river's bed, and struck out. A sudden swirl of the eddy carried him against the wall, and he guided himself by treading and edging along the upright logs.

He was past them, was caught up by the current and carried along swiftly down the frontage of the town. The question now became where, in the black night, was the dock? He felt the water set sharply from shore and, for fear of being carried into the stream, began to swim to land, making as little noise as possible. Somewhere, within the palisades, he heard the distinct challenge of a sentry.

Another abrupt swirl of outsetting water hit him in the face, and he found himself striving to keep going ahead. It was the devil's own current, he decided, making in a dozen ways at once. This would not do. He could not gain the wharf in this fashion. Kicking over, he headed still farther in and at last had the satisfaction of reaching quiet water again.

He heard the soft ripple of the current against some solid object and, reaching out, came upon the blessed bulk of a pier log. The water flattened him against it, and there he rested while recovering his breath. It was well for him that a knot in the log formed his anchor, for directly above came the abrupt challenge of a protesting voice.

"Eh, Antone, I t'ink you are crazy," it protested. "De current, he make strange noises out dere tonight. Swish, swish, he say. I t'ink we will not get anyt'ing by startin' in de black of de night."

A voluble stream of French answered this. Would that lazy son of good-for-nothing father never stop grumbling?

There was a living to be made; the night was the time for making it. Would he have the whole town knowing where they were bent?

"By gar, I t'ink yes. Best some fallow know w'ere we go. Den, w'en a log heet us, dere will be help. I t'ink some day we pile up. De night, eet is for sleep."

Also, replied the other, the night was for energetic men of business who knew what they were about. Let sluggards sleep.

A third figure clumped methodically out upon the planking. "Well, when're you night birds a-goin' to get off?" it demanded. "Won't keep this gate open no longer. If the patrol'd see me, I'd have a hell of a time explainin'."

"Be of patience, *mon vieux*. Does not the silver chink pleasantly in your pocket?"

The light of the watchman's lantern cast a faint glow upon the water. Cheves flattened the more against the pier log, but he did see, by the same dim rays of light, a ladder nailed against the neighboring pier log. To this was fastened a canoe, and down the ladder descended a Frenchman, then his partner. Cheves swam to the far side of his covert and watched a few lusty strokes carry the canoe into the stream and out of sight. The watchman mumbled a mild curse and turned about to go back across the wharf.

His departure called for swift action. Two strokes brought Cheves to the ladder, and he was up on the dock in time to see the lantern shine midway in the gate. He ran forward, his moccasined feet making no noise. Some worry must have delayed the watchman, for he had stopped, back to the river, and was staring at the ground, idly swinging the lantern.

"Too dangerous," he whispered.

An instant later Cheves slipped one lean arm about the man's neck, snatched the lantern away with the other, and sent it hurtling through the air. The small flame went out as it fell. The best the victim could do was thresh the air futilely with his arms. Cheves clung on until he felt the body grow limp. At that signal he loosened his grip, turned away, and ran across the road into an alley leading toward the fort. The watchman would be all right in another ten minutes, he guessed. He disliked this pussyfoot manner of fighting, but no other way suited his needs. For the watchman, in fear of revealing his own guilt, would never report the entrance of a man through the gate.

By the time he had reached the fort and sent up a call he had worked out his tale for Hamilton. After a parley with the sentry, the guard brought Lieutenant Eltinge to the gate. The latter was visibly upset to see the Virginian again.

"Good Lord," he sputtered. "We thought you were dead... gone the same route our other ranger went."

"I nearly did," replied Cheves. They walked to Eltinge's quarters, where Cheves stripped while Eltinge rummaged his chest and found a tight fit in pants and hunting shirt.

"Get you fresh clothes from the commissary in the morning," he promised. "What happened?" He was all eagerness, pathetic almost in his desire to hear a

story of adventure. "Where were you? Fort's been in an uproar ever since you disappeared."

"Let me see Hamilton," returned Cheves. "Right away. I've got important news."

Eltinge very reluctantly led the Virginian to the guard room, from whence he disappeared into the long hallway. He was shortly back. "Broke into a big meeting, but they're on needles to see you. Go in," he requested.

Again Cheves, nerves taut and wary and face schooled to a fair degree of impassivity, approached Hamilton's quarters. The door stood open, and they were all watching him as he entered—the governor behind his desk, Girty to one side, his bearded face a mask, two officers of the post, and a great, gross-featured hulk of a man who overflowed the largest chair in the room.

"Well?" said Hamilton impatiently. "What happened to you?"

Standing there before a battery of half-hostile eyes, Cheves told them of his capture in the dark street, of his ride through town, of a complete circuit of the palisades (at that point began the fabrication), of being thrown in a dungeon, of being tortured by a band of men, of finally, on this evening, being given the water trial. He had strangled and suffered, and he was now filled with gallons of pure Detroit River water. But he had not told, and the last thing he remembered was unconsciousness. When he woke, it was to find himself in the dark alleys of Detroit again. They finally rained questions on him, yet to all he was indefinite and vague. The clout on the head had fuddled his brain; he could not identify the men or the house. His sense of direction was lost by the eternal switching and turning.

"I couldn't locate it in a thousand years," he protested.

He felt a growing tension in the atmosphere as he proceeded, as if some new and portentous event were approaching, as if each man were weighing some decisive question in his mind. It was Girty, the hostile and implacable Girty, who finally leaned forward, face still a mask.

"Carstairs, I'm damned of you ain't a slippery sort of flea," he growled. "Ye're too slick fer me. I cain't trip you up, but I tell you this"—and here his face broke into a blaze of suspicion—"you ain't no Englishman, and yez ain't fer us! Ye're a domned, murtherin' traitor, that's what ye be!"

The Virginian thrust his forefinger almost into Girty's face. "Come out to the square, and I'll beat that statement out of you," he raved.

The governor toyed with a quill and looked frankly puzzled. The two officers were like wooden statues. It was the grotesque fellow in the huge chair who opened a cavernous mouth to growl out in a dead bass voice: "Girty, what's your evidence?"

"Ain't got none," snapped the ranger. "But there's been too many things I can't explain. I tell you he ain't fer us, and I'm of the idee he should be in the guard house. There's somethin' new afoot, I tell you. Captured, be damned!"

At this outright accusation, Hamilton came to one of his rare, abrupt decisions. The quill snapped between his fingers.

"That's enough ragging, gentlemen. We'll not get anywhere by this method. Foley," he asked one of the officers, "will you go out and bring in the new messenger from Kaskaskia?"

The word struck Cheves like a blow from a cudgel. Here he was, trapped! He had tarried too long.

The officer left the room, forgetting to close the door, and the Virginian wished wistfully that it were clear and that the way beyond it were clear. He heard the governor talking.

"New messenger came in late this evening, very tired, and with two runners from Vincennes. Gave him a bit of time to rest. We'll soon settle this question."

It was but a scant five minutes that the officer was gone, yet it seemed like an hour to Cheves. Girty's eyes, glinting from behind the tangled black beard never left the Virginian's face. Hamilton leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling, seeming bored by it all. The fellow in the large chair shifted his immense paunch from time to time and emitted strange whistling sounds of annoyance from his mouth.

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Cheves, still standing with his face to the governor, heard the officer and his charge enter the room and stop, yet he did not turn, choosing to retain his attitude of immobility and indifference as long as he might. Hamilton lowered his gaze from the ceiling.

"You were brought in to settle a slight difficulty," he said, addressing the newcomer. "Could you identify the gentleman in front of you?" He motioned for Cheves to turn.

The latter swung on his heel. The new messenger was Parmenter! It was a straitened, weather-worn edition of the man with whom Cheves had come down the Ohio. The long chase had drained his physical vigor until there was left only a shell of a body, within which burned a consuming fire. The fire was there, no doubt of that. Cheves saw the black eyes of the man snap and light with the ineradicable passion of hatred. Then, as suddenly as they had lit, so quickly did a veil of courtesy, a screen of polite recognition conceal the man's real feelings.

Cheves waited for the exposure. His mind covered a hundred details in the moment's silence. What would be Parmenter's concealment if he revealed Cheves? What was Parmenter's real status? And how had he managed to come as the accredited messenger from Kaskaskia, bringing with him two 'breeds from Vincennes?

"Well, do ye know him?" the irritable voice of Girty broke in.

"Yes," replied Parmenter, "I know him."

"Who is he?" insisted the ranger, the rancor of a long suppressed suspicion rendering him furious. Cheves waited for the final word.

"Messenger from Kaskaskia," announced Parmenter laconically. His sharp eyes sought the features of his fellow Virginian. The taint of mockery found its way to his face.

"What's his name, damn ye!" roared Girty, fast losing control of himself.

Here, thought Cheves, Parmenter must reach his rope's end.

"We are not exactly the best of friends, if you please, though we have known each other under many circumstances," Parmenter returned. "His name is Carstairs."

Utterly amazed, Cheves was attracted by a sound to the rear and turned in time to see Girty shut his mouth with an abrupt, vindictive snap. Hamilton had secured himself another pen and was chewing its point.

"That seems to clarify things, does it not, Girty!" he remarked curtly. "Now will both you gentlemen be kind enough to leave us? Foley, go along and show Parmenter quarters. Come back as soon as you're finished."

Chapter VIII

Beneath the Paulin.

WITHIN the privacy of quarters Cheves essayed to untangle the twisted skein of events. Where had Parmenter gotten his knowledge of Cheves's pseudonym and role? How had he managed to get into the confidence of the Vincennes habitants and rangers? An obvious answer to this last was that Parmenter was as capable at masquerading as he. More so, in fact, Cheves decided grimly, since he now languished under a cloud of suspicion while Parmenter was unquestionably accepted at face value.

"Of course!" he said aloud to himself. "I should have known it sooner. He got my name when he followed the same trail from Ouitanon. So much for that mystery."

Parmenter would lie. He could do nothing else. He would only succeed in compromising himself by trying to expose his fellow Virginian and the same applied to himself, Cheves knew. They were both in very much the same boat, their fates irretrievably mingled whether or not they willed it so. Cheves, looking up to the dark ceiling from bed, gave a short, hard laugh.

"Danny boy, we'll have a talk in the morning. 'Twill be to the point, likewise." And with that Cheves made an effort to dismiss the whole thing from his mind and go to sleep.

He did see Parmenter in the morning. The fort square was teeming with life when he left the mess after breakfast. Swarthy *coureurs* crossed and recrossed the square, now and then a more indolent habitant mixing in with the crowd. A few soldiers performed the detail work of policing. Girty strode toward the gate with a file of men behind him. And out in the center of all this life Cheves met Parmenter. By accident, it seemed, yet it was not accident, for Cheves had been maneuvering some time to get his man in this position. He came up from Parmenter's rear.

"Well, Danny?" he whispered.

Parmenter whirled around, his eyes startled, then he caught hold of himself.

"Thought I might stab you in the back, or somethin' like that, eh?" queried Cheves. "That's your way, not mine. When I get ready, 'twill be fairly and squarely."

Parmenter thrust his hands nearer the weapons in his belt. Alertness hardened his eyes.

"What's your idea in followin' me eight hundred miles and tryin' to do me up?" Cheves continued. "Who gave you permission to leave the expedition?"

"You ought to know without bein' told," growled Parmenter. The thought of his grievances began to inflame his morose soul and set his nerves to dancing and jumping with rage. "I've stood all I'm a-goin' to! I ain't makin' no bones about it either. One way or another, I'm after you, and I'll get you. 'Twouldn't do me any

good if they found you out here and shot you. I want to do that with my own hands. One way or another, Cheves, I'm a-goin' to hurt you so bad you'll never get over it. Take warnin' now!"

"Thanks for the warnin'," returned Cheves, hard and dry. "Knife and knife it's to be? Very well, I can watch out for myself."

It was a queer thing, these men facing each other with the similitude of friendship in their eyes and the anger of death in their hearts, with a half dozen Britishers looking on, unaware of the significance of the tableau.

"Let me say this," remarked Cheves. "I've held off many times from hurtin' you when cause was given me. You're from Virginia and so am I. But I can't disregard it any longer. It's your life or mine, and I've work to do. Next time we fight I shall kill you."

The coldness and deliberate finality of this tone seemed to quench, in a measure, the other's anger. Bereft of that, Parmenter's face seemed only thoroughly weak and vicious, capable of any crime.

"One thing more," continued Cheves. "You'll be questioned about Kaskaskia by Hamilton. Tell him the story I did." And he gave, in a brief phrase or two, the message he had given the governor. "Best to hang together on that much of it," he added, "or neither of us will accomplish our designs. Both be shot for nothin', then." And with that he walked off.

He saw Eltinge wave a hand from the guard room, and a moment later the lieutenant had come up.

"Let's take a turn about the parade," he suggested. "Must have fresh air and exercise. I'd give a hundred pounds if I might go north with the next fur brigade. It's a silly state of affairs, is it not, when a man comes seven thousand miles to have a bit of adventure and then finds himself in a job like that of a clerk in a London counting house."

They went through the gate. It was another warm day in Detroit town. The sun fell across the hard packed earth of the parade ground and blended its warmth with the breeze coming off the river. A scattering of blanketed Indians were sitting against the fort wall, wrapped to the ears. A larger number of them than he had previously seen, Cheves thought. Eltinge offered a cigar to Cheves and lit another himself.

"Look at me," said the lieutenant with ill-concealed bitterness. "I might as well be a London hack driver for all the West and North I've seen. King and duty! King and duty! Damn, I've had my share of king and duty! I want active service. Now you," he said, taking a vigorous pull on the cigar, "are seeing things. I'd give five hundred pounds to be in your boots right now. More than that. Give all I had to have come down the Ohio and up the Wabash. Man! Think of it!"

It was a rather amazing outburst for a phlegmatic Englishman to make, Cheves reflected. Now, he would give nearly anything he possessed to be out of his boots and into those of Eltinge—for the brief time in which he might come closer to the heart of the fort and learn a certain indispensable secret which was all that held him back. He needed desperately to get that secret and clear out. No telling when the real Kaskaskia coureur might turn up.

"University man, with a backwoods training! Lord, what a life you're having," Eltinge began afresh. "Me, a-rusting in this infernal village. And now Hamilton's figuring on a fresh expedition south, and I can't go along."

Cheves came to a sudden alert attention and flicked the ashes from the cigar. "No fun in a scalping expedition," he said casually. "That's bloody work. If he were going south to Vincennes with regulars, it would be different."

"That's what it's to be. Girty and Hamilton and Dejean had a long powwow over it last night. Tonight they're having another. Isn't just decided yet. But the governor has his heart set on it."

Dejean! Ralston's contemptuous, bitter description of the man occurred to Cheves. Dejean, then, was the fat, gross figure in the large chair. So they contemplated an expedition southward toward Clark? Here was the secret for which he had tarried so long. But he must find more about it.

"Of course," he said in an off-hand manner, "it will be slow and cumbersome with regular troops. It will have to be a small detachment if they expect to make time."

"It will be," returned Eltinge confidently. "Why, Carstairs, we've hardly enough men to keep this garrison. A good strong force of Americans coming up some night could nearly wipe us out. It's ticklish to think of. And now they want to weaken us further by taking a wild chase down the Wabash to the Illinois country. Let 'em take care of themselves down there. Detroit's the queen of the Northwest, just as Cadillac said it was sixty years ago. Lose Detroit and we lose the whole country. Yet I'd give anything to go along!"

"Girty ought to be due to go to the border settlements pretty soon with a war party," Cheves offered as a mild comment, trying another tack. "Time they were sending some old-hand ranger out. We don't know what's taking place east of the Scioto any more."

"You know," and the young lieutenant said this in a very hesitating way, "I am not wholly in favor of letting Indians help us fight our quarrels. It isn't exactly in the blood of Englishmen to fight in that fashion."

They had made their detour and were back within the gate again.

"Duty once more," continued Eltinge bitterly. "Garrison duty!"

"Your turn will come," said Cheves, trying to console him. With that they parted, the lieutenant headed for the guard room.

And so will mine, Cheves thought, going back through the open gate. Tonight they were to hold a council in the governor's room again? Through some means he must hear what they had to say. Time was getting short, and the strands of inevitable exposure seemed to draw tighter about him. Clark, eight hundred miles away, waited to hear his report.

For the best part of the afternoon he wandered around the village and sat on a stringer of King's Wharf, watching the canoes furrow up and down the river. There was in him a great desire to see Katherine Ralston.

NIGHT came and the hurried forms of men sliding through the door of the guard room, heading for the council chamber. Cheves, loafing in a dark corner of the fort, saw them enter, one by one, counting them until he had reached six. After that no more went through. Now, if he could get past the guard room, he felt

secure in his concealment for the hall leading to the governor's room opened out at intervals into storerooms, and it so happened that the door of the council chamber abutted upon just such a storeroom. Bales of goods, trading trinkets, and other items of barter were stored there. It would be no great job to find concealment once he reached the place.

He crept along the wall, in the shadows, toward the entrance to the guard room. A sentry paused on the corner bastion twenty feet above but did not see him. A door opened from officers' quarters, and a pale dim candle light seeped out as a man emerged, buttoned a jacket, and closed the door behind him. Cheves flattened against the wall and kept still. The officer cut across the court toward the guard room; the door opened and another similarly thin wave of light flickered. The officer hesitated on the threshold. Cheves was only a scant thirty feet from him.

"Hey, O'Malley," called the officer softly. "Come out and have a bit of fresh air. It's my turn now, but I'm cursed if I want to go in there yet. Let's walk a bit. I've a bottle of Medford rum that might int'rest you."

The offer drew the officer of the guard out into the night, leaving the guard room door open. This was the thrice golden opportunity for which Cheves looked. He ran softly forward, crossed the threshold, and went swiftly through the room, got into the hallway, and closed the inner door behind him.

He went perhaps twenty feet down the dark passageway before striking another door, opened and closed it behind him, and continued on, being now in a sudden bayou of the hall wherein were barrels of lead shot from the Illinois country and the mines of the Wisconsin area. He slid through another door and came at last to the room of supplies, beyond which was the governor's chamber. It was perfectly black and that was protection for him. He got closer to the door, beneath which streamed a thin line of light and through which came the undertone of speech— heavy, irritated, passionate speech. Girty talking again!

But Cheves had yet to provide safety for himself. He crept back from the door and felt about with hands and feet, coming in contact with a heavy, tarred canvas paulin such as were used to cover canoe loads in wet weather. It was jammed between other bales of goods. By much fumbling labor, he straightened it in such a fashion that he might crawl under, still between the bales. It was protection of a sort. Then he crept back to the door.

The voice now audible was that of Dejean. Cheves recognized the heavy, dull tones.

"...Evidence not good enough, Girty," he was saying.

"I'd line him up against the wall and shoot him if we had the least scrap of evidence. There is none."

"Gentlemen, keep to the topic." It was the impatient voice of Hamilton. "Can we spare that many soldiers from our garrison to strengthen the southern forts?"

"I say no," Dejean voted. "We can't weaken Detroit. What's the danger in the south? I've heard of none. Let them fend for themselves. No great damage done if they fall from Indian attacks. Detroit must be kept strong. Why, a force of a hundred Americans or four or five hundred savages could wipe us off the map if they had the chance of surprise and weak defense. We're criminally weak! Damn the commandant at Montreal that he can't send us another company."

"Hark!" said Girty.

Cheves caught the shuffle of a foot. He sprang for the paulin and got beneath it. The next moment the door was jerked open and light flooded out, reaching vaguely back to the pile of bales. Cheves guessed, rather than saw, that Girty stood peering across the threshold.

"Oh, come back here," growled Dejean.

After a bit the door closed. Cheves waited another good ten minutes before venturing back to his post.

"Weakness it may be, but I'm responsible for the whole country," Hamilton was arguing. "Detroit's in no danger." His voice fell to calmer tones, and Cheves lost a part of it. Then it rose again. "Detroit's in no danger while the southern forts are abominably weak."

A silence, then argument, then rebuttal. It was a long while before he could again catch the threads of conversation. When he did, it was to note a new and strangely familiar voice. Then a quick, near paralyzing shock of concern and surprise struck him as he heard the name of Ralston mentioned.

"What have you found?" It was Hamilton who put the question. "Isn't Ralston one of them? Wasn't he responsible for that last ranger's disappearance?—Isn't he a rebel? You've been working with them for two months now and haven't given me a jot of information. Haven't you found anything?"

"I haven't found anything yet, sir." It was only by the questioning silence of the room that Cheves was able to hear the slow, cold, deliberate answer. "No cause for you to take them in. No proof of anything whatsoever. They've tended to their business."

At that point Cheves recognized the voice as belonging to John Harkness, the lieutenant and right hand man of Colonel Ralston.

"Must be that girl. She's been influencing you. Damned strange about that family! That's why I gave you the job this spring. And you haven't found a thing. It's hardly believable."

"Didn't I manage to put your fingers on the rest of the malcontents? Haven't we got them nearly all weeded out? Haven't I done good work, sir?" The cold voice rose to a metallic, angry pitch.

"Yes," replied the governor. "You've done such good work that this singular ineffectiveness of yours recently doesn't seem right. And I'm morally certain the Ralstons are the most dangerous enemies we've got here in Detroit."

"I have found nothing, sir," replied John Harkness obstinately. "But I've got my eyes on another man, within this fort. Give me three days and I shall turn him over to you."

"Who is he?"

"I beg not to be asked that until I can bring him to you with the proof."

Again the talk fell to a long jumble of questions and answers, and Cheves felt that the conference was drawing to a close. It was just as well. He had heard all he could assimilate. This revelation of the duplicity of Harkness left his mind racing along a new path. Harkness, then, was a British intelligence officer and as such had been responsible for the Americans deported and executed around Detroit town.

Yet why had he lied thus to his commandant, reporting that he knew of no subversive acts on the part of the Ralstons, when he was the full confidant of all of the colonel's plans? In the mind of Cheves there was a swift answer to this. The Lord bless Katherine Ralston. She had turned a British officer off the straight path of his duty. Hamilton had made a shrewder surmise than he knew.

A general stir and scraping of chairs forced Cheves back beneath the paulin. The doors opened, and the officers marched out one by one, retreating down the hall to the guard room. Again Cheves took a swift and dangerous chance. Crawling out from concealment, he followed the last man at the interval of a room's length. The gloom of the passageway made this possible. When he came to the guard room, both inner and outer doors stood open, and the chamber itself was empty. He saw, through the vista thus formed, the small group disappear in the direction of officers' quarters, swallowed up in the night. He stepped into the guard room, closed the inner door behind him, and walked slowly out into the court, to come face to face with the lieutenant of the guard who advanced out of the night.

The latter appeared a bit flustered, as though caught off his post.

"Pardon," said Cheves. "I came by here thinking to find Lieutenant Eltinge."

"Oh. Dare say you'll find him in quarters." The officer got within the guard room and unceremoniously closed the door on Cheves.

Chapter IX

Maelstrom.

THE lieutenant was not in quarters which was just as well, for Cheves had a great amount of thinking to do and wanted nothing so much as time and solitude. He helped himself to one of Eltinge's cigars and settled in a camp chair.

His mission in Detroit was ended. He had secured the essential knowledge that a company of men was being dispatched south. Likewise, he had secured a hundred other tag ends of information for which Clark thirsted. It had been an unusually successful trip, and there was no further reason for postponing departure.

No reason? Frankness asserted itself. There were Katherine Ralston and her father, two very good reasons for tarrying. These people lived on the rim of a crater, sheltered only by the efforts of a man who had betrayed his duty. And Harkness, to bolster up his difficult position, had dangled the prospects of another victim before Hamilton's covetous eyes. That victim was to be Cheves.

Yet how could Harkness incriminate him without involving the Ralstons? He did not see. A recollection of the hard-bitten face and the direct, unfriendly eyes of the Englishman left him with the conviction that here was a man to deal with. Very dangerous and with unknown sources of power in reserve. The fact that he now played a double game made him only the more dangerous. He was no callow youth, but a desperate, grown soldier, playing the grimmest role of all.

There was also Parmenter to contend with. There was Girty sulking about, waiting only for the slightest misstep. Above all, the real messenger from

Kaskaskia must shortly be on his way. That meant inevitable exposure. In all, the situation had become too badly tangled for one man to forecast.

The promptings of his conscience impelled him to pick up the pistol and holster lying on the cot and start immediately southward, while an inner feeling of loyalty, mingled with some other emotion he did not care to analyze, rose to combat the first impulse. And there he sat, undecided and distressed, trying not to think of the dismal future for the Ralstons which seemed to him inevitable.

He rose and went out, and the fresh air made him feel better. After all, was it not his duty to remain and see the war council? Some new factor might develop which would be highly important for Clark to know. Ah, there was a solution! He recognized immediately that it was but a subterfuge, that he sought now to deceive himself. This genuinely distressed him.

The tramp of a sentry, twenty feet above, echoed evenly down. The night was serene, the sky luminous with stars, and the moon riding high behind a passing net of clouds. He had come by the closed main gate, drawing full on the fragrant remnant of the Virginia cigar, the tip of which glowed in the night. Turning a corner, he started down the north side of the court, locked in the struggle which has oppressed men since the beginning of time. It wore on him worse than the combined hardships of his journey.

The roar of a pistol filled the court and thundered around the stockade. The bullet thudded into a nearby log, not a foot from Cheves's head. It was as if a breath of air had been expelled against his face. He jerked back and stood on tiptoe at the same time as he heard the crack of the sentry's musket changing positions from shoulder to charge.

"Who's there?" bawled the guard from the bastion top.

That bullet had come from officers' quarters, Cheves swiftly noted. By chance his head had been turned that way, and he had seen the red finger of flame. It was from the room next to his own, he thought. The door of the guard room jerked open and the lieutenant ran out; at the same time men popped from quarters. Cheves, eyes still riveted on the point from which the bullet had come, saw a door open and a man slip out and mingle with the other approaching figures.

"What's up?" called the lieutenant to the sentry.

"A shot, sir, man in the court alone."

"What's the matter?" the officer called, seeing Cheves.

"It's nothin'," returned Cheves laconically. "Probably someone cleaning his gun after dark. No damage. Just a bit more lead in the stockade."

"Very strange. Did you notice the direction it came from?"

"Not at all. Was just goin' along with me head in the air, thinkin' of other things. It's nothin' at all, Lieutenant." He scanned the circle and found, as he expected, Parmenter. The moon slid hastily out to a clearer sky, and Cheves got a better view of his fellow Virginian. The face was drawn to an expression of veiled unconcern, but the restless, bitter eyes, they were the sole testimony Cheves asked. He turned away from the small group. "It's nothin'," he repeated with impatience. "Have none of you heard a pistol shot before?"

He made for quarters and once there got quickly to bed. The struggle had been briefly terminated. He would stay now.

HE woke to a day of sullen and fitful contrasts. A gathering haze blanketed the town and the wind, toward mid-morning, died away, leaving a murky sun and a torrid fog to torture and bake the inhabitants. It was insufferable within the fort. Even the stolid Indians, now cluttering up the court, suffered visibly, sweat rolling down daubed faces. Yet they clung to their dignity and suffered rather than cast the swathing blankets from their bodies. Dressed for ceremony in a white man's fort, they must so remain.

Cheves endured it as long as he could then left the fort and started for the river. There, at least, he would find cool water. He crossed the parade and was almost suffocated by the waves of heat reflected from the packed earth. It made his head swim and he was glad to gain the partial protection of a narrow alley. A short way down the cool interior of a wine shop drew him in; it was some relief. He ordered a glass of port and sipped it in grateful leisure. On the point of going and continuing his journey river-ward, he saw Eltinge and motioned for him to enter.

"Gad, this is insufferable!" panted the lieutenant, well-nigh dazed. "Nothing like it since I've been here. We're due for a heat storm soon enough. Sooner the better. I'm near done for." He wiped a vagrant trickle of sweat from his forehead.

"I'm headed for the river," vouchsafed Cheves. "Come along. We'll have some comfort there."

The girl came up, but Eltinge shook his head.

"*Non, merci*, no liquor on a day like this. To the river? Not a bad idea. Probably find most of the town there. Well, let's go. I've got to be back at three o'clock. My turn of guard again. I hope the storm breaks by then."

They passed out and continued down the alley. At the first intersection they came upon an old Frenchman, bent and rickety, hobbling along. His mouth hung wide open, and fear was visibly stamped on his wrinkled face.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he gasped as they went by him, and immediately thereafter clapped a hand to his heart.

A woman ran down the street, got hold of the fellow's hand, and led him back to a house.

"Be somebody dead before this is over," panted Eltinge. "Never a thing like it before, in my time."

Even then, as Cheves surveyed the eastern skyline, he saw a black mass of clouds forming up.

"Won't be long," he said and was aware of a tension in his body. He had come near to shouting that last phrase and was vaguely surprised at himself.

Eltinge gave him a curious glance. A small group of men were bunched up at the next intersection and seemed to be busy over a prostrate form in the roadway.

"Hello," said Eltinge. "Somebody's gone under. I knew it."

He turned toward the group, and Cheves followed. The Frenchmen parted as the Englishman came up, revealing Danny Parmenter kneeling in the center. Pillowed on his thigh was the white, drawn face of Colonel Ralston.

"What's the trouble?" demanded Eltinge, assuming authority.

Parmenter looked up and saw them. A brief flicker of excitement animated his face as he recognized Cheves.

"Old gentleman here went under to the heat," he responded. "Just happened along as he toppled over."

"I thought so," said Eltinge.

Cheves nodded impassively. "It would be wise to get the man out of the sun," he offered in a noncommittal manner. "Come on, Eltinge, let's get to the river before we melt."

Parmenter shot him another quick, triumphant glance and turned back to his charge. Willing Frenchmen gave him aid, and they picked up the colonel and headed for the nearest wine shop.

"Cold-blooded chap, aren't you?" said Eltinge in a kind of admiration. "Life doesn't seem worth a plugged ha'penny to you rangers."

"Ain't time to worry about it," responded the Virginian. "Trouble enough to keep your own skin." Internally he boiled.

Here was an unfortunate circumstance! Parmenter would know soon enough of the Ralston residence. Ah, there was an opportunity for injury, and Parmenter would see it in a flash. Trust his diabolic treachery. Why hadn't he killed the man before and saved all this untold accumulation of animus and certain misfortune? If harm came to the Ralstons—then Parmenter should pay.

They went through the gate and walked out upon the puncheons of King's Wharf. No townspeople were there. They had gone to the beaches on both sides of the stockade, where they might swim.

"Just seeing water makes me feel better," remarked Eltinge. "Gad, I never want to be as hot as this again."

"Just as bad as this in the Illinois country sometimes," offered Cheves, leading the way to a seat on a stringer within the small shade afforded by the wall. "When you have to cut through the prairie covered with hemp and grape, it's pretty bad. Heat stays in the tangle, and a man swelters till he's like raw beefsteak."

"That's different. You're out doing something. Here you just sit passive. Might as well be a huckster in Whitechapel."

The black cloud soared out of the eastward at a tremendous pace. A half hour ago it had been only a suggestion. Now its ragged edges swept the sky. Far off came the tremor and report of thunder.

"Storm's about due," said Eltinge, twisting his neck in acute misery. "There's the wind."

The sun was blotted out in the space of a minute. The mass rushed on, first showing the gray-shot edges, then appeared the solid opaque center. A quick wind struck them. In five minutes it grew perceptibly cooler. Cheves saw the people on the beaches come out of the water and begin a general hurried movement toward town. Came a crash and rumble of thunder, and the reverberating roll of the echo. A strong gust of wind hit them, wind cold enough to be comfortable.

"I think we'd better go back," said Eltinge, a trace of nervousness in his voice. "I'm not used to this. We'll be rained on shortly."

"'Twill be worse than that," assented Cheves. They got up and returned through the gate.

It was but mid-afternoon, yet from the darkness it might have been twilight. The whole sky was filled with black, twisting clouds. A patter of rain struck the dusty alley.

"Here she comes!"

A root-like flame of lightning flashed and disappeared and then came the roar and tumult of the ensuing thunder crash, rolling and booming like the cataclysmic fall of mountains. The wind sharpened, and the rain came in larger drops. The two men hurried up the alley, being met and passed by sober-faced inhabitants. One man shouted out a phrase of unintelligible French to them from an open door then slammed it behind him. A candle light appeared through a window and was, the next moment, snuffed out.

They crossed the parade in driving rain and went through the gate as a huge clap of thunder shook the earth and deafened their hearing. It was black night. The storm took on a deeper, more sinister note as the two men gained the shelter of their room.

Eltinge tarried only long enough to put on a dry tunic and buckle on a pistol.

"My turn at guard," he said and went out the door, leaving Cheves alone.

The things that fate accomplished! What was he to do in the face of this last dilemma, Cheves thought rapidly. By this time, in all likelihood, Danny Parmenter had wormed his insinuating way into the graces of the Ralstons. Oh, why hadn't he told the whole story of the man's defection to them? He supposed that wouldn't have been possible. He could not have done it and still kept his self respect. Yet how much easier it would have made his own position here in a hostile land. Now he must rack his brains and forestall the man's trickery, for Parmenter had sworn to hurt him until he would die of the pain. Well, here was the chance: Parmenter confiding to the Ralstons, duping them under the guise of friendship and old acquaintance, weaving his own designs into their fears.

How was he to prevent this? Better to have shot the man down in cold blood than to imagine all the injury he could do now. Cheves grew angrier and more gloomy. The tremendous onslaught of the storm outside, the crash and roll of the thunder, the drive of the rain against the door, the shriek of the wind, the whole fierce and resentful tempo seemed to communicate its surge and animus to him. He got up and paced across the small quarters, unable to stem the slowly rising rage. It was a cold, implacable rage such as he had experienced but once before in his life, and that on the occasion of a particularly bloody border massacre. He had gone into the woods, at the head of an avenging Kentucky company, in just such a mood.

Of a sudden he reached out for a belt and pistol, strapped it around him, then struggled into a great coat. Time had come to use ball and shot. Here, at last, one strand of the tangled skein must be cut in twain. As he put on a cape and started for the door, a sinister chill of apprehension invaded him. Things went wrongly, he knew, at the Ralston place.

He did not open the door. It was pushed wide before him under the impetus of a newcomer's hand and the drive of the storm which streaked across the small room snuffed out the candle.

"Pardon," said a cold voice. "Didn't mean to create such a disturbance."

The door closed, and Cheves fumbled to relight the candle. When once again it guttered and flared, illuminating the room, the Virginian turned to identify this sudden visitor.

It was John Harkness who leaned against the door, one hand to the knob. Bundled up as the Englishman was, Cheves made out only the slit of the thin, restrained mouth, the arrogant nose, and the harsh eyes.

"Take a chair," said Cheves.

Harkness shook his head and stared at the Virginian. Internal excitement of some sort began to work at his face.

"What can I do for you?" asked Cheves, impatience cropping up. He had work to do.

"Going out?"

"I thought to." Perhaps this man had come upon an errand of capture. Cheves hunched his body to loosen the great coat and render the pistol and holster more accessible.

Harkness noted this movement and shook his head. At the same time he unbuttoned his coat to reveal an identical service weapon.

"That's what I've come for," he said, with a significant stab of a forefinger.

"I don't understand," said Cheves.

"You and I... got to settle this... out of court." The words came in a sketchy phrase or two, lacking coherence. Harkness seemed to realize it and suddenly jerked up his head. "Here," he began afresh, "there's no use in beating around the bush. You and I've got to fight this out. One man goes under. Understand?"

"Only a part of it."

"I'll tell you more, then. Last night I turned around to look back when I got out of the conference. Was half way across the court when I looked. Saw you coming out of the guard room. You overheard that conference."

Cheves nodded. Little good to deny it. Moreover, this man had some other plan up his sleeve.

"Well," said Harkness, raising his chin to a higher, more stubborn level. "You know the part I play then." Here bitterness asserted itself. "I guess you might call me a traitor or a renegade. But you know the reason!"

Cheves inclined his head.

"A soldier has no right to fall in love," continued Harkness. "Damn it all, a high-bred woman has no right in this country. What was I to do? She doesn't stand the ghost of a show if her father is discovered. I've done the best I could, by both sides. Now you come and, damn your soul, she likes you! Oh, I saw that. Well, I've not perjured myself, and eaten dirt, and lost my self respect just to have you step in. I've done these things for a certain reward, and I shall have it. I'm desperate now. You'll have to fight me. One of us goes under!"

Cheves straightened. Here was a plain and simple call to duel. He bowed ceremoniously.

"I'm at your service, sir, at any time," he replied courteously.

"Now!" Harkness closed his mouth with a snap. "We'll have it out, while all this infernal racket is going on. I warn you, I'm a dead shot, and I don't mean you shall cheat me."

"I have always been able to care for myself," Cheves observed, buttoning his coat. "Will you lead the way?"

They went out. The dead-black center of the storm clouds had passed over, but the light was grime colored and the rain was blinding. The thunder boomed and

rolled; now and then a dart of lightning streaked across the heavens and ended in a fury of noise that stunned the earth. Harkness led the way through a corridor of the fort, traversed the mess hall past several storerooms, and stopped at the end of a blind passageway. Here was a small and heavily bolted door. Harkness shot back the draws and opened the barrier. It led out behind the fort, beyond the stockade, on the far end and wooded side of the town.

"One man only comes back through here," said Harkness on the threshold. He was forced to raise his voice to a higher pitch. "Things...well enough...you hadn't stepped in! Ralstons weren't doing any damage. Did my duty. Won't put my head in a noose to be cheated."

"It's quite a natural thought," observed Cheves. "I was on the verge of going out to do myself a little justice when you stepped in."

They advanced toward a grove of trees with the wind and the rain driving them along. A racketing clap of thunder shivered the ground. Not far off was the crash of falling limbs.

"Lightning strikes close," said Cheves. But the wind snatched the words from his mouth, and his companion, hearing only a faint sound of the voice, turned to catch what had been said.

Cheves shook his head. They went on. Funny, the Virginian mused, he could not find it in his heart to be angry at his challenger. The way of life got a man into positions from which he could not extricate himself by diplomacy. The only alternative then was to close the mind and the heart and fight it out. And Harkness, become ensnared in the tangle of a double role, had soldier-like elected to cut the mess squarely and cleanly in twain, falling back at last upon the simplest code he knew. Cheves admired him for this.

There came a diminution of the storm, and Cheves was aware that they had penetrated to the heart of a grove of oak, the branches of which were fending off in part the attacks of the storm.

"Remember, I'm a dead shot," Harkness warned, facing about. "Want to give you an even chance, but I'm going to kill you. Take your choice of positions."

The light, such as it was, broke slantwise through an opening of the oaks and fell on the north side of the glade. Cheves, by a sweep of the hand, elected the south side. It forced Harkness to stand in the small bit of light thus being more exposed, while Cheves stood in comparative darkness and was the harder to see.

"Leave top coats on, pistols beneath them to keep powder dry," said Harkness, reciting the conditions of the duel. "I'll walk over there, turn, and face you. When I turn, begin to count three, like this." He spaced three counts. "Fire when you've pronounced three. Is that satisfactory?"

Cheves nodded, walked to the spot of his choice, and turned.

"I'll wait here for you," he said.

Harkness tarried, seeming to have lost for the moment his usual decisive manner. "Damn it, man, you've forced this. No other way!"

"I'm not complaining."

"Can't be both of us. One has to get out of the way. I'll leave your body here. Some wood gatherer will pick it up in a day or so."

Cheves drew the gun from its holster and held it beneath his coat. Lacking free play, he unbuttoned the top of the garment.

"I'm ready," he said.

"You're not afraid," Harkness remarked, staring at the Virginian a moment with compressed lips. He walked a step, exclaimed, "Ready," and began a methodical advance toward his chosen place.

A shaft of lightning flashed across the sky and clearly revealed the scene. The earth jarred, and the world went black, leaving Cheves half blinded from the glare. A dozen streaks of red danced before his eyes. Nerves taut, he peered ahead and saw the dim form of Harkness halt, back turned. The Virginian got a firmer grip on his gun and waited.

Glare caught him, too, he thought. Then the Englishman swung, slow and careful, on his heel. Cheves saw his face lift in signal, the white standing out against the surrounding black. At that the Virginian began to count, dragging each syllable to create the proper pause.

He had not uttered "three" when the world rocked again and a larger, more blinding flash came and went, playing havoc with his vision.

"Three!" he shouted—and held his fire.

He could not see, and he would not waste his shot. Yet the etiquette of the situation demanded that he stand there, immovable, and take the other's fire. Across the space came, after what seemed a life-long passage of time, a shout. "I can't see!"

In answer Cheves returned a similar cry.

When at last his pupils began to distinguish objects on the far side of the glade, he noted that Harkness had folded his arms and was showing his back. A surge of admiration invaded Cheves. The man had plenty of courage. He waited until clearer eyed and sent over a second shout. At this Harkness wheeled and again jerked up his head. Again Cheves began the slow, monotonous count. At "three" he raised the pistol from its security, extended it, and took up the trigger's slack. He saw that Harkness came up slower, and he withheld final pressure until the man's gun was nearly horizontal. Then he fired.

He saw the flame from the answering gun, heard the echo of the answering shot, but felt no impact of bullet. His mind, coolly detached, seeming remote from excitement, decided that he had not been hit, and in an impersonal way he was glad it had been decided. Lifting back the flap of his coat, he replaced the pistol and advanced across the glade.

Harkness had fallen and now struggled to remain up on one elbow, but he was too far gone. The elbow slipped, and his head fell to the ground. The Virginian drew out a handkerchief.

"Where?" he asked.

Harkness stabbed a futile finger at his chest. Cheves started to open the tunic but was stopped by a sudden access of strength from the other man.

"Get away," he growled. A species of surprise flitted across his face. The quick energy ebbed away. "I'm done up. Get away."

When next the Virginian thrust his hand across the stained chest, the heart had stopped its labor. Cheves rose, retraced the way through the glade, and came upon the rear door. Getting within the fort once again, he shot the bolts and half ran down the passageway, wanting only to be out of this angle of the fort unwitnessed.

It seemed that the whole military population had gathered in the square, not under arms now standing any formation but milling and shifting from place to place, congregating into small groups, breaking up, and reforming. A high excitement was stamped on each face. Cheves halted on the edge of the crowd and sought to catch the tag ends of conversation that came up to him on the wind.

"Come down the Ohio, crossed seventy-five miles of Illinois prairie land, and surprised Rocheblave after dark. Kaskaskia's fallen!"

Cheves waited to hear no more. The thing feared had come to pass. Clark had struck, and the real messenger from Kaskaskia had come. Now he must get out.

His first thought was of the rear door. Turning, he strode toward the entrance to the mess room, whence he had just come. An officer bumped sharply against him and stared into his face, to break into a quick cry: "Eh, Carstairs? There you are! Stop!"

He had caught the Virginian on the shoulder. Cheves tore loose and broke into a run, but it seemed a dozen men sprang up on the instant. The shout went up: "Here's the spy!" and was born on fifty tongues at once. Confusion and riot! With the whole garrison pressing toward him, five feet to the mess room door, if he could only make it and stem the rush for a moment. He cast one swift glance behind and saw the rage-swollen face of Girty glaring at him. Then he turned and knocked the only remaining man out of his path with the butt of his gun, leaping ahead. No time for parley nor subterfuge. Get on! Fight it out!

A blow on the head felled him, senseless, to the hard earth of the court.

Chapter X

The Benefit of Learning.

THE fort prison, Cheves had learned earlier, was below ground, being truly a foul, dank, and oppressive kind of residence. This was the description of Eltinge: "You know," he had once confided to Cheves, "there's a lot of inhumanity in the world, and I'm sorry to see so much of it on the English side of the fence. That prison, now, it's abominable." And here it was that Cheves found himself.

A chilly drought of air swept diagonally across it, from one unseen vent to another. It was this drought, added to a moist yet hard earth, that brought him back to reality, aching of head, sore of limb. Yet the bludgeon-stroke had been more stunning than dangerous. He felt gingerly over his face and hair and found no blood. The old cut held fast under the strain. The sum total of this last accident was a huge, pounding pain over the eyes.

Acute discomfort brought him to his feet. There was one small beam of smudgy light coming from a corner grating, high up. It was the sort of window built not to admit light but to tantalize some light-hungry prisoner, and from appearances it was built level with the surface of the ground. The current of air did not come from that direction, so evidently there were other openings of a kind in this dreary dungeon. Well, he might find some more comfortable spot to rest than here in the center of this black pit. He began a slow tour forward.

His arm, stretched ahead to fend against accidents, struck a log wall, wet to the touch. At another point when his fingers came in contact with a small, slimy body, it sent an unpleasant shock through him. Probably a snail. It was well that no illuminating light revealed the whole nastiness of this place. His foot struck softer material. Reaching down with inquisitive fingers, he felt a thick, wet fabric which parted under the stress of a gentle pull. Once, he decided, it had been a blanket.

By now he had come to the unknown source of air. As far as he could determine, it was simply a small tunnel, entering at the bottom of the prison area and going back and upward to the surface. It was too small, his foot determined, for any effort at escape. Continuing on, he arrived beneath the window, some ten feet above his head. His exploring fingers seeking everywhere found small gouged niches in the logs, ascending at intervals of a foot. Some poor lost soul previously jailed had tried to attain freedom. The Virginian thrust a toe in a lower aperture and found a finger hold farther up. A small excitement stirred in him and gave zest to the discovery. A bare chance, here, for escape. His groping fingers found a higher niche, and he drew himself up.

He had climbed four feet perhaps, each succeeding hole becoming smaller and more untenable, when his hand found only the unbroken surface of a log. This, then, was the end of the attempt at freedom; the man had given up. Poor devil! Doubtless gone under and now an unknown bit of wreckage in an unknown grave. The Virginian let himself down, reluctantly, and continued his explorations.

Opposite the window the log wall left off to admit a heavy, spiked, and bolted door, solid save for a small aperture some six inches square. Some blacksmith had spent many laborious hours in fashioning that impregnable barrier. Well, nothing to do save seek the least uncomfortable spot and play 'possum.

As far as he could determine, the foot of the door was as good a place as any, so there he sat and stared into the dark. He had not rested five minutes before coming to a characteristic and irrevocable decision: he would again stake his future on one last desperate fling of chance. As events now stood, he saw but one future, that of being lined up against the outer wall of the fort and shot. It seemed inevitable. If such were the outlook, no possible risk he might take could be either rash or wholly past hope. Born and bred to the idea of loyalty, he believed in the fulfillment of whatever mission entrusted to him. Here, at the low ebb of personal fortune, he did not so much choose the idea of overpowering the jailer from a hasty temperament as from the hard shove of his clear, ruthless logic. He had failed to escape, and he carried a precious knowledge that his chief needed. Now he must atone for that failure.

The light gradually merged with the inner shadows until at last there was no light. At some point in the evening he slept. The hard, damp ground caused his slumber to be fitful. Once a rat crawled its lethargic way across his hand, and again the current of air momentarily shifted its course and brought him a fresher stench. But his final waking was due to a steady advance of footsteps down the hall and the scrape of a key in the prison door. On the instant he had sprung up, fully alive, mind racing over the coming struggle. A quick blow on the temple, or a swift arm about the throat, and after that it would not be so difficult to find his way down the passage to the small rear door of the fort. His body curved and his muscles became hard, predatory cords. The door swung back. An arm thrust

through a smoking lantern. Behind it Cheves saw the troubled face of Lieutenant Eltinge. Cheves relaxed, and his hands fell to his sides.

"Carstairs," called Eltinge softly.

"Here."

"Gad, but this is a foul place to put a white man," grumbled the officer. "Inhuman!" He supported a bundle in one hand. This he gave to Cheves, stepped within the prison vault, and closed the heavy door behind him. "Something to eat here," he said. "Hurry! Get after it!"

He put the lantern on the ground. Cheves knelt and unwrapped the cloth and found a piece of meat, a loaf of black bread, and a bottle of wine. He wasted no time but fell to them immediately. The events of the last few hours had famished him.

The lieutenant looked on, clucked his tongue, sighed, and ended by striding back and forth from the lantern's light to the farther gloom and back again, casting troubled glances at the Virginian, sighing, and resuming the march. Once he forced the door back and looked down the passage. He watched the Virginian swallow the last of the wine with mingled sadness and admiration on his fair, boyish face. It was easy to see that he fought with tempting devils and that the older man came near supplying the image of a resourceful, fearless Western god in his young, adventure-craving heart.

"You'll be lined up and shot!" he blurted out finally. "Lined up and shot like a common criminal!"

Cheves silently cursed him for entering the vault out of friendliness. How could he go on with his plan when a man approached him on honor?

"Shot like an ordinary criminal! Isn't as if you were an illiterate ranger. There's enough of them to spare. But a university man! Shot! Oh, that's impossible! We can't afford to do that. Better kill a hundred ordinary fellows!"

Eltinge spoke with the intense loyalty of class, mingled with a bitterness. Here was the major problem of his young life. Here at last he had come to grips with a stern, stark phase of the primitive and warring West. Manfully he fought through to his conclusions.

"Why didn't you leave before? Why did you wait? 'Twas a blunder. Your partner got away."

So Parmenter had slipped out. Once again a chill of apprehension and foreboding thrust its spidery fingers up Cheves's back. Something had gone wrong at the Ralston place.

"You'll not do us any hurt by escaping," Eltinge went on. "You Americans will never get Detroit. It's too far from your base, and you'd not get up this way far without our being warned in advance. So, no matter what you know about the fort and the town, it'll not help Clark." He was arguing more to himself than to Cheves.

"And whatever you know about our future movements in the southwell, that doesn't matter either. You can't stop us. We'll retake Kaskaskia shortly. You can't fight us on equal ground. We're too powerful. We've got millions to your thousands."

A long silence followed which Eltinge ended by a brief snap of his fingers. He opened and stared through the door again and listened with a warning eye turned

on Cheves. Then he swung around, unbuckled his pistol belt with its shot and powder pouch, and handed it to the Virginian.

"Strap it on," he commanded.

Cheves, who had seen the processes of the man's mind go on, knew well enough what this meant.

"How will you clear yourself?" he asked, taking the belt.

"There wasn't any man of the guard available to bring down your food, so I did it. They don't think I amount to much... the officers don't." He laughed bitterly at this. "They think I'm just a young lad. It won't be any trouble at all to make them believe I was overpowered. 'Just boy foolishness and carelessness,' is what they'll say and let it go at that. I'll probably get a few hard words from Hamilton, and that's all. Oh, I know how I stand around here. That's why they won't let me go on expeditions. Too young! Too inexperienced!" He spat the words out with venom then came suddenly back to the business at hand and stripped off his great coat. "Let's change these. Cap, too."

The transfer was effected swiftly.

"Now listen closely," directed Eltinge. "Go straight up this corridor, take the stairs, and open the door on the first landing you reach. This avoids the mess room and puts you into another passage. Follow it down and you'll get to a door, unbolt it and you're out of the fort. Only one chance in a thousand that you'll find anyone in that passage. Nothing but stores there. At the door I've put a pouch with some food in it, jerked meat and bread."

"Eltinge," queried Cheves, "why do you take all this trouble and put yourself in so much danger?"

The young lieutenant's eyes sparkled. Here, at last, he was involved in direct adventure, and it seemed to affect him like old wine. "Because," he said briefly, "it isn't right, under any kind of war law, to shoot a good university man. There's only a few of us left in the world, and we've got to hang together. Some day, after this war's over, we'll have a few things to say about running governments. It may seem like treachery now, but we'll both be glad when we've quit fighting." It was idealism—sincere boyish idealism. Eltinge suddenly went shy. "Come, no tosh. One more thing. You'll have to mark me up. Let go with your fist and strike me in the eye. Got to leave me with some physical evidence of struggle."

Cheves said nothing; there was nothing to say. In his life he had met and encompassed a variety of strange happenings and out of this had grown a philosophy that was compounded largely of quiet acceptance when tight situations of a kind involved him. His mouth closed tighter. To save Eltinge suspense he shot a direct, hard blow at the slightly pale but entirely resolute face. It landed flush on the right eye. Eltinge clapped a hand up and staggered back. Cheves buttoned the coat and pulled down the cap.

"What time was it when you came down?" he asked. "Ten o'clock," responded the lieutenant, still pressing his eye. "You'd better lose no time. Good luck."

"Good luck yourself," replied Cheves, and that was all.

He closed the door tightly and locked it, throwing the key in some dark recess farther on. It would take them an hour or better to find that key or to unhinge that door. Then he set out down the passage, swinging the lantern before. He went up the stairs and got through the first door, as directed. He was back, now, in the

passage traversed earlier in the day. At the door he found the pouch. This he slung up, got out of the door, and closed it behind him.

Blacker than pitch, this night. Against it the lantern gave but little assurance, yet it was sufficient to keep him from breaking his neck in some unexpected ditch. Doubtless there was a guard on both of the rear corner bastions, but from experience Cheves knew they would be within the shelter of the blockhouses, evading the driving, miserable rain. Discipline, Cheves had decided earlier, was somewhat lax in the fort.

He struck out through the first grove of woods where he had fought his duel, got beyond it, and thence turned south, heading for the Ralston farm. He pronounced, as he went, a silent blessing upon Eltinge. Only a man untouched and unscarred by the hard suspicions and crafty deceits of frontier life could have done so unselfish a deed.

Chapter XI

Dan Fellows.

BEYOND the southwestern angle of the fort, the woods fell away for a space and the wind, coming northeasterly across the open waters of Lake St. Clair, rushed over the easy rise of the French farms in a gust of fury, bringing with it the lash and sting of rain. The lantern guttered and threatened to snuff out and Cheves, having great need of its small comfort, sheltered it beneath his great coat. Travel was tedious and difficult. Long before he had embarked upon the main road from the fort, a sweat covered his skin, while his hands and face were whipped raw.

He guessed it was near to midnight when finally he stumbled upon the side road and came through the Ralston orchard. A tentative use of the lantern revealed the pathway leading by the barn to the house. Thus he came to the small porch which fended the front door. There was no light within, but then it was long past time for bed. He stepped up and rapped strongly against the panel and waited, turning his back to the bitter wind. After an interval he rapped again, with greater force. This storm was near to drowning out all lesser noises.

But, with the passage of fifteen minutes, broken by as much effort as he could effect against the door and productive of no results, he decided to force it and go inside. The lock was not turned, and this struck him strangely enough, too, in a country where precautions were not usually overlooked. The living room was still warm with the last embers in the fireplace. His lantern showed some evidence of disorder. A book or two tumbled from the shelf to the floor. The doors to the kitchen, to the second story, and to the bedroom off the living room were wide open.

"Colonel Ralston!" This time Cheves raised his voice high enough to wake the sleepers.

And still he got no answer. In sudden impatience he walked to the bedroom. This, he was certain, belonged to the colonel. On the threshold he thrust forward

the lantern and inspected the interior. The bed, neatly made, was unwrinkled and unoccupied. Here again he saw evidence of disorder, private letters, clothing, and a book or two thrown in a big heap in the center of the floor.

All the while a rising, premonitory thrust of fear had been working in the Virginian. He turned and made his way into the kitchen in a few swift strides. Again the same spectacle of wide-flung closet doors and small disorder with no human occupancy. There was left now but one other place, the second floor. Cheves was loath to go above, for that was Katherine's domain. He thrust his shoulders through the stairway door and called again.

No answer. He went up, now thoroughly aroused, and found himself in the single room which constituted the whole upper part of the house. The lantern revealed the distinct feminine touch of this room. Yet here again there spoke the same story, disorder, as though indicating sudden flight.

Sudden flight! Now why had he thought of that? Cheves turned on his steps and went below. Sudden flight! What would be the reason for their fleeing? No sooner had he asked himself that question when appeared before him the vindictive, vicious face of Danny Parmenter. Here, he was morally certain, rested the efforts of that fellow's malignant brain and cankerous heart.

"I'll hurt you so bad you'll die of the pain of it," Parmenter had threatened.

And here was the hurt. If he still doubted, Cheves told himself, he had only to remember the meeting of Parmenter and Colonel Ralston in the town that same day. The line of evidence was too strong to be overlooked. A roaring anger, a gritting, surpassing rage swept the Virginian. He was done forever with mild means. He would find that fellow and kill him, as he should have done long ago.

If they had fled, Katherine would have left some note for him under the rock beside the barn. He retraced his steps down the pathway, found the rock, and rolled it back. A white bit of paper, released of weight, skipped off in the wind. He made a wild dash and recovered it. By the lantern he read the few brief lines:

Richard:

Danny brought back Father from town, ill. He says there is great danger and that we are to leave immediately. I don't understand it all, but Father believes him. I'm afraid, Dick. John left and didn't come back. What does it mean? Something terrible seems about to happen and there's no one I can trust save you, and you haven't time to worry over us. Danny says we are going to St. Joseph's, then down the Illinois to the Mississippi, and on below to St. Louis. Oh, I wish you were here! Danny's face makes me shiver. It's a terrible night to start out. Pierre and François go with us, and I feel a little safer. Dick, come when you can!

Katherine

Bless her! Trying to be honest about the matter and yet not wanting to pull him away from his duty. "You haven't time to worry over us." And Parmenter's face made her shiver! She couldn't keep out that foreboding note. Perhaps Cheves never suffered so much as in the next fifteen minutes, pacing the ground and puzzling out his own best course of action.

His own trail was southward to the Maumee. The St. Joseph's trail turned sharply westward, across the lower end of the peninsula to the small fort which sat on the south tip of Lake Michigan. When he left this house and started his return journey to Kaskaskia, each step took him farther from the St. Joseph's trail. And his plain duty, inscribed in every argument he thrust at himself, made him tarry no longer but to make all haste to Clark. It would be late summer when he reached his chief with information that might lead to an expedition northward. And if that expedition were to be successful, it must start before the fall storms. Thus on his celerity depended a large measure of the conquest of Detroit and the Northwest. The conquest of a kingdom for the Americans.

It was a battle of heart and head with this loyal Virginian. The colonel, he knew, would be so much clay in Parmenter's hands. The two Frenchmen, very steadfast to the family, would protect the girl as long as they were able. But once Parmenter had the upper hand, there was no fathomable depth to his iniquity. No man can plumb the mind of a renegade; and Parmenter was a renegade.

Yet out of it all came one unalterable conclusion. The party did not dare to touch the British St. Joseph's. They would skirt it, gain the Illinois River, descend it to the Mississippi, and thence go down by rapid, easy stages to the Spanish town of St. Louis. Such being the route, Parmenter would hardly pick a quarrel with the men of the party until St. Louis was within striking distance. He needed such strength as he possessed too badly to do away with any of them. Posing as British he would gain through the Indian tribes without difficulty. Here, then, was Cheves's hope: to return to Kaskaskia as fast as he was able and, having completed his mission, to strike up the Mississippi and meet the party. Then he would settle with Danny Parmenter.

It was a slim, tenuous hope, and it made Cheves groan to think of what might happen on the long trail down the Illinois. Again, he repeated to himself, the heart of a renegade was unfathomable. But he had no alternative. It was a struggle of head and heart, and the head won, albeit it fairly tore him in twain to make the decision.

Now he must go. There was much territory to be put between him and Detroit town before daybreak filtered through the storm. He left the house, traversed the path and by-road, and came again to the main road, continued southward on it until it dwindled to a thin Indian trace, skirted the river, abruptly left it to plunge westward through a forest, heading ever for the broad highway of the Maumee. He went as fast as his long legs would permit, holding nothing for reserve. The lantern guttered and was extinguished; with an oath of regret he threw it away and continued on. In his heart was a heaviness which he wistfully hoped not many men might be called upon to suffer. The very light of life itself grew more drab the farther he advanced upon the plain path of duty. He wondered why his own lot never seemed to correspond to the many tales of romantic love he had heard or read, where dawn was rose shot, and life seemed an unending bliss.

Westward the course of empire. The unbending, loyal fiber of such men as Richard Cheves made that empire possible. Lesser, weak-grained men could not have done the work. He plunged on through the rioting night. Though every instinct of private and personal desire might cry out in outraged feeling, he could not change his decision. The blood of Virginia held him fast. Eight hundred miles

south Clark waited, curbing his bold, impatient imagination until his messenger arrived.

Morning two days later found Cheves forging a steady way up the Maumee trail toward the portage. He did not fear being overtaken now, for he knew that only an Indian runner could keep a faster pace than the one he traveled and, since he came from the direction of Detroit and wore part British equipment, he had but little fear of any obstacle ahead. Thus he relaxed vigilance. The storm which had cloaked his escape from the British stronghold passed over, and now the wet woods steamed under the hot summer's sun.

Once, at noon, he stopped beside the river to eat. When he turned to leave again, he found himself confronted by the sudden apparition of a squad of savages advancing out of concealment. Boldly he adopted the ranger's front, threw up a hand in salutation, and waited. To enlighten them he shoved forward the British pistol and holster, with which he knew they were acquainted. They spoke in a tongue he could not understand but took to be Ottawa, since this was their country. He shook his head and tried French with futility. English was equally incomprehensible to them, and so he at last fell back upon the universal language of signs.

He was, he told them in this medium, from Detroit, going southward, and in very much of a hurry. Three gestures accomplished this much for him, hands forward and back, and a rapid moving of feet. The Big Knives were sending out war parties, and he hastened in advance to warn the lower forts. They nodded gravely, understanding much of this by implication. They also had scouts out and even now some of their chiefs were in Detroit with the white chiefs. A few ceremonious gestures, and they filed in behind him as he retook the path. For an hour they gave him company and then silently faded into the brush and were gone.

Evening brought him by an immense grove of water maple. The river shallowed up and formed a long sliding riffle which sent its wash of sound out through the surrounding territory. Through this Cheves threaded his way, going as long as there was a ray of daylight to guide him. He had come through a copse of hazel, making a horseshoe turn to go by a scarp of rock when, on looking ahead, he saw a tall bearded fellow advancing along the path. Throwing up a hand, the Virginian stopped. The amazing thing happened when the fellow got within ten yards. He had been staring at Cheves with earnest seeking on his face, and now the gaunt, black features broke into a huge smile. A cavernous mouth let out a whoop of joy.

"*Yeee-ipp!* Wal... Dick! Dog me, if it hain't himself! Whar in thunderation ye goin' now?"

All that Cheves, amazed, could see was a mass of whiskers and white teeth. When they got quite close, he caught the outline of the bold jaw, the steel-gray eyes, and the beak of a nose. An immediate shaft of warmth and security invaded him.

"Dan Fellows!" he cried in delight.

"Yup. What's left of him. Ain't she a hell of a country to get through?" His face darkened. "Whar's that rat, Parmenter, and his friend, Sartaine? They lit out beyint you, bent on mischief, so I jest took a chaw er baccy an' my gun an' got beyint them."

"Haven't seen Sartaine," replied Cheves. An idea struck him and left him with an expanding heart. He turned off the path and started toward the river. "We camp here."

Thereafter they were busy exchanging notes over the fire and the grub.

"Gosh a'mighty!" exclaimed Fellows in a rage when he heard of Parmenter's career in Detroit. The presence of the Ralston amazed him, and the whole tangle left him lowering with doubt and anger. "Ef I ever see Parmenter, I'm a-goin' to kill him, s' help me. A dad-burned rat! Sartaine, he prob'ly done for along the trail somewhar's. But the Ralstons! Whut in thunder air we a-goin' to do, Dick?"

"You're goin' to start back to Clark with my information," said Cheves. turnin' off now for the Saint Joseph's trail. "The Maumee parallels it right along here. I'd guess they were a day behind me, since I've been travelin' single and fast. It's a fifty-mile jump from this trail to that one. I ought to intercept them tomorrow night or the next day."

The gaunt-featured backwoodsman grew solemn. "Dick, she's a hell of a journey around Ouiatanon, an' I thought like I'd lose my hair by Vincennes. But I'll go! Whut's the larnin' I'm to take back?"

Cheves summarized it briefly, and bit by bit the sparkle returned to the elder man's eyes.

"You'll have to make a fast trip," warned Cheves. "If Clark is to come north, he'll be wanting to start before the snow flies. I'm comin' down the Mississippi with the Ralstons and without Parmenter."

Fellows's fist clenched across the fire. "Dick, don't ye take no chances," he insisted. "Shoot him like a copperhead. Don't you git any hifalutin notions about his honor. Birds don't have teeth, nuther do renegades have any Virginny spirit. I'm afeard you'll be a givin' him too much rope and fust thing he'll stab you in the back. You don't never take a hint from the tricks he's worked. Now you be foreminded and watch him close."

"I understand thoroughly," returned Cheves somberly. "Be sure you explain to Clark the reason I'm doin' this. Let's turn in now. There's hard work ahead."

Fellows sighed and shook his head, running a horny paw across the jet whiskers. "Wisht you'd let me go. Ain't never been a time but what you give him too much leeway. I'm dumned afeard." Sitting cross-legged before the fire, black and saturnine of visage, and brooding of eye, he appeared a harbinger of fate. He sighed again. "Damned Ouiatanon! Wisht they'd a-built it a hundred miles to one side of the Wabash. Took me a week to git around it. Thought I was nigh to losin' my hair, too."

The fire sank lower and the swish of the rifles lulled them to a wary sleep.

Chapter XII

Showdown.

THAT night, one hundred miles to the northeast, Colonel Henry Ralston gave up his life from physical exhaustion, and Parmenter's somber eyes seemed

flecked with sardonic amusement as tragedy stalked abroad for Katherine Ralston. Yet, being a thoroughbred woman, she closed her mouth tight down over the impulse to loose bitter tears and reined her horse—she rode the single plow horse that the Ralston place had boasted—to follow Parmenter and the two Frenchmen. They had buried her father in a crude, unsatisfactory way in the sandy soil of a creek bottom and weighted the grave down with rocks. This latter precaution had been the stubborn insistence of Pierre and François. Parmenter looked on and cursed them for the delay. Then it was the girl saw this man's real worth and turned away to shudder. Betwixt her and the menace of him was only the strength of the two servants. She wondered how long they would resist the cunning and trickery he displayed and, wondering, was lost in an abyss of misery. Better a thousand times imprisonment in Detroit than all the misfortune now upon them.

The trip through the storm had been a nightmare made increasingly terrible by the knowledge that her father gave up more of his small supply of vitality with each punishing step after Parmenter. And now the irony of it! With her father dead and buried, Parmenter had relaxed the pace.

"I think we can slow up a bit," he said, dropping beside her. "We're out of their track. Cheer up, my dear. Don't look so solemn. Your father was an old man. His time had come to die."

She kept her gaze straight ahead, not replying, not even wishing to notice him. Anger struggled through a dead load of grief.

"And don't pout," he added with a touch of petulance. "I'm goin' to get you out of a difficult situation. You should be grateful for that. I think, when we get to Saint Louis, you should show your appreciation in a more tangible form, my dear."

She blazed up at that, turning fairly toward him. "Danny, have you not enough courtesy to keep from calling me endearing names to which you have no right? Can't you ever be a gentleman? Must you always be using unfair means to make love?"

"Unfair?" He grew sullen on the instant. "You've never been anything but unfair to me, young lady! Didn't you play with me and then throw me over for that scoundrel, Cheves?"

"Stop! I'll not have you call him that! You don't even possess decency enough not to run a man down behind his back. I thought there never was a Virginia man who would do that."

"Don't use heroics on me. I won't stand for them. All that kind of sentiment is dead. Honor...decency! Pah! Those are just subterfuges you women nurse to keep a man off, until you want him. Don't try them on me."

"I wish," she said, very pale, "that Richard Cheves were here."

"That paragon of virtue! That sugar-mouthed, wooden-faced, lead soldier! You'll never see him again." Parmenter sneered with a short, contemptuous laugh. "He's one of these toadyin' general's pets and, so help me, I'll settle with him one of these days!"

The vitriolic passion in his voice startled Katherine. She squared about in the saddle, hoping that he might leave and go ahead. He had raised his voice to such a pitch that Pierre, marching fifty yards in advance, turned about and halted, a dogged expression on his face.

"Get ahead!" stormed Parmenter, swayed by his rage. "Who told you to drop back here?"

"I stay here eef I like, you unerstan'?" replied Pierre. "I don't take no talk from a fallow like you," he glowered.

Parmenter shifted a hand to his pistol. Something in the steady expression of the Frenchman halted that movement, and he finished by brushing past the man and striding along the trail.

"Pierre," breathed the girl, "stay by me."

"*Mais oui*, eef he use hees mout' too much, Pierre he weel close eet."

"I never knew," she said, more to herself than to her servant, "that he could be so violent."

"Hees eye, Pierre don' like. Dere's wan bad cast, like a wil' horse."

The trail to St. Joseph's was a thing to be hunted for and carefully kept, so thin and uncertain a trace did it make through the varied country of the lower peninsula. After leaving Detroit, they had passed a succession of hard wood groves. Now pine began to cover the ground and the trail twisted through multifold varieties of underbrush. They forded a stream shrunk the size of a creek—and here lost the way altogether.

Parmenter scouted ahead for the best part of a forenoon before finding the route, which did not help his surly disposition in the least. Once, the elder Frenchman, François, got in his path. The Virginian shoved him aside with a grunt of disgust. François hit the ground, and his wrinkled face puckered from the hurt of it. Pierre gave a shout and grabbed at his wrist. The sun glinted on the blade of his knife as he came by Parmenter's elbow.

"Don' make dat meestake no more," he growled. "You wan' t' fight, eh? Alors, anny time you say, den we fight."

Parmenter thrust a bloodshot glance at him and forged on. Pierre dropped back, shaking his head in manifest displeasure and sending a rapid volley of French at his partner.

The afternoon shimmered and danced under the September heat. The pace of the party slackened, each member suffering. Even the patient, slow-footed horse moved with difficulty, tongue hanging sidewise from its mouth. Pierre stalked directly ahead of Katherine, and François kept the middle ground between the young Frenchman and Parmenter. The latter's face had gone white. Obviously the man suffered in a physical way but still stronger was the goad of his temper, stinging him to fury. His initial hatred of Cheves was rendered the more intense by Katherine Ralston's contempt and Pierre's cool defiance.

Added to this was perhaps a fear that he made ill progress on the St. Joseph's trail. The signs of travel had faded into the forest carpet some distance back. He judged his way now solely by the width and accessibility of the terrain ahead. He had embarked upon this expedition with knowledge and confidence mostly assumed. Now he floundered and doubted. The rest of the party kept its own counsel and suffered in silence.

The sun fell over the horizon, and the cool of evening brought its sweet relief. They crossed a green bottom and came to a creek. Parmenter waded and kept his way. The Frenchman stopped to see that horse and rider got safely over. The

animal limped patiently to the water's edge and stopped to drink. Katherine felt its flanks quiver.

"Poor Ted," she said, "he's very tired. And so am I. Why can't we stop here for the night? Perhaps we'll not find water farther on."

Pierre nodded his head and thrust up a hand for her to dismount. Thus he took the management of the party on his own shoulders. François mumbled a word of warning, to which Pierre responded by a shrug and motioned for his partner to get firewood.

Parmenter threshed back through the brush and sent out a shout across the creek. "We don't stop here. There's another mile or better to go before dark. Come along."

"We stop w'en *ma'm'selle* ees tired, *m'sieu*," replied Pierre, all softness. "Eef you wan' to go anudder mile, *allez*." He spoke in a pleasant way yet, anticipating the coming storm, squared toward the Virginian and thrust both hands to his hips.

"Be careful, Pierre," warned the girl. She raised her voice. "If you don't mind, Danny, I'd like to stop here. I'm so tired."

"I don't want to stop," yelled Parmenter, "and I'll have no half-breed tellin' me what to do! Pick up the reins of that horse, put the girl back on, and come through," he ordered.

Pierre was pleasantly obstinate. He manipulated a shrug, without letting his hands stray far from the sheath-knife. "*Ma'm'selle* is ver' tired. We rest here."

"Will you do as I say?" roared Parmenter. The pistol came to his hand.

"Never mind, Pierre," said the girl. "I'll get back on." Pierre smiled and shook his head. His eyes never wavered from the pistol.

"We stay here, *m'sieu*," he repeated, and gathered his muscles.

The pistol came level with Parmenter's angry eyes. The Frenchman gave a prodigious leap aside and down as the report came and uttered a cry of pain. He had not been quick enough. The bullet caught him in the arm. He was up, next instant, leaping forward with the spring of an injured cat, fumbling for his knife with the left hand. Parmenter reversed his pistol and waited.

"Don't, Pierre!" cried the girl. "Don't!"

Pierre stumbled through the water, gathered himself, and sprang upon Parmenter. Katherine Ralston, looking fearfully on, saw the knife describe an arc and slash through the Virginian's tunic, saw, at the same time, the heavy pistol butt come down upon the Frenchman's head. The latter slid to the ground, leaving Parmenter above him, swaying and holding fast to a shoulder.

"The beggar slashed me," he said, then raised his head. "Now will you do as I say? Come on!" he snarled.

"No," said the girl, "I will not."

Parmenter, breathing heavily, glared at her for a full minute in a battle of wills then gave in. "All right," he yielded sullenly. He gave the prone figure a prod with his foot and recrossed the stream. "Get the wood," he ordered François.

Katherine Ralston went to the creek.

"Where you goin'?" queried Parmenter.

She refused to answer, waded the stream, and knelt beside Pierre. Parmenter sat apathetically on a log and watched her spill water on the unconscious man's face.

Presently Pierre stirred and sat up, got his bearings, and protested at her ministrations. "Eet's noddin'. *Ma'm'selle*, she should not bodder wit' me."

Despite her protests he struggled to his feet and returned across the stream. It distressed him to see her wading in the water after him, yet he did not dare to carry her over.

François nursed the fire, and Pierre made shift at supper with now and then a covert glance at Parmenter. It was plain to see that he put no trust in the other. But the Virginian scarcely stirred. The whole driving animus that rendered him active and dangerous had apparently evaporated, and he seemed only a dull, petty sort of figure, engrossed wholly in himself. A tinge of red colored one sleeve of his shirt; the knife wound was, from all appearances, only a scratch. When the time came to eat, the girl, out of the pure sympathy of her heart, motioned for him to get his share. Mechanically he obeyed. It put courage in her to see him thus, and she did dare to ask him a question that had long been troubling her.

"Danny, where are we now?" she queried.

"A little better than half way to Saint Joseph's," he replied. "And off the trail. I think we're too far south."

She had not the heart to ask more. A fresh feeling of despondency swept her. With all the misfortune of this ill- starred journey, the culminating catastrophe must come to break her small shoulders. It took the savor from the food she ate.

AT that moment Richard Cheves, guided by the pistol shot, had reached the creek at a lower point and was following it upstream. That shot was the first tangible result of a heartbreaking three-day journey. A bit later he turned a bend and caught the cheerful light of the fire. Here he crossed the stream, without noise, and threaded the trees.

Fifty yards off he stopped to forewarn himself. He saw, first of all, like a sinister beacon, the hunched form of Parmenter on the log; next, he caught alternate sight of the Frenchmen as they moved about the clearing looking for firewood. And, with a stirring heart that seemed recompense enough for the toil and privation he had undergone, he saw last the small, bowed figure of Katherine Ralston looking soberly into the flames. Though he searched all parts of the clearing, he did not find Colonel Ralston, and this troubled him. Well, time to go forward, time to put a full stop to his worries and their worries. He shifted his holster and advanced to the light.

Katherine saw him first. It was wonderful to note the way her face changed from shadow to sunlight.

"Dick!" she cried.

Parmenter sprang to his feet as though stung by a scorpion and reached for his gun. It was then too late. Cheves stood in front of him.

"Easy, Danny, just a moment. You and I'll square up in just a minute," he said. Then he turned to the girl and announced simply, "I came as fast as I could, as soon as I could, Katherine."

"I knew you would." Her face echoed her words.

"Where," he said, in that same sober, granite-like tone, "is your father?"

"Dead," she whispered. "It was too hard for him."

She saw his face clearly then, as he turned toward Danny Parmenter and the fire. It was thin and fatigued from hard traveling, with lines stamped upon it that do not belong to a man of twenty-eight. The hard frontier! It was not a life for soft men and, if frontier hearts were sometimes steeled beyond human compassion, it was because inexorable forces so tempered them. She pitied Danny Parmenter.

"Well," said Cheves, "are you ready now?"

"My gun is not loaded."

"I heard it a while back," Cheves acknowledged. "Load it."

His eyes did not leave Parmenter while the operation took place.

"All right, go in front of me, Danny, straight down the creek." He turned to Katherine. "One of us will be back in a moment."

Her heart constricted until it seemed on the verge of breaking. She thought to cry out and say—"Don't! Let well enough be!"—but she knew immediately that here was a man whose mind she could not change now. So she bowed her head, lest he might see the suffering on it, and clenched her hands.

She heard the brush crack under foot and the steady tramp of deliberate steps marching to duel, receding out of hearing until all was silent. The whole world stood on tiptoe, it seemed, waiting for the one event to take place. Pierre refueled the fire and, while still kneeling, crossed himself. She found herself counting.

The roar of a pistol shot rushed through the woods. She gave a small cry and immediately suppressed it. One shot! Only one shot! One man had not even a chance to fire! Pierre sprang up, all aquiver.

"By gar, I bet Parmenter he shoot biffor de time come! Dere ees wan cast in dose eye, like a wil' horse!"

Again she found herself counting and listening, wholly numb to all other thought and sensation.

The second shot!

Soon she heard the methodical tramp of a man's feet, growing louder and louder until he stood on the threshold of the clearing, until he had come by the fire, until he stood before her. With a supreme effort of will she forced up her head and found there the grave, lined face of Richard Cheves looking down at her with inexpressible hope and longing and sadness.

She gave a cry and was the next moment in his arms. The whole pent-up flood of emotion broke and swept her away. She was crying, crying as though her heart were about to break. Cheves held her, saying nothing at all but fully content just to hold her.

They skirted St. Joseph's and came to the navigable Illinois. Here Cheves boldly entered an Indian village and bartered for a canoe. With it they continued down the river in long stages until the broad Mississippi met them. They paddled ever southward and one fine day sighted an American flag over Kaskaskia. Clark was there to meet them, and after attending to the girl, took Cheves to his headquarters. Fellows had come through a week previously with the vital news, but Clark wanted the information first hand and Cheves told his story from beginning to end.

Clark's aggressive, stubborn face lit. "They will come south, then, Cheves?"

"Hamilton at the head of the party," Cheves nodded. "When will this be, do you think?"

"Between now and winter. There's but a small force in Detroit and they can't spare many men now."

"That's our opportunity!" Clark's fist smote the puncheon table. "Colonel Hamilton never will see Detroit again if he comes."

With the information Cheves had brought back from the British post, George Rogers Clark won the Northwest for a new and democratic nation. Hamilton and Dejean came south in the fall of that same year. Clark engaged them in the winter campaign across the Illinois drowned lands and took them both prisoners of war. The victory forever ended British dominion south of Detroit. Henceforth the whole broad sweep of that plain was American. The power of Detroit town had been broken by one audacious commander backed by the impatient and rugged men under him. Of that Northwestern victory Cheves performed the pioneer work that made the last great coup possible. As another result of Cheves's arduous undertaking, the Americans embarked on a system of rangers to combat the British. Throughout the Wabash land these solitary voyagers met and successfully coped with foreign representatives, stood before Indian camp fires, and told of a new authority in the land. The Long Knives—the Americans—had come to stay.

It was within the fort at Kaskaskia that Katherine Ralston and Richard Cheves were married.

"I can't leave this country," he told her. "It's a great empire. You and I have helped make it, and we've got to stay. There'll be thousands coming across the Alleghenies and down the Ohio to keep us company. Here I shall stake my claim."

"Where you go, there I shall be," she reminded him.

On the rich bottom land of the Illinois, fronting the Mississippi, they made their home.

