

Mercer's Best Shot

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

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

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

Standing there, he seemed to fit into the wilderness, to share its colors and become its own; the strength of his figure, the look of content in his eyes, like that of a wild beast that has found a lair to suit him, made him part of it. His dress, too, matched the flush of color around him; the fur cap upon his head had been dyed the green of the grass; the darker green of the oak-leaves was the tint of his hunting-shirt of tanned buckskin with the long fringe hanging almost to his knees, and of the leggings of the same material which rose above his moccasins of buffalo-hide. But the moccasins and the seams of the leggings were adorned with countless little Indian beads of red and blue and yellow, giving dashes of new colors to the green of his dress, just as the wild flowers and the peach-blossoms and the silver and gold of the brook varied the dominant green note of the forest. A careless eye would have passed over him, his figure making no outline against the wall of forest behind him. It was the effect that he sought, to pass through the wood and canebrake and across green open, affording slight mark for the eye, for he knew that all alike were infested by a foe perhaps no wilder than himself.

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

Far off a range of hills showed a faint blue tracery against the sky of deeper blue. At their foot was a band of silver, the Kentucky, the river to which the brook that plashed before him was hurrying. Everywhere the grass grew rich and rank, showing the depth and quality of the soil beneath. A hundred yards away a buffalo grazed as peacefully as if man had never come, and farther on a herd of deer raised their heads to sniff the southern wind.

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

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

The water touched his lips, and was cool and pleasant. He had come far and was thirsty. He blew the bubbles back and drank, not eagerly nor in a hurry, but sipping it gently, as a connoisseur tastes rare old wine. Then he raised his head a

little and looked at his shadow in the water, as perfect as if a mirror gave back his face—eyes, nose, mouth, each feature shown. He bent his head, sipping the water a little more: raising it again, he saw a shadow that appeared beside his own.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

