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The Free Rangers

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CHAPTER I. THE CALL

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The wilderness rolled away to north and to south, and also it rolled away to east and to west, an unbroken sweep of dark, glossy green. Straight up stood the mighty trunks, but the leaves rippled and sang low when a gentle south wind breathed upon them. It was the forest as God made it, the magnificent valley of North America, upon whose edges the white man had just begun to nibble.

A young man, stepping lightly, came into a little glade. He was white, but he brought with him no alien air. He was in full harmony with the primeval Woods, a part of them, one in whose ears the soft song of the leaves was a familiar and loved tune. He was lean, but tall, and he walked with a wonderful swinging gait that betokened a frame wrought to the strength of steel by exercise, and, weather, and life always in the open. Though his face was browned by sun and storm his hair was yellow and his eyes blue. He was dressed wholly in deerskin and he carried over his shoulder the long slender rifle of the border. At his belt swung hatchet and knife.

There was a touch to the young man that separated him from the ordinary woods rover. He held himself erect with a certain pride of manner. The stock of his rifle, an unusually fine piece, was carved in an ornate and beautiful way. The deerskin of his attire had been tanned with uncommon care, and his moccasins were sewn thickly with little beads of yellow and blue and red and green. Every piece of clothing was scrupulously clean, and his arms were polished and bright.

The shiftless one-who so little deserved his name-paused a moment in the glade and, dropping the stock of his rifle to the ground, leaned upon the muzzle. He listened, although he expected to hear nothing save the song of the leaves, and that alone he heard. A faint smile passed over the face of Shif'less Sol. He was satisfied. All was happening as he had planned. Then he swung the rifle back to his shoulder, and walked to the crest of a hill near by.

The summit was bare and the shiftless one saw far. It was a splendid rolling country, covered with forests of oak and elm, beech, hickory and maple. Here and there faint threads of silver showed where rivers or brooks flowed, and he drew a long deep breath. The measure of line and verse he knew not, but deep in his being Nature had kindled the true fire of poetry, and now his pleasure was so keen and sharp that a throb of emotion stirred in his throat. It was a grand country and, if reserved for any one, it must be reserved for his race and his people. Shif'less Sol was resolved upon that purpose and to it he was ready to devote body and life.

Yet the wilderness seemed to tell only of peace. The low song of the leaves was soothing and all innocence. The shiftless one was far beyond the farthest outpost of his kind, beyond the broad yellow current of the Mississippi, deep in the heart of the primeval forest. He might travel full three hundred miles to the eastward and find no white cabin, while to westward his own kind were almost a world away. On all sides stretched the vast maze of forest and river, through which roamed only wild animals and wilder man.

Shif'less Sol, from his post on the hill, examined the whole circle of the forest long and carefully. He seemed

intent upon some unusual object. It was shown in the concentration of his look and the thoughtful pucker of his forehead. It was not game, because in a glade to windward at the foot of the hill, five buffaloes grazed undisturbed and now and then uttered short, panting grunts to show their satisfaction. Presently a splendid stag, walking through the woods as if he were sole proprietor, scented the strange human odor, and threw up his head in alarm. But the figure on the hill, the like of which the deer had never seen before, did not stir or take notice, and His Lordship the Stag raised his head higher to see. The figure still did not stir, and, his alarm dying, the stag walked disdainfully away among the trees.

Birds, the scarlet tanager, the blue bird, the cat bird, the jay and others of their kin settled on the trees near the young man with the yellow hair, and gazed at him with curiosity and without fear. A rabbit peeped up now and then, but beyond the new presence the wilderness was undisturbed, and it became obvious to the animal tribe that the stranger meant no harm. Nor did the shiftless one himself discern any alien note. The sky, a solid curve of blue, bore nowhere a trace of smoke. It was undarkened and unstained, the same lonely brightness that had dawned every morning for untold thousands of years.

Shif'less Sol showed no disappointment. Again all seemed to be happening as he wished. Presently he left the hill and, face toward the south, began to walk swiftly and silently down the rows of trees. There was but little undergrowth, nothing to check his speed, and he strode on and on. After a while he came to a brook running through

low soft soil and then he did a strange thing, the very act that a white man travelling through the dangerous forest would have avoided. He planted one foot in the yielding soil near the water's edge, and then stepping across, planted the other in exactly the same way on the far side.

When another yard brought him to hard ground he stopped and looked back with satisfaction. On either side of the brook remained the firm deep impression of a human foot, of a white foot, the toes being turned outward. No wilderness rover could mistake it, and yet it was hundreds of miles to the nearest settlement of Shif'less Sol's kind.

He took another look at the footsteps, smiled again and resumed his journey. The character of the country did not change. Still the low rolling hills, still the splendid forests of oak and elm, beech, maple and hickory, and of all their noble kin, still the little brooks of clear water, still the deer and the buffalo, grazing in the glades, and taking but little notice of the strange human figure as it passed. Presently, the shiftless one stopped again and he did another thing, yet stranger than the pressing-in of the foot-prints beside the little stream. He drew the hatchet from his belt and cut a chip out of the bark of a hickory. A hundred yards further on he did the same thing, and, at three hundred yards or so, he cut the chip for the third time. He looked well at the marks, saw that they were clear, distinct and unmistakable, and then the peculiar little smile of satisfaction would pass again over his face.

But these stops were only momentary. Save for them he never ceased his rapid course, and always it led straight toward the south. When the sun was squarely overhead,

pouring down a flood of golden beams, he paused in the shade of a mighty oak, and took food from his belt. He might have eaten there in silence and obscurity, but once more the shiftless one showed a singular lack of caution and woodcraft. He drew together dry sticks, ignited a fire with flint and steel, and cooked deer meat over it. He let the fire burn high, and a thin column of dark smoke rose—far up into the blue. Any savage, roaming the wilderness, might see it, but the shiftless one was reckless. He let the fire burn on, after his food was cooked, while the column of smoke grew thicker and mounted higher, and ate the savory steaks, lying comfortably between two upthrust roots. Now and then he uttered a little sigh of satisfaction, because he had travelled far and hard, and he was hungry. Food meant new strength.

But he was not as reckless as he seemed. Nothing that passed in the forest within the range of eyesight escaped his notice. He heard the leaf, when it fell close by, and the light tread of a deer passing. He remained a full hour between the roots, a long time for one who might have a purpose, and, after he rose, he did not scatter the fire and trample upon the brands after the wilderness custom when one was ready to depart. The flames had died down, but he let the coals smoulder on, and, hundreds of yards away, he could still see their smoke. Now, he sought the softest parts of the earth and trod there deliberately, leaving many footprints. Again he cut little chips from the trees as he passed, but never ceased his swift and silent journey to the south. The hours fled by, and a dark shade appeared in the east. It deepened into dusk, and spread steadily toward the

zenith. The sun, a golden ball, sank behind a hill in the west, and then the shiftless one stopped.

He ascended a low hill again, and took a long scrutinizing look around the whole horizon. But his gaze was not apprehensive. On the contrary, it was expectant, and his face seemed to show a slight disappointment when the wilderness merely presented its wonted aspect. Then he built another fire, not choosing a secluded glade, but the top of the hill, the most exposed spot that he could find, and, after he had eaten his supper, he sat beside it, the expectant air still on his face.

Nothing came. But the shiftless one sat long. He raked up dead leaves of last year's winter and made a pillow, against which he reclined luxuriously. Shiftless Sol was one who drew mental and physical comfort from every favoring circumstance, and the leaves felt very soft to his head and shoulders. He was not in the least lonesome, although the night had fully come, and heavy darkness lay like a black robe over the forest. He stretched out his moccasined toes to the fire, closed his eyes for a moment or two, and a dreamy look of satisfaction rested on his face. It seemed to the shiftless one that he lay in the very lap of luxury, in the very best of worlds.

But when he opened his eyes again he continued to watch the forest, or rather he watched with his ears now, as he lay close to the earth, and his hearing, at all times, was so acute that it seemed to border on instinct or divination. But no sound save the usual ones of the forest and the night came to him, and he remained quite still, thinking.

Shif'less Sol Hyde was in an exalted mood, and the flickering firelight showed a face refined and ennobled by a great purpose. Leading a life that made him think little of hardship and danger he thought nothing at all of them now, but he felt instead a great buoyancy, and a hope equally great.

He lay awake a full three hours after the dark had come, and he rose only twice from his reclining position, each time merely to replenish the fire which remained a red core in the circling blackness. Always he was listening and always he heard nothing but the usual sounds of the forest and the night. The darkness grew denser and heavier, but after a while it began to thin and lighten. The sky became clear, and the great stars swam in the dusky blue. Then Shif'less Sol fell asleep, head on the leaves, feet to the fire, and slept soundly all through the night.

He was up at dawn, cooked his breakfast, and then, after another long and searching examination of the surrounding forest, departed, leaving the coals of the fire to smoulder, and tell as they might that some one had passed. Shif'less Sol throughout that morning repeated the tactics of the preceding day, leaving footprints that would last, and cutting pieces of bark from the trees with his sharp hatchet. At the noon hour he stopped, according to custom, and, just when he had lighted his fire, he uttered a low cry of pleasure.

The shiftless one was gazing back upon his own trail, and the singular look of exaltation upon his face deepened. He rose to his feet and stood, very erect, in the attitude of one

who welcomes. No undergrowth was here, and he could see far down the aisles of trunks.

A figure, so distant that only a keen eye would notice it, was approaching. It came on swiftly and silently, much after the manner of the shiftless one himself, elastic, and instinct with strength.

The figure was that of a boy in years, but of a man in size, surpassing Shif'less Sol himself in height, yellow haired, blue-eyed, and dressed, too, in the neatest of forest garb. His whole appearance was uncommon, likely anywhere to attract attention and admiration. The shiftless one drew a long breath of mingled welcome and approval.

"I knew that he would be first," he murmured.

Then he sat down and began to broil a juicy deer steak on the end of a sharpened stick.

Henry Ware came into the little glade. He had seen the fire afar and he knew who waited. All was plain to him like the print of a book, and, without a word, he dropped down on the other side of the fire facing Shif'less Sol. The two nodded, but their eyes spoke far more. Sol held out the steak, now crisp and brown and full of savor, and Henry began to eat. Sol quickly broiled another for himself, and joined him in the pleasant task, over which they were silent for a little while.

"I was on the Ohio," said Henry at last, "when the trapper brought me your message, but I started at once."

"O' course," said Shif'less Sol, "I never doubted it for a minute. I reckon that you've come about seven hundred miles."

"Nearer eight," said Henry, "but I'm fresh and strong, and we need all our strength, Sol, because it's a great task that lies before us."

"It shorely is," said Sol, "an' that's why I sent the message. I don't want to brag, Henry, but we've done a big thing or two before, an' maybe we kin do a bigger now."

He spoke the dialect of the border, he was not a man of books, but that great look of exaltation came into his face again, and the boy on the other side of the fire shared it.

"It seems to me, Sol," said Henry presently, "that we've been selected for work of a certain kind. We finish one job, and then another on the same line begins."

"Mebbe it's because we like to do it, an' are fit fur it," said Sol philosophically. "I've noticed that a river genially runs in a bed that suits it. I don't know whether the bed is thar because the river is, or the river is thar 'cause the bed is, but it's shore that they're both thar together, an' you can't git around that."

"There's something in what you say," said Henry.

Then they relapsed into silence, and, in a half hour, as if by mutual consent, they rose, left the fire burning, and departed, still walking steadily toward the south.

The country grew rougher. The hills were higher and closer together, and the undergrowth became thick. Neither took any precautions as they passed among the slender bushes, frequently trampling them down and leaving signs that the blindest could not fail to see. Now and then the two looked back but they beheld only the forest and the forest people.

"I don't think I ever saw the game so tame before," said Henry. "Which means," said Sol, "that the warriors ain't hunted here fur a long time. I ain't seen a single sign o' them."

"Nor I."

They fell silent and scarcely spoke until the sun was setting again, when they stopped for the night, choosing a conspicuous place, as Sol had done the evening before. After supper, they sought soft places on the turf, and lay in peace, gazing up at the great stars. Henry was the first to break the silence.

"One is coming," he said. "I can hear the footstep. Listen!"

His ear was to the earth, and the shiftless one imitated him. At The end of a minute he spoke.

"Yes," he said, "I hear him, too. We'll make him welcome."

He rose, put a fresh piece of wood on the fire, and smiled, as he saw the flame leap up and crackle merrily.

"Here he is," said Henry.

The figure that emerged from the bushes was thick-set and powerful, the strong face seamed and tanned by the wind, rain and sun of years. The man stepped into the circle of the firelight, and held out his hand. Each shook it with a firm and hearty clasp, and Tom Ross took his seat with them beside the fire. They handed him food first, and then he said:

"I was away up in the Miami country, huntin' buffalo, when the word came to me, Sol, but I quit on the minute an' started."

"I was shore you would," said the shiftless one quietly. "Buffaloes are big game, but we're huntin' bigger now."

"I was never in this part of the country before," said Tom Ross, looking around curiously at the ghostly tree trunks.

"I've been through here," said Henry, "and it runs on in the same way for hundreds of miles in every direction."

"Bigger an' finer than any o' them old empires that Paul used to tell us about," said Shif'less Sol.

"Yes," said Henry.

The three looked at one another significantly. They wrapped themselves in their blankets by and by, and went to sleep on the soft turf. Henry was the first to awake, just when the dawn was turning from pink to red, and a single glance revealed to him an object on the horizon that had riot been there the night before. A man stood on the crest of a low hill, and even at the distance, Henry recognized him. His comrades were awaking and he turned to them.

"See!" he said, pointing with a long forefinger.

Their eyes followed, and they too recognized the man.

"He'll be here in a minute," said Shif'less Sol. "He jest eats up space."

He spoke the truth, as it seemed scarcely a minute before Long Jim Hart entered the camp, showing no sign of fatigue. The three welcomed him and gave him a place at their breakfast fire.

"I wuz at Marlowe," he said, "when the word reached me, but I started just an hour later. I struck your trail, Sol, two days back, an' I traveled nearly all last night. I saw Henry join you an' then Tom."

Shif'less Sol laughed. He had a soft, mellow laugh that crinkled up the corners of his mouth, and made his eyes shine. There was no doubt that a man who laughed such a laugh was enjoying himself.

"I reckon you didn't have much trouble follerin' that trail o' ourn," he said.

Jim Hart answered the laugh with a grin.

"Not much," he replied. "It was like a wagon road through the wilderness. The ashes uv your last camp fire weren't sca'cely cold when I passed by."

"We're all here 'cept the fifth feller," said Tom Ross.

"The fifth will come," said Henry emphatically.

"Uv course," said Tom Ross with equal emphasis.

"And when he comes," said Shif'less Sol, "we take right hold o' the big job."

They lingered awhile over their breakfast, but saw no one approaching. Then they took up the march again, going steadily southward in single file, talking little, but leaving a distinct trail. They were only four, but they were a formidable party, all strong of arm, keen of eye and ear, skilled in the lore of the forest, and every one bore the best weapons that the time could furnish.

Toward noon the day grew very warm and clouds gathered in the sky. The wind became damp.

"Rain," said Henry. "I'm sorry of that. I wish it wouldn't break before he overtook us."

"S'pose we stop an make ready," said Shif'less Sol. "You know we ain't bound to be in a big hurry, an' it won't help any o' us to get a soakin'."

"You're shorely right, Sol," said Jim Hart. "We're bound to take the best uv care uv ourselves."

They looked around with expert eyes, and quickly chose a stony outcrop or hollow in the side of a hill, just above which grew two gigantic beeches very close together. Then it was wonderful to see them work, so swift and skillful were they. They cut small saplings with their hatchets, and, with the little poles and fallen bark of last year, made a rude thatch which helped out the thick branches of the beeches overhead. They also built up the sides of the hollow with the same materials, and the whole was done in less than ten minutes. Then they raked in heaps of dead leaves and sat down upon them comfortably.

Many drops of water would come through the leaves and thatch, but such as they, hardened to the wilderness, would not notice them. Meanwhile the storm was gathering with the rapidity so frequent in the great valley. All the little clouds swung together and made a big one that covered nearly the whole sky. The air darkened rapidly. Thunder began to growl and mutter and now and then emitted a sharp crash. Lightning cut the heavens from zenith to horizon, and the forest would leap into the light, standing there a moment, vivid, like tracery.

A blaze more brilliant than all the rest cleft wide the sky and, as they looked toward the North, they saw directly in the middle of the flame a black dot that had not been there before.

"He's coming," said Henry in the quiet tone that indicated nothing more than a certainty, fulfilled.

"Just in time to take a seat in our house," said the shiftless one.

Sol ran out and gave utterance to a long echoing cry that sounded like a call. It was answered at once by the new black dot under the Northern horizon, which was now growing fast in size, as it came on rapidly. It took a human shape, and, thirty yards away, a fine, delicately-chiselled face, the face of a scholar and dreamer, remarkable in the wildernesses, was revealed. The face belonged to a youth, tall and strong, but not so tall and large as Henry.

"Here we are, Paul," said Shif'less Sol. "We've fixed fur you."

"And mighty glad I am to overtake you fellows, said Paul Cotter, "particularly at this time."

He ran for the shelter just as the forest began to moan, and great drops of rain rushed down upon them. He was inside in a moment, and each gave his hand a firm grasp.

"We're all here now," said Henry.

"All here and ready for the great work," said Shif'less Sol, his tranquil face illumined again with that look of supreme exaltation.

Then the storm burst. The skies opened and dropped down floods of water. They heard it beating on the leaves and thatch overhead, and some came through, falling upon them but they paid no heed. They sat placidly until the rush and roar passed, and then Henry said to the others:

"We're to stick to the task that we've set ourselves through thick and through thin, through everything?"

"Yes! Yes!"

"If one falls, the four that are left keep on?"

"Yes! Yes!"

"If three fail and only two are left, these must not flinch."

"Yes! Yes!"

"If four go down and only one is left, then he whoever he may be, must go on and win alone?"

"Yes! Yes!" came forth with deep emphasis.

CHAPTER II. A FOREST ENVOY

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A group of men were seated in a pleasant valley, where the golden beams of the sun sifted in myriads through the green leaves.

They were about fifty in number and all were white. Most of them were dressed in Old World fashion, doublets, knee breeches, hose, and cocked hats. Nearly all were dark; olive faces, black hair, and black pointed beards, but now and then one had fair hair, and eyes of a cold, pale blue. Manner, speech, looks, and dress, alike differentiated them from the borderers. They were not the kind of men whom one would expect to find in these lonely woods in the heart of North America.

The leader of the company—and obviously he was such—was one of the few who belonged to the blonde type. His eyes were of the chilly, metallic blue, and his hair, long and fair, curled at the ends. His dress, of some fine, black cloth, was scrupulously neat and clean, and a silver-hilted small sword swung at his belt. He was not more than thirty.

The fair man was leaning lazily but gracefully against the trunk of a tree, and he talked in a manner that seemed indolent and careless, but which was neither to a youth in buckskins who sat opposite him, a striking contrast in appearance. This youth was undeniably of the Anglo-Saxon type, large and wellbuilt, with a broad, full forehead, but with eyes set too close together. He was tanned almost to the darkness of an Indian.

"You tell me, Senior Wyatt," said Don Francisco Alvarez, the leader of the Spanish band, that the new settlers in Kaintock* have twice driven off the allied tribes, and that, if they are left alone another year or two, they will go down so deep in the soil that they can never be uprooted. Is it not so?"

[*An early French and Spanish name for Kentucky.]

"It is so," replied Braxton Wyatt, the renegade. The tribes have failed twice in a great effort. Every man among these settlers is, a daring and skillful fighter, and many of the boys -and many of the women, too. But if white troops and cannon are sent against them their forts must fall."

The Spaniard was idly whipping the grass stems with a little switch. Now he narrowed his metallic, blue eyes, and gazed directly into those of Braxton Wyatt.

"And you, Senior Wyatt?" he said, speaking his slow, precise English. "Nothing premeditated is done without a motive. You are of these people who live in Kaintock, their blood is your blood; why then do you wish to have them destroyed?"

A deep flush broke its way through the brown tan on the face of Braxton Wyatt, and his eyes fell before the cold gaze of the Spaniard. But he raised them again in a moment. Braxton Wyatt was not a coward, and he never permitted a guilty conscience to bother him.

"I did belong to them," he replied, "but my tastes led me away. I have felt that all this mighty valley should belong to the Indians who have inhabited it so long, but, if the white people come, it should be those who are true and loyal to their kings, not these rebels of the colonies."

Francisco Alvarez smiled cynically, and once more surveyed Braxton Wyatt, with a rapid, measuring glance.

"You speak my sentiments, Senior Wyatt," he said, "and you speak them in a language that I scarcely expected."

"I had a schoolmaster even in the wilderness," said Braxton Wyatt. "And I may tell you, too, as proof of my faith that I would be hanged at once should I return to the settlements."

"I do not doubt your faith. I was merely curious about your motives. I am sure also that you can be of great help to us." He spoke in a patronizing manner, and Braxton Wyatt moved slightly in anger, but restrained his speech.

"I may say," continued the Spaniard, "that His Excellency Bernardo Galvez, His Most Catholic Majesty's Governor of his loyal province of Louisiana, has been stirred by the word that comes to him of these new settlements of the rebel Americans in the land of the Ohio: The province of Louisiana is vast, and it may be that it includes the country on either side of the Ohio. The French, our predecessors, claimed it, and now that all the colonists east of the mountains are busy fighting their king, it may be easy to take it from them, as one would snip off a skirt with a pair of scissors. That is why I and this faithful band are so far north in these woods."

Braxton Wyatt nodded.

"And a wise thing, too," he said. "I am strong with the tribes. The great chief, Yellow Panther, of the Miamis and the great chief, Red Eagle, of the Shawnees are both my friends. I know how they feel. The Spanish in New Orleans are far away. Their settlements do not spread. They come rather to hunt and trade. But the Americans push farther and farther.

They build their homes and they never go back. Do you wonder then that the warriors wish your help?"

Francisco Alvarez smiled again. It was a cold but satisfied smile and he rubbed one white hand over the other.

"Your logic is good," he said, "and these reasons have occurred to me, also, but my master, Bernardo Galvez, the Governor, is troubled. We love not England and there is a party among us -a party at present in power -which wishes to help the Americans in order that we may damage England, but I, if I could choose the way would have no part in it. As surely as we help the rebels we will also create rebels against ourselves."

"You are far from New Orleans," said Braxton Wyatt, "It would take long for a messenger to go and come, and meanwhile you could act as you think best."

"It is so," said the Spaniard. "Our presence here is unknown to all save the chiefs and yourself. In this wilderness, a thousand miles from his superior, one must act according to his judgment, and I should like to see these rebel settlements crushed."

He spoke to himself rather than to Wyatt, and again his eyes narrowed. Blue eyes are generally warm and sympathetic, but his were of the cold, metallic shade that can express cruelty so well. He plucked, too, at his short, light beard, and Braxton Wyatt read his thoughts. The renegade felt a thrill of satisfaction. Here was a man who could be useful.

"How far is it from this place to the land of the Miamis and the Shawnees?" asked Alvarez.

"It must be six or seven hundred miles, but bands of both tribes are now hunting much farther west. One Shawnee party that I know of is even now west of the Mississippi."

Francisco Alvarez frowned slightly.

"It is a huge country," he said. " These great distances, annoy me. Still, one must travel them. Ah, what is it now?"

He was looking at Braxton Wyatt, as he spoke, and he saw a sudden change appear upon his face, a look of recognition and then of mingled hate and rage. The renegade was staring Northward, and the eyes of Alvarez followed his.

The Spaniard saw a man or rather a youth approaching, a straight, slender, but tall and compact figure, and a face uncommon in the wilderness, fine, delicate, with the eyes of a dreamer, and seer, but never weak. The youth came on steadily, straight toward the Spanish camp.

"Paul Cotter!" exclaimed Braxton Wyatt. "How under the sun did he come here!"

"Some one you know?" said Alvarez who heard the words.

"Yes, from the settlements of which we speak," replied Wyatt quickly and in a low tone. He had no time to add more, because Paul was now in the Spanish camp, and was gravely saluting the leader, whom he had recognized instantly to be such by his dress and manner. Francisco Alvarez rose to his feet, and politely returned the salute. He saw at once a quality in the stranger that was not wholly of the wilderness. Braxton Wyatt nodded, but Paul took no notice whatever of him. A flush broke again through the tan of the renegade's face.

"Be seated," said Alvarez, and Paul sat down on a little grassy knoll.

"You are Captain Francisco Alvarez of the Spanish forces at New Orleans?"

"You have me truly," replied the Spaniard smiling and shrugging his shoulders, "although I cannot surmise how you became aware of my presence here. But the domains of my master, the king, extend far, and his servants must travel far, also, to do his will."

Paul understood the implication in his words, but he, too, had the gift of language and diplomacy, and he did not reply to it. Stirred by deep curiosity, the Spanish soldiers were gathering a little nearer, but Alvarez waved back all but Wyatt.

"I am glad to find you here, Captain Alvarez," said Paul with a gravity beyond his years; indeed, as he spoke, his face was lighted up by that same singular look of exaltation that had passed more than once over the face of the shiftless one. "And I am glad because I have come for a reason, one of the greatest of all reasons. I want to say something, not for myself, but for others."

"Ah, an ambassador, I see," said Francisco Alvarez with a light touch of irony.

But Paul took no notice of the satire. He was far too much in earnest, and he resumed in tones impressive in their solemnity:

"I am from one of the little white villages in the Kentucky woods far to the eastward. There we have fought the wilderness and twice we have driven back strong forces of

the allied tribes, although they came with great resolution and were helped moreover by treachery."

Braxton Wyatt moved angrily and was about to speak, but Paul, never glancing in his direction, went on steadily:

"These settlements cannot be uprooted now. They may be damaged. They may be made to suffer great loss and grief, but the vanguard of our people will never turn back. Neither warrior nor king can withstand it."

Now Paul's look was wholly that of the prophet.

As he said the last words, "neither warrior nor king can withstand it," his face was transfigured. He did not see the Spaniard before him, nor Braxton Wyatt, the renegade, nor the surrounding woods, but he saw instead great states and mighty cities.

The Spaniard, despite his displeasure, was impressed by the words of the youth, but he took hold of himself bodily, as it were, and shook off the spell. A challenging light sprang into his cold blue eyes.

"I do not know so much about warriors," he said, "but kings may be and are able to do what they will. If my master should choose to, put forth his strength, even to send his far-extended arm into these woods, to what would your tiny settlements amount? A pinch of sand before a puff of wind. Whiff! You are gone. Nor could your people east of the mountains help you, because they, on bended knee, will soon be receiving their own lesson from the King of England."

Francisco Alvarez snapped his fingers, as if Paul and his people were annihilated by a single derisive gesture. Paul reddened and a dangerous flash came into his eyes. But the

natural diplomatist in him took control, and he replied with the utmost calmness:

"It may be so, but it is not a question that should arise. The King of Spain is at peace with us. We even hear, deep in the woods as we are, that he may take our part against England. France already is helping us. So I have come to ask you to take no share in plots against us, not to listen to evil counsels, and not to turn ear to traitors, who, having been traitors to one people, can readily be traitors to another."

Braxton Wyatt leaped to his feet, his face blazing with wrath, and his hand flew to the hilt of the knife at his belt.

"Now this is more than I will stand!" he exclaimed, "you cannot ignore me, Paul Cotter, until such time you choose, and then call me foul names!"

The Spaniard smiled. The sight of Braxton Wyatt's wrath pleased him, but he put out his hand in a detaining gesture.

"Sit down!" he said in -a tone so sharp that Wyatt obeyed. "This is no time for personal quarrels. As I see it, an embassy has come to us and we must discuss matters of state. Is it not so, Senior, Senior..."

"Cotter! Paul Cotter is my name."

Paul felt the sneer in the Spaniard's last words, but he hid his resentment.

"Then your proposition is this," continued Alvarez, "that I and my men have nothing to do with the Indians, that we make no treaty, no agreement with them, that we abandon this country and go back to New Orleans. This you propose despite the fact that the region in which we now are belongs to Spain."

"I would not put it in quite that fashion," replied Paul calmly. "I suggest instead that you be our friend. It is natural for the white races to stand together. I suggest that you send away, also, the messenger of the tribes who comes seeking your help to slaughter women and children."

Braxton Wyatt half rose, but again he was put down by the restraining gesture of Francisco Alvarez.

"No personal quarrels, as I stated before," said the Spaniard, "but to you, Senior Cotter, I wish to say that I have heard your words, but it seems to me they are without weight. I do not agree with you that the settlements of the Americans cannot be uprooted. Nor am I sure that your title to Kaintock is good. It was claimed in the beginning by France, and justly, but a great war gave it by might though not by right to England. Now Spain has succeeded to France. Here, throughout all this vast region, there is none to dispute her title. To the east of the Mississippi great changes are going on, and it may be that Kaintock, also, will revert to my master, the king."

He waved his hand in a gesture of finality, and a look of satisfaction came into Braxton Wyatt's eyes. The renegade glanced triumphantly at Paul, but Paul's face remained calm.

"You would not proceed to any act of hostility in conjunction with the tribes, when Spain and the colonies are at peace?" said Paul to the Spaniard.

Francisco Alvarez frowned, and assumed a haughty look.

"I make neither promises nor prophecies," he said.

"I have spoken courteously to you, Senior Cotter, although you are a trespasser on the Spanish domain. I have given you the hospitality of our camp, but I cannot

answer questions pertaining to the policy of my government."

Paul, for the first time, showed asperity. He, too, drew himself up with a degree of haughtiness, and he looked Don Francisco Alvarez squarely in the eyes, as he replied:

"I did not come here to ask questions. I came merely to say that our nations are at peace, and to urge you not to help savages in a war upon white people."

"I do not approve of rebels," said Alvarez.

Paul was silent. He felt instinctively that his mission had failed. Something cold and cruel about the Spaniard repelled him, and he believed, too, that Braxton Wyatt had not been without a sinister influence.

Alvarez arose and walked over to his camp-fire. Braxton Wyatt followed him and whispered rapidly to the Spaniard. Paul, persistent and always hopeful, was putting down his anger and trying to think of other effective words that he might use. But none would come into his head, and he, too, rose.

"I am sorry that we cannot agree, Captain Alvarez," he said with the grave courtesy that became him so well, "and therefore I will bid you, good day."

A thin smile passed over the face of the Spaniard, and the blue eyes shed a momentary, metallic gleam.

"I pray you not to be in haste, Senior Cotter," he said. "Be our guest for a while."

"I must go," replied Paul, "although I thank you for the courtesy."

"But, we cannot part with you now," said the Spaniard, "you are on Spanish soil. Others of you kind may be near,

also, and you and they have come uninvited. I would know more about it."

"You mean that you will detain me?" said Paul in surprise.

The Spaniard delicately stroked his pointed beard, "Perhaps that is the word," he replied. "As I said, you have trespassed upon our domain, and must hold you, for a time, at least. I know not what plot is afoot."

"As a prisoner?"

"If you wish to call it so."

"And yet there is no war between your country and mine!"

The Spaniard delicately stroked his pointed beard again.

Paul looked at him accusingly, and Francisco Alvarez unable to sustain his straight gaze, turned his eyes aside. But Braxton Wyatt's face was full of triumph, although he kept silent. Paul thought rapidly. It seemed to him a traitorous design and he did not doubt that Wyatt had instigated it, but he must submit at present. He was powerless inside a ring of fifty soldiers. Without a word, he sat down again on the little grassy knoll and it pleased Alvarez to affect a great politeness, and to play with his prisoner as a cat with a mouse. He insisted that he eat and he made his men bring him the tenderest of food, deer meat and wild turkey, and fish, freshly caught. Finally he opened a flask and poured wine in a small silver cup.

"It is the wine of Xeres, Senior Cotter," he said, "and you can judge how precious it is, as it must be a full five thousand miles from- its birthplace."

He handed the little cup in grandiose manner to Paul, and Paul, meeting his humor, accepted it in like fashion. He had

not tasted wine often in his life and he found it a strong fluid, but, in this crisis, it strengthened him and put a new sparkle in his blood.

"Thanks," he said as he politely returned the empty cup, and resumed his seat on the knoll. Then Alvarez walked aside, and talked again in whispers with the renegade.

Wyatt urged that Paul be held indefinitely. He would not talk at first, but they must get from him the fullest details about the settlements in Kentucky, the weak points, where to attack and when. If the settlements were left alone they would certainly spread all over Kentucky and in time across the Mississippi into the Spanish domain. Spain was far away, and she could not drive them back. But the Spaniards could urge on the tribes again, and with a hidden hand, send them arms and ammunition. White men with cannon could even join the warriors, and Spain might convincingly say that she knew nothing of it.

The words of the renegade pleased Francisco Alvarez. Deep down in his crafty heart he loved intrigue and cunning.

"Yes, we'll hold him," he said. "He is a trespasser here, although I will admit that he is not the kind of person that I expected to find in the heart of this vast wilderness."

He glanced at Paul, who was sitting on the knoll, calm and apparently unconcerned, his fine features at rest, his blue eyes lazily regarding the forest. The blue of Paul's eyes was different from the blue of the eyes of Alvarez. The blue of his was deep, warm, and sympathetic.

"Is it likely that Cotter is alone?" Alvarez asked of Wyatt.

"Not at all," replied the renegade. "He has friends, and I warn you that they are able and dangerous. We must be on