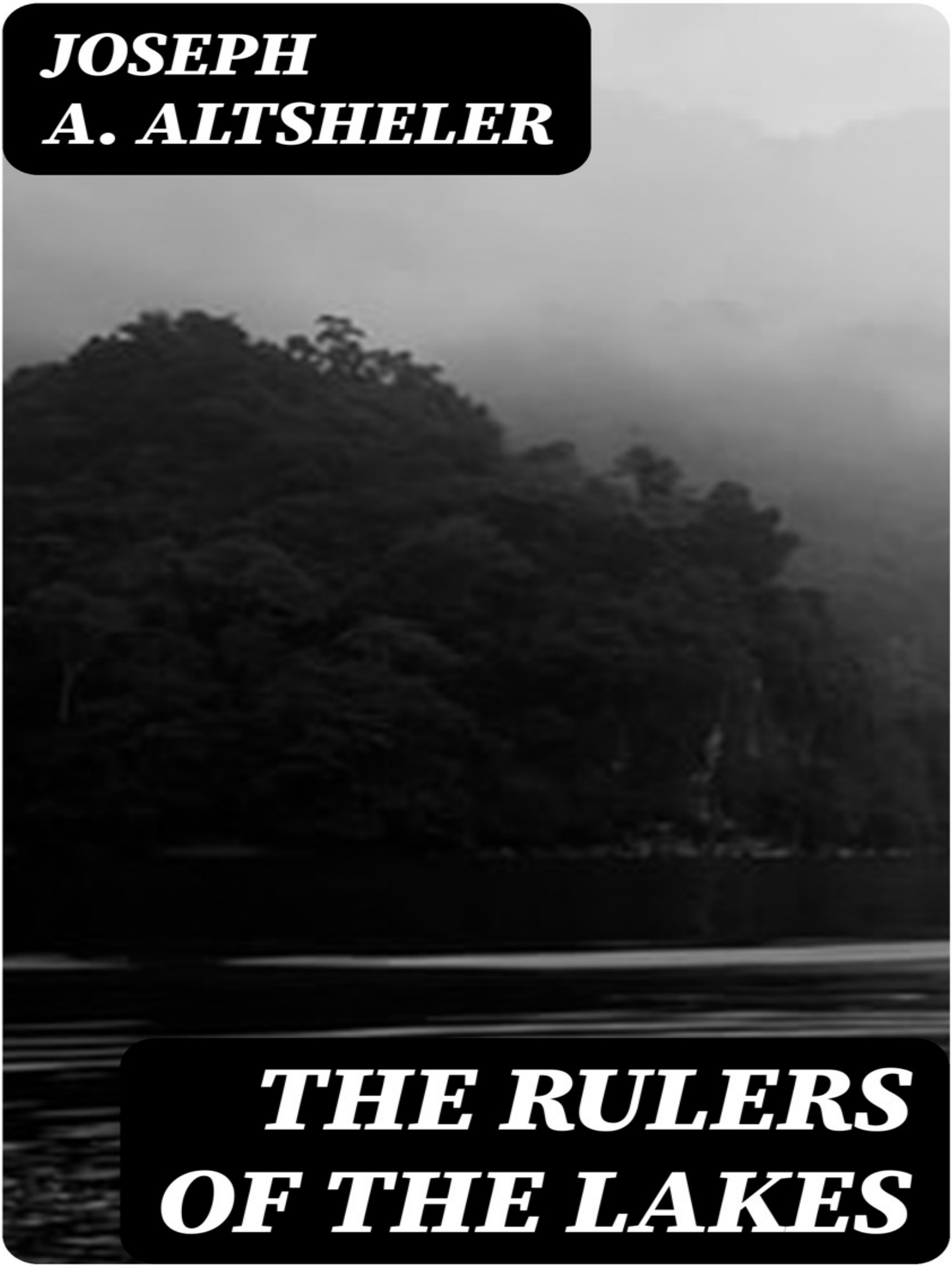
JOSEPH
A. ALTSHELER
THE RULERS
OF THE LAKES

Joseph A. Altsheler

The Rulers of the Lakes

A Story of George and Champlain

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FOREWORD

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"The Rulers of the Lakes" is a complete story, but it is also the third volume of the French and Indian War Series, following "The Hunters of the Hills" and "The Shadow of the North." Robert Lennox, Tayoga, Willet, and all the important characters in the earlier romances reappear.

CHARACTERS IN THE FRENCH AND INDIAN WAR SERIES

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ROBERT LENNOX A lad of unknown origin
TAYOGA A young Onondaga warrior
DAVID WILLET A hunter
RAYMOND LOUIS DE ST. LUC A brilliant French officer
AGUSTE DE COURCELLES A French officer
FRANÇOIS DE JUMONVILLE A French officer
LOUIS DE GALISONNIÈRE A young French officer
JEAN DE MÉZY A corrupt Frenchman
ARMAND GLANDELET A young Frenchman

PIERRE BOUCHER A bully and bravo
PHILIBERT DROUILLARD A French priest
THE MARQUIS DUQUESNE Governor-General of Canada
MARQUIS DE VAUDREUIL Governor-General of Canada
FRANÇOIS BIGOT Intendant of Canada
MARQUIS DE MONTCALM French commander-in-chief
DE LEVIS A French general
BOURLAMAQUE A French general
BOUGAINVILLE A French general
ARMAND DUBOIS A follower of St. Luc
M. DE CHATILLARD An old French Seigneur
CHARLES LANGLADE A French partisan
THE DOVE The Indian wife of Langlade
TANDAKORA An Ojibway chief
DAGANOWEDA A young Mohawk chief
HENDRICK An old Mohawk chief
BRADDOCK A British general
ABERCROMBIE A British general
WOLFE A British general
COL. WILLIAM JOHNSON Anglo-American leader
MOLLY BRANT Col. Wm. Johnson's Indian wife
JOSEPH BRANT Young brother of Molly Brant,
afterward the great Mohawk
chief, Thayendanegea
ROBERT DINWIDDIE Lieutenant-Governor of Virginia
WILLIAM SHIRLEY Governor of Massachusetts
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN Famous American patriot
JAMES COLDEN A young Philadelphia captain
WILLIAMWILTON A young Philadelphia lieutenant
HUGH CARSON A young Philadelphia lieutenant

JACOBUS HUYSMAN An Albany burgher
CATERINA Jacobus Huysman's cook
ALEXANDER MCLEAN An Albany schoolmaster
BENJAMIN HARDY A New York merchant
JOHNATHAN PILLSBURY Clerk to Benjamin Hardy
ADRIAN VAN ZOON A New York merchant
THE SLAVER A nameless rover
ACHILLE GARAY A French spy
ALFRED GROSVENOR A young English officer
JAMES CABELL A young Virginian
WALTER STUART A young Virginian
BLACK RIFLE A famous "Indian fighter"
ELIHU STRONG A Massachusetts colonel
ALAN HERVEY A New York financier
STUART WHYTE Captain of the British sloop, *Hawk*
JOHN LATHAM Lieutenant of the British sloop, *Hawk*
EDWARD CHARTERIS A young officer of the Royal Americans
ZEBEDEE CRANE A young scout and forest runner
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The RULERS OF THE LAKES

A STORY OF GEORGE AND CHAMPLAIN

CHAPTER I

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THE HERALDS OF PERIL

The three, the white youth, the red youth, and the white man, lay deep in the forest, watching the fire that burned on a low hill to the west, where black figures flitted now and then before the flame. They did not stir or speak for a long time, because a great horror was upon them. They had seen an army destroyed a few days before by a savage but invisible foe. They had heard continually for hours the fierce triumphant yells of the warriors and they had seen the soldiers dropping by hundreds, but the woods and thickets had hid the foe who sent forth such a rain of death.

Robert Lennox could not yet stop the quiver of his nerves when he recalled the spectacle, and Willet, the hunter, hardened though he was to war, shuddered in spite of himself at the memory of that terrible battle in the leafy wilderness. Nor was Tayoga, the young Onondaga, free from emotion when he thought of Braddock's defeat, and the blazing triumph it meant for the western tribes, the enemies of his people.

They had turned back, availing themselves of their roving commission, when they saw that the victors were not pursuing the remains of the beaten army, and now they

were watching the French and Indians. Fort Duquesne was not many miles away, but the fire on the hill had been built by a party of Indians led by a Frenchman, his uniform showing when he passed between eye and flame, the warriors being naked save for the breech cloth.

"I hope it's not St. Luc," said Robert.

"Why?" asked Willet. "He was in the battle. We saw him leading on the
Indian hosts."

"I know. That was fair combat, I suppose, and the French used the tools they had. The Chevalier could scarcely have been a loyal son of France if he had not fought us then, but I don't like to think of him over there by the fire, leading a band of Indians who will kill and scalp women and children as well as men along the border."

"Nor I, either, though I'm not worried about it. I can't tell who the man is, but I know it's not St. Luc. Now I see him black against the blaze, and it's not the Chevalier's figure."

Robert suddenly drew a long breath, as if he had made a surprising recognition.

"I'm not sure," he said, "but I notice a trick of movement now and then reminding me of someone. I'm thinking it's the same Auguste de Courcelles, Colonel of France, whom we met first in the northern woods and again in Quebec. There was one memorable night, as you know, Dave, when we had occasion to mark him well."

"I think you're right, Robert," said the hunter. "It looks like De
Courcelles."

"I know he is right," said Tayoga, speaking for the first time. "I have been watching him whenever he passed before the fire, and I cannot mistake him."

"I wonder what he's doing here," said Robert. "He may have been in the battle, or he may have come to Duquesne a day or two later."

"I think," said Willet, "that he's getting ready to lead a band against the border, now almost defenseless."

"He is a bad man," said Tayoga. "His soul is full of wickedness and cruelty, and it should be sent to the dwelling place of the evil minded. If Great Bear and Dagaeoga say the word I will creep through the thickets and kill him."

Robert glanced at him. The Onondaga had spoken in the gentle tones of one who felt grief rather than anger. Robert knew that his heart was soft, that in ordinary life none was kinder than Tayoga. And yet he was and always would be an Indian. De Courcelles had a bad mind, and he was also a danger that should be removed. Then why not remove him?

"No, Tayoga," said Willet. "We can't let you risk yourself that way. But we might go a little closer without any great danger. Ah, do you see that new figure passing before the blaze?"

"Tandakora!" exclaimed the white youth and the red youth together.

"Nobody who knows him could mistake him, even at this distance. I think he must be the biggest Indian in all the world."

"But a bullet would bring him crashing to earth as quickly as any other," said the Onondaga.

"Aye, so it would, Tayoga, but his time hasn't come yet, though it will come, and may we be present when your Manitou deals with him as he deserves. Suppose we curve to the right through these thick bushes, and from the slope there I think we can get a much better view of the band."

They advanced softly upon rising ground, and being able to approach two or three hundred yards, saw quite clearly all those around the fire. The white man was in truth De Courcelles, and the gigantic Indian, although there could have been no mistake about him, was Tandakora, the Ojibway. The warriors, about thirty in number, were, Willet thought, a mingling of Ojibways, Pottawattomies and Ottawas. All were in war paint and were heavily armed, many of them carrying big muskets with bayonets on the end, taken from Braddock's fallen soldiers. Three had small swords belted to their naked waists, not as weapons, but rather as the visible emblems of triumph.

As he looked, Robert's head grew hot with the blood pumped up from his angry heart. It seemed to him that they swaggered and boasted, although they were but true to savage nature.

"Easy, lad," said Willet, putting a restraining hand upon his shoulder.

"It's their hour. You can't deny that, and we'll have to bide a while."

"But will our hour ever come, Dave? Our army has been beaten, destroyed. The colonies and mother country alike are sluggish, and now have no plans, the whole border lies at the mercy of the tomahawk and the French power in

Canada not only grows all the time, but is directed by able and daring men."

"Patience, lad, patience! Our strength is greater than that of the foe, although we may be slower in using it. But I tell you we'll see our day of triumph yet."

"They are getting ready to move," whispered the Onondaga. "The Frenchman and the band will march northward."

"And not back to Duquesne?" said Willet. "What makes you think so,
Tayoga?"

"What is left for them to do at Duquesne? It will be many a day before the English and Americans come against it again."

"That, alas, is true, Tayoga. They're not needed longer here, nor are we. They've put out their fire, and now they're off toward the north, just as you said they would be. Tandakora and De Courcelles lead, marching side by side. A pretty pair, well met here in the forest. Now, I wish I knew where they were going!"

"Can't the Great Bear guess?" said the Onondaga.

"No, Tayoga. How should I?"

"Doesn't Great Bear remember the fort in the forest, the one called
Refuge?"

"Of course I do, Tayoga! And the brave lads, Colden and Wilton and Carson and their comrades who defended it so long and so well. That's the most likely point of attack, and now, since Braddock's army is destroyed it's too far in the

wilderness, too exposed, and should be abandoned. Suppose we carry a warning!"

Robert's eyes glistened. The idea made a strong appeal to him. He had mellow memories of those Philadelphia lads, and it would be pleasant to see them again. The three, in bearing the alarm, might achieve, too, a task that would lighten, in a measure, the terror along the border. It would be a relief at least to do something while the government disagreed and delayed.

"Let's start at once for Fort Refuge," he said, "and help them to get away before the storm breaks. What do you say, Tayoga?"

"It is what we ought to do," replied the Onondaga, in his precise
English of the schools.

"Come," said Willet, leading the way, and the three, leaving the fire behind them, marched rapidly into the north and east. Two miles gone, and they stopped to study the sun, by which they meant to take their reckoning.

"The fort lies there," said Willet, pointing a long finger, "and by my calculations it will take us about five days and nights to reach it, that is, if nothing gets in our way."

"You think, then," asked Robert, "that the French and Indians are already spreading a net?"

"The Indians might stop, Robert, my lad, to exult over their victory and to celebrate it with songs and dances, but the French leaders, whose influence with them is now overwhelming, will push them on. They will want to reap all the fruits of their great triumph by the river. I've often told you about the quality of the French and you've seen for

yourself. Ligneris, Contrecoeur, De Courcelles, St. Luc and the others will flame like torches along the border."

"And St. Luc will be the most daring, skillful and energetic of them all."

"It's a fact that all three of us know, Robert, and now, having fixed our course, we must push ahead with all speed. De Courcelles, Tandakora and the warriors are on the march, too, and we may see them again before we see Fort Refuge."

"The forest will be full of warriors," said Tayoga, speaking with great gravity. "The fort will be the first thought of the western barbarians, and of the tribes from Canada, and they will wish to avenge the defeat they suffered before it."

It was not long until they had ample proof that the Onondaga's words were true. They saw three trails in the course of the day, and all of them led toward the fort. Willet and Tayoga, with their wonderful knowledge of the forest, estimated that about thirty warriors made one trail, about twenty another, and fifteen the smallest.

"They're going fast, too," said the hunter, "but we must go faster."

"They will see our traces," said Tayoga, "and by signaling to one another they will tell all that we are in the woods. Then they will set a force to destroy us, while the greater bands go on to take the fort."

"But we'll pass 'em," said Robert confidently. "They can't stop us!"

Tayoga and the hunter glanced at him. Then they looked at each other and smiled. They knew Robert thoroughly, they understood his vivid and enthusiastic nature which,

looking forward with so much confidence to success, was apt to consider it already won, a fact that perhaps contributed in no small measure to the triumph wished so ardently. At last, the horror of the great defeat in the forest and the slaughter of an army was passing. It was Robert's hopeful temperament and brilliant mind that gave him such a great charm for all who met him, a charm to which even the fifty wise old sachems in the vale of Onondaga had not been insensible.

"No, Robert," said the Great Bear gravely, "I don't think anything can stop us. I've a prevision that De Courcelles and Tandakora will stand in our way, but we'll just brush 'em out of it."

They had not ceased to march at speed, while they talked, and now Tayoga announced the presence of a river, an obstacle that might prove formidable to foresters less expert than they. It was lined on both sides with dense forest, and they walked along its bank about a mile until they came to a comparatively shallow place where they forded it in water above their knees. However, their leggings and moccasins dried fast in the midsummer sun, and, experiencing no discomfort, they pressed forward with unabated speed.

All the afternoon they continued their great journey to save those at the fort, fording another river and a half dozen creeks and leaping across many brooks. Twice they crossed trails leading to the east and twice other trails leading to the west, but they felt that all of them would presently turn and join in the general march converging upon Fort Refuge. They were sure, too, that De Courcelles, Tandakora and their band

were marching on a line almost parallel with them, and that they would offer the greatest danger.

Night came, a beautiful, bright summer night with a silky blue sky in which multitudes of silver stars danced, and they sought a covert in a dense thicket where they lay on their blankets, ate venison, and talked a little before they slept.

Robert's brilliant and enthusiastic mood lasted. He could see nothing but success. With the fading of the great slaughter by the river came other pictures, deep of hue, intense and charged with pleasant memories. Life recently had been a great panorama to him, bright and full of changes. He could not keep from contrasting his present position, hid in a thicket to save himself from cruel savages, with those vivid days at Quebec, his gorgeous period in New York, and the gay time with sporting youth in the cozy little capital of Williamsburg.

But the contrast, so far from making him unhappy, merely expanded his spirit. He rejoiced in the pleasures that he had known and adapted himself to present conditions. Always influenced greatly by what lay just around him, he considered their thicket the best thicket in which he had ever been hidden. The leaves of last year, drifted into little heaps on which they lay, were uncommonly large and soft. The light breeze rustling the boughs over his head whispered only of peace and ease, and the two comrades, who lay on either side of him, were the finest comrades any lad ever had.

"Tayoga," he asked, and his voice was sincerely earnest, "can you see on his star Tododaho, the founder and protector of the great league of the Hodenosaunee?"

The young Onondaga, his face mystic and reverential, gazed toward the west where a star of great size and beauty quivered and blazed.

"I behold him," he replied. "His face is turned toward us, and the wise serpents lie, coil on coil, in his hair. There are wreaths of vapor about his eyes, but I can see them shining through, shining with kindness, as the mighty chief, who went away four hundred years ago, watches over us. His eyes say that so long as our deeds are just, so long as we walk in the path that Manitou wishes, we shall be victorious. Now a cloud passes before the star, and I cannot see the face of Tododaho, but he has spoken, and it will be well for us to remember his words."

He sank back on his blanket and closed his eyes as if he, too, in thought, had shot through space to some great star. Robert and Willet were silent, sharing perhaps in his emotion. The religion and beliefs of the Indian were real and vital to them, and if Tododaho promised success to Tayoga then the promise would be fulfilled.

"I think, Robert," said Willet, "that you'd better keep the first watch.
Wake me a little while before midnight, and I'll take the second."

"Good enough," said Robert. "I think I can hear any footfall Tandakora may make, if he approaches."

"It is not enough to hear the footfall of the Ojibway," said Tayoga, opening his eyes and sitting up. "To be a great sentinel and forester worthy to be compared with the greatest, Dagaeoga must hear the whisper of the grass as it bends under the lightest wind, he must hear the sound

made by the little leaf as it falls, he must hear the ripple in the brook that is flowing a hundred yards from us, and he must hear the wild flowers talking together in the night. Only then can Dagaeoga call himself a sentinel fit to watch over two such sleeping foresters as the Great Bear and myself."

"Close your eyes and go to sleep without fear," said Robert in the same vein. "I shall hear Tandakora breathing if he comes within a mile of us, at the same distance I shall hear the moccasin of De Courcelles, when it brushes against last year's fallen leaf, and at half a mile I shall see the look of revenge and cruelty upon the face of the Ojibway seeking for us."

Willet laughed softly, but with evident satisfaction.

"You two boys are surely the greatest talkers I've heard for a long time," he said. "You have happy thoughts and you put 'em into words. If I didn't know that you had a lot of deeds, too, to your credit, I'd call you boasters, but knowing it, I don't. Go ahead and spout language, because you're only lads and I can see that you enjoy it."

"I'm going to sleep now," said Tayoga, "but Dagaeoga can keep on talking and be happy, because he will talk to himself long after we have gone to the land of dreams."

"If I do talk to myself," said Robert, "it's because I like to talk to a bright fellow, and I like to have a bright fellow talk to me. Sleep as soundly as you please, you two, because while you're sleeping I can carry on an intellectual conversation."

The hunter laughed again.

"It's no use, Tayoga," he said. "You can't put him down. The fifty wise old sachems in the vale of Onondaga proclaimed him a great orator, and great orators must always have their way."

"It is so," said the Onondaga. "The voice of Dagaeoga is like a river. It flows on forever, and like the murmur of the stream it will soothe me to deeper slumbers. Now I sleep."

"And so do I," said the hunter.

It seemed marvelous that such formal announcements should be followed by fact, but within three minutes both went to that pleasant land of dreams of which they had been talking so lightly. Their breathing was long and regular and, beyond a doubt, they had put absolute faith in their sentinel. Robert's mind, so quick to respond to obvious confidence, glowed with resolve. There was no danger now that he would relax the needed vigilance a particle, and, rifle in the hollow of his arm, he began softly to patrol the bushes.

He was convinced that De Courcelles and Tandakora were not many miles away—they might even be within a mile—and memory of a former occasion, somewhat similar, when Tayoga had detected the presence of the Ojibway, roused his emulation. He was determined that, while he was on watch, no creeping savage should come near enough to strike.

Hand on the hammer and trigger of his rifle he walked in an ever widening circle about his sleeping comrades, searching the thickets with eyes, good naturally and trained highly, and stopping now and then to listen. Two or three

times he put his ear to the earth that he might hear, as Tayoga had bade him, the rustle of leaves a mile away.

His eager spirit, always impatient for action, found relief in the continuous walking, and the steady enlargement of the circle in which he traveled, acquiring soon a radius of several hundred yards. On the western perimeter he was beyond the deep thicket, and within a magnificent wood, unchoked by undergrowth. Here the trees stood up in great, regular rows, ordered by nature, and the brilliant moonlight clothed every one of them in a veil of silver. On such a bright night in summer the wilderness always had for him an elusive though powerful beauty, but he felt its danger. Among the mighty trunks, with no concealing thickets, he could be seen easily, if prowling savages were near, and, as he made his circles, he always hastened through what he called to himself his park, until he came to the bushes, in the density of which he was well hidden from any eye fifty feet away.

It was an hour until midnight, and the radius of his circle had increased another fifty yards, when he came again to the great spaces among the oaks and beeches. Halfway through and he sank softly down behind the trunk of a huge oak. Either in fact or in a sort of mental illusion, he had heard a moccasin brush a dry leaf far away. The command of Tayoga, though spoken in jest, had been so impressive that his ear was obeying it. Firm in the belief that his own dark shadow blurred with the dark trunk, and that he was safe from the sight of a questing eye, he lay there a long time, listening.

In time, the sound, translated from fancy into fact, came again, and now he knew that it was near, perhaps not more than a hundred yards away, the rustling of a real moccasin against a real dry leaf. Twice and thrice his ear signaled to his brain. It could not be fancy. It was instead an alarming fact.

He was about to creep from the tree, and return to his comrades with word that the enemy was near, but he restrained his impulse, merely crouching a little lower that his dark shadow might blend with the dark earth as well as the dark trunk. Then he heard several rustlings and the very low murmur of voices.

Gradually the voices which had been blended together, detached themselves and Robert recognized those of Tandakora and De Courcelles. Presently they came into the moonlight, followed by the savage band, and they passed within fifty yards of the youth who lay in the shelter of the trunk, pressing himself into the earth.

The Frenchman and the Ojibway were talking with great earnestness and Robert's imagination, plumbing the distance, told him the words they said. Tandakora was stating with great emphasis that the three whose trail they had found had gone on very fast, obviously with the intention of warning the garrison at the fort, and if they were to be cut off the band must hasten, too. De Courcelles was replying that in his opinion Tandakora was right, but it would not be well to get too far ahead. They must throw out flankers as they marched, but there was no immediate need of them. If the band spread out before dawn it would be sufficient.

Robert's fancy was so intense and creative that, beginning by imagining these things so, he made them so. The band therefore was sure to go on without searching the thickets on either right or left at present, and all immediate apprehension disappeared from his mind. Tandakora and De Courcelles were in the center of the moonlight, and although knowing them evil, he was surprised to see how very evil their faces looked, each in its own red or white way. He could remember nothing at that moment but their wickedness, and their treacherous attacks upon his life and those of his friends, and the memory clothed them about with a hideous veil through which only their cruel souls shone. It was characteristic of him that he should always see everything in extreme colors, and in his mind the good were always very good and the bad were very bad.

Hence it was to him an actual physical as well as mental relief, when the Frenchman, the Ojibway and their band, passing on, were blotted from his eyes by the forest. Then he turned back to the thicket in which his comrades lay, and bent over them for the purpose of awakening them. But before he could speak or lay a hand upon either, Tayoga sat up, his eyes wide open.

"You come with news that the enemy has been at hand!"

"Yes, but how did you know it?"

"I see it in your look, and, also when I slept, the Keeper of Dreams whispered it in my ear. An evil wind, too, blew upon my face and I knew it was the breath of De Courcelles and Tandakora. They have been near."

"They and their entire band passed not more than four hundred yards to the eastward of us. I lay in the bush and

saw them distinctly. They're trying to beat us to Fort Refuge."

"But they won't do it, because we won't let 'em," said Willet, who had awakened at the talking. "We'll make a curve and get ahead of 'em again. You watched well, Robert."

"I obeyed the strict injunctions of Tayoga," said young Lennox, smiling faintly. "He bade me listen so intently that I should hear the rustle of a dry leaf when a moccasin touched it a mile away in the forest. Well, I heard it, and going whence the sound came I saw De Courcelles, Tandakora and their warriors pass by."

"You love to paint pictures with words, Robert. I see that well, but 'tis not likely that you exaggerate so much, after all. I'm sorry you won't get your share of sleep, but we must be up and away."

"I'll claim a double portion of it later on, Dave, but I agree with you that what we need most just now is silence and speed, and speed and silence."

The three, making a curve toward the east, traveled at high speed through the rest of the night, Tayoga now leading and showing all his inimitable skill as a forest trailer. In truth, the Onondaga was in his element. His spirits, like Robert's, rose as dangers grew thicker around them, and he had been affected less than either of his comrades by the terrible slaughter of Braddock's men. Mentally at least, he was more of a stoic, and woe to the vanquished was a part of the lore of all the Indian tribes. The French and their allies had struck a heavy blow and there was nothing left for the

English and Americans to do but to strike back. It was all very simple.

Day came, and at the suggestion of Willet they rested again in the thickets. Robert was not really weary, at least the spirit uplifted him, though he knew that he must not overtask the body. His enthusiasm, based upon such a sanguine temperament, continued to rise. Again he foresaw glittering success. They would shake off all their foes, reach the fort in time, and lead the garrison and the people who had found refuge there safely out of the wilderness.

Where they lay the bushes were very dense. Before hiding there they had drunk abundantly at a little brook thirty or forty feet away, and now they ate with content the venison that formed their breakfast. Over the vast forest a brilliant sun was rising and here the leaves and grass were not burned much by summer heat. It looked fresh and green, and the wind sang pleasantly through its cool shadows. It appealed to Robert. With his plastic nature he was all for the town when he was in town, and now in the forest he was all for the forest.

"I can understand why you love it so well," he said to Tayoga, waving his hand at the verdant world that curved about them.

"My people and their ancestors have lived in it for more generations than anyone knows," said the Onondaga, his eyes glistening. "I have been in the white man's schools, and the white man's towns, and I have seen the good in them, but this is my real home. This is what I love best. My heart beats strongest for the forest."

"My own heart does a lot of beating for the woods," said Willet, thoughtfully, "and it ought to do so, I've spent so many years of my life in them—happy years, too. They say that no matter how great an evil may be some good will come out of it, and this war will achieve one good end."

"What is that, Great Bear?"

"It will delay the work of the ax. Men will be so busy with the rifle that they will have mighty little time for the ax. The trees will stop falling for a while, and the forest will cover again the places where it has been cleared away. Why, the game itself will increase!"

"How long do you think we'd better stay here?" asked Robert, his eager soul anxious to be on again.

"Patience! patience, my lad," replied Willet. "It's one thing that you'll have to practice. We don't want to run squarely into De Courcelles, Tandakora and their band, and meanwhile we're very comfortable here, gathering strength. Look at Tayoga there and learn from him. If need be he could lie in the same place a week and be happy."

"I hope the need will not come," laughed the Onondaga.

Robert felt the truth of Willet's words, and he put restraint upon himself, resolved that he would not be the first to propose the new start. He had finished breakfast and he lay on his elbow gazing up through the green tracery of the bushes at the sky. It was a wonderful sky, a deep, soft, velvet blue, and it tinted the woods with glorious and kindly hues. It seemed strange to Robert, at the moment, that a forest so beautiful should bristle with danger, but he knew it too well to allow its softness and air of innocence to deceive him.

It was almost the middle of the morning when Willet gave the word to renew the march, and they soon saw they had extreme need of caution. Evidence that warriors had passed was all about them. Now and then they saw the faint imprint of a moccasin. Twice they found little painted feathers that had fallen from a headdress or a scalplock, and once Tayoga saw a red bead lying in the grass where it had dropped, perhaps, from a legging.

"We shall have to pass by Tandakora's band and perhaps other bands in the night," said Tayoga.

"It's possible, too," said Willet, "that they know we're on our way to the fort, and may try to stop us. Our critical time will soon be at hand."

They listened throughout the afternoon for the signals that bands might make to one another, but heard nothing. Willet, in truth, was not surprised.

"Silence will serve them best," he said, "and they'll send runners from band to band. Still, if they do give signals we want to know it."

"There is a river, narrow but deep, about five miles ahead," said Tayoga, "and we'll have to cross it on our way to the fort. I think it is there that Tandakora will await us."

"It's pretty sure to be the place," said Willet. "Do you know where there's a ford, Tayoga?"

"There is none."

"Then we'll have to swim for it. That's bad. But you say it's a narrow stream?"

"Yes, Great Bear. Two minutes would carry us across it."

"Then we must find some place for the fording where the trees lean over from either side and the shadow is deep."

Tayoga nodded, and, after that, they advanced in silence, redoubling their caution as they drew near to the river. The night was not so bright as the one that had just gone before, but it furnished sufficient light for wary and watching warriors to see their figures at a considerable distance, and, now and then, they stopped to search the thickets with their own eyes. No wind blew, their footsteps made no sound and the intense stillness of the forest wove itself into the texture of Robert's mind. His extraordinary fancy peopled it with phantoms. There was a warrior in every bush, but, secure in the comradeship of his two great friends, he went on without fear.

"There is no signal," whispered Tayoga at last. "They do not even imitate the cry of bird or beast, and it proves one thing, Great Bear."

"So it does, Tayoga."

"You know as well as I do, Great Bear, that they make no sound because they have set the trap, and they do not wish to alarm the game which they expect to walk into it."

"Even so, Tayoga. Our minds travel in the same channel."

"But the game is suspicious, nevertheless," continued Tayoga in his precise school English, "and the trap will not fall."

"No, Tayoga, it won't fall, because the game won't walk into it."

"Tandakora will suffer great disappointment. He is a mighty hunter and he has hunted mighty game, but the game that he hunts now is more wary than the stag or the bear, and has greater power to strike back than either."

"Well spoken, Tayoga."

The hunter and the Onondaga looked at each other in the dark and laughed. Their spirits were as wild as the wilderness, and they were enjoying the prospect of the Ojibway's empty trap. Robert laughed with them. Already in his eager mind success was achieved and the crossing was made. After a while he saw dim silver through the trees, and he knew they had come to the river. Then the three sank down and approached inch by inch, sure that De Courcelles, Tandakora and their forces would be watching on the other side.

CHAPTER II

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THE KINDLY BRIDGE

The thicket in which the three lay was of low but dense bushes, with high grass growing wherever the sun could reach it. In the grass tiny wild flowers, purple, blue and white were in bloom, and Robert inhaled their faint odor as he crouched, watching for the enemy who sought his life. It was a forest scene, the beauty of which would have pleased him at any other time, nor was he wholly unconscious of it now. The river itself, as Tayoga had stated, was narrow. At some points it did not seem to be more than ten or fifteen yards across, but it flowed in a slow, heavy current, showing depths below. Nor could he see, looking up and down the stream, any prospect of a ford.

Robert's gaze moved in an eager quest along the far shore, but he detected no sign of Tandakora, the Frenchman or their men. Yet he felt that Tayoga and Willet were right and that foes were on watch there. It was inevitable, because it was just the place where they could wait best for the three. Nevertheless he asked, though it was merely to confirm his own belief.

"Do you think they're in the brush, Dave?"

"Not a doubt of it, Robert," the hunter whispered back. "They haven't seen us yet, but they hope to do so soon."

"And we also, who haven't seen them yet, hope to do so soon."

"Aye, Robert, that's the fact. Ah, I think I catch a glimpse of them now. Tayoga, wouldn't you say that the reflection in the big green bush across the river is caused by a moonbeam falling on a burnished rifle barrel?"

"Not a doubt of it, Great Bear. Now, I see the rifle itself! And now I see the hands that hold it. The hands belong to a live warrior, an Ojibway, or a Pottowattomie. He is kneeling, waiting for a shot, if he should find anything to shoot at."

"I see him, too, Tayoga, and there are three more warriors just beyond him. It's certainly the band of Tandakora and De Courcelles, and they've set a beautiful trap for three who will not come into it."

"It is so, Great Bear. One may build a splendid bear trap but of what use is it if the bear stays away?"

"But what are we to do?" asked Robert. "We can't cross in the face of such a force."

"We'll go down the stream," replied Willet, "keeping hidden, of course, in the thickets, and look for a chance to pass. Of course, they've sent men in both directions along the bank, but we may go farther than any of them."

He led the way, and they went cautiously through the thickets two or three miles, all the time intently watching the other shore. Twice they saw Indian sentinels on watch, and knew that they could not risk the passage. Finally they stopped and waited a full two hours in the thickets, the contest becoming one of patience.