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Title: Rebel Siege

Date of first publication: 1943

Author: Jim Kjelgaard (1910-1959)

Date first posted: September 19 2012

Date last updated: September 19 2012

Faded Page eBook #20120918

This eBook was produced by: David T. Jones, Mary Meehan, Greg Weeks & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

**The Story of a Frontier
Riflemaker's Son**

Rebel Siege

By **Jim Kjelgaard**

Illustrated by
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HOLIDAY HOUSE NEW YORK

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NINTH PRINTING

CONTENTS

Chapter 1, THE RIFLE MAKER	9
Chapter 2, THE TORIES RISE	30
Chapter 3, CABIN FIGHT	48
Chapter 4, THE FOOLS	71
Chapter 5, THE FLIGHT	90
Chapter 6, A CHANGE IN IAN	110
Chapter 7, WESTWARD TREK	129
Chapter 8, KITTEN TOE	152
Chapter 9, THE ARMY	174
Chapter 10, THE BULLDOG GROWLS	190
Chapter 11, IN PURSUIT	211
Chapter 12, THE BATTLE	234

REBEL SIEGE
The Story of a Frontier
Riflemaker's Son

1. *THE RIFLE MAKER*

Kinross McKenzie heard the pigeons, heard the beating of countless wings like wind rising in the distance, long before he saw them. He stepped from beneath the knobby-branched black walnut tree that shaded his father's forge and squinted up into a cloudless, shadowless blue sky.

The noise of the pigeons' wings grew stronger, as they steadily beat toward the gap in the mountains where Ian McKenzie lived. The vanguard of the feathered horde came in sight. Then the log house and his father's gun shop were suddenly in shadow as unnumbered closely packed pigeons flew over them.

Kin turned to watch them pass, saw them go out of sight behind Burnt-Tree Knob, and swiftly calculated the exact spot where they would come to earth. Just beyond Burnt-Tree was a long stretch of bare rocks. Beyond that was Santaree Creek, and on its borders was a mighty beech grove whose last year's harvest had been disturbed very little. The pigeons would light in the beeches, and they were hardly seven miles across the mountains. Kin looked wistfully at the cabin, and at the shop where his father kept the rifles he made. If only he could have the rest of the day off

But he couldn't. It seemed as though every man in the Carolinas wanted a gun nowadays, and his father would never consent to Kin's taking even an hour off. There was the forge to tend, and stocks to shape, and tarred rope to wrap around and burn off wooden stocks so they'd look like curly maple, and ... A sudden blow on the side of his head sent him reeling. Kin looked up to see his bearded father standing beside him.

"Didna I tell ye to keep the forge burnin' while I went to the stream?" Ian McKenzie demanded.

"I did." It was marvelous, the way anyone as big as Ian could come upon a man so unawares.

"Aye?" Ian said dourly. "Look at it."

Kin looked. The forge's fire box contained a mass of black charcoal from which thin wisps of smoke arose. Yet it couldn't have been more than a minute ago, anyway not *much* more, that he had looked around to see the pigeons. He scratched his head.

"How did it get that way?"

Ian spat. "I dinna know what you young'uns are comin' to. If ye really need an explanation, I can tell ye that the fire went low because ye had yer mind on the pigeons. Ye're fourteen, an' it's high time ye were thinkin' like a man instead o' gawkin' at a flight o' pigeons for a fair half hour. When I was a lad an' my father was teachin' me the gunsmith's trade ... But build the fire up, Kin, an' don't mind that little clout on the knob. Ye know yer old father too well to think that he meant anything by it."

"Sure, I know," Kin grinned.

He grasped the handles of the bellows and diligently began to work them back and forth. The wisps of smoke that drifted up from the charcoal gathered volume, and a little flame broke through. The flame leaped higher, and the black charcoal in the fire pot became a mass of glowing coals.

Kin stole a covert glance at his father, a troubled man these days. Kin knew, without understanding why anyone should be bothered by anything that touched his life so little, that Ian worried deeply over the tales that drifted up here into the Blue Ridge, tales of violence and savagery, of British Dragoons and German Yagers pouring into America to march and battle and kill the colonists who were in revolt against the rule of Mother England. Still, just over the mountains the Cherokees were usually battling and marching, and they would have done a good bit more killing had it not been for the Kentucky rifles that the mountain gunsmiths made and the mountain men shot. Kin knew that even now his father had orders for a score of rifles. He pumped harder.

Ian picked up a half-finished barrel and brought it over to the forge. He thrust the long ribbon of wrought iron into the fire, heated it a glowing red, and pounded it around an iron mandrel. When he had formed another inch of barrel he knocked the mandrel out, cooled the barrel and the mandrel in water, and came back to re-heat the barrel.

"Tell me why I knocked the mandrel out," he ordered.

"So you wouldn't forge it right into the barrel," Kin said correctly.

His father grunted approval. "And now some heat, boy."

Inch by inch the ribbon of wrought iron was shaped around the mandrel and forged into a perfect rifle barrel. Kin picked up the reamer, and began the tedious task of turning it through the forty-two inch wrought-iron tube. He watched the shiny, hard little chips that the reamer cut out falling at his feet, thick as the pigeons gathering food in the forest. He wondered if the pigeons were still ... But there wasn't any hope of going hunting.

When the barrel was properly reamed, Kin carried it over to the rifling bench. None but the sure hand of Ian McKenzie could rifle the barrels he made, and Kin stood idly by while the rifling tool cut into the barrel the grooves that would make the ball fly true. Ian looked up to frown, and Kin instantly concentrated all his attention on the rifling.

But when Ian resumed his work, Kin looked at his father's face and worried. Ian McKenzie was not the carefree, fun-loving man who had moved his gunsmith's shop from Pennsylvania to McKenzie's Gap. Lately he had become more and more morose, more solemn, less inclined to laugh. Kin thought of a dog they had once owned, that had never been able to decide whether it wanted to hunt with Kin or Ian. Torn between two masters, it had grown savage and ugly, and one day it had disappeared in the woods never to be seen alive again. Kin and his father had found its skeleton two months later. The hound had insanely attacked a great black bear, and for its temerity had been beaten into a pulp. Every bone in its body was broken.

Ian looked up suddenly and said, "Kinross, I wish yer mother was alive."

Kin stared, puzzled. His mother had died so long ago that he scarcely remembered her. But he had often thought that it would be nice to have a mother, someone to make milk cakes as Jack Boone's mother did. Once, Kin recalled very clearly, Daniel Boone had stopped at Jack's house and left a quantity of something called sugar. Jack's mother had made candy, and Kin had had some. He guessed that he never would forget how good that had tasted, much better than ordinary maple sugar or molasses.

"I wish she was alive, too," Kin said dutifully.

"Yer mother was wise, boy." His father's voice trembled. "More than once when I would hae done wrong she bade me better. But who is to bid me now? Who knows what is right and what is wrong in all this?"

"Don't you?" Kin asked in astonishment.

His father glanced up, and was silent for a moment.

"Aye," he said slowly. "Aye, laddie. But come on. We're sittin' here like a couple o' woods runners with nothin' to do but sit in the sun when there's rifles to make."

He looked at the rifled barrel on his lap. The back had to be plugged, the touch hole drilled, and the sights, lock, and stock attached. Kin knew that all this would be done with the painstaking care that his father gave everything, and that the finished product would not be just another Kentucky rifle but a McKenzie rifle—something that the over-the-mountain settlers and Indian fighters would walk three hundred miles for. But now the sun was settling behind the western mountains and long shadows were enfolding the cabin.

"It's coming on night," Kin said.

For a moment Ian McKenzie sat without answering.

"It will soon be dark," Kin repeated.

Ian looked up as though the coming of another night was a startling event, one that must be desperately met and coped with.

"Aye!" he roared. "So it is! An' ye just sittin' here lookin' at my gun! On to your work, boy. Ye can sit an' moon for a bit before bed-time."

Kin left the shop eagerly. He was glad to be away from the onerous task of learning the gunsmith's trade and relieved to

be parted, if only for a little while, from his troubled, glowering father. The gunsmith's trade was a dull one. A man stood over a forge or rifling bench all day long and gave his heart and soul to the making of a perfect weapon. Then somebody came along to buy it and had all the fun. The over-the-mountain men lived a real life, shooting buffalo, and hunting Indians, and living exactly as they pleased. But there was never any excitement around McKenzie's Gap. True, a party of ten Cherokees had come about a year ago and besieged the cabin. But it had happened that Tom Boone, Joel Creed, and Turkey-Trot Logan had been there to buy rifles. The three and his father had each defended one of the four walls. All Kin had been allowed to do was lie on the floor and reload rifles. When the Cherokees finally departed, he had been forbidden to go out into the woods until the four men had scouted around.

He had wanted to go, had wanted to see if Turkey-Trot would scalp the dead Cherokees. Then the men had come back and told him that they hadn't hit a thing. But Kin knew better. After he had permission to go out, he had made his own scout around the clearing and found blood on the leaves. He was a man now, though. His father had said so just this afternoon, and he'd bet that the next Cherokee raid would find him shooting his own gun instead of reloading someone else's.

He entered the forest, cool hardwoods that rose to a mighty height, and walked on through them. He was a friend of these woods. He knew where the squirrels played, where the buck deer came to grow new horns, and where the black bears wallowed like pigs in their mud holes. Yes, they were his woods, and once his imagination had peopled them with a strange assortment of savage beasts and men. But that was long ago, when he had been just a child playing games. A man couldn't get excited about imaginary Cherokees, when there were real ones not too far away. And it was prudent to be alert even here. There were whispers of men who had to skulk through these woods unseen, and who would bear no interference with their comings and goings. Kin had never seen any of these people who traveled by night. But twice he had found strange tracks in the woods.

A tinkling, silvery sound drifted through the trees and Kin turned in its direction. He found his father's yellow, broken-horned cow switching away the flies in the shade of a huge gum tree, and cut a small switch in case old Bonnie needed any urging to make her go home. But this night she needed none, and the bell on her neck tinkled cheerily as she struck a bee-line toward the clearing.

The yellow cow chose her own placid pace through the forest back to the clearing, and ambled up to the rough-hewn stanchion where she was milked every morning and every night. Kin draped a twisted grass rope over her neck, took the milk pail down from the wooden peg on which it hung, kicked the milking stool up close to Bonnie's left side, and sat down on it with the pail between his legs. With an expertness born of long practice he leaned his head against her soft flank and began stripping the milk from her udder. As it foamed in the pail, Bonnie switched her tail from side to side.

Suddenly she stepped backward. Kin murmured, "So—o, Bonnie," and tried to continue milking. But the cow side-stepped, tossed her head, and blew through her nostrils. Kin arose, set the half-filled pail aside, and watched her. Bonnie's head was raised, her eyes were questing, and her ears were cocked forward. Kin stared in the direction she was looking, and strained his ears. He neither heard nor saw anything. But something was coming up the trail that skirted the edge of his father's clearing. And it was something strange to Bonnie, or she would not have shown alarm.

Kin untied the cow, led her around to the rear of the cabin where she could not be seen from the trail, and went back for the milk. As he picked up the pail, he saw Ian sitting on a block of firewood before the door. His father was entirely relaxed, puffing contentedly on a corncob pipe with a reed stem. Something strange was coming—anything strange was probably hostile—and his father was sitting just as he had sat on every other night. Kin had better warn him.

"Bonnie's scared!" he blurted. "Somethin's comin'!"

"Mind yerself, boy," Ian McKenzie said from the corner of his mouth. "Take the milk in the house."

Kin carried the milk inside, and set it on the table. Four loaded rifles leaned against the door, within reach of his father's hand. The heavy wooden shutters were ready to swing against the cabin's glassless windows and the loopholes were open. Ian McKenzie knew as well as Bonnie that something strange, something possibly to be feared, moved on the Cota Springs trail and he was ready for it. Maybe it was more Cherokees! Kin felt a strange weakness in his stomach and knees, and looked around to select the loophole from which he would probably fire his first shot. He was afraid, but knew that he could fight. Kin walked back outside, marveling that Ian could be so calm, so obviously unafraid.

"'Tis no time to lose yer head, boy," Ian said steadily. "Sit down an' rest easy. If we're fired upon, ye know where the

rifles are."

Kin sat down on the cabin's door step and wriggled his bare toes on the packed earth. He jerked erect and almost cried out when a wild turkey dropped from a tree into his father's field and began to feed. But the turkey fed only a few seconds and sat bolt upright. Then it ran swiftly into the forest. Kin strove vainly for some intimation of what the turkey had heard or seen.

Then, at long last, it came. At first an almost indistinguishable muffled throbbing, the sound his ears picked up was quickly translated into the drumming of horses' hoofs. There must be, Kin decided, at least ten of the horses and they were coming fast.

But the tenseness under which he labored gave an unreal quality to the thudding hoofs, made them strangely unlike those of ordinary running horses. They came to him in a measured, hollow cadence. Kin thought of a trapped beaver that he had once seen. The trapper had hit it over the head with a club, but had not killed it outright, and the beaver had lain on its side drawing long, deep breaths.

"The beat o' the death drum," Ian muttered to himself.

Kin glanced at him curiously. He knew vaguely that Ian had once been a soldier, and that a death drum was beaten when another soldier was executed. But now that he thought of it, the timed rhythm of the running horses *was* like a drum. Kin's hand stole inside the door, and drew comfort from the feel of a loaded rifle there. He clutched the rifle tighter as the first of the mounted men swept into view.

He was a gorgeously uniformed officer mounted on a superb stallion. Kin gaped at his plumed hat, his scarlet coat, the polished leather that adorned his uniform, and the saber that dangled from his side. He must be a mighty man to have such a horse and such a uniform! The twelve men following him were only a little less brilliantly attired and mounted, and all carried rifles slung across their saddles. At a smart trot, looking neither to the right nor to the left, they swept across the clearing, and into the forest on the other side. Kin watched them out of sight, and continued to listen until the beat of the horses' hoofs was only a dying echo.

"What are British soldiers doing here?" he gasped.

Ian McKenzie shook his head, and it seemed to Kin that he had never seen his father look more weary.

"Tis little they know," Ian said bitterly. "I had hoped that we'd be spared this. They have come to hold the country for the King. But is it the King's country, or does it belong to the men who made it? Mountain men dinna quake at the sight o' a uniform and saber. Nor do dragoons give way before a shaken tomahawk an' an Indian yell. There'll be blood in plenty shed, an' for what? There'll be murder an' pillage, an' for what? For somethin', somethin' I dinna know. But I hae ways to find out."

It was an impassioned, excited outburst, a revealing glimpse of the gnawing canker that Ian carried in his bosom, but it made little sense to Kin. He looked sharply at his father.

"What do you mean?"

"Ye'll find out," Ian McKenzie said. "An' the later ye find out, the longer ye'll be happy. Do ye now put food on the table. There'll be no work tomorrow, boy, for I'm ridin' to Gilbert Town."

Kin built up the fire on the hearth, and set corn cake to baking before it. He broiled venison steaks on the hot coals, and put the simple fare on the table, along with butter and mugs of Bonnie's rich milk. The dragoons had come and gone, and their memory was exciting. But his father had said that he was going to Gilbert Town tomorrow, and that was an all-day's ride. It would give Kin a wonderful opportunity to go see if the pigeons were still beyond the Santaree. He ate heartily, but Ian dawdled over the food on his plate. When the pewter dishes were washed, Kin was more than ready to stretch out on his pallet. When he fell asleep, his father was still moodily hunched before the embers.

He was awakened in the pre-dawn darkness by his father moving about. Ian murmured softly under his breath because there were no live coals on the hearth, and he laid tinder impatiently. His flint and steel sparked, and the tinder caught fire. Kin watched him make fresh corn cake and warm some of the venison that was left over from last night. Kin lay very still, pretending to be asleep, while his father ate. Ian would not awaken him, but he might forbid Kin to leave the

clearing if he knew that he was already awake. Ian caught up one of the rifles, picked up his powder horns and bullet pouch, and went out the door. The thudding of his roan saddle horse's hoof beats drifted back through the just-awakening day.

Kin rolled from his pallet and gulped the remnants of food that Ian had left. It was not enough, but he was too impatient to seek out the pigeons to prepare a proper breakfast. He snatched up the pail and ran out to milk Bonnie. Then he untied the old cow, to wander and graze at will in the forest until next milking time, and set the pail of milk in the spring to keep cool. The day, a satisfactorily long one, was all his now.

He took his rifle down from the buck-horn rack where he kept it and carried it over to the dying fire for a final inspection before setting out—a man's gun had better be in good working order. The rifle, a .30 caliber with a forty-two inch barrel, was a beautiful piece, one that Ian McKenzie had labored on for three solid weeks before giving it to his son. The barrel was made of the finest iron that the Mott Iron Works could produce. The stock was genuine curly maple, and the lock had been manufactured by the famous Gulcher. Ian had adjusted and readjusted the sights until Kin could split a hair with the gun at fifty yards.

Finding it in satisfactory working order, Kin took a ball from a buckskin pouch, and laid it in the palm of his hand. He removed the plug from the end of his powder horn, and spilled over the ball enough powder to cover it. The powder was poured down the gun from the muzzle end. Kin produced a coarse cloth patch from the pouch, spit on it, and folded it around the ball so that the patch enclosed the bullet like a little sack. He rammed the patched bullet down on top of the powder, automatically repeating his father's loading instructions.

"A spit patch is better than a grease patch. Grease leaves a dirty ring around your gun muzzle, and covers up the fouling in the bore. Besides, some time you might not have any grease, and you can usually manage to spit. Be sure to get the ball dead center in the patch or it will fly crooked, and learn to load your gun in eighteen seconds flat!"

Finally Kin filled the priming pan, hung his powder horn and bullet pouch on his belt, and set out.

A buck deer, grazing at the edge of his father's field, raised its head and snorted. Catching man scent it wheeled, and with white tail high over its back dashed toward the forest. Kin snapped the rifle to his shoulder and drew a bead on the buck. His finger tightened on the trigger, but relaxed again. Killing the buck would mean that at least two hours would be lost dressing and skinning it, and he did not want to lose two hours out of his first holiday he had enjoyed in nearly a month. Besides, a buck could be had any time, and the pigeons were still beyond the Santaree.

Kin walked slowly and cautiously, keeping among the trees as much as possible and hurrying only when he had to cross an open space. The country here was as safe as any. But there were strangers who traveled only at night in these woods. There might be Cherokees, and now that the dragoons were here nobody knew what was going to happen.

Kin came to the top of Burnt-Tree Knob, and crouched behind one of the huge, fire-killed trunks that kept a skeleton watch over the long stretch of bare rocks sloping to the creek. It was five hundred yards from here to the creek, and Kin would have to detour around the bare rocks if he did not want to be seen. Probably there was no danger. But there might be. Kin ducked back into the forest and made his way south. When he came again to the top of the mountain green forest trees stood between him and the Santaree. Skulking from trunk to trunk, he made his way toward the grove where the pigeons were feeding.

Suddenly he stopped. Through the spaced trunks he caught occasional glimpses of the gently flowing Santaree. A huge tree had fallen on its bank, and on its trunk sat a girl with her arms clasped about her knees. Her long, dark hair fell in two braids down her back. She was dressed in Indian buckskins, and like an Indian, she was tanned a deep brown. Kin knew her, Molly Faris of Gilbert Town, and the scandal of that sedate village because, instead of sitting at home and learning the graces that befitted a lady, she much preferred hunting, fishing, and running through the woods.

Kin's attention was drawn to the lean man beside her. He wore a round, crowned hat with a broad brim, a coarse gray coatee of mixed cotton and wool, dark linsey-woolsey trousers that clung tightly to his muscular legs, hobnailed boots, and a red cotton handkerchief tied loosely around his neck. He was Tanse Willard, who had been a noted Indian fighter before the war started, and who had since then gone off to fight the British. Nobody knew more about the forest than Tanse. He had often taken Kin hunting, and was the one personal connection the boy had with the war. The report had come through that Tanse had been killed at Charleston. But here he was, big as life, mooning at Molly Faris.

Suddenly Kin saw something else, down the Santaree. It was the merest bit of color, a flash of red. He gazed steadily in that direction, and saw the red again. A half-breed Cherokee who had earned the unsavory name of Stink-Hard Joe came into view and turned to beckon to someone behind him. A British officer and a half dozen armed dragoons appeared. Stink-Hard Joe gestured with his hands, and the officer nodded. They knew Tanse and Molly were near, but did not know exactly how near. And Tanse was wholly unaware of his danger. Neither the British nor the two on the log enjoyed the wide sweep of vision that Kin's hill afforded him.

Kin knelt behind a tree and rested his rifle against its trunk. He took careful aim, and squeezed the trigger. The rifle cracked, and Tanse Willard's hat flew from his head. Then Tanse and Molly were gone, disappearing as suddenly and completely as the Indians whose lore both knew so well.

Kin took another ball from his bullet pouch, measured the proper charge of powder by pouring it from the powder horn over the ball, and reloaded the rifle. But Stink-Hard Joe had located the source of the shot, and was coming fast with the British soldiers close behind him. There wasn't time to run for it. Kin raised the rifle, and centered the front sight squarely on Stink-Hard Joe's chest.

"Stay back!" he gritted.

The half-breed hesitated, and fell back. The British officer came up, and the dragoons formed a line behind him. The officer fixed Kin with a half-amused, half-scornful glance.

"Ho, my little firebrand," he said calmly. "What did you shoot at?"

"A squirrel."

"Where is it?"

"I missed."

"Hm-m, missed with a rifle like that?" He took a tentative step forward. "Let me see the gun."

"Keep your hands off!" Kin snapped. "Nobody but me handles my gun!"

"Oh, come now."

The officer took another step forward. Kin whipped the rifle toward him, and pulled the hammer back. Then suddenly he trembled at the thought of the thing that he had been about to do. He couldn't shoot down an unarmed man, even though he had six soldiers at his back. The British officer grasped the rifle's muzzle, turned it, and plucked it away.

"Give me that!" Kin flared.

"I hardly think it's the proper weapon for you. You might be tempted to shoot at more 'squirrels.' By the way, my rebel chip, perhaps you'd better do a little serious thinking. You're young, but not too young to swing from an oak branch. What's your name?"

"None of your business!"

"His name Mick-Kenzie, Lieutenant All-Aire," Stink-Hard Joe said.

"Oh, one of the hard-headed Scots, eh? Well, McKenzie, take my advice and think. We'll see you again."

The British wheeled and started back down the Santaree. Kin watched them go, while tears of rage and frustration rose in his eyes. They had his gun, his beloved rifle, and a man was nothing without a gun. The whipping his father would certainly give him was as nothing compared to the fact that he had lost it. Maybe he should have shot while he had the chance; Turkey-Trot Logan would have. But shooting a man was not the same as shooting a buck or pigeon. Kin gritted his teeth.

"I'll get my gun back!" he vowed. "Somehow and some way I'll get it back!"

2. *THE TORIES RISE*

The sun had passed its zenith and was starting its dip westward when Kin got home. Bonnie was standing in the shade of the gun shop, switching her tail to keep the flies away, but the split-rail pasture where his father's saddle horse grazed was still empty.

Kin threw himself down in the grass beside Bonnie. He put one hand over his eyes, and gave himself up to the bitterness within him. Ever since he and his father had come here to McKenzie's Gap his eyes and thoughts had been on the west, the wilderness that began here at their very door. It was glorious to know that, as soon as you were a man, you were free to go into that wilderness, and that only your own hardihood and courage limited what you could find there.

But the first, and almost the only, requisite of life in the west was a rifle. Kin had pictured himself leaving his father's home to join the Long Hunters who did everything that a man should do. But his rifle, as fine a one as could be found on the frontier, was an integral part of that picture. For him, no other gun could take its place.

Bonnie tossed her head when Kin sat up suddenly. He looked west, toward the Santaree, and his face set in the determination of the breed from which he had sprung.

"I'll get it back," he said. "No man will ever take my gun away from me and keep it."

Kin got to his feet, drove Bonnie to the milking station, and milked. He set the pail of milk in the spring and looked down the trail. Ian would be home soon. He would certainly be hungry, and a change from venison might help to soften the beating that was going to be Kin's when Ian found out about the lost rifle.

Kin took a fishhook, another of his father's products, and tied it on a line. He walked to the edge of the clearing, and lay full length on the bank of a sluggish little stream that wandered there. Rolling up his sleeves, he reached into the water and overturned a flat rock. A brown crayfish scuttled backward. Kin dropped his opened left hand behind it, and flicked a finger at the crayfish's claws. The little crustacean backed into his left hand. Kin closed it, brought his captive to land, and tied it on the hook.

He whirled the line about his head and cast. The crayfish splashed on the water, and the ripples were still spreading from the place where it hit when a bass rose to take it. The line moved slowly through the water, and Kin paid out more from the coil in his hand. When the line stopped moving he gave the bass fifteen seconds to swallow the crayfish and struck hard.

There was a mighty tug on the line's end as the hooked bass started upstream. Kin turned him. The bass leaped clear of the water in a vain effort to rid himself of the hook, and surged downstream. He fought mightily, with bulldog courage and endurance. But after ten minutes Kin played him in to shore and reached down to slip his fingers through the gills of a six-pound small-mouth.

He lifted the fish clear of the water and carried it to the cabin. With a hunting knife he removed its head and the spiny fin on its back, and split it to the tail. He took away the backbone, went out to the wood pile for a fresh piece of green ash, laid the fish on it, and set it on the embers at one side of the fireplace. The bass would cook, but the green wood would not burn through to let it scorch. Kin peeled a dozen potatoes, and dropped them into a kettle of boiling water. With a dish of butter in one hand and a knife in the other he sat on an upended block of wood basting the bass while darkness slowly descended. Then, suddenly, he reached down to shove the bass away from the embers and leap to the rifle rack on the wall.

Through the open door came the rapid pound of running horses on the trail. Kin took down a long rifle, and held it in his hand while he listened. It was hard to tell how many horses were coming, but there was more than one. Kin grasped another rifle, and slipped through the door. It wasn't Cherokees because they came like panthers in the night, unseen and unheard. But it might be more of the plundering British soldiers. Kin set his mouth. The British had all the plunder they were going to get from the McKenzies!

Keeping close to the dark wall, Kin crept to the end of the cabin and crouched behind an outjutting log. He rested a rifle on the log, and sighted toward the fire-lighted door. If whoever was coming intended to enter the cabin they would be framed for an instant in the light, and whatever action was necessary could be decided on in that instant. Then two

horsemen came into the clearing, and Kin took the sighted rifle down. The leading horse was his father's roan, and nobody but Ian sat a saddle in exactly the way this rider was sitting. Twenty feet behind galloped a pure white horse with an unknown rider. They turned from the trail, and rode to the pasture. With a rifle in either hand Kin went forward, and reached the gate just as Ian was swinging from the saddle.

"Who's this coming?" the unknown rider asked sharply.

His hand dived into a saddle bag, and came up with a long pistol. Kin lifted a rifle with one hand, but Ian intervened.

"Meet my son, Kinross," he said. "Kinross, this is Mr. Elmo Bladen. He was venturin' to Gilbert Town, an' I knew he'd find but lean wayfarin' along the road this time of night. So I invited him to partake of our poor fare an' hospitality."

"It's not so poor," Kin answered sourly.

"The man's our guest!" Ian thundered. "Mind yer manners, laddie!"

Elmo Bladen laughed, a deep and hearty but somehow unpleasant sound like that of a grunting pig.

"The lad's got a ready tongue, eh, McKenzie? There's nought like spirit. I always did say that mine got me where I am today. An' I'll wager that he's got hot vittles ready for his tired father an' his father's com'ny too."

"I have, Mr. Bladen," Kin said with stiff politeness, "an' you're welcome to what there is."

"An' could I use it?" he guffawed. "I'll say I could!"

He dismounted, jerked the saddle and bridle from the white horse, slapped it on the rump as it passed through the pasture gate, and walked toward the cabin. Kin stood looking wonderingly at Ian, who was rubbing down the roan. It was unwritten law that a man should care for his horse before himself, yet Elmo Bladen had gone into the cabin apparently without even a thought for his sweating mount. Ian handed Kin the curry comb, and Kin curried the white horse.

When they entered the cabin Elmo Bladen was sitting before the fire with one of Ian's rifles across his knees. He wiped the corner of his mouth, down which a generous portion of the bass had just disappeared, and stood up. Kin looked at him, a fattish man with red cheeks and eyes and unkempt bristles of black hair.

"Nice gun ya got there, McKenzie," he said affably. "Ya wouldn't care to trade it, eh?"

"No."

Elmo Bladen shrugged. "Well, I'll get me a rifle of some kind when I get to Gilbert Town. Say, know what I'm gonna do when I get there?"

"If ye care to tell us."

"Sure I care," Elmo Bladen said expansively. "I'm gonna join the British, an' I bet I get me a commission in the militia before I'm done. Some of these rich rebel Whigs hereabouts is gonna have less land an' money when we get done with 'em. One thing I will say, you'll find Elmo Bladen on the winnin' side in any kind of ruckus."

"Ye seem sure the British will win."

"Faugh! How can they lose? Ya know that most of the damned rebels are bottled up in Charleston. After that falls who besides a few guerillas like this Sumter will be able to fight? The King, God bless him, will rule his own again!"

Ian's voice was low and strained. "General Lincoln surrendered Charleston on May 12, near seven weeks past."

"I told ya so! I told ya so!" Elmo Bladen cried exultantly. "Our side has won, an' the damned rebels are gone ganders. How come ya by this knowledge, friend McKenzie?"

"I found it out in Gilbert Town, where I journeyed today to swear anew my allegiance to the King. I would hae known it sooner, but I hae not been venturin' far from my gun makin'. Let us eat now."

Elmo Bladen grinned slyly as he sat down at the table. "Trust a Scot to land butter-side up, eh? I been back in the woods myself, doin' a little business with the Injuns an' gettin' furs dirt cheap. Who commands the British here?"

"Major Ferguson, an' a smartly turned-out soldier he is."

"How many does he command?"

"About a hundred an' fifty regulars, an' a body of militia, of which he's recrootin' more. They're flockin' in now that the army is here to protect 'em from the Whigs. An' on second thought, Bladen, though I wouldna hurry a guest from my house, mayhap ye had best start as soon as ye hae had yer fill o' food, if only to protect yer own interests. Every mother's son who's sidin' in wi' Ferguson expects a commission in the militia. There'll be naught left when ye get there."

Elmo Bladen thumped the table with his fist. "Sound advice, McKenzie! I'll start!"

He leaped up and, as he started for the door, calmly took up the Kentucky rifle that he had been examining.

Ian said steadily, "No doubt ye didna hear me when I said that I want to keep the rifle. It is no for trade or sale."

"Oh yes, oh yes," Elmo Bladen laughed, and laid the rifle down on the table. "But ya know how it is with a man who's mind is occupied. I had it in mind that we had already traded. I thought I gave ya my watch."

"A natural mistake. Good-bye, Bladen, an' good fortune."

"Good-bye, McKenzie."

He stamped out the door, and slammed it behind him. A moment later came the hoof beats of his horse, thudding away into the night. Ian sat gazing into the fire. His face was drawn, and when he looked up, inexpressibly weary.

"Kin," he said, "there goes as great a fool as ye'll ever see, an' as great a rogue. He would kill for gain."

"I didn't like him," Kin said.

"Nor did I. But I could do naught but ask him in. He was hungry, an' needed a rest. I'm ashamed that I even hinted he should leave. But I am happy that he didna spend the night."

Kin sat squirming on his chair. Ian had been tired when he came in, and occupied with a guest, and he hadn't yet looked toward the buck-horn rack where Kin's rifle usually rested. But he would look, and it was best to tell him what had happened rather than face his wrath and fumble for excuses when he found it out himself.

"I lost my rifle today," Kin blurted apprehensively.

Ian sat upright, and turned to face his son. "Well?"

"I went to hunt the pigeons that passed over yesterday," Kin said. "Tanse Willard was sittin' on a log by the Santaree. He was, he was watchin' somethin'. Stink-Hard Joe an' seven British soldiers was comin' up the creek. I shot through Tanse's hat to warn him. He got away. But the British took my rifle."

"Why did you warn Tanse?" Ian asked.

"He ... I like him."

Ian turned back to face the fire, and rested his chin in cupped hands. For a moment he was silent.

"Ye should hae a drubbin'," he said. "But I canna find it in me to give ye one. There are some qualities that must be kept if anythin' at all is worth livin' for, an' one is a man's feelin' for a friend. Ye did what I would hae done. But it's up to ye to get a new rifle for yerself."

For a moment Kin sat studying this unpredictable father of his who sometimes deviated so surprisingly from his normal routine. But the relief he felt was tempered by a new anxiety.

"Did you take the British pledge because you think they'll win?" he asked.

"Now ye do get a drubbin'!" Ian roared. He half rose, but settled back in his chair. "No. I guess not, Kin. It's little ye know what ye asked. I was born a subject o' the King, I pledged my loyalty to him before ye were on this earth. Ye do no swear on an' off such things lightly, remember that! Besides, it is no foregone conclusion that the British will win. I hae it

in mind that Lord Cornwallis an' his officers know little enou' o' the temper o' the men with which they meddle. They're no coastal planters, who either want the King's protection or at the best make only a half-hearted resistance. The Whigs who have flocked to Sumter, who live on half rations when they can get 'em an' who sleep in the swamps, do that not because they love a yoke. The men who hae gone beyond the mountains went there because they want to be free to mind their own affairs. They would hae taken no part in this war had not short-sighted British stirred the Indians against 'em. But now that they are in it, 'twill be to the last man."

"Will there be fighting hereabouts?" Kin asked eagerly.

"Aye, an' bloody an' bitter it will be. Ye just saw a fair example o' what's gone off to join the British, unprincipled cut-throats who neither believe in God nor fear a devil so long as they hae enou' o' their kind to snarl wi' them. An' they are only part o' what the British will muster. There'll be wi' Ferguson Tories who believe as firmly in the King's cause as the Rebels do in theirs, an' they'll fight as hard for it. There'll be soldiers of the wind who care not how any battle goes so long as they get their fill of fightin' an' pillage. There will be the regulars, among a million pounds of which there's not an ounce of cowardice. Make no mistake about it, Ferguson will ha' wi' him as fierce a pack of wolves as ever fought over a deer. An' in no way whatever will they be better men than the Rebels. But go to bed now an' forget talk of war an' killin'. Ye hae work for the mornin', an' must be rested."

Kin went to his pallet, and lay watching Ian stare moodily into the dying fire. After ten minutes Ian rose, set the latch on the door, and sought his own bed. For half an hour he tossed about on the deer-skin mattress. Finally his gentle snoring and even breathing told that he was asleep.

But Kin could not sleep. His mind was a whirl of questions for which there were no proper answers. McKenzie's Gap had been a dull enough place, but Kin had not known until now that he would have lived no other place if he could. Every one of the great plans he had made for himself had his father's house as a starting point. From it he would go into the west, cast his lot with the men who had already gone there and help them do whatever they were doing to build the country up. Now the British were here to shape the country and its inhabitants to their own designs. They had taken his rifle, and would take more of what was not theirs if they so desired. And yet, for some reason that he could not fully understand, his father had gone off to swear allegiance to these red-coated invaders.

Kin rose on his pallet and stared steadily toward his father's bed. Ian was motionless, with one hand thrown over his eyes. When Kin stamped his bare foot on the floor, Ian stirred but did not awaken. Kin slipped softly from the pallet, and tiptoed across the room. He went to the door, lifted the latch, and walked into a moon-sprayed night. For a moment he stood staring across the clearing.

It seemed exactly the same as it had on every other moonlit night. The adze marks on the rough-hewn timbers in his father's work shop were very plain. The roan horse was standing with lowered head in one corner of the pasture. The trail to Gilbert Town was white under the moon, and the trees a silvery-yellow.

Kin walked from the house into the meadow, and the heavy dew on the grass was pleasantly cool to his bare feet. He went to the edge of the meadow, and on into the forest. He had no clear idea of what he was going to do, or why he was going. All he knew was that he wanted to be alone in his woods, to see if somehow and some way he might work out an answer to the baffling problems that confronted him.

But there was no peace in the woods tonight. From far off a rabbit squealed as a hunting fox or bobcat leaped on it. Even the animals were at war. Kin walked on to where a huge elm rose high above all the other trees in the forest, sat down on one of its knobby roots, and rested his cheek on his right hand. He had to get his rifle back from Lieutenant Allaire. Maybe he could go into the British camp and steal it. He could pick a pail of berries, and enter the camp on the pretense of selling them.

Kin rose suddenly, and backed against the elm's trunk as a shadowy figure appeared before him. He felt about with his bare feet for a club or rock, anything with which he might defend himself.

"Kin, it's me. Tanse."

Tanse Willard, who had come as silently as one of the stalking foxes or bobcats that made their lairs in the forest, walked nearer, and leaned on his long rifle. The reckless grin on his face was plain in the moonlight.

"Tanse!" Kin gasped. "What are you doin' here? It—it ain't safe! There's British soldiers hereabouts!"

"That's one reason I'm here," Tanse said casually. "The other reason is to sort of say much obliged for that shot you made over on the Santaree this mornin'. But I didn't cal'clate on seein' you before mornin'. You got any notion who told them British Molly an' me was there?"

"Stink-Hard Joe. Why?"

"Just somethin' for my memory book," Tanse said grimly. "I sort of like to keep such things. Now another thing, do you know how many men this Ferguson's got with him?"

"My father said a hundred an' fifty regulars, an' he's recruitin' militia. Tanse, you better get out of here. There was a man named Bladen at the house tonight. He's gone off to join Ferguson, an' he said the British was sure to win."

"Bladen, eh?" Tanse Willard said. "My memory book's buildin' up fast. But friend Bladen's sort of countin' his pat'idges before they're in the pot. Sumter's doin' a great job with what he has to do with. An' Gates is on his way with an army. We're kind of figurin' on chasin' Cornwallis an' all his little sojers right into the Atlantic when he gets here. Gates licked 'em at Saratoga, an' he'll lick 'em in Carolina."

He spoke with a profound conviction and a deep confidence that imparted itself to Kin. Gates must be a mighty man, to inspire such respect in Tanse Willard.

"Can Gates lick Cornwallis?" Kin asked.

"That he can—an' will. Kin, which side are you on?"

"On yours. But my father's with the British."

"That makes it all the better," Tanse said thoughtfully. "Nobody will be ready to suspect you. Kin, Ike Shelby an' Colonel McDowell are down from over the mountains with their riflemen. To help 'em, Clarke's comin' back from where he was chased into Georgia. Graham, Andy Hampton, an' Major Robertson will be with 'em. They'll have upwards of a thousand men amongst 'em, an' they aim to worry the British as much as they can until Gates comes. Then they'll join him for the final push. You're 'bout fourteen, ain't you?"

"Goin' on fifteen."

"There's thirteen-year-olders in the army. Sumter's got two dozen picked riflemen not more'n a year older'n you."

"Could I join Sumter?" Kin asked eagerly.

"No. You can't," Tanse interrupted. "We need you for somethin' else. I'm off on a scout to watch Cornwallis. When I come back I'll have news. If you hear a she fox yell like they do in matin' time, an' don't do in late summer, will you come to this tree as quick as your legs will carry you?"

"Yes," Kin breathed.

"Good. Well, I'll be trailin' along."

Tanse Willard melted into the forest and blended with the shadows. Kin stood staring after him, breathless and wildly happy. Everything was not lost, and Elmo Bladen didn't know what he was talking about. Gates was coming with a great army. He would drive the British away and all would be as it had been before. Kin strode dreamily back to the cabin and crawled on his pallet with a light heart.

As July melted slowly into the golden days of August, Kin worked about the clearing and helped his father make guns. Even when the long working day ended, he no longer followed his former habit of roaming through the forest. When Tanse called, he would not call in vain.

The call came suddenly and unexpectedly in the mist-ridden dimness of an early August dawn. Across the clearing it floated, the lonely wail of a she fox in want of a mate. Ian, who had grown even more haggard and tired in the past three weeks, looked up from his bowl of breakfast porridge and fell to eating again. Kin sat up, and tried to speak.

Ian looked up a second time.

"What's the worry, laddie? Did ye think yon fox a spook?"

"Can I go look for it?" Kin blurted.

"Aye. But be back within the hour."

Kin streaked through the door and raced toward the forest. He flashed among the trees to the great elm that was the appointed rendezvous, and drew up short.

A lathered brown horse stood beside the tree. Its head drooped, and great strips of froth trailed from its mouth. Tanse Willard leaned against the tree. One arm braced his body, but the other hung bloody and useless at his side. A bullet had plowed a furrow across his temple, and blood had caked in his beard. His eyes were fire-red, his face haggard and desperate. He saw Kin, and staggered toward him.

"Kin," he panted. "Go down to Reed Bowie's house! Tell him that Cornwallis met Gates at Camden yesterday, an' Gates' whole army was wiped out! Reed must get word to McDowell an' Shelby or they'll be cut off too! Kin, do you understand?"

Kin nodded dumbly, and passed an arm about Tanse's shoulder.

"Didn't you hear what I said?" Tanse shouted. "I don't need help! I've got to warn Sumter! Go, man! Go!"

Kin turned around. Without looking back he started for Reed Bowie's cabin at a dead run.

3. *CABIN FIGHT*

Kin reached the old trail, and fought his way through the tangle of vines and brambles growing beside it. He raised a hand to wipe the sweat from his face and was surprised to see blood seeping from his wrist. For a moment he looked stupidly at it, and glanced back at the elm where he had met Tanse Willard. The events of the past twenty minutes seemed like a dream. Kin looked again at the blood on his bramble-raked wrist. The sight sobered him.

This was no dream. Gates' mighty army, on its way to drive the British out of the south, had been wiped out. Tanse Willard, back in the woods with a spent horse, a broken arm, and nobody knew what other wounds, was going to warn Sumter and had sent Kin to warn the rest of the Rebels.

He thrust his hands in his pockets and started walking. He wanted to run, to race madly as long as his lungs could draw a breath and his feet carry him. But running on this trail, where either British dragoons or Tory militiamen might be encountered, was the surest way to draw attention to himself. It was the fool's way, and he had been enough of a fool to tear so recklessly through the forest.

It was best to walk openly, with no attempt at concealment. Kin remembered the time he had gone to visit Jack Boone, and a fox had come out of the woods into the Boone clearing. Since it was summer, and fox pelts were valueless, no one had given it more than a casual glance. All had thought it a young and stupid fox crossing the field. But, when it was passing the chicken coop, it had leaped sideways, seized a chicken, and dashed to safety in the woods. Kin would take a lesson from that fox; walk innocently toward his objective and, if it became necessary, run after he reached it.

He swung down a steep little pitch and crossed Purling Creek on the hewn log that served as bridge. His heart began to beat a little faster, and his tongue was a dry, twisted piece of rope in his mouth. In spite of his intention to walk as the fox had, and to deceive anyone he might meet into believing that he was on a perfectly harmless mission, he had known that he could dive into the woods on either side of the trail if that should become necessary. And, once in the woods, he had at least a chance of eluding anyone who might chase him.

But just ahead the trail forked. The left fork swung westward, and became a dim Indian path that only the over-the-mountain men knew thoroughly or could find with any certainty. The right fork led to Gilbert Town. And John Denning's clearing, the first between McKenzie's Gap and Gilbert Town, lay where the trails forked. If he met anyone in the clearing ... Kin thrust his hands a little deeper into his pockets and slid his tongue between his teeth. He came to the edge of the clearing, and knew that his fears had been justified.

Denning's place began at Purling Creek, reached nearly to the top of the opposite hill, and both ways to bends in the trail. Denning had been here ten years, and his clearing was more advanced than those of most of his neighbors. The trees that had grown in it were either burned or piled in a withering mass of trunks and twigs at the edge of the forest. Most of the stumps had been rooted out. Denning's cabin and barns were in the center of the clearing, almost beside the trail. Beyond them a split-rail fence enclosed what had been five acres of Indian corn. Kin gasped, remembering how John Denning had boasted to Ian of that corn.

Now a herd of horses grazed in it, and evidently they had been there for more than one day. More than half the corn was either trampled to the ground or standing on gaunt stalks with the leaves and ears eaten away. Kin heard the remaining corn rustle as the horses crowded through it. A vicious little black mare kicked at a bay gelding, and sent him scrambling toward the fence. Kin crept behind a tree, and looked at the house.

Blue wood smoke curled from its broad stone chimney. As he watched, the door opened, and a man with a pewter kettle in one hand and a woollen blanket trailing behind him came out and walked toward a row of saddles on a fence rail. He threw the pot down, and draped the blanket across the rail. Snatching up a bridle, he went into the cornfield and came back leading the little black mare. He folded the blanket carefully over her back, strapped the saddle on, and went galloping down the trail.

Then, from the house, came the hearty laugh of another man. Kin shivered. The laughter was still unpleasantly like the grunting of a pig, and was followed by the booming voice of Elmo Bladen.

"We'll come back when your husband's home, Miz Denning," he said. "Ya got him to thank for this. If he'd of joined up with the King's men, like he should, he'd of kept his stuff."

Kin heard a woman's voice, shrill with anger.

"Yes, come back when my husband's here—if you dare! You'll take away something you missed this time—bullets from his rifle!"

Elmo Bladen laughed again. Then, through the open door, ten men came out of the cabin to walk toward the cornfield where the horses were foraging. Bladen, with a long sword slapping his thigh and a military cap tilted at a rakish angle on his head, strode importantly before his men. All carried rifles and wore swords. A few had bucktails in their caps or strips of yellow cloth wound about them. The man who had gone away on the black mare came back driving five red and white cows. He herded them up to the barn as the others began to saddle their horses.

Kin slipped silently back into the forest. His heart was beating like a trip hammer and perspiration bathed his forehead. The men at Denning's were not just bandits on a periodic raid. They were Tory militiamen, a recognized part of Ferguson's army, using their authority to loot. And in the short time they had spent at Denning's they had all but ruined him, destroyed ten years work! Kin thought of a horde of such men, riding unchecked over the country like a swarm of locusts, devouring whatever lay in their path. And nothing could be done. McDowell and Shelby must be warned, must be told that Gates' army was destroyed and all hope was gone, or they would be trapped too. Then there wouldn't be anybody left except Sumter—and the best he could do was worry the British.

Kin back-tracked to the trail, and glanced fearfully up and down it before he scooted across into the woods again. Reed Bowie lived on the west fork, a mile beyond Denning's. It was harder to get there through the woods, and took much longer than it would have taken by the trail. But to meet any of the gang commanded by Elmo Bladen would mean he wouldn't get there at all.

He broke into a run, dodging from tree to tree and wherever he could keeping thick bunches of rhododendrons or brambles between himself and his back trail. He did not run blindly any more, tearing through the brush without regard to what lay ahead. He was afraid and knew that he was afraid. But he might have to fight, or hide, or run, and he had to keep a cool head.

Kin came to the edge of Reed Bowie's clearing, and stared across it. Reed was a trapper and hunter rather than a farmer. He had girdled the trees in his clearing and hauled some of them away. The rest stood like rattling, leafless skeletons. Wild grass and wild flowers grew tall among them. But all about the cabin, for two hundred feet in every direction, every bit of vegetation had been leveled to the ground. Reed Bowie might be a careless farmer. But he was anything but careless in other ways. Anyone intent on entering the cabin by force would have to cross two hundred feet of open ground that held scarcely enough shelter to protect a chipmunk.

Kin drew back, and hesitated another few seconds. Everything seemed serene, free of danger, harmless. But was it? Turkey-Trot Logan had told him that when everything seemed inviting the best possible course was to stay away. Cherokees laid such ambushes, paving the way and making everything easy until you were in the middle of their trap and unable to get out again. Some of the men with Elmo Bladen must know all the Cherokee tricks. Kin drew a deep breath and started running. If this was a chance, he had to take it.

He tore wildly across the clearing, seeing only the cabin and heedless of the branches that slapped him and the brambles that plucked at his clothing. As he ran, everything but the cabin faded out of focus. For a moment that stood out with cameo-like clearness, a far-off haven that he must reach. Then the cabin faded too, and became only a shapeless blur. Kin raced madly, and it seemed that the faster he ran the farther away the cabin drew. Finally he was aware of a door closing and of four walls about him. He staggered, clutching at the back of a chair to steady himself. Everything he had seen and done this morning once more seemed like some terrible nightmare. Then the fever in his brain was pierced by a voice as soft and clear as a girl's.

"Sit down and rest, boy. And the next time you want to run like a bullet-marked deer, ponder on it a bit. Then don't do it."

Kin shook his head to clear it, and blinked as he looked across the room. An old man was sitting on a chair before a rough-hewn table. He was dressed in a buckskin hunting shirt with fringes on the shoulders and a star of red and blue porcupine quills worked into the collar. Silvery hair swept back from his forehead to his shoulders, and a long, silvery beard brushed the table. For all his age, his face was as guileless and his eyes as gentle as those of a week-old fawn.

"I'm lookin' for Reed Bowie!" Kin blurted.

"I'm Reed Bowie. My son, Reed, has gone away to fight with the British."

Kin's stomach turned over. Reed Bowie, the friend upon whom Tanse had depended, was with the British! This benign old grandfather could be of little use. Kin sank into a chair, and looked up to find Reed Bowie's eyes upon him.

"Who are you?"

"Kinross McKenzie."

"You would be Ian's son," the old man mused. "How is your father?"

"He's with the British too!" Kin said fiercely. "An' I hate him for it! The British took my rifle."

"An unpardonable sin," the old man said gravely. "You must get it back."

Kin sprang to his feet. "I'm goin' to!" he declared. "I'm goin' to if I have to kill every dirty Tory an' British soldier in Carolina!"

"Don't start with me," the old man said. "Only my son has gone away to fight with the British."

"Are *you* on our side?" Kin asked. He dreaded the answer.

"I'm helping as much as a poor old man can help. I've been over the mountains while my son remained here. Maybe what you wanted to tell him should be told to me."

"How do I know you ain't a Tory?"

"Be not a witness against thy neighbor without cause," Reed Bowie chuckled. "And that brings us just about to where we started from, eh?"

A wooden shutter slapped noisily against the side of the cabin as a stray gust of wind caught it, and swung open again. Kin glanced through the paneless window. His jaw dropped and his eyes opened wide. Six of the horsemen that he had seen at Denning's were coming down the trail. Elmo Bladen led on his white horse. Just behind, crowding close to the white horse's heels, was a lanky soldier astride the vicious little black mare. Kin shot a suspicious glance at Reed Bowie. The old man was gazing calmly out the window. His kindly face had not moved a muscle, but Kin knew that his own face must reflect the fear that he felt.

"They were at Denning's when I came by!" he breathed. "They—they took everythin' they could lay their hands on!"

Reed Bowie said with grim humor, "The Lord giveth and the Tories taketh away. Can you use a pistol, Kinross?"

"Yes."

"Then get ready to use one."

He walked to the farther wall, pushed aside a deer-skin flap and took down a Kentucky rifle and a flint-lock pistol. Reed Bowie had seemed a small man when he was sitting behind the table. But standing up, he was well over six feet. His shoulders bulged the seams of the buckskin shirt he wore; his hips were small and his legs long. He was straight and unbowed as Ian, but the deliberation with which he inspected the two firearms was maddening. Kin glanced out the window, and saw the galloping horses fan out into the clearing. Reed Bowie came back and pressed the pistol into his hand.

"It's all ready," he said calmly.

Kin cocked the pistol and raised his arm. Maybe, he thought, if Elmo Bladen and his Tories knew that the cabin was to be defended, they wouldn't attack it. Or at least they might go back for reinforcements, and give him time to see this old man to a place of safety. But his hand trembled, and the pistol shook so badly that he was unable to draw a good bead. Kin strove to steady himself, and was about to grip the pistol with both hands when his arm was seized in a firm grip. Reed Bowie's musical voice sounded in his ear.

"Don't shoot at those fellows because ..."

He leaned the long rifle over the window sill, took quick aim, and tightened his finger on the trigger. The rifle cracked. Elmo Bladen threw both arms straight in the air and tumbled from his saddle while the white horse pounded on. Reed Bowie stepped back from the window.

"... because you might have missed with the pistol," he finished calmly, "and powder and shot are hard to come by."

Five rifles cracked, and a savage yell went up from the five Tories outside. Kin saw a lock of Reed Bowie's white hair jerk as a bullet streaked through it. Through the open window he saw the white horse come to a halt within forty feet of the cabin and look nervously back toward his companions. The next moment Kin was lying on the floor with one of Reed Bowie's moccasined feet on his chest. He squirmed and wriggled, but could not arise.

"What are they doin'?" he whispered.

"They're coming," Reed Bowie said coolly, as he reloaded. "They're driving their horses ahead of them for cover."

He stooped suddenly, plucked the pistol from Kin's hand, and fired. Outside a skittish horse jumped nervously. One of the Tories shouted, and again five bullets whistled through the window. Reed Bowie poured a charge of powder down the muzzle of the pistol, and took a handful of small pellets from his pocket. He poured them on top of the powder, and rammed a patch down to hold them there. Then he resumed his post beside the window, peering out at the Tory troopers, but making no move to shoot.

Through the chinking in the log walls Kin heard the steady thud of the five driven horses' hoofs, and knew that the Tories were crouching behind those horses. When they got close enough to the cabin they would rush it. Hot perspiration bathed Kin's body. He closed his eyes and clenched his jaws, awaiting the final rush. The shuffling hoofs of the driven horses seemed to be almost beside the cabin now.

Reed Bowie went into action so suddenly and unexpectedly that Kin cried out in alarm. He thrust the pistol out the window, and pressed the trigger. The gun roared, and a great cloud of black powder drifted back into the cabin. A horse screamed as the shot with which the pistol had been loaded stung his hide. Kin heard the pounding of hoofs as rearing horses pulled at their bridles. There came the thud of one or more galloping away, and above it all the hysterical shout of one of the Tories, "Whoa thar! Whoa thar! Whoa thar!"

"Get out of this!" yelled another voice.

Reed Bowie calmly slid his long rifle through the window. But almost thirty seconds elapsed before he shot. Then he brought the rifle back in, leaned it against the wall, and took his foot from Kin's chest. Kin shakily got to his feet, wondering if all this really could have happened. Reed Bowie's expression had not changed. He was still the same benign, innocent-appearing old man Kin had encountered when he burst into the cabin.

"Did you get him?" he whispered.

"There's no need to whisper," Reed Bowie said soothingly. "The wicked flee when no man pursueth. Kinross, if you ask him, your father will tell you that Tories of this stamp are a curse to the country. And Whigs of the same stamp are as great a curse. I told my son Reed that, since he felt he must fight for the King, to join the regular army and abide by its rules. But now do you know which side I'm on?"

"Yes!" Kin said emphatically. "I met Tanse Willard up in the woods. He'd been on a scout. He said I should tell Reed Bowie, an' I reckon he must of meant you, that Gates' army was wiped out at Camden. He says you should hurry an' tell McDowell an' Shelby so they won't be caught too."

Kin swelled with the importance of his mission, and at the same time felt a little irritation because Reed Bowie received it so calmly.

"Tanse was wounded, too," he volunteered. "I guess he must of been in that battle, huh? But he said he was goin' off to warn Sumter...."

"Tanse'll probably do that, too," Reed Bowie murmured. "But we have a little work to do ourselves now. I think you'd best go with me, Kinross. I may need your help."

Kin glanced up resentfully. Reed Bowie's words seemed to have had a double meaning: Kin needed someone to watch

over him and Reed Bowie intended to do it. Kin flushed hotly at the thought of his lying helplessly on the floor while the old man fought off the Tories. Without a word, he followed Reed Bowie outside, and looked toward the place where Elmo Bladen had been shot.

The fallen Tory leader was no longer there. Either he had been only wounded and dragged himself away or else his fleeing comrades had taken him with them. Reed Bowie had caught Elmo Bladen's white horse, and was riding toward the edge of the clearing, where the other five horses had gathered in a nervous group. Kin expected to see them wheel and gallop away. But Reed Bowie evidently understood horses as well as he did rifles. He dismounted, and the little black mare stretched her head toward him. One by one he approached and caught up the trailing bridles of all five horses. Remounting the white horse, he led the rest back to the cabin. Then he tied the little mare to a post along with the white horse, and began stripping the saddles from the other four.

"What are you doin' that for?" Kin asked, puzzled.

"We can have no saddled horses except the two we ride. We probably will have to cross British lines. By the way, Kinross, did you know that you're my grandson?"

"I...? All right. But some of those Tory militiamen know me now. They'll know I ain't your grandson."

"Do any of the British soldiers know you?"

"There's a Lieutenant Allaire. He took my gun."

"We'll risk meeting him, and Tories that may know you."

He stooped, picked up two saddles and bridles, and carried them into the cabin. Kin brought a third saddle in, and Reed Bowie returned for the remaining saddle and the two bridles. He laid them against the wall, and took a stick of dry wood from beside the fireplace. With a long hunting knife he began paring thin shavings from it and piling them against the wall. When he had enough he took a hot ember from the smoldering fire and laid it in the center of the shavings. They blackened at the edges, and a thin tongue of yellow flame licked up from them. Reed Bowie laid a few sticks of kindling on the shavings, and added more wood. The fire leaped high, hurling itself in a hungry attack against the wall.

"Come on," Bowie said gruffly.

They walked out of the cabin, and closed the door behind them. Reed Bowie turned to watch the blue smoke that was finding a way through every crack and chink in the walls, and for the first time he seemed to undergo a change. There was immeasurable sadness in his voice when he spoke.

"It was my son's home. But my son is now my enemy."

"Why did you burn it?" Kin asked.

"This is war," the old man answered. "I want none to know that I stayed here, and I want no enemy to find comfort and shelter here. Ride the white horse, Kinross."

He swung himself to the black mare's back, laid the rifle across the saddle, put the pistol in his pocket, and was away down the trail. The four free horses strung out behind him, and Kin brought up the rear. Reed Bowie cantered toward the west, until the sun was almost directly overhead. Then he swung into the forest. Kin followed, into trackless wilderness where great trees reared on all sides.

Kin studied the ground, looking for a sign of a trail or track, any indication that man might have been here before. There were none. He wondered at Reed Bowie's ability to pick a way through this wilderness. They were traveling by the sun, and the sun was swinging toward the west when they came to the top of a small knoll and looked into the distance to see water sparkling between the trees.

"There's the river," Reed Bowie said. "And there is where we may have trouble. British patrols are thick through here. If we reach the river without meeting one, get across. If you start across, don't come back for anything. But if we meet a patrol—well, we'll just have to hope that the Lord is on our side and that our wits are in order. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

The black mare chose her own pace down the hill, until they came to a beaten trail that wound along the border of the river. The four free horses stopped beside her, and cocked their ears forward at something on the trail. One snorted, and there came an answering snort from trees behind which Kin could not see. He touched the white horse with his heels, and the horse gave a little hop that took him to the center of the trail. Kin stared in the direction Reed Bowie was looking, and his heart seemed to stop beating.

A uniformed British sergeant, mounted on a skittish sorrel mare, was riding toward them. Beside him, with fixed muskets trained on Kin and Reed Bowie, stalked five militiamen. Kin glanced around apprehensively, and his nervousness communicated itself to the white horse. It danced sideways, and tossed its head to chew on the bit in its mouth. Reed Bowie reached forth to lay a hand on its neck and the horse was quiet again. The British sergeant reined up ten feet away and sat sideways in his saddle, looking at them. His tunic was open, and his hard eyes, Kin thought, were looking right through him. The five militiamen slouched carelessly, but never for an instant relaxed the hold on their rifles.

"Who are you?" The sergeant's voice was crisp.

"It depends," Reed Bowie answered. "Early this morning my grandson and I were good Whigs. Since that time we've been only a couple of wayfarers with four extra horses. Now I reckon the time has come to be good Tories."

"Explain yourself, old man!" the sergeant ordered sternly.

"Well," Reed Bowie shrugged, "you can't take lodging at a good Whig's house unless you're a good Whig too. Now, just suppose he had four horses in his pasture. If he thought you were a Tory you'd never have a chance to tap him on the head with a rifle barrel and get them, would you? When you're driving those horses you might meet up with either Whigs or Tories, so you're a wayfarer until you know who you're meeting. But when you meet up with a British patrol, someone who can put the horses into the King's service, it's high time to become a good Tory."

The five militiamen grinned, put their rifle stocks on the ground, and leaned on their barrels. When the sergeant spoke again his voice was less stern.

"Did you steal those horses?"

"Steal is a harsh word," Reed Bowie said piously. "The robbery of the wicked shall destroy them. All I care to say is that the horses were at a good Whig's house early this morning. Now I'm willing to do my duty by the King and sell them to you for, let us say, sixty shillings each?"

"Sixty shillings for those spavined brutes?" The sergeant gazed scornfully toward the horses. "They might carry a soldier two or three miles, but I doubt it. The four may be worth sixty shillings."

"They've run many a mile since morning," Reed Bowie said. "And they're tired. But any of them are still more than a match for that mare you're riding. Still, I don't want to haggle with a King's man. Suppose we say fifty each?"

"Thirty."

"I'll meet you halfway again. Make it forty."

"All right," the sergeant laughed. "I'll give you sixty for that black mare and your grandson's white horse."

"No. We need swift mounts in our business. Do you have the money with you?"

"Not that much." The sergeant reached inside his tunic and brought out a purse. He emptied its contents into his hand.

"I have a hundred and five shillings," he announced. "I'll owe you fifty-five. But you have a soldier's word that it will be paid the next time you pass by here."

"A soldier's word is good enough for me," Reed Bowie said. He rode forward and took the money. "Thank you, Sergeant."

"Why don't you and the boy come into camp for a meal and a rest?" the sergeant asked.

Reed Bowie shook his head. "It's time for us to be Whigs again. We heard of horses across the river."

"Meet me here tomorrow," the sergeant said eagerly. "I'll give forty shillings apiece for all the horses you can bring."

"Fair enough," Reed Bowie answered. "And bring the money you owe me, too. Come on, grandson. We have to swim. Head slantwise upstream. Lean a little forward, so as to sink your horse's head nearer to the water. Slacken your reins and give him play. That's it."

Kin rode into the river, and felt the water surge up around his saddle as the white horse started swimming. Reed Bowie, holding the rifle, pistol, and both powder horns high, rode beside him. Neither spoke until the horses reached shallow water and scrambled for a footing in the pebbly bottom.

"Why is he so anxious to buy horses?" Kin asked.

"He'll sell them to the army for sixty or seventy shillings each. But the hundred and five we have will help John Denning get a new start."

They splashed through the shallow water and urged their tired horses up the bank on the opposite side. Reed Bowie led through forest so trackless and dense that the sun never reached its floor. Again Kin sought vainly for some sign of trail or landmark.

The man who came out from behind a cypress tree did so so suddenly and unexpectedly that he seemed to have been standing before them all the time. He was a small man, dressed in mountaineer's clothing. The rifle he carried was almost as long as he was, but he handled it as though it were a part of him.

"Halt," he said in a nasal twang, "an' give the password."

"Don't go botherin' me for passwords, Saullie," Reed Bowie said. "Where's the Colonel?"

"Reed Bowie!" the sentry exclaimed. "Come on!"

He led off at a trot through the dark woods, until they came to a fallen tree. Kin stared at the man sitting on it. Of ordinary stature, he somehow seemed to be a very giant of a man. His hair was combed back from his powerful forehead, and his face had the strength of a granite rock. Reed Bowie slid from his horse, and his voice was weighted with respect when he said to Kin,

"Get down and salute, Kinross. This is Colonel Shelby."

Kin slid from his saddle and saluted stiffly.

"Colonel Shelby, this is Kinross McKenzie," Reed Bowie said. "He comes direct from Tanse Willard with news that Gates met Cornwallis at Camden. Gates was wiped out."

"So," Isaac Shelby said expressionlessly. Kin watched him closely, awaiting the shock of the news. But as he watched in vain, he suddenly knew why Reed Bowie regarded this man with such great deference. Isaac Shelby was a real leader. But, more than that, he was a great *man*. If no one stood at his back, he would still fight alone for anything in which he believed.

"So," he said again, "that's the way the cat jumped, eh? We'll have to retreat."

"That's all you can do, Colonel."

"Yup. That's all. But we had sort of figgered on pokin' a few hornets into the British garrison at Musgrove's Mills. That would be one last slap at 'em, anyway."

"I reckon you'll have to give it up. The woods are full of British and Tories."

Isaac Shelby jumped to his feet so suddenly that Kin stepped backward involuntarily.

"We ain't givin' it up!" he snapped. "You an' the boy git as much sleep as you kin if you're ridin' with us, Reed. We start for Musgrove's Mills an hour before sundown!"

4. *THE FOOLS*

Kin was safely in bed, waiting dawn and the work it would bring, when a huge white horse that grunted like a pig came up to stand over him. The horse's cavernous mouth opened, and his teeth closed on Kin's shoulder. Kin leaped up with a cry. He opened bewildered eyes to stare at the green forest all about and at Reed Bowie's kindly face. The old man took his huge hand from Kin's shoulder.

"Get up, Son," he said. "All fighting men will want to go to Musgrove's Mills, and it's almost time to ride. The Colonel thinks you and I sort of ought to stick together, too. How about it?"

"I haven't got a gun."

"I thought of that, too," Reed Bowie said. He took the pistol from his belt and gave it to Kin, along with a horn of powder and a pouch of bullets. "They're yours to keep. I know they're not as good as the rifle Allaire took. But they'll do in a pinch."

Kin pocketed the pistol, and hung the horn and the bullet pouch about his waist. A sudden warmth surged through him. Now that he had a gun once more, he was once more a man. He tried to make his voice steady when he asked,

"How many men are at Musgrove's Mills?"

"The Colonel figgers about two hundred."

"And how many men have we got?"

"Two hundred."

"But—but suppose there's more men than that at the Mills?"

Reed Bowie laughed. "Suppose there is? When I said the Colonel's got two hundred men, I didn't mean two hundred like we met back at the cabin. Colonel Clarke's here, and I reckon he'll command with Shelby. Captain Jim McCall and Captain Sam Hammond are along, and they'll be going for something besides the ride. Colonel Jim Williams is here with Tom Brandon, Jim Steen, and Major McJunkin. You should know McJunkin; he's almost an army in himself. Then there's Major Joe McDowell, Captain Dave Vance, Captain Valentine Sevier, and Captain Shadrach Inman. I could reel off the rest of the names, and you'd have two hundred riflemen that can shoot the whiskers off'n a chipmunk."

Kin asked hesitantly, "Where's Ferguson?"

"Faugh!" Reed Bowie chuckled. "He's camped between us and Musgrove's. The Bulldog's on watch, and the Colonel's picking the bone right out from between his fore legs. But you'd better come. They'll be riding soon."

Even to Kin, willing to rely on the judgment of older men, this seemed a mad scheme. Gates, the man upon whom everyone had relied, had been crushingly defeated. Rebels of the southern provinces should either be admitting that the British had fairly won or else going back over the mountains to those dim valleys where no British could follow. Yet a handful of them were going to try to outflank the wily Ferguson and attack a British stronghold. Kin thought dully of his level-headed father and the lonely cabin he had left so abruptly.

They came suddenly in a natural forest meadow.

Throughout the clearing, and just within the trees at its borders, little groups of men stood or lounged about. Except for a very few who were dressed in homespun working clothes, all wore hunting shirts. Either the shirts, or the fringes with which the sleeves were adorned, varied in color. Most of the men had bucktails or a sprig of green pine or holly in their round hats. A few swaggered about with swords and sabers, but the majority carried only long rifles and the accompanying hunting knife.

"They're not much to look at," Reed Bowie admitted. "But they'll do. The color of their shirts or fringes tells what company they belong to."

Come upon so suddenly and unexpectedly, it seemed like a vast number of men in the clearing. And how could so many gather in one place without making a sound or in any way revealing their presence? Kin glanced across the clearing.

Sitting on or gathered about a fallen log a group of men, evidently officers, were talking earnestly. Some were clad in the blue and buff uniforms of the Continental army, but most were dressed only in hunting shirts with their distinguishing colors.

A tall, wiry soldier wearing a coon-skin cap with the tail dangling down his neck bawled, "Hustle up, Val! I wanna get my hands on the King's money chest!"

One of the men on the fallen log turned around and drawled, "Maybe you'd like to go off an' get it alone, Pete. Shut up until we're ready or I'll put you on hoss detail."

The wiry soldier chuckled, and fell to counting his bullets.

"That's Valentine Sevier," Reed Bowie explained. "He used to be a spy and has got more nerve than a cimarron bear. I reckon they're about ready."

The officers about the fallen log dispersed among the men until only one was left. It was Isaac Shelby, and he mounted the log. His voice was not loud, but still loud enough to reach every man in the clearing.

"All right, here it is without any trimmin's. Gates has been licked, an' Ferguson's gonna be on our necks afore long."

The men stood silent, open-mouthed, waiting what was to come next.

"Anybody here who thinks he ain't in one hell of a fix had better think again," Shelby continued. "We can't lick the Tories an' British with what we got—I sent a runner to McDowell tellin' him to clear out. Every man of you's gonna have to ride back to yore cabin, an' tell those you left there that Bulldog Ferguson run you out."

Isaac Shelby looked at the ground, and when he glanced up again he flicked his hand in a gesture that brought grins to the faces of those who had campaigned with him before.

"But I sort of got to thinkin'," Shelby said carelessly. "It's a long ways from here to the Holston an' Nolachucky. I thought, 'Ike, you an' all these other men rode all that way to fight the British.' Now, except for that little skirmish when we took Thicketty Fort, an' that piddlin' little fight we had with Dunlap in Fair Forest, we ain't hardly bothered 'em a'tall! But I thought too that it ain't hardly right to ask you to go on an' fight the garrison at Musgrove's when I know that we can't get help an' Ferguson's gonna be on us. So the best thing any of you can do is scat while the scattin's good. Start now an' ride back over the mountains."

He paused a moment, and when he spoke again his voice was fiercely vehement.

"But *I'm* goin' to Musgrove's! An' I thought that if six or eight of you might be big enough fools to come along—why, that's six or eight more bullets we could toss into the garrison there. Does anybody want to go?"

There was an incoherent shout. Two hundred men raised their right arms, or tossed caps into the air. Kin felt a strange magnetism grip him with irresistible force, and raised his hand with the rest. Follow this man! Follow this leader who knew the path and was bigger than any obstacle in it! A strange, tingling pleasure coursed up and down Kin's spine when Isaac Shelby smiled and looked down at his men. He seemed to be looking not at a crowd, but individually at each person in it.

"Danged if you ain't all fools," he said clearly. "But come on. All we got to do is ride forty miles by the crack o' dawn, have a hell of a fight when we git thar, an' ride far enough an' fast enough to keep ahead of whoever comes after us. Any man as gets left behind'll have to look after hisself as best he can. Don't get caught by the Tories unless you fancy yourself danglin' from a tree with a rope around your neck. Cornwallis an' his men favor them neckties—for Whigs."

A spontaneous laugh rose from the assembled men, and they turned to rush back into the forest. Kin found himself running with them, racing beside Reed Bowie with the pistol clutched grimly in his hand. A strange eagerness possessed him; he wanted to be at grips with whatever enemy they were going to meet. Isaac Shelby had told them to expect a gruelling ride, a hard fight, and perhaps no escape. Yet the manner in which he had told it made everything seem a gay lark. Then a horse neighed, and there came to Kin the realization that they were not running toward Musgrove's but only toward the horses that were to carry them there.

Saddled, bridled, and ready, the horses were tied to the limbs of trees. A few danced skittishly at the ends of their

tethers, but the majority only gazed mildly at the soldiers rushing upon them. Kin knew without being told that these had been through a dozen campaigns, that they were more accustomed to being rushed upon and away at the touch of a spur than they were to being mounted gently. Of nearly every size and color, they were as genuinely war horses as were any mounts that ever carried knights or Crusaders. And Kin found out also that the apparently helter-skelter rush had had some method. The white horse stood near, and beside it was the little black mare. A huge bay stallion was tied to the same tree. Isaac Shelby untied it, and stood with the reins over his arm. Officers moved about, and thirty men swung into their saddles.

"That's Williams' party," Reed Bowie volunteered.

"Yeh," Shelby agreed. "He an' Brandon know this kentry good's anybody here. They're leadin' off." He stared reflectively after the disappearing horsemen. "Well, looks like it's our turn to go."

Kin swung into the saddle, and crowded the white horse close to the black mare's heels. Reed Bowie's words floated back to him.

"Just give your horse his head, and he won't fall behind. All you have to do is stay in the saddle. Williams and Brandon will guide us there."

For an hour they rode through the forest. Once the brush crashed as a herd of deer, scenting or hearing the column of horsemen, wheeled and fled from it. A mocking bird, with almost perfect precision, began to mimic the steady clip-clop, clip-clop, of the marching horses' hoofs.

Darkness fell, and it seemed to Kin that at the exact second complete night overtook him, his horse stepped from trackless forest onto a road. Williams and Brandon were doing very well up there in front. While it was still broad daylight, and prying eyes might identify them, they had stayed in the woods. But when night came, they had sought the much easier travelling to be found on the road. The white horse pricked up his ears, his swaying body moving faster as he went into a canter. Kin swung in his saddle, and dimly made out the horseman just behind. The column was galloping.

But it seemed that they continued it for an interminably long while. Kin felt water splash as they galloped through a small river, and automatically lifted his powder horn high in the air. Then they had crossed the river and were on dry ground again. Kin stifled a yawn, and let the reins go slack on the white horse's neck while he reached forth to grasp the saddle horn with both hands. It was a shameful way to ride, he knew. But nobody could see it. He sank forward in the saddle, and his hands wrapped a little tighter about the saddle horn as he tried to fight back an overpowering impulse to sleep. Never in his life had he been more weary. Kin thought dully of his father, and wondered miserably what he was doing and thinking.

In sudden terror he jerked himself erect. Someone was trying to drag him from his saddle. Kin's hand lunged down in a savage attack on the arm that encircled his waist, and he twisted sharply in the saddle.

"It's only Reed, Kinross."

"I've been asleep!" Kin said it as though it was an accusation, a crime to sleep when there were some who could know no rest. Shame crept through him.

"So have half the others," was the reply. "How do you feel now?"

"Fine. How far do we have to go yet?"

"About an hour's ride."

Kin said, "I'll make it."

The white horse's hoof beats were no longer a rhythmic cadence but a stumbling, tired beat. But, whatever his shortcomings might have been, Elmo Bladen had known how to pick a good horse. When the line broke into a canter again the white horse galloped with them, flinging his powerful body forward and keeping his nose at the little black mare's heels. Kin left the reins slack on the horse's neck, and the night wind was pleasantly cool against his face. It awakened him fully, and the clip-clop song of the mocking bird again began to play through his mind. Every man here was riding to battle and some were certainly going to die. Yet that fact seemed as unreal as the ride itself. But the smell

of the dew-wet earth was very real, as was the hushed expectancy that always preceded the birth of a day. Kin glanced back at the column, and saw mounted men dimly outlined. Looking ahead, he could see Reed Bowie on his little black mare and Isaac Shelby on his huge stallion. Day was almost here. Five minutes later Kin followed the column into a field where the leaders of the party had already dismounted. Kin slid from the saddle and leaned against his horse while a tall, unruffled man in buckskins came out of the half darkness. It was Valentine Sevier.

"I'm all set, Colonel," he said coolly.

He turned and stalked away. Five men, each carrying a Kentucky rifle, fell in behind him and disappeared in the woods. Kin watched them curiously, and glanced inquiringly at Reed Bowie.

"They're scouts," said the old man. "Going to find out what's what and why."

Kin looked again at the forest into which the scouts had disappeared. He, Jack Boone, and Sam Denning had played at this, in the forest about McKenzie's Gap. But this was the real thing. Kin had to force himself to believe it because all about soldiers were stripping saddles and bridles from their mounts and rubbing the horses down. Finished, they put the bridles back on and looped the reins over their arms while they either sat or lay down and let the tired horses graze on the scanty grass in the clearing. Except for the fact that no man got far from his saddle or let go of his rifle, they were doing their necessary chores as though this was nothing out of the ordinary. In guilty haste Kin pulled the saddle from the white horse, and began to knead the sweat and saddle stains from his back.

He sat on the ground with the looped bridle reins over his wrist and tried to be as calm as the rest of the men appeared. A flicker's strident morning call shattered the stillness, and a woodpecker began his rattling tap-tap against a tree trunk. Two crows cawed indolently as they winged toward some objective of their own. It was exactly like every other morning, the same sounds, the same cool air, the same rising sun with its promise of fierce heat to come.

From the direction the scouts had taken, a rifle shot cracked like a whip lash. It was followed by another shot, sharp and clear. Then came the rattle of a half-dozen shots, and two more spaced five seconds apart.

As though the shots had been a signal they were expecting, every man rose and slapped the saddle back on his horse. There was no excitement, no apparent confusion. But every man had his rifle ready, and was prepared to fight or to ride and run. Kin saddled the white horse, and swore under his breath because his fingers trembled when he buckled the cinch strap. The sight of Reed Bowie standing with one hand on the black mare's withers calmed him. Whatever Reed did, he would do. Clarke, Brandon, Williams, and the rest of the officers led their horses over near Shelby's mount. Then suddenly two hundred rifles went up to cover movement at the edge of the woods. The rifles were lowered when Valentine Sevier and six men broke from the shelter of the trees.

They came across the field at a dead run. A spreading circle of blood showed through the shoulder of one man's buckskin shirt, and another reached up an impatient hand to brush the blood away from a bullet gash in his forehead. Valentine Sevier came to a halt before the assembled officers, and Kin heard him say,

"We forded the river, Colonel, an' got right up to the camp. I could only make a guess, but I know thar's closer to five hundred than two hundred men in it. Comin' back, we met a British patrol an' had a little scrimmage with 'em. We got one, wounded two. But t'other two got back to camp. They know we're here, Colonel, but they don't know how many of us there are. By the way, we found Adam Reep hangin' 'round next to the camp. He's got somethin' to say about the Tories that we didn't figger on."

Adam Reep, a diminutive man with a ridiculously long rifle, came forward.

"I been a-lyin' out," he said. "I got tired of hidin' in the brush an' come down here to see if I could flush a British sentry an' get a shot at him. Last evenin' Colonel Inness, I knowed him on account I been to Ninety-Six an' saw him, come in with two hundred Provincials an' about a hundred Tories. Dave Fannin' an' Dan Clary's thar, too. They sent a hundred men off this mornin' on some of the hell's business them Tories is allus runnin'. But I reckon there still is five hundred men in camp."

Williams said apprehensively, "We'd better get out."

"How ya gonna get out?" Shelby snapped. "Every horse here has got forty miles behind it now. If we try to run them wolves will be snappin' at our heels an' pullin' us down from behind. We gotta fight!"

"Shore, an' that makes sense to me," Colonel Clarke drawled.

The rest of the officers nodded their assent. Shelby turned to Adam Reep.

"Ain't there a ridge over thataway?"

"Yup. A good timbered ridge. It's a mite east of Cedar Shoal Crick an' 'bout half a mile from the ford. It's a right smart place to fight from, Cunnel."

"Take us there."

Isaac Shelby swung into his saddle, and Adam Reep started at a fast trot through the woods. Kin mounted, and the white horse kept just behind Shelby's stallion as both followed Adam Reep. Reed Bowie edged his mare up beside Kin, but the two hundred soldiers made so little noise in mounting and following that Kin had to look behind to make sure they were coming. Adam Reep halted, and raised his hand.

"This is a good place to leave the hosses, Cunnel."

There was a hurried consultation between Shelby and Clarke. The officers came up, and circulated among the troops. Two parties of twenty men each and one of twenty-five remained mounted. The rest dismounted, tying their horses to trees and bushes or merely leaving them with reins trailing on the ground. They started walking forward, up a ridge that was bisected by an old road. Isaac Shelby walked to the rim of the ridge, and stood for a moment looking down. Kin could see a river glinting in the early morning sun and, beyond that, the tents of the British camp. Shelby turned around and lifted a bull-like voice.

"We'll make a breastwork across the road an' along the ridge. Make it one to shoot from. Everybody pitch in."

Kin leaped toward a log, one that ordinarily he would not have tried to lift. But it seemed to come off the ground almost of its own volition, and Kin looked up to see Reed Bowie carrying the other end of it. They took it to the road, threw it down, and went back for another. Kin was only dimly aware of other men all about, carrying logs, rocks, sods, anything to help build up the breastwork. But he was clearly aware of Isaac Shelby, seemingly everywhere at once, doing twice the work of anyone else, and infusing into the tired troops his own boundless vitality. Then, after an interval that Kin thought could not have been more than two minutes but actually was thirty, Isaac Shelby once more had the attention of his men.

"Good enough," he said calmly. "We could lick Cornwallis hisself from behind this. You ready, Shad?"

"All ready, Colonel."

In charge of the twenty-five mounted men, Captain Shadrach Inman and his party rode down the ridge. Kin followed Reed Bowie and Shelby to the right flank of the hastily improvised fort, and stood there with his eyes fixed on the little party of mounted men who were riding down to the ford. They drew up at the river, levelled their rifles, and shot at a party of Tories assembling on the other side. Kin saw three Tories fall, and the rest take cover.

A great roar went up from the British camp. Drums began to rattle, and bugles blasted their shrill defiance. Men on foot and on horseback poured toward the river and began to splash recklessly across it. Captain Inman's little band reloaded and shot again. Then, wheeling their horses, they began a disorderly retreat.

Kin opened and closed his jaws, and glanced back toward the tethered horses. He wanted desperately to go back there, to get so far from this place that even the echo of the noises that filled his ears would no longer be remembered. But his body was a wooden thing incapable of motion.

The man to his left, a Watauga rifleman named William Smith, exclaimed,

"By gum! Thar's the leader! Lay off him, all of you. He's my meat!"

"All right, Bill," Shelby drawled. "But don't shoot 'til you can count the ha'r in his eyebrows."

"Huh! Sinst when you been tellin' me how to shoot?"

"Just because you won the beef critter at the shoot last year ... say, look at Inman! If he ain't the gumptionest!"

Inman's command had turned, charged back into the very teeth of the British, and fired another volley. They wheeled, and each man bent low over his horse's neck as they raced up the hill toward the breastwork. Three riderless horses, with dangling bridle reins and flapping stirrups, ran with them. The men leaped the barricade and raced their horses down the hill to where the rest were tethered. At this apparent retreat, the pursuing British and Tories redoubled their speed. A spontaneous shout burst from foot soldiers and horsemen alike.

Kin fixed his eyes on an officer, a red-coated lieutenant with a waving sword in one hand and a pistol in the other. The lieutenant was young, with curly brown hair that was gathered in a knot at the base of his neck. A ragged blue scar ran down his right cheek. His eyes flashed white, and Kin realized with a start that the officer was almost close enough for him to "count the hair in his eyebrows."

At that moment a murderous volley came from the men behind the barricade. Kin saw a little spot of blood on the lieutenant's forehead, and his eyes blinked as though he had been suddenly and greatly surprised. He fell limply forward. But, even as he fell, his arm jerked forward and his sword pointed up hill, toward the enemy, the direction in which a good soldier should go. Kin glanced down the battle line, and saw fallen British and Tories everywhere, either lying still or trying to crawl away.

They had fallen into the trap set by Inman's twenty-five men, without even suspecting that a hundred and seventy-five more lay in ambush. For a short space they drew back in bewildered confusion. But their officers were still with them, riding or walking along their lines and whipping them back into order.

Still outnumbering the rebels three to one, the British and Tories reformed their lines and charged up the ridge straight toward the barricade.

5. *THE FLIGHT*

Uniformed Provincials, on foot and on horse, swarmed up the ridge toward the right flank of the breastwork. Bayonets gleamed on the ends of their muskets, and the officers' waving swords gave back brilliant reflections of the rising morning sun. But, when they shot, most of their bullets whistled harmlessly over the barricade.

"They're over-shootin'," William Smith sneered. "Guess they never shot uphill afore. Now, whar did that leader git to?"

Kin turned around. Nearly every rifle had helped fire the first Whig volley. Since then their shooting had been sporadic, and Kin had been able to tell from which position nearly every shot had come. But it occurred to him suddenly that William Smith had not been firing at all. And anyone who was not helping beat back the British was helping lose the battle for his own comrades.

"Why don't you shoot?" Kin demanded.

"I shoot when I see somethin' I want to shoot at—an' then I hit it!"

"Leave him alone," Reed Bowie said. "He wants ... Damn the luck!"

The old man had been kneeling behind the breastwork with his gun resting across the top of it. He swung his rifle toward a sergeant who was leading a squad of soldiers up the ridge, but just at that moment two officers galloped in front of them and little dust bombs exploded beneath their horses' hoofs to screen both the officers and the men. Reed Bowie remained in position, his rifle trained on the dust screen. When the sergeant and his men came rushing out of it, thirty feet nearer the breastwork, Bowie's finger tightened on the trigger. The sergeant took three loose-legged steps forward and fell on his face. Reed Bowie dropped behind the breastwork and methodically began reloading his rifle. More rifles spoke, and two of the men who had been with the sergeant dropped in their tracks. The rest fell back uncertainly.

Kin rested his pistol across the breastwork, and flinched only slightly when a bullet whistled three feet over his head. The first baptism of fire, he had found, was very like the first attempt to swim. You might be afraid of the water, but once you were in it and found that you could handle yourself there, much of that fear departed. This was the same. A little care and caution greatly increased your chances of living through a battle. So far the Whigs' only casualties were the three men that Captain Inman had lost.

But, though he had been shooting wildly, Kin now held his fire. Talking with William Smith, and watching Reed Bowie shoot, had taught him one of the most significant facts of frontier fighting. Schooled as European soldiers, the British were maintaining a constant fire. It made a terrifying noise, but most of their bullets whistled harmlessly over the breastwork. Trained as frontier Indian fighters accustomed to setting out on long, lonely journeys and carrying on their persons enough powder and shot to last them, the Whigs had been taught that each shot must count.

Kin recalled Ian's words: "I hae it in mind that Lord Cornwallis an' his officers know little enou' o' the temper o' the men with which they meddle." Ian had known what he was talking about. As against three Americans lost, the ridge was littered with British and Tory dead and wounded.

But still they came on, swarming up the ridge, outnumbering the barricade's defenders two to one. Kin heard firing to the left, and risked a glance in that direction. He could see Tories, still far down the ridge, creeping from tree to tree and shooting whenever an opportunity offered. Clarke was holding them. But the right flank of the breastwork, Shelby's position, was threatened by regulars who had been trained in the hard school of direct assault.

An officer with a duelling pistol in either hand rode up to the barricade, leaned over, and shot. A buckskinned mountaineer dropped his rifle and pressed both hands to his side. Kin watched him walk backward to a tree, and sit down by it with his head bent and both hands still tightly pressed against his side. Finally he relaxed and his hands fluttered to the ground.

A dozen rifles spoke, but the daring British officer seemed to bear a charmed life. He wheeled his horse and raced back down the ridge. As soon as he had reloaded his pistols he returned for another charge. And the men behind him, inspired by and partaking of his own courage, came with him in an intrepid, irresistible attack that brought them to and over the breastwork in a surging flood of fighting men and weapons.

But the mountaineers were no longer there. Kin had watched the British charge, men with waving sabers or fixed bayonets. Then he had been aware that Reed Bowie had seized him by the hand and run with him. Now he peered out from behind a tree to see the British take the right flank of the breastwork. Reed Bowie knelt behind another tree. A third concealed Shelby, and a fourth sheltered William Smith. Kin watched the rifleman's worried face, and heard him mutter.

"Dog-gone, I shore thought I saw him ag'in. But he wan't thar."

The British began to deploy from the captured breastwork into the woods. They were coming more slowly now—there were veterans among them who had gone into the woods after mountaineers before. A little wind began to lift the smoke and dust of battle from the ridge. Then two officers came in sight. The first was the one who had ridden up to the breastwork and inspired the first charge, but the other was as magnificently mounted and as reckless. Their spurred horses bounded to the fore of the advancing British. Behind them, the walking infantrymen broke into a trot, and the mounted soldiers spurred forward. Kin heard William Smith's happy shout.

"Dog-gone, thar he be!"

His rifle slid around the tree, held steady for a second, and belched its smoke and flame. The officer reeled in his saddle, his sword clattered to the ground, and the reins went limp. The horse reared and screamed, lashing out with his forefeet. He wheeled and raced back into the British lines. Two troopers caught his bridle, while others dragged the wounded officer from the saddle and carried him away.

But another rifle had cracked, and the other officer leaned forward to put both arms about his galloping horse's neck. The horse tore through the Whig lines, leaped a fallen tree, and went racing through the forest with his rider still grimly clinging to the saddle. With the disabling of their two leaders, the British force suddenly became a body without a head. It could still fling itself about, and move its muscles, but it had nothing to direct it. And the Whigs who faced this paralyzed monster seized their opportunity to demolish it.

The Indian yell that swelled from the mountaineers' throats rang through the forest, filling its emptiness with terrible threats of things to come. They were no longer two hundred men, but a great yelling devil whose high-pitched voice completely demoralized the British. They turned to run, and Kin found himself running after them. He saw Captain Shadrach Inman race by. A long knife gleamed in his right hand, his rifle was clutched in his left.

From the center and left flanks of the breastwork, Clarke's and Williams' men joined in the Indian yell and leaped the barricade to join the charge. A dozen of the fleetest mountaineers broke like hounds from a pack and began snapping at the very heels of the fleeing British and Tories. Kin raced behind them, carried along by the victorious wave, for the moment forgetting everything save that the enemies who would have killed him had broken themselves on the Whig defenses and were in full retreat. Intoxicated with victory, he yelled at every step.

Then suddenly a heavy hand on his shoulder jerked him backward. Kin whirled, doubling his fists to strike at whoever dared rob him of his just share of the Whig triumph. But he was jerked back more rudely, and a cuff alongside the head sent him sprawling to the ground. For a moment, half-dazed, he lay still. Then he rose to a sitting position and raised a hand to his smarting cheek.

The blow and the fall seemed to have erased from his mind the wild battle lust that had possessed it, and when he looked down the ridge he saw a very clear picture of the battle. Reed Bowie, standing just a little way ahead of him, whipped his rifle to his shoulder and shot. Kin followed the direction in which the rifle pointed, and stifled a horrified gasp.

Three hundred feet down the ridge Captain Inman was surrounded by British regulars. He had grasped his gun by the end of the barrel, and was swinging it like a flail about his head. A soldier staggered soddenly out of the group, and walked drunkenly toward the river. Reed Bowie began to reload his rifle. But, as though at a given signal, the British soldiers drew away from Captain Inman's side. Muskets rattled. Captain Inman's knees buckled, as he sank to the ground near the base of a Spanish oak.

"See why I stopped you?" said Reed Bowie grimly. "You'd a' been there, too."

The British force was a beaten but not yet a broken thing, an animal to be harried to a stand and pulled down. The regulars could still strike and kill, and only the Tories' flight had become a rout. The first of the retreating British reached the ford, and began splashing across it toward their stronghold on the other side. More troops piled into the

river. A detachment of five regulars, who had evidently appointed themselves a rear guard, turned for a stand on the river bank. Mountaineers swarmed over them, and lined up along the river bank to shoot at the fleeing men in the water. Kin watched five prisoners, in charge of a grim-faced mountaineer, hurry back toward the top of the ridge.

A dragoon standing knee-deep in water turned and levelled his musket. Kin flinched involuntarily as the heavy slug whistled toward him. He heard its sodden "splat," as it struck William Smith low down in the abdomen. The rifleman who had come all the way from the Watauga to shoot the British leader and be shot by the dragoon, opened his hunting shirt and thrust his hand inside. He brought it out again, and looked at the blood on his fingers. Then he sat tiredly down on the river bank.

"Look what they done to me!" he said wonderingly.

The dragoon climbed out on the opposite bank of the river and turned around. He put his left thumb to his nose and wriggled his fingers. Kin felt hot anger, and saw a red flush begin at Reed Bowie's collar and creep up to his temples. The wounded William Smith sat helplessly, miserable in his own pain and despair. It was oddly as though manhood was a tangible thing that could be shut up within a body, and as though the dragoon's bullet hole had provided an exit to let it spill out of William Smith. He whimpered like a little child.

"Look! Look what he's doin' now!"

Reed Bowie raised his rifle and shot. The dragoon tumbled into the river, with his head and shoulders submerged and his feet up on the bank.

The Whig soldiers lined up on the river bank, staring at one another. So far they had come, and now they must go no farther. For a shadow hovered over the garrison at Musgrove's. And, though only a shadow, it was still strong enough to come between the beaten British and Tories on one side of the river and the victorious Whigs on the other. It was the shadow of the mighty Ferguson. Maybe he was already on the way. Certainly the British had sent runners to tell him of the attack. Kin looked about for Shelby, and saw him standing alone on the river bank, waiting. Colonel Brandon came down the ridge.

"What's the count?" Shelby asked.

"There's sixty-one daid on the field," Tom Brandon drawled. "We kil't nine mo' we know of when they was crossin' the rivah. There's seven'y-three wounded on this side, an' some mo' that got across."

"What's our loss?"

"Fo' daid, nine wounded."

"Can the wounded ride?"

"Seven of 'em cain't."

"We'll leave them."

"Leave us!"

The agonized cry was wrung from William Smith. He still sat on the ground like a dog that has been torn in fighting a bear, and that now has to be shot because it is badly hurt. His imploring eyes were fixed on Shelby, and his strangely white hands clenched and unclenched. Shelby turned away from him, and beckoned a British lieutenant who was standing between two huge mountaineers.

"Cross the river," Shelby said. "Tell whoever's in command over there that I'm leavin' seven wounded men on the field, an' I expect they'll be treated accordin' to the laws of war."

"You needn't worry, Colonel Shelby," the lieutenant said haughtily. "The British army always treats wounded enemies that way."

"Your damn Tory allies don't," Shelby said bitterly, and turned away. Then he lifted his voice and shouted, "Back to the hosses, everybody that kin ride!"

After the battle that had raged up and down it, the ridge was strangely hushed. Scarcely an hour had passed since Kin had helped build the breastwork, and in that hour more than a hundred and fifty men had been killed or wounded. A trooper with a brilliant splash of blood on his pasty gray forehead grinned at him. Kin grinned back. Then he closed his eyes, to fight back the sudden sickness that rose in the pit of his stomach, and walked on.

But the defiant grin of a suffering man crystallized a transformation that had been forming within him since the battle started. Lieutenant Allaire had taken his gun. That had been an intolerable act, one that under no circumstances was to be borne. It had inspired in Kin a violent hatred of the British and all they stood for.

Now the bitter hate was gone. The British were not some repulsive breed of reptile. They were men, and in the face of tremendous losses they had fought bravely. But there was a difference in men. Turkey-Trot Logan, for instance. If he was told to stay in one place and make rifles, as Ian did, doubtless he would refuse to do it. If someone tried to force him to stay in one place, he would fight to his last bullet. Yet Ian had always seemed happy at his trade of rifle-making.

Kin was beginning to understand America as it now existed. Each man, in this country he had helped to make, was free to choose what he would do, to walk and live as he desired. The war was being fought principally to preserve that right to be free, and the burning question to be settled was whose way of life should prevail here in this new country.

Kin looked back down the ridge. Most of the dead and wounded men on it lay there because they believed in a King's right to rule. William Smith and the other Whigs lay there because they disputed that right. Shelby, Reed Bowie, and all the others who were about to flee Ferguson's wrath disputed it. Yet, in defending their belief that it was a man's birthright to choose his own destiny, his leaders did not hate the men who opposed them. If they hated at all, it was the principle that these men represented. And the only way they could strike at that principle was through the men.

Kin felt as though he had grown years older during the short hour in which the battle had raged. He still yearned to have his rifle back. But the lost gun was now only a symbol of much greater things for which he was fighting. He felt that he was stronger, and that his new-found understanding now rested on such a firm foundation that nothing could ever tear it down.

The horses lifted their heads and looked up the ridge when their masters strode toward them. A few of the mountaineers led British horses whose riders had been shot, but there were scarcely a half dozen of these. The prisoners were lined up. Valentine Sevier and Tom Brandon started at opposite ends of the line and walked along it jerking flints from the captured men's rifles. When their hands were filled they passed the flints out to others, and they were distributed among the mountaineers until every rifle was stripped of its flint.

Meantime Shelby had mounted a stump and was addressing the prisoners.

"Ye're prisoners of war," he said crisply. "As such ye'll be treated. One of ye will ride with every three men here. Ye'll share the horses, take your turn at ridin' an' at walkin' when an' if we hafta walk. Try to escape an' ye'll be shot." He turned to the mountaineers. "Ye heard what I said. Every group of three will be responsible fer one prisoner. We're ridin' now."

"Whar be we ridin', Cunnel?" a bearded mountaineer asked gruffly.

"Back over the mountains."

"Them hosses are mighty tired, Cunnel," the mountaineer objected. "So are the men. They'll never make it."

"They'll make it," Shelby said grimly.

"Yes suh, Cunnel."

Reed Bowie, walking companionably beside an eighteen-year-old boy in the uniform of a British Provincial, came from the line of prisoners. Kin looked the boy over curiously. His uniform was torn. There was a great smudge of dirt on his right cheek and a powder burn on the back of his hand. Smoldering defiance glittered in his eyes, but there was a very genuine curiosity there, too.

Reed Bowie said, "This is George Crowlby, from up New Jersey way. I thought you might like to share your horse with him for a while. How about it?"

"I reckon he can ride with me," Kin said stiffly, and led the way to the horses.

The battered young soldier muttered under his breath and followed Kin to the white horse. They mounted, Kin in the saddle and the young soldier sitting on the horse's rump with both arms around Kin's waist. He turned for one swift, apprehensive look behind him, and was reassured by the sight of Major McJunkin riding there. A man needn't hate his enemies. But still it might be a good idea not to trust any at your back. If the young soldier had a knife ...

But he only held on tightly with both arms and let his legs dangle down the white horse's flanks. As they drew farther away from the battlefield, and any chance of rescue, it became apparent that his silence and sullenness were only masks to hide fear. But no one gave him the slightest attention, nor offered him harm, and his fear began to cool.

Kin gave all his attention to the trail. He was wearier than he ever remembered being before. Even Reed Bowie's shoulders were stooped, and the black mare plodded with drooping head. Shelby's immense stallion had lost most of his dash and fire. And Kin knew that every horse and every man that had been at Musgrove's was just as tired. Isaac Shelby would need all his cunning and all his boundless energy if he would keep his command away from Bulldog Ferguson's jaws this time.

After another hour the white horse ambled to an oak tree, stood with lowered head against it, and refused to move. Kin dug his heels into the horse's ribs, and lashed him about the neck with the ends of the reins. The white horse slid gently forward and sprawled on the ground with his head against the tree. Kin sprang from the saddle, and the young soldier leaped after him. Horsemen filled the trail behind them, and their noise brought Shelby and Reed Bowie back.

"What's the matter?" Shelby barked.

"My horse fell. I reckon he's dead."

"Bring him one of the British horses we caught," Shelby ordered.

Kin and the young soldier mounted the British horse, a rangy sorrel with long legs. Shelby wheeled his stallion and led off. The sun beat down with a fierce intensity on the heavy hunting garb of battle-harassed men, burning out the sweat that oozed from their pores, making the weary trail almost unbearable. They came to a river, and every man threw himself from the saddle to wade beside his mount. They rolled in the water, threw it over their heads and faces, and drank. And when they climbed out on the opposite bank they were all able to go on.

Twice during the day they stopped to rest their horses, but only for twenty minutes at a time. At the second rest Valentine Sevier, who had stayed behind to scout, galloped up on a lathered, spent horse and conferred a few seconds with Shelby. Kin caught a few hurried words, "Ferguson ... half hour behind," and they were off again. Riding through dense forests or along settlers' fields, snatching ears of green corn or unripe peaches as they rode and pronouncing them the most delicious food they had ever eaten, they continued until nightfall. And they forced their weary horses into the night until, at last, they reached the foothills of their own beloved mountains and knew that, at least for the time being, they were safe from Ferguson and his avenging band. Every man's face was swollen with fatigue, and sixty dead or spent horses were left behind on the trail. But Shelby had brought his command through without losing a man. They slid from their saddles or sank down where they stood to sleep. In the past thirty-six hours, the little army had ridden more than one hundred miles on horseback and fought a savage battle. They had done what they set out to do.

Except for Reed Bowie, Shelby, Valentine Sevier, and a few others who had volunteered for guard and sentry duty, only Kin remained awake. Tired as he was, he sat on the bank of a purling little stream, and watched the bright array of stars in the sky. He knew the stream for a tributary of the Santaree. Only a few short miles away, if you knew the route through the forests, was McKenzie's Gap. And in the cabin there sat a lonely, heavy-hearted man who had chosen the British side, but who loved his son greatly. Kin rose and walked over to where Reed Bowie and Shelby were talking.

"I'm goin' home," he announced.

"To your father?" Reed Bowie asked.

"Yes."

"He's a Tory."

"He's my father."

"Well, putting it that way, I guess the Colonel won't object. How about it, Colonel?"

"Go an' welcome, boy," Shelby said gravely. "Take your horse."

"You'll have better use for the horse. I don't want it."

"As ye say, boy. Good luck."

"Good luck, Colonel Shelby."

"Good-bye, Kinross." Reed Bowie shook his hand. "Remember us."

"I will."

Kin choked back a sob of loneliness and exhaustion as he swung westward through the forest. He found the Cota Springs trail, and stumbled along it, half asleep. By instinct he hesitated when he came to the edge of his father's clearing. The roan saddle horse snorted, and ran a few steps in the pasture. Bonnie shuffled out of a patch of grass, and blew through her nostrils as she made way for him. Kin looked at the cabin.

The acrid smoke that rolled from its chimney stung his nostrils, and streaks of firelight danced up and down the partly open door. Kin walked silently up to it, and peered in. Ian sat before the fireplace, with his chin buried in his hands. He was unmoving, but there was something about him that had not been there when Kin left. Ian's shoulders were bowed, his face was gray and seamed, and he looked like an old man. Kin spoke softly from the doorway.

"I'm here, father."

Ian twitched nervously, then sat bolt upright. He turned around to face the door.

"Kin! Is that you?"

"Yes." Kin stood quite still, torn between anxiety and relief.

"Ah-h! Where hae ye been?"

"Fightin' the British."

"So. Well, come on in."

Kin entered the cabin and walked to Ian's side. But the vast weariness that had been upon him all day, and that had lifted only for a little while at the Rebel camp and during the walk home, now returned with overwhelming force. The dancing fire became a distorted image of smoke and flame. Ian's profile faded, wavering back and forth. Kin tried to keep his eyes open, and could not.

He knew vaguely that he had fallen forward in Ian's arms, and that Ian was carrying him to his pallet. Kin stirred restlessly, then stopped. Sleep was stealing over him. But, more than that, he stopped moving because he knew that Ian would not want even his son to know that he was crying, or to hear him say,

"Thank ye, God. Thank ye for sendin' my boy back to me."

6. *A CHANGE IN IAN*

The sun was high when Kin awoke. He sat up and leaned forward in bed, clasping his hands across the patchwork quilt and recalling in minutest detail everything that had happened since he had met Tanse Willard in the woods and been sent by him to carry the message to Reed Bowie. That, the Tories, the long ride, Shelby and his army, and the battle. It seemed almost impossible that his mind could leap the span of all those events in a few short minutes, and that each recollection could be so sharp and clear.

The battle itself ... Kin frowned because the memory of it seemed to have something strangely lacking. While it raged he had had little time for anything save his own personal actions and those of the men nearest him. But his idea of a battle had been and still was lusty conflict filled with adventurous deeds and excitement. At Musgrove's Mills, though he had seen much of adventure and many deeds of bravery, he had also seen suffering and tormented men to whom death would have been a blessing. Somehow he had never thought of that as an inevitable companion of battles.

There had been something else too, another feeling that his imagination had never associated with wars. Each time he had seen one of the British or Tories fall, there had come to him a sensation of great triumph that had been wholly apart from any feeling of humanity. Every British and Tory that could fight no more was one less to help oppress his homeland. And the principal effect of the battle at Musgrove's Mills, as far as Kin was concerned, was to strengthen his determination that all British and all British sympathizers must be defeated.

Kin looked about the cabin, at Ian's empty bed and the smoldering coals in the fireplace. Ian had gone outside, and the measured ringing of his hammer told that he was forging another gun barrel. Kin dressed, glad that his father was not there to see him right now and ashamed of the fact that he was glad. Last night when he came in he had been so tired that he had noticed only his father's weary face. But now that he was rested he hesitated to face Ian because memory of that gaunt, drawn face was frightening and because he did not know exactly what would be his father's reaction to the fact that he had been fighting with the Rebels.

At first his raging appetite took control over everything else. Then Kin dawdled over the roasted squirrels and corn bread that Ian had left for him because he was worried about what his father would say or do. Only when he was finished did it occur to him that Ian had never before prepared a meal. That in itself was startling enough to deserve sober consideration.

Kin threw the squirrel bones into the fire and watched the flames leap around them. Then with resolute determination he went outside to face his father.

Ian was standing under the black walnut tree with his back to Kin. His coarse homespun shirt was soaked with perspiration, and his long black hair hung in straggling locks down his back. His beard was a black outline on either side of his face. As Kin looked at him, he felt a great flood of sympathy.

His father had always worked very hard. But now it was as though a demon with a lashing whip sat astride his shoulders. The gun barrel he was making rested in an ingenious iron cradle, which only Ian could have conceived and manufactured, that held it in the glowing coals. He worked the bellows, pumping them so hard that the blue flame stretched toward the top of the forge and black specks of dust flew from the bottom of it to rise in the air and settle back again. He looked at nothing save the gun barrel and the forge, concentrating on his work as though it had some magnetic quality from which he could not avert his eyes. He grasped the hot barrel with tongs and stepped toward the mandrel.

Kin walked forward. "I'll work the bellows," he said.

It seemed a perfectly natural thing to say and yet the words were scarcely spoken before Kin felt that it had been the wrong thing. Ian laid the hot barrel down on a wooden bench—something that he would have boxed Kin's ears for doing—and seemed neither to see the smoke that arose from it nor to smell the scorched wood. He said nothing and Kin felt an embarrassed flush begin at his neck to creep up through his temples. Ian should have been roaring at him that the day was wasting and he'd better get to work before he felt some more tangible form of his father's wrath. He should have been deploring the lack of diligence exhibited by the younger generation that would lie abed after the sun was two hours high. Now, Kin felt uneasily, it was oddly as though their roles were reversed. He was the one who gave commands and Ian the one to obey them.

"Did ye have a sound rest?" Ian asked finally.

"I never turned over once my eyes shut."

"Well, that's—that's well enou'. Ye looked sore in need o' sleep."

Ian glanced at the sky as though looking for something that was not there, then let his glance roam off across the forest. Obviously his mind was far from the topic he had selected for conversation. If Kin's allegiance to the Rebels was bothering him, it was just as well to bring that to a head and get it over with.

Kin said, "I want you to know that I take no shame in the part I played with Isaac Shelby. His side is mine, and I'll stand or fall with it."

Kin spoke with a firmness that startled even himself, and breathlessly awaited the explosion from Ian. But it did not come. Ian looked at the ground, and when he raised his eyes to meet those of his son they were expressionless.

"'Tis well that a man should know what he wants," he said. "An' so there'll be naught o' secrecy between us, I'll tell ye that I still favor the King an' crown. They hae made grievous, blood-ridden mistakes, errors that canna be corrected. But so hae the Rebels."

"You—you ain't mad at me?" Kin gasped.

"I am not. Such decisions as ye hae made consarn only a man an' his conscience. I would be the last to tell ye that your choice is an unwise one. But I do ask ye to tell me just one thing. Did any British or Tory soldier know ye as my son? Or did any see ye that will know ye again?"

"Only the prisoners, an' where they're goin' no talk will drift back."

"Then," Ian said with satisfaction, "ye're safe here for as long as ye care to abide. I asked ye if ye had been singled out because Major Ferguson has sent word by runner that one o' his officers will see me on important affairs before the week has lapsed. I would not want ye shot or sent to one of the stinkin' prisons where captured Rebels are sent. I will expect ye not to interfere wi' or obstruct the officer, who will be a guest at our home. Nor will I interfere should any o' those wi' whom ye hae cast your lot hae affairs wi' ye here. On such terms, think ye that we might still live as father an' son?"

Kin's lower lip trembled, but he stiffened it. He had come home expecting to be bullied and brow-beaten and roared at, all the old safe, secure signs that Ian still loved and cherished him, and that his father was at least one sane thing in a confused world. Instead, he had arrived to be received as a man, and to find Ian upset much more than himself by the turn of events. Well, if he was expected to be a man, a man he would be.

"I came home because I thought ye wanted me here," he said.

"Ye did!" The exclamation was one of sheer delight, and for a brief flash the old Ian rose out of the shell in which he had enclosed himself. But almost immediately he sank back into it. "Well—well now. That's real nice."

"Are you feelin' all right?" Kin challenged bluntly.

"An' why would I not?" Ian countered. "Maybe 'tis you that are forgettin' I'm an old man."

Kin pondered a moment on that puzzling assertion. He had never thought of Ian as old. All he knew was that since the British invasion and near subjugation of the southern colonies he hadn't been happy. That was strange, considering that Ian's side was winning the war. Perhaps his father was sick with some mysterious ailment that he did not care to admit. Kin reproached himself mentally for having been away for even two days.

"Anyway, I'm goin' to help you make guns now," he promised.

Ian brightened visibly. He might be unhappy, and his son lost to him, but gun-making no one could ever take from him. It was to Ian what Kin had sought when he came home, something sane and safe and stable in a world where all values were either suddenly wiped out or reversed.

"'Tis small help I'll be needin'," Ian said proudly. "Do ye mind last winter when Turkey-Trot Logan crossed the

mountains wi' the names o' twenty-one men who wanted McKenzie rifles? An' this is the last, Kin. I sent my promise back by Turkey-Trot that every last rifle would be ready by the time the bucks were ruttin'. An' they will be. On this bench rests the bar'l for the twenty-first gun—Turkey-Trot's—an' a finer bar'l I never fashioned. Ye can help me finish it, Kin."

Kin took his accustomed place at the bellows, and in a half dozen lusty sweeps sent the smoldering fire roaring toward the top of the iron forge. Since Kin's working the bellows made the iron cradle unnecessary, Ian discarded it and personally attended to heating the wrought-iron ribbon that was to be the barrel. An inch at a time he pounded it around the shaping mandrel, getting it as near perfection as he could with the rude tools at his command and waiting for his reamer and rifling bench to make it perfect.

Except for the barrel he was making, Ian's concerns seemed to have dissolved. He neither thought of nor looked at anything else. But for Kin the task of pumping the bellows was even more onerous than it had been before. Somewhere Isaac Shelby, and Reed Bowie, and Valentine Sevier, and the handful of valiant spirits that accompanied them must still be riding toward their rendezvous over the mountains. And when they arrived there, what then? Shelby himself had said that he had too few men to challenge Ferguson. And except for Sumter, whose best efforts only worried his enemies, there was no threat to the British in the south.

Kin glanced westward across the mountains. When the British had all the Carolinas—if they made good on what seemed likely now and got them—it was not beyond the realm of possibility that they would cross the mountains too. Then where would Shelby and all the others go, and what would they do?

Twilight came at last. Kin sighed his relief as he stopped pumping the bellows and watched the fire die in the forge. For a short space he looked disinterestedly on as Ian formed the end of the barrel around the mandrel, with sure blows of his hammer welding shut every crack and crevice in it. Ian was still too absorbed to notice Kin or anything else. He worked with renewed energy, as though he feared the hobgoblins that must come down with the night, and hoped that the sound of his hammer and sight of the barrel he was shaping would keep them away.

"I'll go fetch Bonnie and milk," said Kin.

Ian did not look up and Kin raised his voice, "I'll go fetch Bonnie!"

Ian forged the last quarter-inch of barrel, and knocked the mandrel out. He looked up and smiled, but it was the uncertain smile of a man who seemed not to know exactly where he was or how he had come there. Kin shifted his feet, awkwardly ill at ease. Dimly he remembered his mother, and how the fun had gone out of Ian when she died. But Ian had still retained his spirit, and now even that was gone. His father should not be like this. If only Ian would roar a command, or even send Kin staggering with a clout alongside the ear!

Kin turned on his heel, and walked across the field into the forest. He had thought that after the endless day it would be a relief to be away from the forge and Ian. But the forest that he had once considered so huge had mysteriously shrunken to the very narrowest of limits. And the little imagined adventures he had always enjoyed on his routine task of bringing the cow home to be milked were no longer present to add zest. He knew that his part in the battle of Musgrove's Mills had been almost as insignificant as his defense of the cabin when Reed Bowie had been attacked by the Tories. He had fired his pistol. But he had taken no aim and probably he had hit nothing. However even being at such grips with a flesh and blood enemy had forever destroyed his imaginary foes. But another feeling plagued him too, a sensation of great restlessness and a longing to return to those soldiers whom he had so gladly left. McKenzie's Gap, if it had been dull before, was twice as dull and devoid of promise now.

Kin found Bonnie grazing in the shade of a tulip tree and switched her so savagely that the bell on the startled old cow's neck clanged as she trotted homeward.

That night, when the milking was done and the supper dishes cleaned up, Ian went to his bed and Kin to his pallet. His hand stole beneath the mattress, and drew comfort from the feel of the pistol that Reed Bowie had given him. For a long while he lay awake, hugging the pistol close, and when he finally dozed off his clenched fist was wrapped tightly about its hilt.

Ian was up and out when Kin awoke. Kin arose, gulped the remnants of breakfast that his father had left, and went to the door. Ian had already put sights on the rifle barrel he was making for Turkey-Trot Logan, and was fitting to it one of the

various stocks that he had manufactured and laid away to season. Kin sat idly on an upended block of wood and watched him pare away bits of the stock until it slipped perfectly into place. Ian went into his gun shop, came out with a lock, and began fitting it into place. The sun began its slow swing from east to west, and was almost halfway around its appointed circle when both Kin and Ian heard a significant sound that they had heard once before, the galloping of a troop of horsemen on the Cota Springs trail.

Ian stood up, grasping the nearly-finished rifle in his right hand. Kin remained seated, with his steady gaze fixed on the trail. He knew who must be coming in such force, and presently he knew he was right, as a company of mounted dragoons broke out of the forest into his father's field.

Kin had never seen the dragoons' commander, but he knew that the slight person who sat a magnificent Arab stallion as though he was part of it, could be none other than Major Patrick Ferguson himself. Kin made an almost involuntary motion toward the cabin. But Ian stood in his way, and it was part of Ian's pact that his friends should be free to come and go without molestation.

Ferguson spoke from the saddle: "Ho, friend McKenzie! I told that dolt of a runner I sent you that one of my officers would call. But DePeyster is in sick bay and Allaire has business with an ailing grandmother, whom I suspect is about twenty years old and winks a wicked eye!"

Kin stared at this scourge of all who dared ally themselves with the Rebels. Ferguson was a small man compared to most of the mountaineers. But there was something about him that Kin had recognized in only one other man, Isaac Shelby. Totally unlike in appearance, breeding, and culture, Shelby and Ferguson still had very much in common. There was the same flashing vitality, the same dauntless spirit, the same general air of scorn that said the odds were nothing. Both men were intelligent. But where Shelby had been blunt, Ferguson was cunning. It was impossible to be close to Patrick Ferguson without receiving the definite impression that nowhere on earth was there a man to match him.

Ian advanced to meet his guest, and a great pride leaped in Kin. There was about Ian none of the deference with which the soldiers who accompanied Ferguson seemed to regard him. Ian walked straight, as a man should, and extended a hand to Ferguson.

"I am glad that ye saw fit to come yerself," Ian said. "How go the battles?"

Ferguson's laughter rang through the clearing. "One way, friend McKenzie, only one way! We put an end to Gates, as you no doubt know. What you may not know is that we also caught the master brush-skulker of them all, Sumter, and polished him up very prettily at Fishing Creek. No more will he be a thorn in my Lord Cornwallis' side! To be sure we had some small misfortunes at Musgrove's Mills, but such are to be expected. The wonder is that we've had no more reverses, with the half-civilized recruits this back country affords. Faugh! I'd as soon break a pack of wild dogs to the rules of warfare! Rest easy, friend McKenzie. The few of these bearded Rebels who still declare themselves against the King no longer dare come out of their woods to do so. The end of the war is in sight, and then these barbarians are going to regret their presumption! But the friends of the King will never suffer, and you may wager on that."

"Will ye dismount an' come in?" Ian asked.

"I'd like to! Faith and I'd like to rest in a Christian home without my nostrils rebelling at the stink of the cheap rum that primes my so-called army! But there's a few of these ridge-runners still to clean up, and with that I come to the real purpose of this call."

"I'll do what I can to further the King's cause," Ian said quietly.

"Well spoken, friend McKenzie, and 'tis no more than we had expected from you. You're a rifle-maker by trade, are you not?"

"Aye."

"And 'tis a marvelous rifle you make." The respect in Ferguson's voice was tinted with envy. "I, too, have dabbled in your man's trade. Had I the time to perfect the Ferguson rifle, these hard-headed woodsmen would be facing a hail of fire the like of which they had never dreamed of. Mine was a breech-loader, that could be handled without all this ramrod-patch business. The trigger-guard was a lever that lowered the breech plug, and left an opening in the top of the barrel. The ball was dropped in there, and rolled forward to stop against the lands. You could drop your firing charge behind

the bullet, and close the breech again. We used 'em at Brandywine. But with all those working parts, and this damned unhealthy American climate, it got out of order too easily. There's other things that needed the doing, such as making it a .30 rather than a .60 caliber, so twice as many bullets can be carried. But it's the coming gun, McKenzie! A breech-loader's the coming gun, mark my words!" Ferguson suddenly changed his tone. "How many rifles are in your stock room now?"

"Twenty-one."

"Twenty-one! 'Tis a richer haul than I had thought to find! Twenty-one of the men I can select armed with McKenzie rifles...! They'll be a match for any hundred of these Rebels! I'll take 'em, and all you can make."

Ian said gravely, "Ye canna hae them."

"Oh, come now. 'Tis not so much that we need rifles as it is that we need rifles to match the ones these damned sharpshooters use. What are your reasons for refusing?"

"I promised them to others," Ian said doggedly.

"What others?"

"Over-the-mountain settlers who ordered them an' need them."

"Ho, those dogs! You know as well as I that a promise to barbarians was made to be broken, friend McKenzie."

"A promise is a promise, if ye make it to a dog," Ian replied stiffly.

"Do you still mean to refuse those rifles to me?" Ferguson's tone was deadly, and his face had lost all of its friendliness.

"I do. I hae gi'en my word to others."

"All right," Ferguson said bluntly. "We're riding on. But we'll be back this way tomorrow, with pack horses, and will pick up the guns then. But I'll leave three men here to see that they don't 'accidentally' go elsewhere. I never would have thought you a man with so tender a conscience, McKenzie. It can only lead to trouble."

Ferguson wheeled his horse and at full gallop went back into the trail. The soldiers streamed after him, save for three hard-faced men who dismounted and began to prepare a bivouac in the clearing. Kin watched them, and glanced wonderingly at Ian. Everything seemed to be happening at once. Gates, the hope of the Rebels, had been crushingly defeated. McDowell and Shelby were in full retreat over the mountains. Ferguson himself had brought news of Sumter's defeat. And now, this.

But Ian was bending over his work, putting the finishing touches to the rifle he was making for Turkey-Trot Logan. The three troopers picketed their horses and, contemptuous of the two at the cabin, occupied themselves with a pack of well-thumbed cards. The sun poured down into the clearing, but still the air was charged with the tenseness that precedes a sudden storm. Ian was a boiling kettle with no outlet, about to burst in all directions at once.

With the coming of night, Kin drove Bonnie in and milked her. The three soldiers sauntered over to watch and, when the pail was filled, one of them snatched it out of his hand. Kin kicked it, and sent the milk spilling in a snowy cascade over the trooper's natty breeches.

"Damned insolent brat!" he swore.

The back of his hand caught Kin across the mouth, and sent him staggering away from the milking stanchion. The three soldiers laughed, and bore what was left of the milk toward their bivouac in the meadow. There was blood on Kin's mouth, and rage in his heart. He ran toward the cabin, and ripped up his pallet to claw for the pistol. But something seized his hand, and Kin looked up to see Ian's eyes burning into his.

Ian's tight lips formed the one word, "Wait!"

Kin rose uncertainly, and groped through the cabin's semi-gloom. Even through his rage, he was gratefully aware that Ian was once more his resolute self, the one who knew exactly what to do and how to go about doing it. Kin heard leather rustle as his father drew a hunting knife from its sheath.

"Where you goin'?" Kin asked nervously.

"Stay here!" Ian snapped, and went out the door.

Kin went to his pallet, and sat alone in the darkness, with the pistol in his hand. He did not know what Ian was up to, but whatever else happened, he could get at least one of the soldiers if they came to get him.

So startling close that it seemed to be almost within the cabin, a rifle cracked. It was followed by another shot, and another. A man yelled. Wild-eyed and quivering, Kin ran to the door. But only the soldiers' leaping fire was visible in the darkness. Then something very close to the cabin moved, and there was the muffled clop of horses' hoofs. Kin whipped the pistol up. But Ian's voice floated from the darkness.

"Come on!" It was the old Ian again, but a grimmer one than Kin had ever heard before. "I hae the three horses! Help me load the rifles on 'em an' we'll leave as soon as it's done. That bloodhound, Ferguson, will be back wi' the morrow. I dinna care to be here when he finds what I hae done tonight!"

7. WESTWARD TREK

One of the horses, a big sorrel mare with a roached mane, lifted her head and peered toward the fire. Her shrill whinny blasted the night, and the other two horses danced at the ends of their bridle reins. Kin's gaze followed the mare's, and he looked back at Ian. Even in his wildest imaginations he never had pictured his father as a deadly knife fighter.

"Did you—did you get all three?" Kin gulped.

"'Tis time to put talk by an' do work," Ian said. "There are twenty-one rifles to stow on two beasts. I'll carry my own gun an' ye had best hang tight to yer pistol. 'Twas in my mind to make ye another rifle, but now there is nae time."

Ian cut a raw-hide thong in two lengths and tied the sorrel mare and a gray gelding. He stripped their saddles and bridles from them. A wild startling song burst from him:

"Shoot 'em, knife 'em, club 'em!
Get 'em to a man.
The bloody devils will get you,
Any way they can!"

Ian roared the song at the top of his voice while he carried a buffalo tallow candle into his gun shop and went to work there. Kin heard a saw whining its way through wood, and the banging of a hammer as Ian drove some of the iron nails he had fashioned from scrap metal. Those nails had been another seven-day wonder in the back country; there was just no end to the things Ian McKenzie could do with a piece of wood or a strip of iron and a tool with which to work it. Kin peered in the shop's open door. Ian was working on two strange-looking cradle-like affairs of wood and iron, and shouting another of the apparently endless verses that went to make up his song:

"Then soldiers fixed their bay'nuts,
An' looked around to find,
Every man in the front ranks
With nary a soul behind."

Kin shivered. But even while a part of him gave way to fear, another part exulted at this strange father whom he had never seen before. The thought occurred to Kin that Ian had gone suddenly crazy, as Charlie Purdie had when he returned from hunting to find his wife and four children murdered and mutilated by a roving band of Cherokees. But people like Ian just didn't go crazy. When their worries and responsibilities could no longer be borne, they found a solution for them. Kin didn't know that after months of torturous indecision, Ian had at last found himself. But he did know that some happy miracle had led him to the side that Kin had prayed he would choose.

The fire in the clearing flickered and went out. The big sorrel mare whinnied again, and there came the sound of her restless hoofs trampling the grass before the cabin. Ian looked up to answer Kin's unspoken question.

"'Twas no unfair fight," he said. "They had their chance. Ye heard the shots."

"I heard them," Kin said steadily.

"Each man had his shot at me; then they were fools enou' to chase me into the dark. War is a hellish thing; ye would know that had ye seen as much of it as I. So I hoped for peace. But now that there is war, let it be war all the way!"

"Why did you change sides?" Kin asked. "Was it because of Major Ferguson?"

"I was a subject of the King," Ian said. "An' the bonds that tie a man to his country are powerful ones. But some things are more powerful, an' one o' them is a man's given word. An' the government that, through one o' its powerful officers, asks me to break a promise is nae one under which I care to live. There were other small factors, too. But yon big mare is afraid now. Ye go lend her comfort while I finish work here—we must have her tractable. We leave within the hour, an' fast an' cunnin' must we travel. A pursuit will be sure an' our end swift should we be o'ertaken."

Ian picked up a knife and gave his attention to one of the wood-and-leather cradles he was fashioning. Kin walked back to the tethered horses. He glanced once into the dark meadow. But the night shielded what lay there and his mind refused

to give the British soldiers more than a passing thought. Death was not a new thing. Since coming to McKenzie's Gap he had lived in its shadow. There had always been raiding Indians out to kill anyone they could find. Besides, he had seen men die before Reed Bowie's cabin and at Musgrove's Mills, and soldiers traded in death, anyway. More than anything else Kin felt a strange elation. He had cast his lot with the Rebels, a shaky cause that bade fair to lead only to ruin. But in spite of the defeats that the Rebels had suffered, and three major disasters had been theirs in almost as many days, the fact that Ian was with them almost offset those losses in his mind.

Kin approached the sorrel mare, and patted her neck. She blew through her nostrils, and smelled him over. The mare, probably some settler's riding horse unused to battle and the smell of blood, stopped trembling as long as Kin remained near. But when he ventured a little way into the darkness, she immediately nickered for him to come back. Kin sat down in front of her.

A three-quarters moon broke through a rift in the black sky, and for a few minutes the cabin, the gun shop, and the clearing were visible under its pale light. Kin started anxiously, but settled back when clouds again closed in over the moon. It was almost as easy to shoot by moonlight as by day, and he and Ian might see enough shooting when day came again. Tonight he hoped they would not have to fight.

Out in the gun shop Ian's hammer became silent, and he stopped singing. Ian had become a Rebel because Major Ferguson had demanded that he break his given word. It seemed a small thing, but yet Kin knew that it was not small. Ian had built his entire life around a few such principles: a man must earn his daily bread, he must do well whatever he did, he must abide by the smallest promise, and he must live so that he need never feel shame.

And Kin knew what the most potent of the other factors influencing Ian's decision had been. He had sworn loyalty to the King. But the men of the back country were his friends and neighbors, and to them he owed loyalty too. Ferguson's demand had been only the final reason for his father's joining the Rebels.

Ian came from the gun shop, carrying on his shoulders the two cradles he had made. As he let them drop to the ground, the gray gelding laid back his ears and made ready to kick. Ian doubled his fist and caught the horse a smart blow in the ribs. The gray subsided—he knew a master when he met one.

Ian grinned. "One horse so leery she's all but a-faint. Another all set to kick anybody's ribs in wi'out givin' notice. 'Tis a smartly turned-out pack train we hae, Kin. But we'll get the rifles over the mountains to their rightful owners yet. Are ye scared?"

"Some," Kin said frankly.

Ian grinned again. "So am I. Ferguson is nae the man to relish havin' his soldiers done away wi'. But maybe he'll give a second thought before he lets them off their tethers again. Can ye manage the mare?"

"Sure. She's scared enough, but is all right as long as she knows she's not alone."

"She will nae be long lonely once the rifles are on her," Ian promised. "We'll stay close enou', for a dozen throats would be slit for less than the load she'll carry. The pack saddles are a wee bit on the makeshift side. But they'll do."

He picked up one of the two cradles that he had made and laid it on the mare's back. She looked around to see what she was expected to carry now, and turned to lay her muzzle across Kin's shoulder. Kin studied the pack saddle curiously. Hanging down on either side of the mare's back, it had wooden cross-pieces upon which the gun stocks would rest. At the top were two more wooden bars against which the barrels would lean, and a leather strap to hold each gun in place. There was space for five rifles on either side. Hastily designed and hurriedly put together, the saddles were still durable and built to fit a horse without galling or chafing. Ian strapped it tight, and the mare moved up two steps to get closer to Kin. The gelding laid his ears back and began rolling his eyes. He snorted.

When Ian caught hold of the buckskin thong about his neck the gelding reared and screamed, pawing the air with his front hoofs and walking backward. Ian laughed, and let the buckskin go slack. With a little flip of his wrist he looped it, and the loop caught around the gelding's muzzle. Ian flexed his arms and dug his heels in the ground. He jerked, and the gelding came down to stand still. When Ian worked hand over hand up the rope, the gelding tried to bite. Ian's clenched fist caught him on the nose, and the gray horse stood quietly. Ian laughed again.

"This horse has the true British spirit an' won't carry Rebel guns. But I think he'll reconsider."

Ian strapped the other pack saddle on the gelding, and tied him to a small tree. The sorrel mare followed them to the gun shop, and thrust her head inside. Ian took two rifles from their racks and crowded by the mare to strap them on the pack saddle. He went in for two more, and continued loading guns until the mare was packing ten of them. They rested five on a side, their long barrels thrust up at a forty-five degree angle and each barrel passing next to the one on the opposite side. Ian stepped back to look at the load.

"'Tis the best we can do," he finally decided. "Such a load may give us some small bother should we come among trees with low branches. If so we'll have to devise something else. The mare will nae cast her load as long as she can have sight of ye, Kin. Let her go wi' ye to the house an' make up a pack of food—a small one, an' take no meat. I'll load that gray hellion."

The mare kept close beside Kin when he went to the cabin, and again she thrust her head inside the door while he lit a candle and looked around the one room. There was no regret, no feeling of sadness that he was leaving this place so long called home. Now that he had accepted the startling fact of Ian's becoming a Rebel he felt only a great excitement. At last they were going west, into the wilderness of which he had so often dreamed! Kin went to his pallet, uncovered the pistol, and thrust it into his belt. As he slung the powder horns and bullet pouch around his waist, the gelding's outraged squeal came from the darkness, followed by Ian's sharp command.

Kin packed sacks with corn meal, salt, parched corn, and a few potatoes. Beyond that there was nothing he could take. Most of the settlers' food came from the forests in which they made their homes. He and Ian would live on the game they shot and the wild plants they found, but that was the way a man should live anyway. Kin leaned his father's rifle against the outside cabin wall, and hung his powder horns and bullet pouch on a wooden peg.

Ian led the still rebellious but loaded gelding up and tied him to the hitching post before the cabin door. He put down a wrapped parcel that Kin knew contained the bullet molds for the twenty-one rifles. Kin looked at it.

"They're all packed together," he said. "How can you tell which mold belongs to its rightful gun?"

Ian, who had more laughter in him tonight than in all the previous years since Kin's mother had died, chuckled with pleasure.

"Even wi' all the muddle o' becomin' a soldier ye still did no forget your gun makin', eh? I made the molds an' I'll tell 'em apart. This disputatious geldin' needs a watchful eye. Suppose ye furnish it while I go saddle the roan."

Ian disappeared in the darkness and Kin leaned against the cabin. He closed his eyes—it was soothing to think of something placid if only for a moment—while some of the gunsmith's instructions that Ian had scolded and hammered into him ran through his mind. Working with only a hammer and an iron mandrel, not even the finest gunsmith could make any two barrels exactly alike. Their diameters would vary, therefore each barrel had to have a bullet mold made especially for it. No, he hadn't forgotten his gun making.

Kin opened his eyes to hear Ian riding by toward the gun shop. He came back with a rifle, the odd one that had not been packed on the horses. He put it into Kin's hands, together with a powder horn and bullet pouch.

"It isna yours," Ian said, "an' ye are to remember that. Ye are to use it only should we have to battle. 'Twill be more effective than a pistol. Ride the roan, an' the sorrel mare will be your charge. I'll ride the bay British horse an' keep the geldin' travellin'."

Kin mounted his father's saddle horse, and gingerly balanced the new rifle across the saddle; a scratch on the stock or barrel would call forth a severe reprimand from Ian. Shielded by the darkness he lifted it to his shoulder and tried the balance. It was a finely-made weapon. But the only rifle Kin cared to shoot or could use as a frontiersman should use a gun was the one that Lieutenant Allaire had taken. Ian grasped the gelding's lead rope and started off through the darkness. The roan followed, and the sorrel mare kept close to the roan.

The first murky light of day found them far back in the wilderness. Kin had passed out of familiar territory when they had forded the Santaree, and had wondered where they were going after that. But Ian seemed to know, and even in the darkness had kept away from all dangerous travel where the horses might have fallen and been hurt. The roan had followed Ian, and the mare would not venture far from the roan's side.

Kin saw that the gray gelding had been fighting both the pack it carried and Ian most of the night. The horse's flanks were

lathered, and it panted on every little rise. As Ian's horse splashed through another creek, the gelding drew back on his lead rope, and raised his feet high to splash the water. Ian pulled him in, and the unwilling pack horse resumed his trailing of the rangy bay.

"The fool has been doin' that most of the night," Ian called back. "He's got a sore neck an' jaw by this time—I hope."

Kin marvelled. To his knowledge neither Ian nor anyone else had ever come exactly this way before. Yet his father rode as certainly as though he was on a road or trail that both he and his horse knew intimately. And he handled the unruly gelding with all the ease of a professional horseman. Kin knew only meager details of his father's youth: Ian had been a cavalryman in countries so far off as to be almost mythical. But now it was evident that Ian had learned a great deal in the King's service. He certainly knew how to make vicious horses obey him and he knew how to find his way through uncharted country. Probably, Kin decided, he was travelling by the sun. But last night he must have just gone west and guided his horse by the feel of the ground beneath its hoofs.

Ahead of them rose a mountain a little taller than the rest, and Ian swerved to ride straight toward it. His saddle horse tossed its head, and tried to snatch a bit of grass. Ian reined him up and rode at a slow walk up the mountain's gentle slope. Exhausted by his continual fighting and rebellious spirit, the gelding drooped his head and plodded along behind. Reaching the summit, Ian dismounted and looped the bridle reins over his arm. He leaped aside when the gray whirled and aimed a vicious kick at him. Kin rolled from the roan's saddle, and took a few groggy steps while his legs threatened to roll from beneath him. But, once his balance was readjusted, it was untold relief to stand again.

Rolling, forest-covered mountains stretched as far as the eye could see. A lonely hawk winged his solitary patrol over one of them, and three buzzards circled above a place where something had died or was about to die. Kin felt a slight disappointment. The west his imagination had created was a romantic place of endless excitement, with a Cherokee behind every fourth tree and a herd of buffalo continually galloping about. But now he was in the west, and it was only forest, and hawks, and turkey buzzards exactly like those about McKenzie's Gap. Ian shaded his eyes with his hand and squinted into the rising sun.

"Do you think we're bein' followed?" Kin asked.

"I well know that we are," Ian said. "A lesser man than Ferguson wouldna bother. But he will. So here's where we start walkin', an' we'll walk clear to the Watauga settlements."

"Why must we walk?"

"I'm goin' to chase the saddle horses away, an' hope that whoever comes after us will come so hurriedly that they willna see the difference in trails. O' course there'll be an Indian tracker, an' such a ruse will nae throw him off for long. But e'en a quarter of an hour will help. Today's the dangerous one. If we keep our hides until sundown, wi' tomorrow's sun we'll be safe from all but Cherokees an' whatever other mad things may abide in these fastnesses."

"How do you figure that?"

"Ye hae ridden wi' mountain men," Ian said simply. "Wi' tomorrow's sun we'll be out o' British land an' in theirs. Unless Ferguson himself leads it, no small patrol will dare follow. An' a small patrol it will be; e'en Ferguson wouldna send an army after two men."

Ian looped the two riding horses' reins over the saddle horns and broke a limber switch from a gum tree. He swished it through the air, cracked the rangy bay across the rump, and the horse jumped like a startled deer. Ian slashed the roan, and it leaped away to follow the bay. The gray gelding snorted and started after them, but Ian gave a jerk on the lead rope that brought him around and back. The sorrel mare looked on with gently reproachful eyes.

"Why didn't you let him go an' keep your roan?" Kin asked.

"These are the strongest horses," Ian said briefly. "Come on."

Kin looked after the running horses, and speculated on what they would do. Probably they would run a little way. Then, unless the pursuing British caught them, they would circle and go back home. Kin chuckled. It would be a neat turn of events if the British pursuers, starting from McKenzie's Gap, should follow the horses back there again.

They entered a great beech forest and plowed their way through a sea of fallen leaves. Innumerable other creatures, deer, bear, squirrels, chipmunks, and a dozen varieties of birds had been there to help harvest the rich crop. Their trails were everywhere, and in hundreds of places they had scraped the leaves aside in their hungry search for the nuts that had fallen underneath them. A huge black bear raised its head to look at them and rambled leisurely away. The deer, craggy-horned bucks watching over slender does, scarcely bothered to move aside. Certainly, where beasts were so unafraid, man could not have hunted much. Then they descended the mountain, crowded through a thick growth of brush, and came suddenly on a small river.

It was unlike any other creek or river that Kin had ever seen. Its bed was so colored with decayed vegetable matter that the water seemed black, yet when Kin cupped his hand and scooped some up he found it crystal-clear and very cold. Ian stood for a moment on its bank, and looked at the sun to get his bearings. He spoke over his shoulder:

"Step in my tracks. Lead the mare as close as ye can in the geldin's trail."

The gelding sat back on his haunches and tossed his head when Ian waded into the river. Ian swore, and strained on the lead rope. Turning sideways, the gelding tried to run, and Ian stumbled in the water. Kin slapped the gray with the end of the mare's lead rope, and the surprised gelding leaped from the bank into the middle of the river. Dragging Ian with him, he splashed across. But once on the other side, within easy reach of the big man's punishing fists, he became tractable. Ian's eyes blazed.

"Of all the devil-possest brutes! Were we out o' this I'd ride ye to a stand-still an' show ye who's the better man! Come on!"

He led the gelding up the opposite bank and into the forest. The mare followed willingly when Kin entered the water, and kept close beside him as he stepped exactly in Ian's tracks. Five minutes later Ian swerved slightly to the north, and in another half hour came to a bare ridge.

It was a long, rocky spine of land upon which no vegetation could find root and from which the wind had blown all leaves. Running north and south, it made a gash in the forest as far as the eye could see in either direction. Ian led the gelding up it, and turned north. When he came to where the creek split the ridge he fought the unwilling gelding into the water again. Straight down the center of the creek he went, walking so close to the gelding that the horse wisely refrained from all protest. A mile and a half farther on they broke suddenly into a long upland meadow.

A herd of elk, grazing in the dead grasses, raised their heads. A magnificent bull with a towering spread of antlers stamped his foot threateningly. When the cows drifted back toward timber the bull followed reluctantly, looking back over his shoulder and craning his neck toward these invaders of his harem's feeding ground. Ian lowered his gun, and peered thoughtfully at a pine-covered ridge that reared protectingly at the far end of the meadow.

"Yon is Strawberry Point," he announced. "An' if the beasties are to carry their loads clear over the mountains they must have rest an' fodder there."

Kin looked up. "How do you know the name of it?"

"Turkey-Trot Logan made me a map," Ian said. "'Twas in my mind that chance might send me this way some time. We will climb the point."

Ian continued on down the creek, and led the gelding out of the water at the foot of the ridge. The stubby jack pine, that from a distance had seemed a heavy growth, was in reality only a straggling forest with patches of grass between the trees. Reaching the summit, Ian tethered the gelding to a jack pine and one by one unloaded the rifles. He lifted the pack saddle off, and the horse rolled in the grass with all four feet waving. When Ian turned toward the mare, Kin had already unloaded her.

"Ye had best tie her, too," Ian said.

Kin tied the mare to another tree, and walked to where his father was peering down the slope into the meadow. Ian tugged at his beard reflectively.

"'Tis unlikely that Ferguson came back last night," he said. "His men would be tired, an' would want sleep before a ride. At the earliest he got back wi' sunup. Given he started the chase at once, an' his men are comin' by daylight

unencumbered wi' pack animals, they'll not get this far in under five hours. We hae four hours to sleep."

Ian lay down with his back to one pack saddle, and Kin rested against the other. For a moment he lay watching an indignant little yellow bird perched in the tree to which the gelding was tethered and scolding at the top of its voice. He grinned. The little bird was so excited and, safe on its lofty perch, was calling that huge horse all sorts of names. It was like ... like ... The bird faded out of focus, the sunlight darkened, and Kin was asleep.

He awoke suddenly, and sat up. The gelding had walked around and around its tree and, brought up short at the end of its rope, was standing with ears erect. Kin saw his father sitting behind a tree just where the slope began to dip. His rifle was in his hands, and others lay beside him. In guilty haste Kin caught up his own rifle. He saw by the lowering sun that it was late afternoon—Ian had let him sleep throughout the day. A bunch of dead grass rustled when he brushed against it, and Ian turned around.

"Come easy!" he hissed.

Kin crept to his father's side and peered down into the meadow. At the far end of it were six men, five in the uniforms of British regulars and the sixth wearing buckskin frontiersman's clothes. Kin gasped. The sixth man, who must have guided the others this far, was Stink-Hard Joe. The Indian gestured, and pointed toward the hill.

"How long have they been there?" Kin whispered.

"Ten minutes. That damned red man's guessed we're here an' would come on. I think the others want to turn back before night o'ertakes them. They must have left their horses back a bit. That means they know we're near."

Kin's breath caught in his throat, and his hands tightened about the rifle. If the six came on he and Ian could be sure of getting two. But the other four would know how to take two men fighting from such open country. Then a dragoon, evidently the leader of this scouting party, talked for a moment with Stink-Hard Joe. When they stopped talking, all six went back in the direction from which they had come. But Stink-Hard Joe, glancing back a dozen times, went last.

"They hae gone," Ian announced. "We'll load the beasties an' push on until darkness catches us."

For the next three days they travelled westward through forests so dense and mighty that the very size of the trees made mites of the men and horses crawling through them. They crossed rolling little ridges, and entered another range of mountains whose haze-shrouded peaks stretched in all directions. And Kin discovered that, after all, few of his dreams of the west had been far-fetched or exaggerated. Deer and elk were so plentiful that they were never out of sight. Flocks of turkeys, so tame that they could be killed with clubs, strutted on the ground before them. Every day they saw a dozen bears and unnumbered hordes of small game. Once, in another little open meadow, Kin thrilled at the sight of seven lumbering buffalo. He and Ian travelled fast but lived on the fat of the land.

It was near evening of the third day that they found the first sign of other human beings in this unspoiled and almost virgin wilderness. Travelling down a shaded valley, following the bed of a turbulent mountain stream, they stopped to examine a moccasin track in the soft sand.

"'Tis that of a white man," Ian said. "Red men toe in more, an' do nae tread so heavy. See here ..."

He stooped to examine the track, and a rifle cracked. The bullet smacked into a tree that Ian had shielded with his body a second before, the bark splinters flew. Kin and Ian leaped for other trees, and crouched behind them with rifles ready. Then, out in the forest, another rifle cracked. Then all was still for long minutes. Kin peered cautiously out from behind his tree, but could see nothing.

"You kin come out now," a familiar voice said.

Kin whirled. Standing scarcely ten feet from him, having come there so quietly that Kin had neither heard nor seen him, was a lanky hunter with one arm in a sling and a bandage around his head.

"Tanse!" Kin breathed. "Tanse Willard!"

"Yup," the hunter grinned. He raised his voice. "Kelly, you an' Taylor come over here."

Kin saw the beaded bag swinging from Tanse's shoulder, and knew it for Stink-Hard Joe's war-bag. Tanse's eyes

dropped to it, and raised to meet Kin's.

"Yeh," he said soberly. "That damn heathen followed you an' come close to gettin' you. Mebbe Ferguson would of made him a captain of scouts if he had."

Kin gulped. Stink-Hard Joe, the vengeful, vindictive renegade, had taken his soldiers back and come on alone to kill the McKenzies and take their rifles. But he had met Tanse Willard, and Tanse could mark off one more score in his memory book. Two other buckskinned hunters came up and murmured clumsy acknowledgment to Tanse's introductions. Tanse shifted his feet awkwardly.

"Well," he said, "we might's well start."

"Where to?" Ian demanded.

"Down to Kitten Toe."

"Nae," Ian said. "I hae a load of rifles for those who ordered them."

"Well," Tanse said. "Well ..." Then bluntly, "Look, Ian, this ain't my doin's. But as soon as we got word that you was comin' we got orders to bring you in. You ain't gonna be hurt or nothin'. But we do aim to keep track of you. I guess you could call yourself a prisoner."

Kin marveled. What mysterious mountain grapevine had relayed the news that he and Ian were coming? But his wonder soon changed to anger.

"You're barkin' up the wrong tree!" he flared. "We're both Rebels now!"

"I know you are," Tanse Willard said. "But I don't know you both are. I'm tellin' you outright that a big stew's cookin' up, an' we're takin' no chances of its news gettin' back over the mountains until we're ready to serve it."

"I'm nae goin'," Ian said flatly. "I'll take these rifles to the men who want them."

Tanse Willard said grimly, "You'll have a chance to deliver every rifle. But you're goin'."

"Do ye promise?"

"That's two promises."

"Then," Ian said simply, "I'll go wi'out fuss or bother."

8. *KITTEN TOE*

Ian led the gelding down the valley, and the mare followed behind Kin. The three hunters stalked ahead, covering ground with the loose-kneed, long-gaited stride of the professional woodsman and apparently conscious of nothing save getting to wherever they were going. Kin worried, and tried to see through the heavy woods on either side; it was impossible to tell what might be lurking there and this was a poor time to get careless. Then the three hunters stopped. Ian and Kin brought up behind them and the man called Kelly went three hundred feet into the woods. He came back driving a white and brown cow. Tanse Willard and Kelly grinned.

"That's Tom Yeobright's cow," Tanse explained. "Every now'n then she gets tired of her home stall an' lights out for tall timber. Tom'll be glad to have her back."

"How'd you know she was there?" Kin asked.

"Kelly smelled her," Tanse said gravely. "He used to be the best cow-smeller in Virginia until the constables found out what happened to all the cows he smelled. That's why he come over the mountains." Tanse laughed at Kin's puzzled face. "Shucks, you get so's you can tell 'most everythin' in the woods if you stay in 'em long enough."

Driving the cow ahead of them, the three hunters continued on down the valley. And for Kin one mysterious way of woodsmen was a mystery no more. Of course Tanse had only been having a little fun with him when he said Kelly smelled the cow. But the hunters had heard the cow moving. Living in dangerous forests, their very lives depending on how alert they remained, they had learned to interpret every sign and use every sense. A squirrel scratching in the leaves would make one sound. But a vigorous turkey gobbler would make quite another and a walking man still another. A buzzard flapping across the sky would mean only that it was on its way to carrion. But an excited thrush fluttering over its nest meant that danger was near. Leaves rustling or grass moving was normal enough when wind blew. But rustling leaves or moving grass when no wind blew meant that something alive moved near or through it. The smell of smoke might indicate a settler's cabin or an Indian encampment, depending on how it smelled. And by such things the woodsmen lived. Tanse, Kelly, and Taylor had all heard the cow, and all had known that it was no normal forest sound.

Ten minutes later they came to the first ragged clearing.

Stumps still spotted the field, and in between them shocks of Indian corn had been stacked. Pumpkins yellowed on the ground, and sunflowers drooped wilted heads. At the edge of the forest were a great many dead trees from which a strip of bark had been peeled. A few, already fallen, leaned against sturdier neighbors or lay full-length on the ground. A one-room log cabin, attached to which was a lean-to barn, stood on a knoll in the center of the field, and Kin saw that within a hundred yards of it in all directions every bit of foliage had been destroyed so that no unseen enemy could come within shooting distance. A red ox was hitched to a crude sledge loaded with corn stalks. When the hunters walked openly into the field the man who had been driving the ox rose from behind the sledge, and leaned his long rifle against it.

He was tall, and lanky like most of the mountaineers. Dressed in deer-skins, the prevailing costume of the country, he walked down to the trail and stood waiting for them. Kin saw a bearded man who bore the marks of very hard work.

"Howdy, Tom Yeobright," Tanse hailed him.

"Howdy."

"We found your cow back in the woods," Tanse continued genially. "She was makin' love to a buck deer!"

"Wouldn't put it past her," Tom Yeobright grunted.

Tanse asked casually, "Have ya heard that the Cherokees are on the prod?"

"Yeh. They told me."

Tanse changed the subject. "How's the farm?"

The hollow cheeks suddenly took on color. "Couldn't be better. Give me twenty year more an' I'll have the purtiest place this side o' the mountains! Did ya know that I got wheat? Yes, sir, wheat! A hul five-pound sack of the purtiest seed I ever knew or heer'd tell about! I toted it over the mountains on my back. Just you wait an' see what I'm gonna do with that

seed. It'll mean bread, real bread!"

"Yes, it will," Tanse said soberly. "Well, I reckon we'll be pushin' along. Come down to Kitten Toe if ya hafta," he added meaningly.

"I'll come," Tom Yeobright said, "if I hafta."

Kin looked once more at the stooped figure that had walked over the mountains to work and who seemed only a dull clod until he spoke of his farm. Then he came alive and showed that, after all, he was a man possessed of a man's feelings. Kin glanced back at the farm, compared to which the clearing and cabin at McKenzie's Gap were a palace and estate. "I'll come if I hafta." The words themselves, as well as Tom Yeobright's manner, had conveyed the impression that it would take more than the threat of an Indian attack to separate the farmer from his farm.

"Why don't he go where he can be safe, if the Cherokees are comin'?" Kin asked Tanse.

"Tom's put a lot of work in that place. He figgers on bringin' his wife here come spring."

"But it's only a stumpy field an' a cabin."

"Tom don't see it thataway. He come over the mountains a year ago, carryin' only an axe an' rifle. Manse Cullen had already started that clearin', but he got careless around some Cherokees that wasn't. Tom's done considible work sinst then."

They passed another farm, almost an exact replica of Tom Yeobright's save for a larger cabin and a detached barn. A man in the field, assisted by a ten-year-old boy, took only time enough from his harvesting to wave at the passing cavalcade. From the cabin's door a gaunt woman shaded her eyes to look at them, and younger children clung shyly to her skirts. A half-dozen red pigs rooted around the field and chickens scratched busily before the door. Doubts began to assail Kin. These over-the-mountain people were not the dashing heroes he had pictured. Save for Tanse and the other hunters they were only farmers, apparently on the verge of starvation and certainly poverty stricken. From where among them would come the spirit needed when Ferguson marched over the mountains or the Cherokees attacked? But maybe they weren't all like that.

"Are there lots of farmers over here?" Kin asked.

Tanse grinned. "They're mostly that. Now'n then you ketch a long hunter or a no-good woods runner like we'uns. But the biggest part are hard-workin', God-fearin', respectable folk."

"Yeh, but all they seem to think about is gettin' their corn in."

"They're peecooliar thataway," Tanse said drily. "The biggest part of 'em got in the habit of eatin' regular, an' corn is what they eat most of over here. 'Course it would be convenient-like if they could buy vittles at a handy store. But in the first place they ain't got no money, an' in the second place there ain't no store."

"Then why do they come way out here?" Kin asked.

"Because they ain't got no money, they can skimp along without stores. On t'other side of the mountains most of 'em didn't have one shillin' to rub ag'in another. How could they buy any land? An' land is what they want. It's the only thing that's allus good, an' over here anybody can have for the takin' as much as he can clear. What's more, they can hold it after they get it."

"I see," Kin said.

But he didn't see. He had expected to find clearings. But with Cherokees threatening from the west and Ferguson from the east, he hadn't expected to find the owners of those clearings more concerned with getting their corn in than with planning to beat back their enemies. The air was one of general complacency; five pounds of seed were more important than the Cherokees or the British.

The village of Kitten Toe was a half-dozen cabins in a five-hundred-acre natural clearing, and a log stockade that enclosed several other small buildings. Shooting buttresses extended over all four corners of the stockade. A spring bubbled up in the center of it and sent a thin trickle of water coursing down to a nearby river. A herd of cattle and one of

horses, watched over by a gangling boy who sat comfortably on the back of a huge plow horse, grazed in the clearing. All about men, women, and children were busy at the all-important task of getting the corn in. Kin could not stifle his disappointment. This was the west, the land of adventure and romance!

Kelly and Taylor swerved aside when they came to the stockade's open gates, and Kin watched them walking toward one of the groups laboring in the fields. Kelly laid down his rifle, picked up a shock of corn, and heaved it to the top of a loaded sledge. Taylor walked past him to the river, and sat on its bank with his rifle across his knees. The sorrel mare nudged Kin with her nose, and he looked around to see Tanse and Ian well within the stockade. Kin ran to catch up.

They walked toward a small cabin, and were almost at the door when it opened and Isaac Shelby stepped out. He grinned.

"Well, Kinross McKenzie. You're a lucky sprig to get over them mountains without havin' your ha'r lifted by a Cherokee."

"It was easy," said Kin, a little too casually. "My father was with me."

"Hm-m, so this is your father. You're a Tory, ain't you?"

"I was," Ian said stiffly.

"But not now," Kin interrupted. "He killed three British soldiers that tried to stop us from comin'."

"Why'd they try to stop you?" asked Shelby bluntly.

"Ferguson wanted the rifles," Ian answered. "But he couldna hae them. They were promised o'er here."

Shelby nodded thoughtfully. "You done a good piece of business, McKenzie. But you know that you come among us with a sour reputation?"

"I know it."

"Just so we understand one another," Shelby said quietly. "You won't be interfered with or harmed so long as you don't try to leave. The end cabin is empty. You an' the boy are welcome to it, and we'll see that you get some food."

Ian said stubbornly, "I journeyed o'er the mountains to bring these rifles to their proper owners. Tanse Willard has gi'en his word that I will hae the chance to do so."

"An' so you shall," Shelby promised. "It don't make a mite of difference to us who gets 'em so long as it's over-the-mountain men. Good-night, gentlemen."

Shelby went back into the cabin from which he had come. Tanse Willard stood shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"Well," he said finally, "ya got it straight from the Colonel hisself. An'—an'—I hope ya don't think too harsh of me for fetchin' ya in!"

Ian said, "'Tis what I would hae ordered had I been in Shelby's place. Will ye come to our cabin, or will ye be about affairs of your own?"

"I've got to go," Tanse said with relief. "But I'll see ya around."

He disappeared in the darkness, and Ian and Kin went to the cabin that had been assigned them. They picketed the horses, and carried the rifles inside. Ian picked up some of the ready-cut firewood beside the door, threw it into the huge fireplace, and lighted it. The fire leaped up, revealing a one-room cabin whose only furniture was a double bunk, a table, and two chairs. Deerskins from which the hair had been scraped hung over the windows. The floor was of packed earth. There were no shooting vents, but inside the stockade they would not be needed. Ian sat down heavily in one of the chairs.

"Well," he said, "here we are."

"You ain't mad about it?" Kin asked.

"An' why should I be? Affairs could no hae come to a better head had I deliberately contrived them. E'er this trip is done we'll see a rare an' wonderful thing."

"What do you mean?"

"More than ye may think. Everything needful for a mighty explosion is here, an' needs but the spark to touch it off. I told ye weeks ago that the British officers know little o' the men wi' whom they meddle. Seein' them convinces me more than ever that I am right. The clash, when it comes, will be huge an' bloody. The man Yeobright, the hunters, all whom I hae met, are o' the highest caliber."

"Yeobright's only a farmer!"

"Aye, only a farmer. But he is one who'll fight tooth an' nail for what he has. Did ye hae a few more years on your shoulders, ye'd see it for yerself. Yeobright will nae be easily stirred to battle. But, once stirred, he will outfight any two o' your professional fire-eaters, because he has somethin' for which to fight."

"But Ferguson an' the Cherokees are both on the march, an' all these people around here think of is workin' in their cornfields!"

"Warrin' red men are so much a part o' life here that nobody becomes unduly stirred at them," Ian commented. "An' Ferguson is far enou' away so that his very distance means security. These people know what it is to march over the mountains. But, if he blunders, watch what will happen."

"Yes, but ..."

"Answer the door," Ian directed. "Some one would speak wi' us."

The knock on the door was repeated, and Kin opened it. A plump, pleasant-faced woman carrying a covered plate stepped in.

"My gracious!" she was saying. "When I heard of travelers from the other side of the mountains here in Kitten Toe I just couldn't believe my ears! I said to my man, Henry, that I just couldn't. By the way, my man is Henry Wayne and I'm Mrs. Henry Wayne. But, as I was saying to Henry, most of the travelers who get here are farmers or hunters who can talk of nothing but their clearings or the last varmint they scalped, be it Indian or four-footed. It amounts to the same thing, Henry says. Where do you come from?"

"McKenzie's Gap, madam," Ian said.

"McKenzie's Gap, I don't know the place. I came to Charlotte as servant to Mr. and Mrs. Notley. They used me well, then Henry married me and brought me to Gilbert Town. We lived a year there, and came over the mountains two years ago."

Her voice was heavy with longing, and wistful with thoughts of the life left behind.

"I hae often been in Gilbert Town," Ian said.

"You have! Did you know the Trevors there?"

"I knew George Trevor."

"George and Elsie Trevor, the very ones! Henry and I lived next door to them for more than four months. Tell me, what are the women in Gilbert Town wearing now?"

"Well—sort o'—that is—dresses."

Bit by bit Mrs. Wayne jogged Ian's memory until she had almost an exact description of the latest styles in Gilbert Town. She wormed from him other bits of homely, intimate news for which she hungered. And when at last she rose to go, as though it was an afterthought she laid down the covered pan.

"I've brought you some johnny-cake. It's not the best but maybe you can choke it down. As I always said to Henry, men are so helpless when it comes to fixing for themselves. Well, I must go. Henry said to turn your horses loose so they can forage. The stockade gates are closed, and they'll join the herd. He says that the boy will take them out tomorrow and bring them back."

"I thank ye, madam," Ian said. "An' I will thank Henry."

Kin opened the door, and when Mrs. Wayne paused for a last good-night he blurted the question that had been on the tip of his tongue since she had entered.

"Wouldn't you like to go back?"

She laughed. "Bless you, honey, no. It was a nice place with many comforts. But over here we have something to call our own. Well, for the last time, good-night. Lord knows I didn't mean to gossip so long, but it was such a comfort. We'll see you around. Drop in to any house when you get lonesome."

The next morning, when Kin woke up, Ian was working bear oil into the locks and working mechanisms of the rifles he had brought over the mountains. Kin ate breakfast, some of Mrs. Wayne's delicious johnny-cake, slices from a roasted haunch of venison that another neighbor had brought in the early morning, and butter. For a moment he loitered idly, watching his father oil the guns—a task that Ian allowed none but himself to do. Kin sauntered to the door, and opened it to confront a cocky, red-haired youth his own age. The red-head grinned, displaying two gaps where front teeth should have been.

"My name's Red Scott," he said, "an' I kin lick you."

Kin sprang from the door straight upon his challenger, and for the moment his surprise attack gave him the advantage. But Red Scott was wiry as a mink and slippery as an eel. He wriggled from beneath Kin and stood up to swan-dive back on top of him. Kin locked his arms about the other's waist, and they rolled over and over in the grass, pummeling each other as they rolled. Blood streamed from Kin's nose and oozed down to his lip. But Red Scott had a black eye and a bruised forehead. Finally, both breathless, they stopped. Kin sat up and blushed at the excited ring of onlookers that the fight had attracted. A gray-haired man who leaned on a cane cackled, "He got ya, Red. You tackled the wrong rooster this time!"

The red-head's grin widened.

"Hey, you ain't so bad!" he said to Kin. "Wanna go fishin'?"

Kin grinned back. "Aye."

"Now I know you're a furriner," Red Scott said. "Did ya come from across the mountains?"

"Aye."

"Aye, aye," the red-head mimicked. "Don'cha know nothin' else?"

Kin wiped the blood from his nose and said seriously, "Well, I know you hurt me a lot more than the British at Musgrove's Mills was able to."

"Was *you* there?"

"Oh, sure," Kin said easily. "Me'n Shelby fought the British back in good shape."

"Seems to me that I heard tell about a couple of others too," Red observed drily. "I guess it was a nice little scrummage though. Of course, if a man wants real stuff, he ain't seen it until he's fit Cherokees. I mind the time when I fit back sixty or seventy, an' ..."

"Milked the cow with your free hand," Kin interrupted sarcastically.

"Aw, I've seen plenty of Injuns; wunst a big war party come outside Kitten Toe. But we socked 'em right back into their ol' woods. Maybe I ain't fought no British. But I bet I seen as much fightin' as you have."

"Mebbe so," Kin agreed condescendingly. "But you never fought British regulars."

"No," Red Scott sighed enviously. "I never did. But I allus hoped to have a whack at 'em. Come on, furriner. We'd best go fishin' if we're goin'. I got to be back an' help harvest."

They overturned flat stones in the river's shallow edge, and caught the little crayfish that scuttled away from beneath them. Red Scott produced a fishline and hook, baited it with one of the crayfish, and whirled the weighted line about his head. The line sailed far out and struck with a little splash on the river's placid surface. Almost at once a fish took the bait, and the boy unceremoniously hauled in a three-pound bass. He rebaited and caught another bass, and another until he had eight. Reluctantly he coiled the line and put it in his pocket.

"Well," he said, "I reckon I got to go heave corn shocks for a spell. Paw'll whale the tar outen me if'n I don't."

For two hours after Red had gone to work Kin loitered about the clearing and in the stockade. Then, driven by boredom to seek action of any sort, he went into the fields and helped the busy men, women and children who were gathering the corn. It was hard, sweaty work with no respite save for the noonday meal, then back to the fields again. Kin was so tired when night came that he could only gulp a hasty supper and roll into his bed. But the next day inaction again drove him to the fields.

Then, when the harvest was finally in, there was corn to strip from the ear and corn meal to grind. And throughout all of it Kin was troubled. Definitely life in the west was not as he had pictured it. Save for an occasional spontaneous party, the whole lives of these settlers seemed only relentless toil. There was an undercurrent of something else that Kin understood only vaguely. No one person who lived here had more than enough to eat and a place to sleep. But all seemed contentedly working toward some goal that a not too-distant day would surely bring. And Kin wondered because he did not know what that goal was or how anyone was going to realize more than they already had.

True, the west had its other side too. Men drifted in from the surrounding forests, stayed an hour or a day, and departed with one of Ian's rifles. Buckskinned hunters and trappers availed themselves of Kitten Toe's open hospitality and went again. But these last, at least to the general public, talked little of what they had seen or done. Shelby came and went, and various men conferred with him in his cabin. None of the visitors caused much stir or were considered anything out of the ordinary. Kin wanted to talk with some of them. But none seemed to have time.

Then, one dreamy, frost-tinted day in late September, the man on watch in the eastern shooting buttress called to another on the ground. The second man went to a huge strip of iron that dangled from a small tree, picked up a piece of hardened hickory, and began to beat furiously on the iron alarm. People streamed in from the fields, and the herd boys hurried the stock inside the stockade. Men stood about with rifles in their hands, and a few mounted the shooting platforms. Then the lookout laughed, and called down,

"Hey, it's Bill Smith."

The stockade gates were flung open and rifles disappeared. Kin ran with the rest to the open gates, and peered out, unbelieving. The rider ambling leisurely toward them was William Smith, the rifleman whom he had last seen desperately wounded at Musgrove's Mills. He waved his hand as amiably as though he had only been on a two-hour visit to a neighbor. Plainly he was enjoying the surprise he had created.

"Howdy, folks. Howdy. Is the Cunnel in?"

Shelby hurried from his cabin, and grasped the returned soldier's hand. His hearty laugh rang out, and Kin thought that never before had he heard such genuine pleasure in any laughter.

"Bill! They couldn't keep you!"

William Smith dismounted, clumsily catching his weight on his left leg. "Easy thar," he cautioned. "I still got a chunk of lead in me. I didn't get away, Cunnel. Ferguson brang his army to Musgrove's Mills not an eye-wink after the fight we had thar. He gimme the best of care, he did. An' soon's I was able to ride he on-loosed me to carry a tale to you personal."

"What is it?"

"He said—now lemme think to get the cut of it. He said," William Smith enunciated painfully, "that if the people over here do not desist from their opposition to British arms, he will march his army over the mountains, hang their leaders,

an' lay waste their country with fire an' sword. Thar! It's out!"

The assembled men murmured among themselves. Shelby laughed again.

"He said that, did he? Come on up to my cabin, Bill. I want to have a little pow-wow."

Shortly after sunup the next morning, Tom Yeobright came down the trail driving his red ox and his cow. He carried only a rifle and axe.

"Howdy," he said briefly, sinking his axe to its head in a post beside the stockade.

"Howdy, Tom," Henry Wayne answered.

"I heer'd a man named Ferguson is headin' this way with fires an' swords an' hangman's ropes," Tom Yeobright stated.

"I reckon he is."

"Well, what are we waitin' for?"

"The Colonel. He went away this mornin'. But he'll be back."

"Did he say he would?"

"Yup."

"Then he will," Tom Yeobright said. "I'll wait."

Just before dark two more settlers came in and swung from their horses. One of them conferred a moment with Tanse Willard, and immediately remounted. He called from his horse,

"Seein's how the Cunnel ain't startin' right off, I'll be a-goin'. I left my wife an' kids packin', an' they can use help."

More men drifted into the stockade, those with families bringing them. They came without fuss or pomp, but within three days Kin counted sixty that had not been there before and the cattle and horse herds that grazed in the clearing were of sizable proportions now. The last to come in was an old, white-bearded hunter who carried two chickens in one hand and a smooth-bore musket as ancient as himself in the other.

"I done heard somebody's gonna hang Ike Shelby an' Chucky Jack Sevier," he chuckled. "I wanna be around when they try it. It oughta be fun. Where's Ike?"

"Gone to see Chucky Jack, Uncle Dobb," a man answered. "But he'll be back."

"Yeh. I guess he'll be back. An' by cracky I'll pad along when he goes to meet that thar hangin' man. Hang us, sword us, burn us, will he?"

On the twenty-fourth of September Shelby rode back into the stockade. He sat his stallion in the center of it, and waited for Kitten Toe to gather around.

"The meetin' place is Sycamore Shoals," he said. "Whoever's goin' leaves from thar. Everybody from Kitten Toe as wants a hand in it leaves now."

Kin hurried away to collect what little they had to take. Within half an hour the men with horses mounted them, and the dozen or so without mounts were forming an awkward line. Besides his rifle, each man carried a blanket, a cup, and a wallet filled with mixed corn meal and maple sugar. Kin saw Mrs. Henry Wayne push her husband away from her, and heard her say,

"Get on with you! That hangman will take some licking! And there's enough of us left to take care of any Cherokees. But, the Lord go with you, Henry!"

She turned away, and Kin saw tears in her eyes. He turned away in confusion and he saw Ian, leading the sorrel mare and the gray gelding, for which he had somehow managed to obtain saddles and bridles. Ian put the reins of the two horses in Kin's hand, went to Shelby, and said steadily,

"If ye can use two more men, both of whom hae seen fightin', I can offer the services of my son an' myself."

For a second the two men faced one another.

"Mount," Isaac Shelby said gruffly. "Mount an' ride."

9. *THE ARMY*

Shelby led the ragged little army from the stockade. The horsemen, mounted on everything from rabbit-sized ponies to heavy-footed plow horses, rode Indian-file behind him. Fourteen who lacked horses marched in the rear and drove a dozen beef cattle. At first they tried to maintain some sort of military step and order. But the cattle were fractious and uneasy about leaving their home pastures. Led by a blunt-horned, white-faced bull, they tried to stampede. The foot soldiers lost all semblance of military dignity as they scampered about to herd them back. Uncle Dobb whacked the bull across the rump with the barrel of his antique smooth-bore, and a laugh went up from the women, children, and old men who had followed the army from the stockade. Suddenly Kin looked with sharp alarm at those who were being left behind.

He had almost forgotten the Cherokees. But nobody had as yet said anything about the Indians forsaking their announced intention to raid the settlements, and every able-bodied man was riding with Shelby. Kin spurred the sorrel mare and caught up with Tanse Willard.

"How many's goin' to fight Ferguson?" he asked.

Tanse shrugged. "All of us, I hope. Leastwise we're all gonna start. Mebbe some won't git thar."

"Yeh, but nobody's left. Who's gonna fight the Cherokees if they come?"

"The women, kids, an' old men."

"How can they?"

"With guns, ya numskull. Did ya think they aimed to scratch their eyes out?"

"But they can't fight."

"Oh yes they can. Some of 'em can sling as straight a rifle ball as any man in this line."

"They're all alone!"

"Not all alone. All the fightin' men ain't here. Some are hangin' close to the Cherokee villages, watchin' 'em. If a war party cuts loose those men will head for the fort. That can't be starved out an' will be damn hard to take."

"Aren't the men worried?"

"Sure. But what good's it do 'em? The Injuns can an' will be took care of in time. But right now the question is either whalin' the tar out of Ferguson or havin' him whale it out of us. We kind of got to take the fust thing fust."

"Oh," Kin said soberly.

He dropped back to his place beside Ian, with a sudden feeling of humbleness. For the first time he began to get a true conception of the west and the people who dared challenge the wilderness there. After imagining it a place of romance and excitement, he had found it a land where people toiled most of their waking hours for a meager living. Now the adventure had come. Stripped of its glamour, it was nothing less than a threat of disaster to all who dared oppose either the British or the Cherokees. Asking no help and expecting no quarter, the over-the-mountain people were rising to meet that threat in the best way they knew, and it was an inspiring way. This was no collection of paid or conscripted soldiers, but a spontaneous gathering of free men who were in arms to defend that freedom for which they had risked security and now were risking their lives.

Ian stole a sideways glance at Kin and said quietly, "Boy, ye are beginnin' to think."

"Yes," Kin said. "Yes. I guess I am."

Somebody yelled, "Bring me a British scalp, furriner. I'll swap ya two Cherokees for it!"

Kin looked down to see Red Scott standing beside the line of march. The red-head clutched an old musket in one hand, and had stuck a rakish coon-skin cap on top of his head. But his eyes were wistful and heavy with longing. Kin, no older

than himself, was going off to battle the hard-fighting British. He was staying home to occupy himself with familiar, and therefore thoroughly despised, Indians. Kin pulled on the reins to make the sorrel prance, and raised his pistol.

"Ya needn't be so hifalutin'," Red Scott hooted. "Look, I got a gun, too!" He waved the old musket.

"Shoot it straight, Red," Kin called earnestly.

"I'll sure 'nough try," Red Scott answered. "Don't let that horse bite ya."

The marching men resolutely turned their backs on Kitten Toe, and none looked back any more. But something invisible was there, as though the men who followed Shelby were simultaneously sending back a prayer for the homes they loved and the loved ones who remained in them. Kin found himself, along with the rest, wishing with all his heart that the crude little settlement called Kitten Toe would be spared all danger, would be there to greet and receive and shelter these men when they returned from their wars.

For nearly an hour the deep silence was broken only by the sound of the plodding horses' hoofs. Then suddenly there came the sound of Uncle Dobb swearing at the white-faced bull, and again the hearty whack of his rifle against the bull's rump. That broke the spell. A rider began to sing, and the rest joined in.

"I walked clean over the mountains,
My true love for to see.
But all I found when I got there,
Was a bloody Cherokee.

Oh I stopped to see my honey,
An' my honey says to me,
'You better git your rifle gun
'Cause there's a Cherokee.'"

A couple of high-spirited frontiersmen raced their horses out of line and through the forest. They wheeled their mounts and came speeding back. Then there was a great argument as to whose horse was the swifter and which man the better rider. The rest of the army joined in, taking sides.

Uncle Dobb, who seemed to cherish a particular aversion to the white-faced bull, came running past berating that stubborn beast with vigorous curses and the muzzle of his rifle. The bull swerved into the woods, and back to the beef herd at the rear.

"Ye hae a tough 'un, Grandfather," Ian called amiably.

Uncle Dobb stopped to glare.

"Don't call me Grandfather!" he snapped. "I ain't but seventy-one. Time you young whipper-snappers seen as much of this as I have, mebbe ye'll begin to know what it's all about!"

"No offense meant," Ian said contritely, winking at Kin.

"Then none will be took," Uncle Dobb smiled. "How old's that boy of your'n?"

"Fifteen," Kin said quickly.

"He's fourteen an' will be fifteen," Ian corrected. "Fourteen to seventy-one, a nice range for soldier's ages, wouldna ye say?"

"Sure would," Uncle Dobb agreed heartily. "Well, I gotta go see to that bull. I swan, he's the peskiest critter I ever see."

He went running off after the bull. The soldiers, save for a few like Tom Yeobright who plodded along as though this was an unwelcome task to be dispensed with quickly, were singing again. Then, as the miles dropped behind them, most were contented merely to sit loosely in their saddles and ride along. Only a few of the most unquenchable spirits still whooped and sang, and chased each other through the forest. It was nearly dusk when the tired horses pricked up their ears and stepped along a little faster. Jaded men sat erect in their saddles. They had ridden over a hill, and the valley

below them was filled with blue wood smoke. Ten minutes later they rode down to the river flats known as Sycamore Shoals.

Hobbled horses whinnied at them. Men gathered around, some few in the blue and buff uniforms of the Continental militia. But even most of the militia had only the part of a uniform, a cap, a jacket, or a pair of boots, to establish their military rank. By far the greater part of the assembled men were dressed in buckskin woodsman's garb. Most of them had a buck's tail stuck in their hats or caps, and those who lacked one sported a sprig of holly or mountain pine. Good-natured jeers and catcalls greeted the latest arrivals.

"The war's pra'tically over. The boys f'm Kitten Toe is here!"

Then suddenly a high-pitched, angry voice cut like a knife blade through the confusion.

"Whoa thar! Whoa thar! Blast yer hide! Whoa thar!"

Head close to the ground, the white-faced bull came thundering past. Hanging to a long rope that he had tied halter-fashion about the bull's head, Uncle Dobb was taking titanic steps in the wake of his fleeing charge. The soldiers scattered. A hundred feet farther on Uncle Dobb snubbed the rope around a tree, brought the bull up suddenly, and began to administer a suitable punishment with the barrel of his old gun. He stopped, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and looked up.

"He's the cussedest critter! I never see'd the beat of him in all my born days!"

"Git down, boys," said a grinning sergeant. "Git down an' find a place to toss yore blankets. We got about a hunnert an' ninety more of Shelby's men here. They's two hunnert an' fifty of us with Chucky Jack Sevier an' mebbe two hunnert of McDowell's. Git down an' come in."

The men from Kitten Toe dismounted, hobbled their horses, and turned them loose to forage. The white-faced bull uttered a throaty bellow and stamped truculently toward a herd of cattle feeding in the meadow. Kin sat gratefully down with his back against a Spanish oak and studied the encampment. Nothing, he thought, could look less like a company of soldiers. The rough, independent force that had elected to be led by Shelby and Sevier were as unlike Ferguson's disciplined men as anything that could be imagined.

For a mile down the open river bed their camp fires twinkled in the darkness. Men sat in groups about them, hooting and whistling or shrieking Indian yells. Others stretched on the ground with their single blanket over them and slept. Groups of riders dashed here and there, and the occasional lone recruit who drifted into camp was invariably greeted by the hoots and yells of whoever he happened to meet first. Far down the river a group of Sevier's mountaineers were bawling,

"The soldier he carries his knapsack and gun,
An' swears at the weight as he tramps through the sun:
But devil a loon, did I ever hear tell,
Who swore at the weight of the Jolly Bott-el.

So heave an' ho, an' trombelow,
The Jolly Bott-el is a feather I trow."

Kin nestled a little closer in his blanket while a drowsy warmth crept over him. And somehow, despite the lack of military order, everything seemed exactly as it should be. The camp, the boisterous soldiers, the wild, uncouth song, were all part of a picture whose pieces were slowly being fitted together. Only when Kin thought of Ferguson and the powerful forces at his command did a twinge of fear cross his mind. But there was no room for many disturbing thoughts because the drowsy warmth had become a delicious, dreamy lassitude. Twice during the night he awoke to see the fires burning low, and only alert sentries moving among them.

The cool, moist dawn was making its first stealthy approach on the camp when he awoke for the third time. Smoke from freshly kindled fires curled upward and blanketed the valley. During the night three beeves had been slaughtered and the awakening soldiers went to them, cut off meat to fit their desires, and cooked it at one of the fires. Ian stirred, and almost before he was awake reached forth a hand to grasp his rifle. He sat stiffly up, and grinned at Kin.

"Gettin' old, I reckon. Let's go rustle some rations."

They went to one of the beef carcasses, and Ian cut off a huge steak. Five men, whose green-fringed shirts proclaimed them to be of Sevier's regiment, moved over to make room for them at a fire. Three of them, a beardless youth of nineteen and two middle-aged woodsmen, were gazing with ill-concealed dislike at the other two. Kin looked at them. Both were young and, judging by the sizes of the steaks they had cut for themselves, both possessed of huge appetites.

"As I was sayin'," one of them declared, "this army ain't goin' to nothin' 'cept its own funeral. When we meets up with Ferguson"—he snapped his fingers—"it'll be over."

"Aw, you're full of smoke talk," a woodsman growled sulkily.

"Am I?" the other demanded. "Tell 'em what you know about Ferguson's Rangers, Sam."

"Jest what ever'budy who ever see'd 'em knows. Them Rangers of his'n is as hard as nails an' twic't as hard to chaw. I seen two of 'em tackle nine of we'uns an' kill every one. Nope, no ordinary army stands a chanst ag'in Ferguson."

"This," Ian said quietly, "is no ordinary army. Besides, though I'll be the first to say that Ferguson is no ordinary enemy, I ken that ye hae o'er-estimated him a bit."

"What do you know of Ferguson?" Sam demanded truculently.

"I think a mite more than you do. He has been triumphant. But, though the legends he likes to spread may lead to other convictions, he is nae a super-man. He can, must, an' will be thoroughly trounced. If he is nae whipped in battle, rest assured he will do as he has promised."

"You fool!" Sam said bitterly. "Maybe you ain't been told that Shelby, Sevier, Campbell, McDowell, an' all the rest of the high mucky-mucks is aimin' to skip out to Louisiana an' live with the Spanish if we git licked? They don't give a hooty-owl's hoot about us! All any of 'em hope to do is loot them rich Tories an' pay for it with our blood!"

Ian said harshly, "More of that talk, friend, is aye likely to get ye a muck o' trouble. But I'm takin' the charitable view, an' thinkin' that ye know nae better. If we are whipped, every man o' us had best go to live wi' the Spanish. But we won't be whipped. To begin wi', this army can stand against any other equal in numbers. To end, Ferguson canna know we are on the way. An' the element o' surprise is worth a second army."

Sam wiped his fingers on his shirt and got up. "Don't say you wasn't told," he said testily.

The two walked away and lost themselves in the awakening army. One of the woodsmen looked after them, and turned troubled eyes on Ian.

"Whadda'ya s'pose he told us that for?"

"I dinna ken," Ian said thoughtfully. "'Tis a common practice of hostile armies to send such gloomy, fearful men, under the guise of friendliness, among their enemies. But we hae no proof. 'Tis best to think them loose-tongued laddies who ken no better than to chatter in such fashion, an' watch them. But Ferguson's Rangers are nae so hard as they are painted. Armed wi' the knife I wear at my belt, I myself killed three who opposed me wi' rifles."

"Did ye now?" The woodsman's troubled face relaxed. "How'd ye do it?"

"'Twas no great feat," Ian said. "Ye could do the same, gi'en the same circumstances. What are the names o' yon buckos?"

"Sam Chambers an' a feller called Crawford. I never see 'em 'til they joined up with Chucky Jack."

Ian thrust a limber green twig through the steak and held it over the fire until the fat began to drip and the edges curled. Quickly he turned it over to sear the other side, and hold in all the juices. When it was broiled he withdrew it from the fire and divided it with his knife. He and Kin ate hungrily, seizing the hot meat in their hands, wolfing it down, and wiping their mouths with the backs of their hands.

The whole army was now astir, those who had caroused throughout most of the night grumbling protests as they rolled from their blankets. Soldiers swarmed about the three beef carcasses, and others edged into empty places as soon as they

were vacated. Men were going toward the hobbled horses that had been collected in a herd, and cutting out their own mounts. Shelby strode to a grassy knoll and whistled, and his huge stallion broke from the herd to come running toward him. For a bit master and horse, the one stroking with hands and the other with soft muzzle, caressed each other.

By the time the sun broke over the mountains the army was ready to move. Horses, loaded with their meager baggage, were tethered to convenient trees or rein-haltered to the ground. The men from Kitten Toe and the country around it were gathered together watching the last-minute hustlings and scurryings about the camp. But the army was a unit now, by virtue of having slept, talked, and eaten together, and all hoots and jeers were a thing of the past. Tanse Willard and Henry Wayne, both of whom had been appointed lieutenants at last night's officers' meeting, moved among them with new authority.

"You seen Uncle Dobb?" Tanse called to Kin.

Kin looked around. All the horses had been caught and saddled, but two dozen cattle still wandered about the camp site. Tom Yeobright and the rest of those who had no horses stood ready to march, but Uncle Dobb was not with them. Kin shook his head.

"Ain't he with the bull?" someone offered.

"Nah! We're leavin' the cattle behind anyhow on account they slow us up too much. I reckon one night's campaignin' was enough for Uncle Dobb. He prob'ly snuck out of camp an' went back to Kitten Toe. We start in ten minutes. But fust the hul army collects at that big pine over there."

In the center of the meadow a towering pine reared its craggy length, and Kin and Ian joined those who were walking toward it. Kin tried to estimate the number of men, for the first time gathered together in broad daylight. He turned a puzzled glance on Ian.

"Two hundred an' fifty with Shelby, the same with Sevier, an' two hundred of McDowell's men, the sergeant said. But it looks to me like more'n seven hundred men."

"There's nine hundred," replied Ian. "While ye slept last night, Colonel Arthur Campbell arrived wi' two hundred more. But we'll need every man; Ferguson commands nigh on to fifteen hundred."

The ring of men about the pine stood awkwardly with their hats or coon-skin caps in their hands. A few, more familiar with the proprieties, even bent their heads. Kin glanced beneath the elbows of a huge mountaineer who stood in the front row and saw a black-robed minister in the center of the ring. His features were sharp, hawk-like, and among those bearded mountaineers, startlingly clean-shaven. There was about him a certain air of gentleness and piety that few of the mountaineers possessed. Tanse, standing beside Kin, whispered respectfully,

"That's the Reverend Samuel Doaks. Many the man dyin' with a Cherokee arrer through him has been helped to Heaven by that man of God. An' many a woman who might have been drove mad by lonesomeness an' danger has found peace through him. He's a wunnerful man."

"Aye," said Ian, "and a wonderful sight that would hae appealed to the Prophet Isaiah: 'The noise of a multitude in the mountains, like as of a great people: the Lord of hosts mastereth the host of the battle.'"

The black-garbed minister crossed himself and intoned his prayer in a quiet but far-reaching voice that all heard.

"Almighty God, our men are going forth to face those whose hearts have not been stirred to compassion. Watch over them, Lord, wherever they may be. It is against Thy word to kill, we know. But in our human frailties and blindness we see no course save that of destroying those who would destroy us. And we pray You, Who are ever with the righteous, to put into our hands the sword of the Lord and of Gideon."

There was a sound like a slowly rising wind as each mountaineer murmured,

"The sword of the Lord and of Gideon."

10. *THE BULLDOG GROWLS*

The next morning Kin awoke long before daylight and, unable to sleep, sat up to look around. Camp fires had burned themselves to a few glowing coals. From far off in the forest came the mournful plaint of a hunting owl, and farther back in the mountains a pack of wolves were in full cry. Kin listened as they swept toward the camp. Then the deer they pursued struck in another direction, and the wolves' howling faded to a muted, silvery echo that at last lost itself in the stillness. Kin shivered, then stiffened suddenly, and silently drew the pistol from beneath his blanket. Unseen and very stealthy, but certainly present, a man was walking among his sleeping comrades. Kin levelled the pistol, and reached forth to shake Ian. But he stayed his hand when he recognized Tanse Willard's voice:

"Coonie, you aimin' to go?"

"Yeah, yeah," Coonie grumbled sleepily. "Land o' Goshen! Is it three o'clock a'ready?"

"Pipe down, ya dough-head! Ya'll have the hul army awake!"

"Well I'm awake, ain't I? Why shouldn't they be?"

There were little noises in the darkness as Coonie rose, cast his blanket aside, picked up his rifle, and stalked off.

"Tanse," Kin said softly.

There was a little motion beside him, and the Indian hunter leaned over him. A hand touched his blanket.

"Ya'd best sleep a bit yet, Kin."

"What's up?"

"Jest the hunters headin' out. This army ain't got no baggage train, an' has gotta live off the kentry. I'm sendin' ten men, an' they'll meet us at tonight's camp with whatever they can bring in. Sevier an' Campbell's each sendin' ten too. Thutty men should bring in enough meat to smell up the skillet anyhow."

"Can I go?"

"Ian'd skin me if I took ya. You haul that blanket over yerself an' get a little more shut-eye."

"I heard wolves."

"So did I. But that hooty owl as sounded off a couple minutes ago was a Cherokee scout. They're in the woods. Hank Wayne's gone off to see can he lift the critter's ha'r."

"Will the Cherokees start a ruckus?"

"Not with this crowd. Mebbe a dozen or so'll tail us to see can they catch anybody laggin' behind. Go back to sleep now, an' save all your fightin' for Ferguson."

Kin sank back in his blanket, but not to sleep. In some strange way everything had become as it should be, and the west had not let him down. Henry Wayne, typical of Kitten Toe's plodding farmers, was at this very minute out in the dark woods, matching his skill and strength against the Cherokees. And Kin knew in his heart that any other man among the nine hundred who slept about him would as readily have undertaken the task; scratch nine hundred settlers and find nine hundred fighting men. Kin thought again of the goal toward which these men and the women they had left behind strove, a goal so important to them that all their peril and privations were only incidental. Yet all they seemed to have, or could ever have, were stumpy fields and shabby cabins.

The slow dawn broke, and the army was awake again. Kin ate parched corn and maple sugar with Ian, and found the mixture filling. The sugar left a pleasant, sweetish taste in his mouth, and when Kin saddled the sorrel mare it was with the feeling that he had eaten enough to last a long time.

At the head of his company, Sevier led down a rocky gorge along which a creek hurled itself in a series of riffles and miniature cascades. Far up the line a brown horse slipped on the wet rocks that bordered the creek, and the rider stood

beside his fallen mount as the column rode past. The horse got up, but fell again when its right front leg folded like a broken stick beneath it. Kin rode past, trying not to look. He heard a shot, and glanced back to see the rider limping toward the foot soldiers who brought up the rear. The body of the horse with the broken leg lay half in and half out of the water, and overhead a wheeling buzzard had already started its slow death watch.

They left the gorge and started up a steep footpath. At Kitten Toe and in the lower valleys all had been mellow autumn. But winter had chosen this isolated spot for his first test of strength with the waning fall, and the leading horses left a wavering line of tracks in three inches of soft, clinging snow. The path became a muddy slough as man after man rode his horse up it, and the footmen toiling in the rear branched out into untrodden snow to avoid its treacherous bottom. Then Ian, riding just ahead of Kin, broke over the edge of the plateau. Following, Kin reined in the mare to stop and wonder.

They had mounted to a hundred acres of table-land. Level as a dish of water, treeless save for a few graceful saplings on one side, the place seemed more the abode of elves and fairies than the parade ground of an army. Withered grasses thrust defiant spears through snow that was crossed and crisscrossed by the tracks of deer and elk. A brown mouse clung to the top of a swaying weed and nibbled at its seed pods. A flock of little gray birds flitted cheerfully about, disdainful of the snow and the army. In the center of the table-land a bubbling spring fed a stream that wandered to the edge of the table-land, and went tumbling down the mountain. In the distance rose forest-clad mountains whose blue peaks were wreathed with fleecy clouds. Never before, Kin thought, had he seen any place so grand, so wild, and so breath-takingly beautiful. When the wars were over and men could resume a normal life he would come here, build a great cabin, and never leave again...

"Ya aimin' to moon all day?" the impatient mountaineer behind him growled. "If so, leave a body pass."

Kin put the sorrel to a trot and caught up with Ian. Sevier's mounted men were deploying on the table-land, trotting their horses about and wheeling to form a long line. A gay mountaineer tossed his hat in the air, and spurred forward to catch it as it floated toward the ground. The black-bearded sergeant growled at him, and with impudent slowness he turned his horse to resume his place in the line. Campbell's and McDowell's men sat easily on their horses, and Shelby's company mingled with them. At the head of the line were Shelby and a uniformed man on a sleek black mare. Ian pointed him out.

"That's Sevier," he said. "Nolachucky Jack, they call him, an' the red men hae as mortal a hate o' him as o' anythin' that walks among these hills. E'en Dan'l Boone makes no more fear in the wigwams."

"Why?"

"Because few men hae done so much to keep them in their places," Ian said simply. "Many the ruckus hatched up in some forest chieftain's lodge has been stopped e'er fairly started, because they knew they'd hae Chucky Jack on their red necks. I dinna see Campbell. He has more book knowledge than all the rest o' this army together, but is nae the man to put himself forward. A hard-headed Presbyterian an' a fightin' man both, Campbell. Ye'll travel many the mile wi'out findin' a more devillin' combination than that."

Kin said, "There was a Valentine Sevier with us at Musgrove's. But I don't see him here, nor Reed Bowie."

"Val's Chucky Jack's brother," a woodsman beside Kin grunted. "They's Bob, too. He's another brother, an' whether they're took single or together they're all hell on wheels. An' Jeeruselam Whiskers! I reckon they sure aim to roll now! Val an' that Reed Bowie couldn't be bothered piddlin' around with a army, though. They an' McDowell have already went over the mountains to see what can they find out. But watch. Looks like they're gonna shoot."

A lieutenant with a blue cocked hat and a deer-skin suit was walking up and down the line. He halted, and pointed at a round boulder that protruded from the spring, a hundred yards away. His words came clearly to Kin.

"Thar's the mark. All set now. Ready—aim—fire!"

The lieutenant threw himself flat on the ground as two hundred and fifty men snapped rifles to their shoulders. Kin braced himself. But because of the rarefied atmosphere the report from the discharged rifles was only a curious snapping and cracking, as though it had come from very far away. A great jeer arose from those who had not shot. Instead of hitting the target, five distinct splashes in the water close to it proved that five men had missed. Sevier's men retired and Campbell's and McDowell's companies took their places. The jeer was louder and more prolonged because a dozen men missed. Shelby's command lined up, fired on the given order, and two hundred and forty-nine scowling men turned on

Kin. His bullet had kicked up snow twenty feet from the boulder, but everyone else's had taken a chip from the already battered rock.

"Wha'cha doin' out with a popgun anyhow?" Jock Bindy growled. "We should all of hit."

"Mebbe ye'd like to shoot a pistol such a distance?" Ian said calmly.

"Fust British soldier I git, I'm gonna bring that kid his gun," Jock Bindy said disgustedly. "He better git one or git in another comp'ny."

The day was nearly spent, but the army marched four miles down into a hollow where a spring gushed from a bank and sent its waters racing away to the river. The hunters who had gone out in the pre-dawn blackness loafed about a fire. Seven deer, two small bears, and a cow elk hung from trees about the spring. Coonie rose from the tree against which he had been reclining, went to one of the deer, and slashed his knife across its back. He pulled the skin both ways from the slit he had made, and in less than ninety seconds the deer's hide was off. Others swarmed about the remaining game, and the meat was ready for the ravenous army who had marched all day with only parched corn and maple sugar to sustain them. Kin found himself hungry, but neither weak nor exhausted. The parched corn sure stuck to a man's ribs.

The army ate, and made camp. Ian came out of the forest with a great armload of pine twigs, and dropped them on the ground. He spread his blanket on them, and arranged Kin's on top. A small fire built ten feet from the side of a huge rock heated the rock's surface and reflected heat down on the blankets. Kin sat on the bed, entirely comfortable and at ease. The ground was wet with melted snow, and a raw wind blew up the valley. But no cabin could offer more comforts than Ian had contrived from the raw materials at hand in a dense wilderness.

Ian sat beside him a few minutes, then rose and strolled restlessly through the camp. He stopped to chat with some of the men from Kitten Toe, and went on to be lost to sight. Kin sat idly watching him, and would have gone with him had not the blankets and fire been so comfortable. The hobbled horses, guarded by twenty men who would be relieved in three hours, shuffled out to forage. Fires leaped high as the cooking was finished and more wood was added. Men were silhouetted against them, some few still singing. Kin watched the restless Coonie, a whirling dervish figure, dancing an intricate jig. But for the most part the army was tired and willing to rest. Kin settled back on the blankets, and fell into a half doze from which he was suddenly awakened by the ringing challenge of a sentry.

"Who is it? Come out of thar with your hands up or I'll shoot!"

And a snappish voice answered, "I'll shoot right back ef'n ya do. I belong to this here army."

There was further motion in the shadows, and Uncle Dobb came into the fire light. His coon-skin cap was pulled defiantly over his eyes, and his bristling whiskers were fiercely out-thrust. Kin stifled a laugh. The charger bearing Uncle Dobb back into camp was the blunt-horned, white-faced bull! Uncle Dobb slid from his mount, and the bull stood respectfully until ordered to go on. Then he ambled down the hollow and began to pull at some frozen grass.

"Pesky critter!" Uncle Dobb snapped. "But I 'low he knows by now that I ain't no man to trifle with. I follied him nigh to Kitten Toe, an' when I caught up with him I says, 'By gummy, I chased ya this far, ye're gonna haul me back.' So tha's what he done. Looks like I ain't gonna walk off to git Ferguson's sculp arter all."

The sentry said respectfully, "Looks like you might know a particle about takin' sculps, Uncle Dobb."

"Oh, them," Uncle Dobb sniffed. "Jest a couple Cherokees as tried to get smart. Well, I gotta go fix me up with some vittles an' some sleep. I ain't had none of neither in two nights."

Kin's eyes had followed the sentry's to the pair of limp scalps swinging at Uncle Dobb's belt. He leaned weakly back against the boulder. Henry Wayne had come out of the forest without saying anything—and without any grisly trophies. But two of the Indians trailing the army had tried to waylay Uncle Dobb, and had caught a Tartar. Kin stared after the old man, and was unaware of Ian's return until his father spoke.

"A bitter blow has already been struck us."

"What?"

"The two big-mouthed laddies," Ian snarled. "I would that I had followed my first inclination to cut the throats o' both."

While we paraded on the table-land, they deserted. They can hae nae purpose save that o' carryin' to Ferguson full tidings o' our gatherin' an' strength. He will hae ample time to arrange a defense an' select a battle-ground. A pair o' men, travellin' light, can go at double the speed o' an army."

"How could they?" asked Kin. "Didn't anybody think to stop them?"

"None but myself," Ian said bitterly. "And, fool that I was, I closed my eyes to their plain actions! But," he added vehemently, "we must go on an' we must win! The King is the King, and may he prosper. But he canna stay on the other side of three thousand miles o' ocean an' rule this great new land fitly. Neither he nor his appointed officers hae any real conception o' what is here. They see only the gold that a new empire may bring them. They canna imagine this new land bursting all bonds an' ties, an' discoverin' in the men who made it the greatest wealth man has e'er known. Here the common man has been assessed at what he is worth, an' not at what some accident o' birth seems to make him worth. This is an army o' common men, goin' forth to fight what they know is tyranny. 'Tis a stupendous uprisin', an' glad I am to be part o' it!"

With this unexpected outburst, Ian stretched out on the improvised bed and pulled the blanket over him.

Five days after leaving the Sycamore Shoals, and more than a hundred and twenty-five miles from them, the army marched into a plantation. Throughout the march, save for the single snow-fall, the weather had been summery and warm. But even so, the treacherous ravines and steep mountains had taken their toll. Thirty riderless horses limped along with the growing crowd of foot soldiers who brought up the rear. A hundred more were foot-sore and weary, able to bear riders only part of the time. And each day took its toll in more lame horses and tired men. But this day's march was ended. Let tomorrow bring what it might, they could rest now.

Kin slid from the sorrel mare, and for a moment stood with the bridle reins over his arm looking around at this place where they were to bivouac for the night. Broad cultivated fields, separated from each other by split-rail fences, surrounded what seemed to him a palatial mansion. Negro slaves, toiling in the fields, harvested the last of the corn. Beyond the house a dozen clean-limbed horses hung their heads over a paddock and whinnied at the army's mounts. A Negro herdsman tended a great herd of cattle, and a pack of hounds set up a rhythmic baying. Kin saw Sevier, Shelby, Campbell, and a dozen lesser officers walk up to and disappear in the house. Compared to the dingy cabins surrounding Kitten Toe, this was a place of lavish wealth and abundance.

Kin hobbled the sorrel mare and turned her loose to graze. He was tired, but after so long a ride it was good to be on foot again and a walk would not come amiss. Besides, this place looked as though it contained much of interest. Idly he strolled toward a group of trees. The splash of falling water was in the distance. A bedraggled black and white dog came from behind a tree and, with hindquarters pressed close to the ground, wagged an apprehensive tail. Kin held out his hand, and snapped his fingers while the dog grovelled closer to the ground.

"Yo' no' count dawg," a voice said. "Yo' flea-chawed meat houn', don' go botherin' white folks with yo' manna's."

Kin reached for his pistol, then dropped his hand sheepishly. A huge Negro, black as a charcoal stump, stood before a big cypress over which masses of clinging vines had draped themselves. The Negro's lips parted and his white teeth framed a dazzling smile.

"It's only Yawk," he said apologetically. "An', if they's not To'ies, I hurts no white folks. Did yo' come with the ahmy, suh?"

"Yes." Kin warmed to the big Negro, the first human being ever to address him as "sir." "What are you doin' in these woods?"

"It's the mill-keepah," York said proudly. "I grinds all the meal fo' de big house. Would you ca'h to see my mill, suh?"

"Sure."

York led the way toward the center of the trees, and stopped on the brink of a deep chasm. A torrent of water spilled over a twenty-foot ledge, and turned a paddle wheel. An iron shaft passed from the wheel into a sturdy, three-sided house beside the stream and turned the big stone mill wheels. The trees all about and the building itself bore the white, dusty evidence of the miller's trade. York picked up a two-hundred-pound sack of flour lying at the head of a footpath leading from the chasm and set it in a drier place. He stood at the head of the path, gazing proudly down at his mill. Kin

looked at him, a splendidly proportioned man, six feet four of bone and muscle, obviously able to tear apart most men who thought themselves strong.

"Are you a slave?" Kin blurted.

"Yes suh. Body an' soul I's a slave."

Kin's embarrassment died at the casual answer given his blunt question.

"What's it like?" he asked.

The Negro shrugged. "I don't know. I's got what I need to eat, an' the mill to wo'k at. I's treated well. I don' have to go fight no To'ies, an' git shot like so many white gen'man I's seen ca'ied to this house. But," he finished wistfully, "I guess it would be nice *not* to be owned."

"Then why ..."

"Watch the dawg!"

The Negro's obsequious voice had become a whisper. His face was intent, and he rolled his eyes as though trying to see something that he knew was present but could not quite make out. The dog sat with head alert and ears erect. He growled softly in his throat, and looked back at his master. The Negro made soft little noises and the dog growled again. It was as though they were talking some strange language perfectly understandable to each other, but wholly unintelligible to anyone else. York whipped a long-bladed knife from his trousers, and plunged its blade into the earth. He seized the handle with his teeth, and lay quietly for a moment. When he rose, he whisked the knife back to its hiding place and said,

"They's ridahs on the way, not so many as ah already heah, but a lot. Did yo-all expec' othahs?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then we best go tell 'em."

York shouldered the bag of flour and slipped among the trees, Kin at his heels. The dog trotted silently behind. The huge Negro was like a shadow; not even Tanse Willard could travel more silently or swiftly. But York had been born in the jungle, and had lived as a jungle creature. Tanse was the descendant of civilized ancestors who must make up in intelligence what he lacked in the five senses.

They reached the clearing. In the first glow of twilight the army's camp fires glowed like bright stars, and smoke from them rose to hang a gauzy blanket over the plantation. Tanse Willard stepped from the shadows.

"What's all the rushin' for?"

"There's horsemen comin'!" Kin blurted. "York heard 'em!"

Tanse shot a keen glance at the Negro. "Is that right?"

"Yes, suh."

Sevier's black-bearded sergeant appeared, carrying a rifle in the crook of his arm. He and Tanse conferred, then the sergeant hurried away. Five minutes later the camp fires were out, the horses had been hurried into the woods, and riflemen had taken up positions in the shelter of rail fences, behind hillocks, anywhere that offered concealment. Shelby, Sevier, and Campbell came from the house with another officer who, Kin learned, was Colonel McDowell. They crouched behind a hillock with Kin, Ian, Coonie, and a dozen other soldiers.

Twenty minutes later a dozen horsemen appeared at the edge of the meadow and rode openly toward the house. They were very close to it when a larger body of about three hundred riders and infantrymen broke from cover. But the night was dropping its black shades fast, and it was difficult to see anything clearly. The advance horsemen were only a dozen yards away when Shelby said heartily,

"Ben Cleveland!"

"Howdy, Isaac." A man mounted on a veritable mountain of a horse rode forward and dismounted. Once on the ground he became a rider worthy of the horse. Six feet three, he must have weighed nearly three hundred pounds. Yet he was neither clumsy nor disproportioned. He turned to call at the horsemen,

"Gently there. Remember the lad's hurt."

"Did ya have trouble?" Shelby inquired.

"That we did!" Colonel Ben Cleveland said bitterly. "I thought this was to be a secret march, but the damned Tory dogs have winded us! A party of the rogues ambushed us while we were crossin' the Catawba this mornin', an' my brother, Larkin, has a ball through the thigh."

"Did they escape?" Colonel Shelby asked quickly.

"They ran like chickens," Ben Cleveland said scornfully. "Don't they always when faced with anything like equal numbers? But I'll catch the devils, an' when I do I'll decorate the nearest trees with 'em! Look at this."

He gave a sheet of paper to Shelby, who read it and passed it on to Sevier. Sevier gave it to Campbell, and that hard-headed fighting man laughed.

"It's not funny!" The venom in Ben Cleveland's words expressed his whole-hearted hate of anything British or Tory.

"That craven hound of a Ferguson had the audacity to paste like notices on half the trees 'twixt here an' Ninety-Six! He's also given one to every turn-coat he's met that looks at all able to hold a gun."

"Don't underestimate him, Ben," Shelby said gravely. "He'll give us a tussle."

"Bah! All I want is to meet him an' his boasted army of Rangers!" He summoned the black-bearded sergeant. "Here, pass this amongst all the men, an' let 'em see for themselves what sort of liar they must deal with."

That night, by the light of a flickering camp fire, Kin and Ian read the paper that had been brought by Ben Cleveland and his riflemen:

*Harbie's Ford, Rapid River
October 1, 1780*

Gentlemen:

Unless you wish to be eat up by an inundation of barbarians, who have begun by murdering an unarmed son before the aged father, and afterwards lopped off his arms, and who by their shocking cruelties and irregularities give the best proof of their cowardice and want of discipline: I say, if you wish to be pinioned, robbed, and murdered, and see your wives and daughters abused by the dregs of mankind—in short if you wish or deserve to live, and bear the name of men, grasp your arms in a moment and run to camp.

The Back Water men have crossed the mountains, McDowell, Sevier, Shelby, and Cleveland are at their head, so that you may know what you have to depend upon. If you choose to be degraded forever and ever by a pack of mongrels, say so at once, and let your women turn their backs on you, and look out for real men to protect them.

Pat. Ferguson, Major 71st Regiment

Ian passed it on to the next man, and sat staring into the fire. His face was hard and set.

"What's it mean?" Kin asked.

"It means," Ian said slowly, "that Bulldog Ferguson at last has learned to respect the men ye see about ye. He is tastin' uneasiness. It means that what ye hae seen thus far will be as child's play compared to what ye will very shortly see."

11. *IN PURSUIT*

Two days later, forty miles from the plantation, the army camped in a mountain gap. But it was not the usual careless camp. Most of the men who had formed new friends on the march, slept, eaten, and quarrelled with them, went back to their own companies and their own officers. Half at a time, the horses were unsaddled, rubbed down, and saddled again. Every half hour and, as the night closed in, every ten minutes, scouts rode out. Kin knew that for five miles in every direction pickets were keeping their dangerous vigil, ready to race back into camp with the warning if an enemy force was sighted. Kin loosened the pistol in his belt, and kept very close to Ian.

The scouts had come into last night's camp with the news that Ferguson's army lay at Gilbert Town. And Gilbert Town was only eighteen miles away.

Campbell, elected commander-in-chief at an officer's meeting, had set up his headquarters on a fallen log. Shelby, Sevier, Cleveland, and Winston, second in command of Cleveland's company, conferred with him there. Ian finished rubbing down the gray gelding, and strapped the saddle back on him. When Ian resumed his place in the riflemen's line, Kin took the saddle from the mare.

He rubbed her back with a rough cloth, brushed the dirt and grime from her withers, and picked out the cockle-burrs that had matted in her tail. One by one he lifted her four feet to search for pebbles or grit that might have become lodged in her hoofs. But his hand trembled, and the mare swung her head to look curiously at him.

"Ye needna be nervous," Ian advised. "We will hae ample warnin' o' an enemy approach."

"Do you—do you think the battle will come tonight?"

"It can come at any moment. Ferguson knows we are on his track, an' 'tis nae beyond the realm o' possibility that his scouts hae looked us o'er. If he thinks he has us out-classed, he will be certain to march."

"A sergeant told me we had five thousand men here!" Kin blurted. "He said he heard Sevier tell a lieutenant."

Ian chuckled. "An' there is small doubt that Sevier told the lieutenant just that. 'Tis the news any leader would like to hae leak. We canna convince ourselves that we are so strong. But it may be that we can convince Ferguson."

"Oh. I see."

"Aye. Such news serves the same purpose as an Indian yell or a catamount's scream, an' 'tis the oldest of army stratagems. But look! A courier has returned, an' nae doubt he brings more news."

A horseman, mounted on a lean, long-legged gray-hound of a horse, had come into camp. He swung from the saddle, rein-haltered the horse, and spoke to a group of soldiers. They laughed, and the lanky courier strode through the camp toward the group of officers.

"That's Valentine Sevier!" Kin cried.

Valentine Sevier sat down on the log, and the commanders of the various companies gathered about him. A little fire sent up flickering tongues of flame, and the reflection from them wreathed Shelby's and Sevier's faces in a strange red glow. Shelby motioned into the darkness, and a half dozen men sauntered up to the log. Kin recognized Henry Wayne, and guessed that the remainder were likewise lieutenants or sergeants. He looked about for Tanse Willard, and remembered that Tanse had gone out with the scouts.

The lesser officers conferred briefly, and spread out among the men. The mountaineers they spoke to began to gather about the log, forming a circle with their commanders in the center. Henry Wayne passed Ian and Kin.

"Go on down," he said. "Everybody's gonna hear this."

They picketed their horses, and joined the crowd surging toward the log. Shelby stood up on it, looked at the packed ring of soldiers, and waited a few minutes for stragglers to come in. Kin studied his face, and that of the other officers', and his own waning confidence returned. None of them seemed worried or even uneasy.

"Mebbe all of ya'd like to know that Ferguson's on the run," said Shelby. "He was at Gilbert Town. But Val, here, just

brought word that he left a couple of nights ago. Mebbe he's scared of the army, an' mebbe he's just lit out on account Uncle Dobb thar's been whettin' his scalpin' knife on that bull's hide. How about it, Uncle Dobb?"

"By cracky, it's sharp enough!" Uncle Dobb cackled. "An' that bull's as good a horse as they is in this man's army!"

Shelby waited for the laughter to subside, and continued,

"We ain't been able to find out just how many men Ferguson's got with him. We do know he's got more'n we have, an' they're pretty near the pick of his troops. They know how to fight, an' they got everything to fight with. Now there ain't a man here as was forced or made to come. An' there ain't one asked to go on if he don't feel like it. Some of us are gonna get kil't. Anybody that wants to fall out now can do it."

He waited, but not a man moved. Shelby grinned.

"I reckon nobody got trampled in the rush to git back over the mountains. An', seein' as I've given ya the worst of it, here's the best. Ferguson may have the most guns, but we got the *best* ones. An'," his voice suddenly became very sober and serious, "I'm tellin' every man of you that the fight I see shapin' up is our kind of fight, a riflemen's fight, an' that kind we're sure to win.

"I don't know where Ferguson's gone. He may be headin' for the fort at Ninety-Six, he may be goin' to join Cornwallis, he may be makin' some kind of play to git us in a trap. But we'll find out where he is an' catch him. When we do, don't wait for orders. Every man will be his own officer. Give 'em Indian play; they hate that wuss'n poison. Now I guess Colonel Campbell'd like to say somethin'."

Campbell mounted the log, and stood outlined in the fire light. A commanding figure, one who had dedicated his life to truth, justice, and the ruthless suppression of his own and his country's enemies, the near fanaticism that gnawed at him was plain in his words.

"Concerning our hated enemy, I can add nothing to what Colonel Shelby has already told you. As far as the rest goes, I can only say that, even though it costs your life, you must strike and fight as hard as you can. Think not of yourself, but of your country and those who would devastate it. Have implicit confidence in your officers. I commend you all to God, and be ready to march in three hours."

"Why'd they put him in command?" Kin whispered.

"He's the man for it," Ian whispered back. "He knows as much about war as any o' them, an' 'tis said that he carries maps in his head. But, as I told ye before, he is nae the man ye'd cotton to on short acquaintance."

They returned to their horses and Kin lay back against a tree, holding his blanket up to shield himself from a driving rain that had sprung up. He thrashed about, trying to find a comfortable position, and rose once to look at Ian. His father lay wrapped in his own blanket, fast asleep for the few hours that would elapse before the army must march again. Kin lay down and tried to sleep, but could not. When, after what seemed endless hours, Henry Wayne came past rousing the mountaineers, he sprang up to fold his blanket. Ian, who seemed able to come from deep slumber into full wakefulness, shook his head.

"Leave it. We're goin' light as we can."

The horses had had no chance to forage, and were restive. Kin went to the picket line, and quieted the nervous sorrel as he felt about in the darkness to adjust her saddle and bridle. The cold rain had become a misty drizzle that soaked clothing and sent clammy little rivulets down neck and armpits. Ian removed his buckskin shirt and wrapped it about the lock of his rifle. Half naked, he put one foot in the stirrup and mounted the gelding. Seemingly oblivious to the driving rain, he sat awaiting the order to march.

"This is where ye hae an advantage," he called to Kin. "Ye can stick the pistol inside yer shirt, an' still use it to keep yer back dry."

Out in the darkness a man swore at a squealing, plunging horse. A laugh rose, and those men nearest the unruly horse's striking hoofs shouted profane advice. Then came the protesting mutter of Uncle Dobb's bull, who had no disposition to start out at this time of night, and the sharp whack of Uncle Dobb's old gun across his shoulders. Then, at last, the army

was on the move.

They rode down the course of a small creek, fording it from time to time as those who led the column now judged the best footing to be on one side or the other. Kin hunched over the saddle, trying to keep the pistol dry and take the pelting rain on his back. But no matter which way he turned, the rain drove from that direction. Finally he slipped the pistol down the back of his shirt and rode erect. Once or twice he slapped the powder horns at his belt. But they were tightly corked, and the polished horn admitted no rain.

A cold dawn, with a mist-ridden sky still spouting volleys of sleet-like rain, crept out of the sky as though it was ashamed to bring a day such as this one. Too miserable and tired to swing and look at the men behind him, Kin let his glance rove over those ahead. Every horseman had taken off his shirt or jacket and wrapped it around the lock of his rifle. Far down a valley Shelby talked with a group of scouts. Kin recognized Tanse Willard, and wondered dully if Tanse ever slept or was ever even tired. The weary, hungry sorrel plodded down into the valley and stood with head drooping. Kin sat astride her, too exhausted to know or care what happened about him. Then Ian, from whom he had become separated during the night, left another group of horsemen and rode up.

"Weariness is part o' war," he said grimly.

"Aye. I know."

"We're goin' to stay here awhile. The horses must forage an' the men must rest. Dismount, an' go join yon group; they're goin' to hae a fire. I'll care for yer beastie."

Kin said stubbornly, "I'll care for my own horse."

He slid to the ground, and clutched a stirrup to steady himself. For a moment he clung tightly to it, then took the saddle and bridle off, hobbled the mare, and let her go to join the rest of the free horses. The herd shuffled down to a creek, and began to pull eagerly at the grass growing along its edge.

Kin strode wearily toward the group to which Ian had directed him. Valentine Sevier sat on the ground, shaving splinters from a pine stick in his left hand. He piled them on a strip of bark, covered them with his body, and struck a spark from flint and steel. A glowing black spot appeared in the center of the shavings, and a little wisp of smoke curled up. He added more splinters, and pieces of wood as a yellow flame licked up through the tinder. Kin leaned against a boulder and said,

"Howdy, Valentine Sevier."

The lean scout looked around. "Howdy, boy."

"I was at Musgrove's. Don't you remember me?"

"Can't say I do. But I'm still glad to see ya. How goes it?"

"All right."

"All right, nothin'," Jock Bindy growled. "Where's this Ferguson we're s'posed to ketch?"

"Ferguson," Valentine Sevier drawled, "is a hard man to catch."

"Yeh," another mountaineer grumbled. "I rid clean f'm the Nolachucky. An' all I seen so far is rain. I gotta be gettin' back thar soon. I got a wife an' six kids, an' them Cherokees ain't so obligin' as to wait 'til I get home."

"I know it's been tough," Valentine Sevier said quietly. "But ye'll clean up this mess an' be headin' back soon."

"That's easy to say," Jock Bindy growled.

Kin sat up as a few horsemen and a dozen weary foot soldiers straggled down the trail. He felt a little pride in his own achievement of having kept up with the army; those who were just arriving hadn't been able to.

"Some's just gettin' here," Kin said to Valentine Sevier.

The scout nodded. "The trail's littered with 'em. Some ain't but halfway f'm last night's camp. Ye'd best git some sleep, boy."

Kin sank back on the ground, and let the fire's warmth creep over him. Dimly he saw Ian come up and choose a bed beside him, and in the last second before he closed his eyes he saw more weary stragglers dragging themselves down the trail.

But it seemed that he was no sooner asleep than he was being shaken to wakefulness again. Kin sat up groggily, rubbing his eyes and yawning. He saw Ian, as usual, tending to his rifle first, and was tempted to lie down again. Then he saw a new addition to the group around the fire, an old man whose silvery hair wreathed his head like a halo, and whose gentle eyes seemed to set him apart from all who would engage in the sinful business of war. Kin bounded erect.

"Reed Bowie!"

"Hello, Kinross," the old man said.

"Where'd you come from?"

"Ferguson."

Jock Bindy snorted skeptically.

"Yes. I spent the last five days with him. He seemed to think me a Tory, and I did not bother to set him right."

"Was ya really with Ferguson?" Jock Bindy demanded. "Whar's he at?"

"I left him at Tate's Meadows. I think he's going to try and join Cornwallis. But Ferguson is a man hungry for military glory, and he won't run far if he thinks he can fight. Since he has a strong force with him, the chances are that he will fight."

"Whoops!" Jock Bindy sprang up and started running towards the horses. Reed Bowie gazed reproachfully after him. "He that is hasty of spirit exalteth folly," he murmured. "Do you remember what I told you about hurrying, Kinross?"

"Aye. Where do we go from here?"

"To the Cowpens. Colonel James Williams, Hambright, Lacey, Hill, and Chronicle are to meet us there with four or five hundred men. It is also the most direct route to Ferguson's line of retreat. Well, perhaps we should start."

Stragglers were still coming down the trail, and all about the encampment lay men who only stared soddently at those preparing to resume the march. A dozen horses lay prone on the ground, and Kin watched an anxious trooper trying to prod one of them to its feet. A great herd of lame and disabled horses limped about or lay down in sheltered places. Uncle Dobb's bull looked sullenly up from the grassy bank where he had made his bed, and heaved himself humpily to his feet when Uncle Dobb flourished the old smooth-bore. Kin found himself next to Colonel Ben Cleveland in the horse herd. Agile as a cat for all his great weight, Colonel Cleveland saddled and mounted his huge horse.

"Steady now, Roebuck," he murmured. He swung toward Kin. "Figure you'll go out, son?"

"Aye," Kin said. "Aren't we all going?"

Ben Cleveland shook his head. "Some of the horses can't carry riders, and some of the men can't ride. They'll come on when they can. You'd best stay here, where there's enough men to put up a fight, unless you're sure you can keep up. Stragglers will be left, an' this is Tory country. Hangin's the least to be expected if you're caught."

Cleveland cantered off to join his own men and Kin took his accustomed place with his father and the men from Kitten Toe. He looked uneasily at those remaining behind. To fight Ferguson on anything like equal terms they should have every man. Yet, nearly half the thirteen hundred who had come to this camp were either unable to go on or unable to go on fast enough. Kin set his eyes to the front and did not look back.

Late that evening they rode down into the Cowpens. Fires gleamed like a handful of stars scattered on the ground, and lit up the big cow pens from which the place took its name. The cattle in them raised their heads to stare at the new arrivals, and fell to grazing again. A party of horsemen came from the bivouac, and a man with a rich German accent called,

"Are you the boys from over the mountains? I'm Hambright."

"We're the ones," Campbell called. "What news of Ferguson?"

"He's down near Kings Mount'n. We have sent Enoch Gilmer off to keep track of him if he should leave. He's a smart feller, Gilmer is. We're waiting for him to come back."

"What plans do you have?" Shelby called impatiently.

"We were waiting to plan with you," Hambright answered. "But we were expecting to march tonight. You fellows better get some rest before we go again. That Tory, Saunders, who owns all the cows down there, he didn't know anything about Ferguson. So we didn't hurt him. But we made some of his cows into beef and there's lots to eat. We harvested his corn for him too, about fifty acres in ten minutes. You can feed your horses good."

Kin dismounted, rubbed the sorrel mare down, and resaddled her. He left the bridle hanging over the saddle horn, and picketed the mare to the top rail of one of the cow pens. With plenty of good Tory corn to eat, no horse would need to forage. Williams' men, who had rested well and who had not marched nearly the distance covered by those from the headwaters of the Nolachucky and the Watauga, gathered around. But there was no horse-play and little animosity. The small force already at the Cowpens knew that they alone could not possibly cope with Ferguson, and they welcomed the new arrivals.

Kin ate, and leaned back against the fence to sleep. War, he decided, was not all bad and had its compensations. After last night's camp, and the wearying ride in the rain, a man really learned to appreciate a camp such as this. It was dry, the rain had stopped, the fire was warm, and he had eaten his fill of Tory beef.

He came suddenly awake in the darkness. Through the mists that blanketed the Cowpens a three-quarters moon showed glimpses of itself as it began the evening rise. It was still early evening. At the most he had slept four hours. But he had slept so well that he felt refreshed, and confidently able to meet whatever should be encountered. Fires leaped high in the darkness, and shadowy figures moved about them. Tansie Willard and Henry Wayne were walking among the men from Kitten Toe, reaching down to shake sleepers into wakefulness.

Jock Bindy sprang up eagerly. "We close to Ferguson?"

"You ain't going, Jock," Tansie said curtly.

"The hell I ain't!"

"Your horse walked lame the last three miles in here. He can't keep up. We're cutting down to those with good horses. If we don't catch Ferguson on this march, we may not catch him at all."

"I'll take young McKenzie's horse. He ain't got no rifle anyway."

"You will not take my horse!" Kin bristled fiercely. "I'm taking him myself!"

"Then, by gummy, I'll walk!"

As Tansie moved on, Kin called after him, "Is there more news of Ferguson?"

"He's camped close to Kings Mountain."

Kin gripped his pistol, and began looking for his horse in the half-moonlight. All about him dim figures were doing the same. Uncle Dobb had mounted the bull, and sat kicking impatient heels against the ribs of that long-suffering beast as he waited for the remainder of the army to prepare. Riding the swift black mare that he had captured from Elmo Bladen's Tory raiders, Reed Bowie approached to take his place in front of Kin.

"Guess I belong with Shelby's company," he said amiably. "Where did you get that horse, Kinross? Been doing a little Tory raiding without me?"

The tension that had gripped Kin snapped like a breaking string. There was something calming about this gentle old man who talked like a preacher and fought like a devil.

"It's one of three horses my father took from the British," Kin said proudly.

"Um-um. I'd heard he had changed his convictions. Well, here we go."

The long column began to move out into the darkness, and Kin looked at those who were to be left behind at this camp. About seven hundred mountaineers had finally ridden into the Cowpens, and Williams had brought four hundred and fifty men. But at least two hundred and fifty from both armies were unable to go on from here. Only a few more than nine hundred men were going out for the final clash with Ferguson's Rangers. But there was some comfort in the thought that they were all picked men who had already proven themselves able to face hardships and toil. That they were all expert riflemen was beyond any question.

The horses' feet made little sucking noises in the muddy trail up which they were walking, and a cold rain began to fall, pelting the riders and swirling in sheets about the plodding horses. As before, it always seemed to be driving from the front, and Kin again thrust his pistol down the back of his shirt. He saw Reed Bowie and Ian strip off their shirts and wrap them about the locks of their guns. From somewhere up ahead Coonie's disgusted voice floated back.

"I'm gonna grow me a set of duck feathers next time I ride with Shelby. I dunno but what I'd ruther be kil't, if that'd git a body out of this."

Kin was surprised when dawn came. The night had been so long and so miserable that it seemed to have no end. He looked again to make sure that it was daylight breaking through the trees. Those fortunate few who had coats had wrapped them about the locks of their guns and still wore their shirts. But for the most part the men were shirtless, their swaying backs gleaming wet with the rain.

"There goes Gilmer to see if the ford's clear," a voice said. "If it ain't somebody's goin' to git hurt."

Up ahead a horseman broke out of line and galloped down the trail. Mud and water splashed from beneath his horse's hoofs as he rode past the leaders. Fifteen minutes later, from far in advance of the army, a man began to sing at the top of his voice,

"Danny Darnley
Went to the fair.
He wanted to see
What he could see there."

"That's Gilmer," Reed Bowie announced. "And that's his signal. We won't fight any Tories at this ford."

The column's pace quickened. Then, fifteen minutes later, it came to a complete halt. Through the trees Kin heard the rushing of water and the snarling of rapids. Slowly the army moved forward again, and Kin came to the edge of the river. Swollen by the rains, it hurled itself savagely down its bed. Hungry little ripples came far up on the shore, and lapped at the willows there. Riders formed a long line across the savage current and, as Kin watched, a horse slipped and went down. The horse was whirled end for end, and neighed shrilly as he was drawn into swifter water. The rider shouted, dropped his rifle, and struck out for shore. A thrown halter settled near him. He grasped it in both hands, and was whipped in a long arc downstream. The men on the end of the rope pulled him slowly in to shore. In the center of the river Uncle Dobb had brought both feet up on the swimming bull's back, and was squatting there like a huge, ungainly bird as the bull struggled through the current.

The sorrel mare walked hesitantly down to the ford and started across. Water rushed against her on the upstream side, and curled back in frothy little waves. But Ian's judgment had been sound. She half-walked, half-swam, to the opposite bank and climbed out of the water.

The overcast sky poured down fresh bursts of rain, and shivering riders leaned forward in their saddles as their horses plodded on. The horse in front of Reed Bowie's staggered and went down. Its rider slipped from the saddle, walked to a rock, and sat wearily down on it, swearing in a low, steady voice. Tanse Willard dismounted and shook the man's shoulders. The rider blinked, and stood out of the path while the rest of the horsemen filed by. Then he went to the rear and marched slowly along, leaning on his rifle as though it were a cane.

Sevier rode back along the line, and Reed Bowie turned his black mare to ride with him. Presently the old man came

back to resume his place. He was looking very thoughtful.

"What happened?" Kin inquired.

"Sevier, Campbell, Williams, an' Cleveland favor stopping to rest," the old man said calmly. "But Shelby says he won't stop before dark if he has to follow Ferguson right into Cornwallis' camp. So I guess we go on."

Kin scraped the bottom of his rucksack for the handful of corn meal that remained there. He ate it, licking the last few grains from the palm of his hand. There seemed to be nothing to say.

Three hours later Gilmer, the scout, rode back. Shelby, whose stallion seemed as tireless as its rider, trotted out to meet him. They reined their horses together, and talked briefly. Then Shelby threw his hat in the air and his long, Indian yell came rolling back, as he whirled the stallion and broke into a gallop. The men at the front of the column rode erect once more, and even the horses pranced a little. Like wildfire the news spread down the line, banishing weariness, cold, and hunger. This was what they had come so far and risked so much to hear.

Coonie turned a beaming face on Reed Bowie. "Did ya hear? Ferguson's on top of that mounting, right over thar! We're gonna have a fight at last!"

Kin looked at a long, low mountain, scarcely two miles away, and turned to blurt at Ian, "There's Ferguson!" And even Ian seemed excited as he passed the news on to the one behind him. As though it was a good omen, the rain stopped. Shelby came riding back to his own command, and talked freely with those about him. Again the news went down the line.

"We got him trapped! We're gonna surround him. Sevier an' Campbell's goin' around to t'other side of the mounting. Thar they go!"

Campbell's and Sevier's men urged their jaded horses to a gallop, and drew away from the rest. A rider dashed up, leading a horse on which sat a thoroughly frightened fourteen-year-old boy.

"He's one o' Ferguson's men!" he yelled. "I ketched him gettin' away!"

Shelby rode forward. Too excited to stay behind, Kin pushed up with him. Colonel Hambright was interviewing the captive.

"Wass you mit Ferguson?"

"Yes."

"What wass you doing now?"

"Goin' to Charlotte with a dispatch for Cornwallis. Major Ferguson wants help."

"Oh, he doess, doess he? How many mens hass he got mit him?"

"I don't know. More than a thousand."

"What doess Ferguson look like?"

"He's the best-dressed officer there. But he's got sort of a checked shirt on over his uniform."

Hambright said kindly, "We ain't goin' to hurt you, poy." Then he turned on the soldiers gathered about. "Well, poys, you heard. When you see dot man mit a pig shirt on over his clothes you know who he iss, and mark him mit your rifles."

Shelby's company rode up a rocky little ridge. Kin looked at the top of Kings Mountain, and saw the tents of Ferguson's army, with baggage wagons lined before them. The sun sent its rays glancing off the fixed bayonets of the soldiers who stood ready to repel the mountaineers.

"Dismount an' tie your horses," said Shelby. "Leave all extra baggage with 'em. Fresh prime your rifles."

He paused and looked steadily at his gaunt, bedraggled troops.

"He's up there. What say we go get him!"



12. *THE BATTLE*

Kin swung to look behind him. Still a hundred and fifty yards away, Uncle Dobb was coming on his bull, bouncing up and down as his outlandish charger galloped stiff-leggedly toward the battle line. The bull's tail was straight up, his head close to the ground. He stopped suddenly and began to buck, whirling his hindquarters and rearing to bring his front legs stiffly down on the ground. Uncle Dobb slid from his back and ran toward the others. The bull lowered his head, chased him a few yards, and returned to a patch of green grass near a stagnant pond. The few other men who had witnessed Uncle Dobb's unceremonious entry into the fight cheered.

Ian said drily, "E'en the bull kens that a man may be ill-spared now. Our path seems to lie this way."

Kin clutched the pistol in his right hand, and hoped that no one but himself was aware of the weak feeling that insisted on gripping the pit of his stomach. It was not as though this was his first battle. He had fought before, and should not be afraid. But, he admitted to himself, he was afraid.

Shelby's company, those who had ridden in the rear taking the extreme right, were fanning out across the side of the mountain. At length Ian, Kin, Tanse Willard, Coonie, and Reed Bowie, were walking alone. They came to a thick patch of laurel, and Ian said,

"Stay right here. Do as ye see the rest do. I'll be next to ye."

Kin stared up the mountain, but could see nothing. He glanced to the left, where the grinning Coonie stood licking his lips and looking up the mountain toward Ferguson's camp. Coonie had taken off his coon-skin cap and tied a gray kerchief about his head. But, for all his recklessness, he was cautious enough to have taken shelter behind a huge buttonwood tree. A dozen feet beyond Coonie, the fierce Uncle Dobb gripped his smooth-bore with both hands. Beyond Uncle Dobb, Kin was surprised to see Tom Yeobright crouched behind a fallen tree. One of the foot soldiers, Tom was not supposed to be here. The next few men were so well hidden that he could not identify them, and Kin looked toward his right.

His rifle dangling in the crook of his arm, Ian stood in the shelter of a few straggling berry bushes. He winked at Kin, and jerked his thumb straight up. Kin forced his dry lips to shape a grin, and looked beyond Ian to see Reed Bowie sitting on a stump. The old man had thrown his hat away, and his silvery hair tumbled about his shoulders. But he was certainly abiding by his own creed of avoiding useless haste. Reed Bowie might have been a squirrel hunter, waiting for his quarry to appear. Tanse Willard occupied Shelby's extreme right, and beyond Tanse Kin saw more men forming a line. They were the Holston men, under Campbell.

The rising plaint of a whistle shattered the mountain's unnatural stillness. Silvery clear and sweet, fitted to the sylvan background, the music of the whistle seemed almost a bird call. But it was followed by the rattle of drums. Kin's knees shook as he peered through the laurel. The whistle and the drums were in Ferguson's camp, calling for some new maneuver or new arrangement of troops. Kin strained to see through the trees, then turned at a sharp hiss to his right. Coonie was pointing up the mountain, evidently passing on some silent signal that had come to him. Uncle Dobb and Tom Yeobright were no longer in sight. Kin looked bewilderedly at Ian, whose lips formed the words,

"Come on."

Kin hesitated, then ran recklessly to the shelter of the nearest tree. He crouched behind it, and looked about in sudden panic. No one else was in sight; he must have misunderstood the orders and was stalking Ferguson alone! He turned to look back down the hill, and his eyes measured the incredible distance of nine feet back to the spot he had left. But, in turning, he caught a glimpse of Coonie. Twenty feet farther up, the mountaineer bent forward and advanced steadily. Suddenly he went out of sight in a bunch of grass scarcely big enough to shelter a rabbit. But Kin caught occasional glimpses of other climbing men. The final advance on Ferguson had started.

A buck deer with wide-branching antlers sprang from a covert and bounded up the mountain. He swerved suddenly, and quartered along the face of the slope. Tree limbs moved, bits of shale rattled, and the deer was out of sight. Kin made a swift run to a birch tree, twenty feet farther up, and threw himself down beside it.

Suddenly two shots, one from either side, snapped like whip lashes. Just above the place where the buck had swerved, brush moved. A buckskin-clad Tory scout stood up, took two or three staggering steps down the mountain, then went

suddenly limp as his knees buckled beneath him. He fell forward, and his hat tumbled from his head as he slid a little way down the mountain. But he still clung to his rifle.

Kin's body seemed suddenly as limp as the dead Tory scout's. He peered to the right and the left, trying to find the source of the two shots, and saw nothing. Again he looked at the fallen scout, and knew exactly how well the hard-riding, soft-stalking mountaineers were fitted to do this job that they had sworn to finish. The scout had been almost invisible there in his ambush. But Coonie and the one other, probably Ian or Reed Bowie, had seen him.

Then all Kin's sane thought was flooded away by the wild Indian yell that seemed to spring to every man's tongue at the same second. Shrill, horrifying, terrible, the yell created its own atmosphere, one proper to the circumstances that called it forth. Buoyed by it, Kin's weakness became strength, his outlook one keyed to battle.

There was a sudden great thrashing of brush and rattling of rocks to the right. Kin looked in that direction, and saw a company of horsemen forcing their mounts at full gallop up the mountain. The Indian yell burst from every throat, as they disappeared from sight. There were scattered volleys from farther up the mountain, and the horsemen rode back. Two riderless horses plunged with flapping stirrups and trailing bridle reins. One turned, and dashed back up the mountain.

The mountaineers had emerged from cover and were running now. Kin ran with them, holding the pistol ready and eager to shoot at whatever might confront him so long as it wore the dress of an enemy. He felt suddenly strong, eager to be in the very forefront of the runners.

Farther up the mountain rifles began to snap. They made a curious, staccato noise, as though a number of men on the edge of the mountain had gathered to shoot at a mark. But six inches from Kin's right cheek a twig broke suddenly, and its own weight carried it to the ground. Kin stopped, and clapped a hand to his face. He realized with sudden surprise that the bullet had been meant for him. Then the wild Indian yell shrieked through the trees again. Kin found himself echoing it while he banished from his mind everything save the tremendous importance of reaching the top of the mountain.

In the bare second he had halted, the others had gained a twenty-foot lead on him. Kin saw Coonie go down, jerking forward and pawing the air with his hands as though he would find something solid upon which he might support himself. Coonie sprawled full length, with the toe of his left moccasin caught behind a boulder. He had tripped, Kin thought absently, and hurt himself in the fall.

On top of the mountain, and to the right, a sudden tremendous volley sounded. Campbell's men had reached the summit, and were shooting. A shout of triumph arose, recognizable as British because the mountaineers gave only the Indian yell. Then the yell sounded from farther down the mountain. Campbell seemed to be retreating.

Just in time to keep himself from running out on the mountain's treeless summit, Kin dropped behind the shaggy trunk of a Spanish oak and peered around it.

Off to the right two hundred British soldiers, keeping perfect step behind the captain who led them, were advancing to fill the gaps left by the men whose charge had forced Campbell down the mountain. All about the rim of the mountain other scarlet-clad soldiers, stiff-necked and apparently interested only in the orders to come from their superiors, awaited the Rebel charge. Immediately before Shelby's column the British, who had been shooting from the rim of the mountain, were retreating to the baggage wagons and reforming their lines. Bayonets gleamed on the ends of their rifles, and the mounted officer who led them had his back contemptuously turned on the Rebels.

Kin stared. The mounted officer was Lieutenant Allaire! He held a sword in his left hand. But the rifle, resting across the saddle in front of him, must be the one he had taken from Kin! It was the gun Ian had made him, his most precious possession, part of himself and his great dreams.

Ten feet to the right Uncle Dobb had stretched his scrawny length behind a boulder. He levelled his old smooth-bore over it, and pressed the trigger. The gun belched the load of lead, pebbles, and scrap metal that Uncle Dobb had crammed down it. The terrific recoil spun Uncle Dobb halfway around, and a thick cloud of black smoke blew away from the boulder. But three British soldiers fell out of line, and a split second later the rest of the mountaineers shot.

Kin saw a dozen British soldiers drop like stunned oxen. Another looked curiously down at his arm, and tried to shake it. Wounded men sat on the ground and, as Kin watched, one of them wilted slowly forward, as though he was very tired. But the mounted Lieutenant Allaire did not even turn around. He lifted the sword, and whipped it toward the ground.

Through the firing, Kin heard his sharp order,

"Forward!"

Lieutenant Allaire wheeled his horse and at full gallop started toward the Rebels on the rim of the mountain. Their bayonets fixed, the infantrymen trotted after him. Kin thrust his pistol around the tree, took a wild shot at the officer, and stood straight up. Uncle Dobb was frantically pouring another charge of powder down the muzzle of his smooth-bore. He dropped a handful of slugs on top of it, and fussed with the priming mechanism.

The advancing British were breaking ranks to spread out toward the mountaineers. A small man, who had joined Shelby at the plantation, ran into the field, levelled his rifle at the soldiers, and shot. With robot-like precision a huge British dragoon bore down on him. The scarlet-clad trooper drew his rifle back, and lunged with the bayonet. Kin saw it enter the little man's stomach, and come out his back. The British soldier put one foot on his fallen enemy, jerked the bayonet out, and ran on again. Suddenly Ian was beside Kin.

"Come on, ye fool!" he panted.

Kin came suddenly out of the half daze that had enveloped him. Scarcely twenty feet away a soldier with levelled bayonet was running straight at him. But Uncle Dobb had managed to prime his gun, and it roared like a thunder clap. The soldier dropped heavily in his tracks.

Kin turned and raced down the mountain. Most of the mountaineers had discharged the single shot that their rifles held, and there had been no time to reload. Kin leaped over a rock and landed almost beside Coonie. But in passing he saw that Coonie had not merely stumbled; there was a dark bullet-hole in the gay, reckless mountaineer's forehead. It seemed a ridiculously small thing to have stolen from Coonie the abundant life that had been his.

Reed Bowie, one of the few men on the frontier who could reload a Kentucky rifle while running, turned and made a snap-shot from his hip. Kin heard one of the pursuing British grunt, and the little noises made by his falling body. Kin tried to coax more speed from his flying legs. The British, with their thrusting bayonets that could easily pierce a man's body, must be very close. Kin fingered the empty pistol, and let it dangle at his side while he ran on. He was to be killed in a moment. But, if he had had his own rifle in his hands instead of the pistol, he could have killed Lieutenant Allaire and contributed that much to the battle. As it was, he had done nothing save climb to the top of the mountain and run back down. That was all he would have for his long march. Anger that this should be so began to drive away some of his panic. He slowed a little, and began to plan how he could throw himself to the ground, let whoever might be pursuing him closest trip over his prostrate body, and try a hand-to-hand fight.

Then, almost at the bottom of the hill, buckskinned men stepped suddenly from behind trees or rose from the rocks where they had found concealment. Shelby, a wise campaigner and an efficient leader, had expected this bayonet charge and prepared for it. Only a part of his company had advanced up the mountain. The rest had stayed hidden at the bottom, and a half hundred fresh riflemen met the British charge there.

Kin stopped, panting, while he poured a charge of powder into the pistol and rammed a ball down its muzzle. Reed Bowie had shot again, and was reloading behind a tree. Kin saw Ian creeping toward a rock from which he might have a better shot. A great rifle fire came from all other sides of the hill. Cleveland, Sevier, and Campbell were in the thickest of the fight.

Tom Yeobright crept forward, shot, and dropped down to reload. Kin sought the shelter of a tree, and shot at a red coat that showed a hundred yards up the mountain. But once more the bullet only kicked up dust twenty yards short of its target. Through the heavy smoke that curled and twisted among the trees, Kin tried to spy out a closer enemy target. Unless he could find one he was of no use whatever. The pistol was accurate only at very short ranges.

The British were fighting as they retreated, one half kneeling to shoot while the other half went a little way farther and reloaded. Then they, in turn, covered the retreat of their comrades. But the mountain men were pursuing them, following Shelby's advice to use the Indian tactics they knew so well, slipping from tree to tree and never showing themselves. The mountaineers' buckskins blended in with the brush and rocks, while the scarlet uniforms of the British were bright marks in the somber forest. Kin saw a huge dragoon stagger and fall on his rifle. Kin swerved toward him. But, when he reached the soldier's body, he saw that blood had spurted from a gaping wound in the man's side to drench his powder horn and bullet pouch. Kin went on without the rifle, swallowing hard.

Twice more the mountaineers gained the summit of the mountain, and at the point of bayonets were driven back down it. They turned to storm Kings Mountain for the third time, and Kin knew then that they were going to win this battle.

He knew it in spite of the fact that Henry Wayne, dragging his right leg and supporting himself on his arms, came crawling down the mountain side. In spite of Captain Ingam, of Shelby's company, who was staring thirstily at a small spring that his smashed hip prevented him from reaching. In spite of Coonie, who never again would smell the fresh winds blowing from the mountain tops or thrill to another deer hunt. How many more of those who had marched over the mountains to die on his puny lump of earth that would have been dwarfed by any of their own mountains, Kin didn't know. But he still knew that the Rebels were going to win this battle.

For the British were tiring. Three times they had charged down the mountain and been forced back. And they were bewildered, too. According to the rules by which they fought, the victory was theirs. The Rebels had been fairly driven from the field, flitting like shadows before the bayonet charges and always avoiding direct combat. But, when they reached the bottom of the hill and found time to reload their rifles, the shadows became men who shot with such deadly precision that few who were seen over their sights escaped being hit. And the mountaineers always climbed back up the mountain almost as swiftly as they fled down.

The precise, exact timing that Patrick Ferguson had so painfully drilled into his troops was lagging too. Kin heard Lieutenant Allaire trying to hearten his men, urging them to turn and fight, and they did their best to divide and cover each other's retreat up the mountain. But the continuous fire from below them was too deadly and too steady. In the last third of the ascent the British turned to run, and the Rebel army was almost at their heels when for the third time in an hour they regained the summit of Kings Mountain.

Kin dropped behind the same Spanish oak that had sheltered him on the first ascent, and looked out at the British camp. British and Tory soldiers, who had formed a solid square about the mountain's rim, were running back, turning to fire, and running again. From all about came the spiteful cracking of long rifles. By sheer coincidence the troops under Campbell, McDowell, and Sevier, had reached the summit almost at the same time as Shelby's men. Ferguson's army was trapped on the narrow, treeless summit.

A once-trim lieutenant, whose natty uniform now clung in shreds to his body, held up a stick with a strip of white cloth tied to the end of it. But another man, who wore a checked shirt and bestrode a beautiful white Arab mare, rode up to the one who would have surrendered. His sword flashed, and the white flag tumbled to the ground. A great cheer rose from the British regulars, and a dozen bullets whistled past the man on the Arab mare. Kin's breath caught in his throat. Nearly the entire Rebel army had witnessed that act of Patrick Ferguson, who could pillage Whigs and hang prisoners, but who would not raise a white flag.

Even now the British regulars were not disorganized. They maintained their ranks and waited for orders from their superiors. Only the Tory militia were uncertain and ready to break.

The white Arab mare flashed in and out among the troops. Then, for a bare second, Patrick Ferguson was entirely alone. He rode his horse to the top of a small promontory, and sat perfectly motionless. Everything about him bespoke contempt for these enemies whom he had so nearly mastered, and whom he knew were about to master him. Patrick Ferguson drew his sword, whirled it about his head, and at full gallop bore down on the mountain men who surrounded him. Two other British officers spurred from the ranks to gallop at his side. From Ferguson's lips came the battle cry that had guided his whole life, and that he would not abandon in death.

"Huzza for King George!"

Tanse Willard and Reed Bowie shot at almost the same second. But a dozen other rifles spoke with theirs. Ferguson jerked backward, as though struck by an invisible club, and for a moment sat rigidly in the saddle. Then he swayed limply to one side, and sprawled to the ground. The white mare stopped, and swung around to stand with her head over her master's body.

Kin stared in fascinated horror at this thing that a thousand mountain men had sworn would come to pass. Patrick Ferguson, the great Tory leader, was dead.

A sharp volley came from the assembled mountaineers, and more of the British fell. But another white flag, held by a tall officer with a bloody bullet gash down the side of his cheek, was waving now. Shelby, Sevier, and Campbell strode

forward, and Shelby's fierce voice blasted every Tory-hating Whig's rifle into silence.

"They have surrendered! Only cowards shoot now!"

Kin joined the breathless over-the-mountain men who crowded forward at their officers' heels. The British captain who held the white flag of surrender walked forward to meet them. He withdrew his sword from its sheath, and extended it hilt first to Colonel Campbell.

"My sword, Sir. I am Captain DePeyster, in command now."

Campbell was flushed with victory, but his manner expressed no hate for the British officer, nothing save the respect that one fighting man must feel for another. Only in Ferguson's eyes had the white flag been a coward's mark. The British had no choice but to surrender, or be shot down where they stood.

Campbell said, "Thank you, Captain. You gave us a stiff fight."

Captain DePeyster's smile could not conceal the crushing heartbreak that he felt.

"We tried, Sir. But, in spite of Major Ferguson's faith in this position, it proved more assailable with the rifle than defensible with the bayonet."

Kin was staring at the prisoners.

In a sudden rush of boldness he walked toward them and touched an officer on the arm.

"I'll take my rifle back now."

Lieutenant Allaire's dirty, discouraged face broke into a tired grin.

"What ho! The young McKenzie! I should have hanged ye back there on the Santaree, eh?"

Kin said stubbornly, "All I want is the rifle."

"And you seem in a position to get it," Lieutenant Allaire said drily. "Take good care of it, young McKenzie. The whole British army could not boast a finer weapon."

Kin curved his fingers about the breech of his gun, and walked back to where a group of the over-the-mountain men were watching the further disarming and organization of the prisoners. Isaac Shelby detached himself from the Whig officers and walked toward them, wiping his forehead with a huge bandana.

"Lively little scummage," he said thoughtfully. "Any of you fellas git hurt?"

"Nope," a laconic mountaineer said. "Jest two-three bullet creases."

Tom Yeobright turned around and extended his hand awkwardly.

"Well, Ike, we ketched Ferguson. So long."

"So long, Tom." Isaac Shelby shook the extended hand warmly. "Give 'em my best when ye git back over the mountains."

"I'll do that."

Tom Yeobright walked slowly to the edge of the mountain, and from everywhere on the battlefield other mountaineers converged to join him. Kin stood where he was, and watched a hundred and fifty of them descend Kings Mountain. They had marched incredible distances to get here, and were taking back only suffering and heartbreak. There would be grief in lonely cabins on the Nolachucky and Watauga for the mountain men who would never return. Homes on the seaboard would mourn the Tory dead. And in England windows would be darkened for the British soldiers who had died on Kings Mountain.

But Kin knew that other things had happened here, too. The mountaineers had given their lives to keep their valleys free. They had broken the threat of Ferguson, and had given their fellow Rebels precious time to gather strength against Cornwallis. And their actions had given proof that they would come again, and again, if need be. But now they were

going home.

When the last westward-bound mountaineer had disappeared, Kin took his own rifle and went to find Ian. There was still work to be done here—right now there were prisoners to be taken care of. After that there might be more battles. But this job would end some time, and when it did he, too, would go back over the mountains. He would find Red Scott. And he'd bet that, between the two of them, they'd be the best pair of long hunters that the west had ever seen.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Big Red
Irish Red
Stormy
Wild Trek
Snow Dog
Haunt Fox
Lion Hound
Desert Dog
Outlaw Red
Rebel Siege
Fire-Hunter
Forest Patrol
Kalak of the Ice
Buckskin Brigade
Boomerang Hunter
Trailing Trouble
A Nose for Trouble
Wildlife Cameraman
Chip, the Dam Builder
Wolf Brother
Hidden Trail

[The end of *Rebel Siege* by Jim Kjelgaard]