

LONG HUNTER

The Story of Big-foot Spencer



EDD WINFIELD PARKS

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By Edd Winfield Parks

SEGMENTS OF SOUTHERN THOUGHT
CHARLES EGBERT CRADDOCK
LONG HUNTER: THE STORY OF BIG-FOOT SPENCER

Editor

THE GREAT CRITICS (WITH J. H. SMITH)
SOUTHERN POETS
THE ESSAYS OF HENRY TIMROD

LONG HUNTER

by EDD WINFIELD PARKS

Illustrated by EDWARD SHENTON

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TO
ELSIE, JACK, AND SHERRILL

Foreword

Soon after his death, Thomas Sharp Spencer became a legendary character. The incidents in his life grew blurred and unimportant. He was remembered as a courageous hunter who lived through a Tennessee winter in a hollow sycamore tree, and as the first settler in a wild frontier region that the Indians had long fought over. This vigorous, surviving legend has a historical truthfulness which may be based only in part on historical fact.

In a sense, this story is an expansion of the legend. The materials out of which it was written are a compound of events known to have happened, said to have happened, and invented by the author as they might have happened. I believe the story to be authentic, but its authenticity is that of fiction, not of known fact.

E. W. P.

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Illustrations

Rifle in hand, he turned back to gaze at his
companions

His body and rifle were motionless, frozen

Hurling bodies shoved him down again. Strong hands
clutched at him

He saw the bull near him raise his head and roar
loudly, challengingly

With a ferocious growl Midnight closed in

“You get off my land!” snapped a shrill boyish voice

LONG HUNTER

The Hour of Decision

Three men sat with their backs against a rock cliff and looked at a pleasant log fire. The fourth man, a Negro, had curled himself into a crudely oval ball and gone to sleep. Firelight glinted from the guns ready at hand, and from the tomahawks and knives in their belts. The light barely revealed a long black hound dozing near the biggest man; it flickered on brown grass and dry, brown pine limbs that had recently been scorched by a forest fire.

A fifth man with his dog was scouting through the woods. Caution was needed. Their blaze made a tiny splotch of light in a vast wilderness; the nearest white settlement was almost a hundred miles away. The five men were in the heart of the Cherokee and Creek hunting grounds. Since last summer the Cherokees had been on the prod; they had attacked the forts on the Watauga and the Holston. The frontiersmen had beaten them back, harried them, and burned their villages. The Indians might not dare to attack the settlements again, but they were bitter with anger. And they were well armed. British agents were bribing them with guns and ammunition, whisky and finery and tall promises, to make trouble in the western country. Even the boldest men needed to be watchful, on the Tennessee frontier, in September, 1777.

So the men by the campfire had their rifles handy, and kept their ears alert for any sounds of uneasiness from the horses. They wore long deerskin leggings, and breechclouts; two of them wore deerskin hunting shirts. The third man, short bodied and broad shouldered, was wearing a homespun linen shirt. The thinnish man next to him seemed cold; he had pulled a Dutch blanket over his shoulders. On the outside of the group sprawled a huge young man, scarcely out of his teens; he had wide shoulders, thick arms, and hamlike hands. He had kicked off his leather moccasins and his bare feet, stretched toward the fire, looked enormous. Daniel Boone had said once that Spencer's footprints were the largest seen in Kentucky since the last mastodon was killed.

The man in the linen shirt fingered his knife. "We've done all that Judge Henderson can expect," he said, "though he'll cuss because we haven't done more. We'd waste time here now. No man would live in these barrens. Tomorrow we strike for Mansker's Lick; you go straight there, Tom, and select a place for us. Kill a deer. I'm tired of jerked meat. We'll look around

there a week. Then I'm going home. If Henderson doesn't like it, he can send another man."

The young giant nodded briefly. His broad, open face was a little surly in repose, but his eyes were bright, far apart, and deep set, his chin long and firm. "I'll take Midnight, Captain Stone." The black dog raised his head, then settled back down.

Matthew Swallow turned his eyes venomously toward the dog. "He may be good after deer. He ain't no good for Indians." He shifted his head. A long red scar began above his left temple and continued behind the ear. "Where be we, captain? I don't want figgers; I want words. Is this Tenasee or Kaintuck?"

"I don't know," answered Stone. "Most folks say this belongs to Virginia; that would make it Kentucky, and north of the line. We may be sitting on it. Judge Henderson asked me to chart the land, not run a line."

Men grew irritable on these long, lonesome trips. The work had quickly grown monotonous. They had seen too much of each other, and for too long had eaten meat and corn bread. Now they were out of corn. Their tempers were short and brittle. A careless word might start a fight.

Thomas Sharp Spencer waited patiently until Captain Stone finished. His body was tense, his blue eyes angry. "That dog—"

Matt interrupted him sharply. "Mebbe you was asleep when the Indians might nigh scalped me. I didn't see you. Long Hunter! Bah!"

"You're hired to look after the horses," snapped Spencer, "but I was the man herding 'em that night."

"So you say. I didn't see you." Swallow attacked from another angle. "Lots of times you ain't to be seen. I never laid eyes on you at Robertson's fort, when the Cherokees came."

"Reckon you didn't," responded Tom. "I was on the right flank of Campbell's Company, at the Island Flats. And I stayed with Colonel Christian when he burnt out the Overhill Cherokees. We didn't get back till two weeks before Christmas. I got a late start hunting, last winter."

"Suits me for you to get an early one now." Swallow barked at him. "You're here. Why don't you stay?"

Captain Stone broke in. "Whoa. You're not fair, Swallow. Why, I heard it was Spencer who wounded the Dragging Canoe, the biggest war chief of the Cherokees."

“Mebbe Big-foot said so himself. He warn’t so good t’other night; he let ’em slip up on us then.” Swallow’s sneer became more pronounced. “I guess Big-foot’s all right when he’s got some one to tell him what to do; he wouldn’t last a week by himself. I don’t believe he shot the Dragging Canoe.”

“Nobody knows who shot him. I aimed at him. But I don’t account to you, Matt Swallow, for nothing I do. You keep a civil tongue in your head, or I’ll tear it out.”

Swallow hushed. This fool boy had the reputation of making up his mind suddenly, on impulse, but then of carrying out with an iron determination whatever he had decided to do. He might yank a man’s tongue out, if he took the notion.

Captain Stone also knew the boy’s habit of impulsive decisions and inflexible adherence to them. “We’ll get back before the hunters set out, Tom. Your ten pounds from Judge Henderson will pay for a good outfit. Though I wish you’d come on to the army with me.”

“I fight better alone. I don’t get along with men telling me what to do.”

Swallow decided to risk Spencer’s anger. “That’s what Big-foot says. I’d bet my house and farm against that ten pounds that Big-mouth wouldn’t last till Christmas.”

“Taken,” snapped the boy. “I stay till Christmas. You’re a witness, captain. I’ll leave you at Bledsoe’s Lick. If I ain’t back by June, Henderson will give my ten pounds to Swallow; any time after Christmas, I get his place.”

“Now,” temporized Swallow, “I didn’t mean . . .”

Stone was angry. “Yes, you did. And you’ll stick by it, if Tom stays. I hope he won’t.” The older man began to talk reasonably and smoothly to the huge young hunter. Spencer listened politely. It was obvious that he would not change his mind.

At last Stone gave up. “When James comes in, you take a turn around the woods, Tom. I’ll go to bed. Wake me when your turn’s up.” He undid his blanket roll.

Swallow was stretched on the ground, apparently asleep. But the thin-faced man was thinking of his cabin, and what he might say to his wife . . . and what she would, assuredly, say to him. His body twitched as a thought flashed in his mind. If the Cherokees heard that the man who shot the

Dragon Canoe (whom the white hunters called Dragging Canoe) was alone near the Cumberland, in their hunting grounds . . . It would be easy to say that, when an Indian was trading at the fort, and no white man would think anything of his words. He could make it sound like praise of Spencer.

The long hunter thought no more about it, after he decided that he would find a place to stay near the lick. His mind was made up. He undid his blanket roll, spread his deerskin on a smooth piece of ground, and lay down. He pulled the blanket over him, partially rolling in it. A moment later he was asleep.

II

The Parting at Bledsoe's Lick

A few years earlier, the first long hunters to come into that section had camped near a buffalo trace. Next morning, Casper Mansker and Isaac Bledsoe had agreed to travel in opposite directions along the trace, in search of hunting stands. Riding west, Mansker had discovered a creek and salt lick; eastward, Bledsoe too had found a lick, in a narrow flat valley of approximately one hundred acres. A small creek ran through the valley, separating it unevenly; in places the creek ran close to a steep, rocky hill, but sometimes curved away from it as much as a hundred yards. South of the creek, and including the lick and the buffalo trace, the valley widened in places to about three hundred yards. The lick itself was in low ground, with a sulphur spring draining into the creek, and with small pools of salty water near the large spring.

Here the ground was packed hard, except where buffalo had pawed the ground, loosening it so they could lick the moist salty earth with their tongues. Near the spring there were deep pits and depressions. On the opposite side of the creek and at each end of the lick there was thick, greenish-brown cane; on the rising ground there were huge oaks and sycamores, tall grass and thin underbrush. Halfway up the ridge was a small, fresh-water spring.

Stone's party had broken camp at Mansker's Lick at early dawn. Now, four men stood by the sulphur spring. They had ridden rapidly along the buffalo trace; the September sun was hot, and the horses in need of water.

"Let 'em drink slow, Blackie," said Captain Stone. "We're heading up the rim when we leave here." He looked around, and waved his hand at a giant, gray-black sycamore. "That the place, Tom?"

Spencer nodded. The three men were relaxed yet watchful; their voices were quiet. The Negro, coal black and slow of movement, led the six horses toward the creek. He stepped carefully, to avoid the huge bones of long-dead buffalo; taking each horse in turn, he loosened the bridle and let the horse drink as long as he would. But never for a moment did he let go the rawhide ropes by which he held them. A lean black dog trotted down and lapped up water.

Stone hesitated for a moment before he spoke again. "Change your mind, Tom, like a wise man should. There's not a white man in a hundred miles of us, unless there's some Creoles at the French Lick, and the Indians are getting more proddy every day. If they stole four horses right out from under our guns, what will they do to you all by yourself?"

Thomas Spencer leaned on the muzzle of his rifle, but so lightly that he did not force the butt into the ground. "They won't do nothing. I'm aiming to stay. This is my country. There's buffalo and elk and beaver and otter, and there's elbow room to turn round in. Why, I even like the stink of this sulphur lick." Spencer laughed as the Negro wrinkled his nose expressively. "Bring the horses here, Blackie. I'll hold 'em while you set my traps off."

A fifth man joined them. James Hambrick seemed to melt out of the forest, without making a sound; one moment he was hidden in a poplar grove, the next minute he was among them. His buckskin moccasins and leggings were black from the water he had walked through. A brown dog trotted on to the creek. "No signs," he said briefly, "today. Two Indians here yesterday. We better be moving." He slipped off a moccasin and twisted it between his fingers, to squeeze out the water. There was brown loam between his bare toes.

Spencer watched the Negro unstrap a cowhide haversack and drop it on the ground. A heavy Dutch blanket with a deerskin rolled inside it was dumped near by. "Hold the horses," he said, tossing the ropes to the Negro. He drew his hunting knife from its sheath at his belt, stepped forward quickly, and cut a handful of hairs from the tail of the nearest horse. Before the horse kicked at him, he was out of range of its hoof. "Might need these for rabbit snares. Well, I'll be seeing you next year."

Captain Stone watched these preparations reluctantly. "I hate to leave you, Tom. You're hardly a man yet, in years, and your brother won't like it. You come back to the Watauga with us, get some tools so you can build you a cabin, and make your plans so the long hunters will know where you are. Maybe you can come back with the Bledsoes, or Casper Mansker."

The boy's brown face flushed a dark-cherry red. He drew himself up to his full six feet four, squared his broad shoulders, and spoke angrily. "I reckon I'm man enough no one here will stop me from doing what I want. You mean well, Captain Stone, and I ain't holding your remarks agin you. I've told you what to do. Leave my horse and stuff with my brother at the Watauga, tell Colonel Henderson to hold my money till next June, and if I ain't back send it to Swallow. If you see any long hunters coming this way,

I'd like five pounds of French powder, a peck or two of corn, and a pig of lead. That's all."

Swallow jerked off his raccoon cap and soothed the still angry wound on his head with his fingers. "Let Big-foot stay. Me, I want to get this head of hair back home, without losing any more of it. He can crawfish if he wants to. But the bet stands. You heard it, captain."

Stone took a menacing step toward Swallow. "Would you hold him . . ."

Swallow backed and answered hastily, "In course, captain, if you . . ."

Contemptuously Spencer interrupted him. "I'm staying. No need for you to fight over that." He looked hard at Swallow. "Thank you, captain, but I'll kill my own cottonmouths."

The men were tense now, and grim. Then Hambrick began to talk, almost ramblingly. "Last month I thought if I could jest set down to one more meal of wheaten flour, I could die happy; now if I jest had Indian meal to wrap around a fish, I'd feel like a human being again. Even a trout ain't good without some fixings. Deer meat fresh and jerked and stewed, bear meat, buffalew meat, nothing but meat and sometimes fish. It knots a man all up insides." He laughed uneasily. The men relaxed. "Swallow's been jumpy as a hibernatin' she-bear before it gets hold of dogwood blossoms, since that Indian creased him with a bullet and he woke up to find him putting a new part in his hair. Lucky he was a young buck, or Swallow mightn't have kneed him off and then knifed him before he finished."

Swallow glanced at Hambrick, then at Stone and Spencer. He grunted harshly, "I'll look about. Meet you at the buffalew street top of the ridge." His voice sneered. "Keep your eyes in the back of your scalp, Big-foot. Good luck. You'll need it." He stepped into a deer trail and disappeared in the cane.

"Swallow's a married man," said Tom Spencer, with surprising mildness, "with kids. And a farm. Ties a man down. I like to move about." He searched briefly for words to express his feelings, then gave up. "You know what I mean, captain, though your way of doing ain't exactly my way."

Stone nodded. "If I was ten years younger, and foot-loose," he said, "I'd stay with you. But we've charted the lay of the land, like Colonel Henderson wanted, and we've earned our money. Your ten pounds will be waiting for you." He hesitated a moment. "Here, Tom, take this."

Captain Stone pulled from his belt a large pistol, with a deerskin cover over the lock and an ivory bead at the end of the barrel. He held it

affectionately in his hand for a moment, fingering the oiled dark wood of the stock and the dark, six-sided steel barrel. Then he handed it to Spencer, dug into a pocket, and brought out a leather pouch filled with bullets. "I haven't got a mold for it. These will have to do you. Sometimes two bullets are better than one."

"Thanks, captain. I'd better be getting my stuff in." He held out an enormous hand. They shook hands briefly but vigorously.

"Blackie can tote them for you."

"No, he can't. Blackie walks all over creation, and leaves a track a gal could follow by moonlight. See you next year, Jim. Same to you, Blackie."

"Good-bye, Mistuh Spencer," said the Negro. "May God be with you."

Spencer whistled softly. "Here, Midnight." The dog trotted over, without making a sound, and began to nuzzle his ankles and legs. "We're staying here." As he stooped, he patted the dog's head, then lifted the heavy leather sack with no apparent effort. With the sack on his shoulders, the rolled blanket under his left arm and the rifle cradled in his right, he walked lightly along the deer path. His feet did not break the grass or an occasional brown leaf, or dislodge a pebble.

He heard Captain Stone, behind him, tell the Negro, "Get the pack horses going, Blackie. We'll catch you in a minute." There was the creaking sound of leather as men mounted into their saddles. He walked on. The ground began to slope gently upward.

When Spencer got to the giant dead sycamore, he leaned over and tossed the blanket into a low, narrow opening. The haversack followed it. Then, rifle in hand, he turned to gaze back at his companions.

Blackie was leading the two pack horses slowly along the wide buffalo trace. Captain Stone and James Hambrick were looking toward him, and he raised his hand in farewell. They waved back, turned, and started their horses to walking rapidly up the trace, Swallow's horse with its empty saddle jogging between them. In a few minutes, the forest hid them completely.

Spencer knelt, and crawled into the sycamore tree. Midnight lay down in the opening, and put his head on his paws. Inside the tree, his tail beat on the ground with contented, regular thumps.

III

The Room in the Tree

Spencer pushed the haversack out of his way, and squatted quietly on his heels until his eyes became accustomed to the darkness. At first, the inside of the tree seemed to be a deep blackness, with no definite size or boundary; gradually, the interior lightened until it took on the shade of dusty twilight.

He was in a room roughly circular. The outside diameter of the great sycamore was a little over eleven feet; inside, at the base, it measured eight and a half feet north and south, and a trifle under eight feet east and west. Underfoot the ground felt soft and springy; the earth was covered with an uneven carpet of wood fibers that had fallen down and not yet rotted away.

Now his eyes could see the furrowed walls of the trunk. This was the home he had selected for the winter; he might as well get it in order. He flexed the muscles in his feet and legs, and suddenly, without swaying or using his hands, stood upright. The round walls of his room tapered slightly in; extending his arms and stretching them, he barely touched the wood with his finger tips.

Above his head, a few ghostly rays of light flickered. The largest of them, ten or twelve feet aboveground, came through a hole left in the tree when a limb had broken off; the others were small enough to be squirrel holes or tiny rotten breaks in the trunk.

He began to examine the trunk at eye level and slightly higher, testing its firmness with the butt of his hand. With his long fingers, he felt above his head and tugged cautiously at a jagged, uneven knot which protruded from the trunk. Gradually he exerted more weight against it, but the knot held firm. With his right hand he slipped his hunting knife from his leather belt, and began to dig a trench in the upper side, close in to the tree trunk. When the cut was an inch deep, he stopped.

Turning around, standing on tiptoe and reaching as high as he could hold the knife, Spencer began to dig directly into a place where the wood was thick and solid. Sweat drops gathered on his forehead. Unmindful of them, he continued to twist the knife carefully, holding the handle with both hands and keeping the point slanted downward. For ten minutes Spencer hollowed the wood, sometimes scooping the small bits out of the hole and measuring it with his fingers. Then he shifted his weight to his heels, and without

moving alternately relaxed and flexed his muscles until they felt smooth and pliant. He eased the knife back into its sheath.

He squatted down, and with sure fingers loosed the rawhide thongs around the haversack. Before he lifted it, the large top part made a rectangle that covered every corner, and was a solid part of the leather at the back. When bound tightly, the haversack was proof against the heaviest rain, and might even withstand a brief immersion if while fording a creek he stepped suddenly into a deep hole. From the sack, Spencer took first a smaller leather sack, with a short thong. He spoke to the dog.

“Meat, Midnight. Enough jerked deer and bear to last us two weeks, though it’d be mighty thin living toward the end. Listen to me, sir; you’re not to jump at this, or even act as if you know we’ve got it. We don’t touch this till we’re plumb out of everything else.”

The dog twisted his head until half of it appeared at the edge of the opening, and flapped his visible ear.

Spencer adjusted the leather handle until it fitted snugly in the trench. Then he drew from the sack two tightly wrapped, round pouches. He hefted them, and dropped one into the sack again. French powder. It was smooth and black and reliable; it was the most expensive of his equipment except for his rifle, and the most valuable. Last night the five men had divided their remaining powder into two equal parts; Captain Stone had handed one to him. “This is all we can spare, Tom; you’ll have to make it go a long way.”

He knew that some hunters carried a gourd of the cheap army powder, and deliberately left it with their cache, so that if the Indians did discover and steal their supplies and furs, they would think they had stolen the powder also, and not search for other hiding places. But he had no cheap powder; he could not afford to lose a dozen grains of what he did have.

Last night he had filled his powder horn nearly to the brim, and partially filled three soft leather pouches. Then he had rolled and tied them so that he was sure they were waterproof; one he had put in an inside pocket of his hunting shirt, and sewed the pocket with deer sinew; the second one he balanced in his right hand as he raised himself on tiptoe. It fitted into the hole he had dug in the trunk. He stuffed powdery chunks of wood close around the pouch, until he could not feel any part of the leather bag, and rubbed a handful of the wood carefully over the hole until he had smoothed over every knife stroke and removed every feel of freshness from the cuts.

The third pouch he would hide in or near the cave. After Spencer had decided, some days ago, to spend the winter in Middle Tennessee instead of returning to the Watauga Settlements, he explored the ground thoroughly, and found two places that he liked. One was a limestone cave two miles away; from a little distance, it seemed to be a shallow ledge covered by an overhanging rock. When a man approached it closely, he discovered that the blackest part of the cliff was not rock at all, but a tall narrow opening. Tomahawk in his right hand, Spencer had edged through the hole, and found a dark, dank room perhaps ten feet wide, and thirty feet long. The dampness of the cave made him prefer the tree. But he intended to use it as a place to hide some of his supplies, and as an emergency home.

One pair of bullet molds he had sewed into his hunting shirt last night; the second pair, wrapped in a greasy skin, he now buried in the ground. A small pig of lead was buried near it. Then he tamped the ground carefully until it was firm, and strewed wood fragments until he was satisfied that no signs of digging remained to betray the hiding places.

Midnight's growl was so low that only a sharp ear near him could hear it. The dog seemed to move deliberately, half rising and backing into the tree without making any noise; but by the time Spencer had dropped full length and was peering out, the dog was lying quietly by his side. The hairs on Midnight's neck were thrust out stiffly; his throat moved, but he did not bark.

Spencer's movements were as unhurried, and as quickly efficient. The rifle was near his right hand, its barrel within the tree so that no light could glint from the steel. He removed the deerskin cover from the lock and tucked it into his bullet pouch; as a continuation of the same movement, he transferred three bullets to his mouth. The powder horn was placed handy to the rifle pan. His preparations completed, Spencer waited, motionless.

The sycamore was near the beginning of the rise, but high enough so that his eyes were just above the level of the tall buffalo grass that surrounded the lick. He could see the wind gently swaying the oak and poplar leaves to his right and to his left, and he could hear the gentle sighing sound that it made in the thick cane on the other side of the creek. Above him, a woodpecker was drilling steadily into the sycamore. He could see nothing dangerous, but near the lick where the buffalo had pawed and tongued the earth until they had made deep depressions, a man could stand erect, and not be seen from a little distance. A brightly colored parakeet skimmed over the water, hesitated in mid-flight, and veered off. Men were somewhere near the lick. He shifted a bullet until he held it between his teeth.

There was a vague, almost unseen movement in the nearest buffalo pit, a hundred yards away. Spencer watched it narrowly. First a roach of close-cropped black hair; then a brown forehead and two deep-set dark eyes that seemed to be looking everywhere.

Midnight stiffened tensely, and growled silently to himself. But Spencer relaxed slightly. Chickasaws. That Indian would not be hunting alone. He could see that the brave was mature, and not a wild young buck eager for scalps; they would be cautious. The Chickasaws were hunting in the land of the Cherokees. The head disappeared. He suspected they had followed Captain Stone's party eastward, on the trail of the horses; he was certain these were the two Indians whose trail Hambrick had found, and that there were only two of them. It would explain their carefulness, and their slowness in picking up the trail. While they would not hesitate to kill a man if it made the job of horse stealing easier, and would undoubtedly take his scalp to add to their collection, the Indian he had seen was bare of war paint and clearly not on the warpath. Spencer saw this, but he did not move. There was no point to tempting an Indian.

Again the head with its coarse black comb appeared. Eyes seemed to be examining the sycamore, before the head turned sideways toward the buffalo trace. When they left, he must go to the buffalo lick, and look at the tree until he found what had made them suspicious. He waited.

He saw the tall grass near the creek move slightly. For a second, black hair showed above the cane on the opposite side at the deer run; another quivering movement of the cane, and then only the slight rustling of the wind and the woodpecker's staccato tattoo. The parakeet flew from his perch on a honey locust to the bank of the creek.

"Stay here, Midnight," said Spencer. "Don't move. I hope those Chickasaws don't get friendly with the Cherokees. We can't keep this place hidden forever, but we might as well try."

Spencer crawled out of the hole on his left hand and his knees. The rifle was raised in his right hand, so that it would not scar the earth or break the grass. For a moment, outside, he remained motionless and quiet. Then he rose, and walking around the tree disappeared into the forest.

He wanted to approach the lick as the Indians had done. If they could find something wrong, so could he; but he would not risk disturbing it by walking straight toward the lick. He found a tiny path that looked like a rabbit run. There were enough animal trails without a man's adding a new one to them. He worked slowly northward until he came to a larger trail.

Here he stopped, and searched the ground carefully. There was no sign. After a moment's hesitation, he turned into it and walked toward the east. A few paces on, he noticed the faint print of a moccasin toe. He nodded approval to himself.

IV

The Cave by the Creek

Spencer first made certain that his feet left no prints on the hard-packed ground of the pit. Then he squatted on his haunches, and gradually got up until his eyes were above the level of the grass. He was in a depression five feet deep; he had to bend his legs and lean slightly forward to keep his head even with the grass. Every blade and leaf seemed in place. For ten minutes he stared at the tree and the ground that led to it, but he could find nothing out of place. Shifting to an upright position, he continued his scrutiny. The hole in the tree was black, framed in the grayness of the sycamore; his eyes could not penetrate the blackness.

He walked to the creekbank. There was evidence here that men and horses had stopped to drink, and that men had dismounted. That huge, flat footprint was Blackie's; any boy of the woods could follow his trace, and know that he walked with a clumsy shambling gait. Swallow had dug his rifle butt carelessly into the ground. He saw his own footprint, even larger than Blackie's, but showing only the ball, heel, and outer rim of his foot. They had made no attempt at concealment.

But there was no print leading toward the tree. His things had mashed the grass, but there was nothing to show they had not been placed on the horse. He walked back to the buffalo pit.

Suddenly two pin points of light appeared in the darkness of the hole. Midnight. The Chickasaw had seen Midnight's eyes when the dog tensed and shifted. From here he might be any varmint, and not worth investigating. But some curious Indian, not intent on stealing horses, might be in need of bear meat, or hopeful that he would find honey.

He continued to watch the tree. Midnight's eyes were completely hidden. He waited patiently. Again the flicker of eyes, clear for a flashing moment and then obscured.

A short, thick limb or the section of a tree trunk would come in handy. The opening had to be left as it was, when they were gone; too many Indians had passed and noticed that hollow; they would immediately mark its being blocked up. But a log a foot thick and two or three feet long, that could be moved deep into the tree and pushed out toward the entrance at night or

when they knew the Indians were near—he could use that. Midnight’s eyes would be hidden. And it might stop a bullet or an arrow.

Midnight twitched his ears in welcome.

“Gave us away, dog. You were the culprit.” Spencer dug into the haversack and brought out another leather bag. From it he pulled several pieces of meat. One he tossed to the dog. “Jerk, Midnight. Eat hearty.”

Man and dog chewed with gusto at the dried deer meat. When they had finished, Spencer burrowed again into his pack, and stowed away in his clothing the powder pouch, a small sack of jerk, a pig of lead, two horsehairs, and a piece of wire. He eased through the opening.

“Come on, Midnight. I go to prepare our other house. Most poor devils back on the Watauga have one log room for a cabin; we’ve got a log house and a stone house, too. And nobody to say a word if we don’t come home to either one.”

He struck out jauntily along the small path until he came to another rabbit run. It was near the creek. This was a good place; he marked it in his mind.

Avoiding the run, he walked to the bank of the creek, and upstream until he came to a deep, shady pool. He bent the piece of wire into a fish-hook and tied it with a rawhide string, then baited the hook with a fat white worm that he caught under a rotted log. Tying the string around a small poplar, he dropped the hook into the pool. From a dense thicket he broke some dry cane and carried them with him.

The trail petered out. The little valley surrounding the lick ended. The ground was rocky and went back from the creek in long, sweeping hills. Spencer turned directly away from the bank, and began to climb through a cedar forest. Dying blackberry bushes grew in thick clusters, and the short thorns pulled at his buckskin leggings. Midnight circled around the thorns.

Spencer came to a small dry branch, and started down it. Before it joined the creek, he angled off to the right, climbing easily and avoiding the heavier rocks. Drops of water oozed through the limestone, making black wet patches that frequently were covered with close-growing green moss.

He stood on a ledge forty feet above the creek. Behind him the cliff rose abruptly, and bulged out over him; the rock was broken by long irregular cracks that made the rock’s face seem to be formed of queerly shaped parallelograms, likely to fall at any moment. Small green plants, from seeds scattered by the birds, grew out of the crevices. Immediately in front of him,

precariously rooted in a lower ledge, was a stunted cedar; beyond it the tops of hickory trees loaded with greenish-brown nuts, and towering above them the long, thin trunks and heavy leaves of tulip poplars.

The entrance to the cave—his cave, he thought, since he had discovered it—was a tall, narrow slit. It looked, from outside, like a break in the rock. But Spencer had found that, by turning his wide shoulders sideways and edging in, he could turn almost opposite to the direction in which he had started, and in eight paces come to an underground cavern. The discovery was simple enough. At sunset he had seen bats disappearing into the side of the rock, a few feet from the stunted cedar. Yet, knowing the location of the opening, he had gone past it once and had to retrace his steps.

Inside the cave he paused. The wall at his shoulder was clammy, the air close and dank. At first, all was blackness, without shape or size. Gradually, as his eyes grew accustomed to the place, the blackness changed to a gloomy darkness. Spencer knelt, and tore the leaves from a cane. He sprinkled a few grains of powder on the leaves. Holding the rifle across his knee, close to the leaves, he let the hammer fall. There was a blinding flash. The leaves burned rapidly and brightly. He heard the quick flapping of wings as the bats flew into darker recesses of the cave. There must be another room, farther back, but he could not see the entrance to it.

Spencer kindled a long cane torch, and set it upright in the ground. By its eerie light he could see small bones on the floor, and one that looked like a human skull. But he disregarded them, and took two long steps to the rock wall. With his tomahawk he swept aside a few bones and small rocks. The tomahawk struck soft, yielding earth. After a few moments of digging, he began to push the dirt away with his hands.

What seemed to be a rough oak stump buried under the ground was faintly visible in the torch's flare. With his knife Spencer pried out a round, tight-fitted peg. He pulled a leather sack from the hollow oak, and opened it. Then he sighed with relief.

“No moisture outside,” he muttered. “This ought to keep powder dry.”

But he first examined the jerk inside the sack, feeling it and smelling it. Midnight sniffed at his shoulder. Spencer tossed a strip to the dog. Midnight set one paw on the meat, and tore at it with his teeth.

“Not rotten, then,” said Spencer in a satisfied tone.

He rewrapped the sack tightly and dropped it back into the stump. On top of this he placed the pouch of powder and the pig of lead. From the

bottom of the peg he took a sticky wad of tree gum and rubbed it first on the inside of the oak, at the top, and then on the edges of his whittled lid. The peg fit tightly in its hole.

Over the buried section of oak he tamped the dirt and small stones, and smoothed them with the end of a cane. When he was satisfied that he had erased every sign of digging, he dropped two thigh bones and a skull over the spot.

After he had found the cave, he wondered how to keep powder dry in it. The buried log was a Creole trick; he had seen them use it on the Wabash. He wasn't an axman, and Blackie had lost their ax, but he had cut a two-foot piece from a fallen oak with his tomahawk, and hollowed it out with his knife and burning coals. Captain Stone had watched him with amusement.

"You'll make a field hand yet, Thomas. Thought you said work like that was for niggers."

Captain Stone was a good leader, with nerve and savvy. But he was a little too dignified, and wanted everything just so, with a man on guard every night. Spencer had not liked that. He was hired to provide meat and serve as a guide, not to wait up for Indians. He'd kill them after they got there, but he wasn't going to worry about them beforehand. Of course, even a fool would hide his powder and lead. . . .

The little captain worried. Especially after the Cherokees stole four of their horses, and got a slice of Swallow's scalp. You couldn't call him "Cap" and have him like it, and he hated horseplay and shouting. Stone was a soldier and a geometer; he felt happier when he had some instrument in his hand or was putting down figures on a map or in a book. He didn't need a guide. He had a compass, and things to squint through; and men like him would ruin this country. First thing you knew, there'd be a cabin and cow-path on every creek.

Stone wasn't a hunter. Big-foot Spencer was. He remembered four years ago, his first time out, how Casper Mansker had called him "Pig-foot," and laughed at his attempts to shoot a buffalo. The hunters were a noisy group, when there were four or five of them together. The Creoles ran from them when they started shouting and singing, and pursuing wild game through the woods.

One day when they were at the station camp, wild, unearthly sounds filled the woods. Even old Mansker was scared, at first. He had grabbed his gun, Nancy, and sat very still. Then he had crawled off in one direction, and

Spencer had circled toward the noise from another. One hunter stayed to guard the camp, and two others crawled directly toward the noise. There, in an open glade, lay Daniel Boone on a deerskin, flat on his back and singing at the top of his voice.

Those were good days. Even the Indians had to look out for themselves, when the hunters were together. But a man worked better alone. Where you were around a man too long, you wanted to fight him.

He twisted out of the cave, and walked back to the deep pool. The line was tight. He cut a green cane, and pulled in the line. He had caught a small trout. After baiting the hook, he dropped the line into the water again.

“Hunt, Midnight,” said Spencer. “This ain’t enough for me. Catch yourself a rabbit, if you want any supper.”

He found a small clearing. After circling around it, he dug punk from a rotted poplar. Over this he arranged, in crisscross fashion, some dry chips and twigs. Again he sprinkled powder on the punk, and snapped the rifle. The punk blazed up, and the twigs began to crackle.

Holding the trout firmly in his left hand, he set the point of the knife in the belly, just below the head, and with one long twisting motion gutted it. He ran the cane through the hole and on through the gills, and stuck the point in the ground so that the fish would cook slowly over the fire. He added some larger chips, then walked away. From time to time he came back and turned the fish. Taking ashes from the edge of the fire, he rubbed them lightly over the place from which he had chipped the punk. Again he scouted the near-by woods. For the time being, he was safe.

Spencer ate with hands and knife, digging the meat from the bones and tossing them into the fire. Once he heard the terrified bleat of a rabbit, and guessed that Midnight had caught his supper. After he had finished the trout, Spencer stamped out the fire, dropped a few leaves on the ashes, and moved a cedar bough until it covered the place entirely.

Midnight came back, wagging his tail. Spencer patted the dog’s head, and noticed the long shadow cast by the dog’s body. His own shadow was lost in the forest shade.

“Air’s getting a nip in it, Midnight. Let’s go home.”

As he passed the junction of the rabbit runs, he stopped, and made a noose of a horsehair. He tied the hair to a springy overhanging branch, weighting the limb so that the noose was low in the darkening path, but the

weight would be dislodged very easily. The second hair he tied in the run he was walking in, a few yards away.

V

The Buffalo Herd

Spencer woke before dawn. Night was breaking; outside the tree there was dull grayness. He unrolled himself from the blanket, picked up the deerskin, and tied them together in a tight roll. Midnight blinked, crawled into the open, and trotted toward the creek.

A distant, rumbling noise filled the air. Spencer shook himself as he felt the keen air strike his face, then he turned up the slope, away from the creek and toward the fresh-water spring. The rumbling grew louder, and the earth began to quiver slightly. He could hear the rustle of small animals as they darted away from the lick, up the seams and gullies that animals had first made and the rains had widened and deepened.

He drank from the spring gustily, his body stretched out and his face and chest supported on his hands. As he began to wash his face with huge doublehandfuls of cold water, he could hear the loud snorts and grunting bellows of the buffalo bulls. The herd was approaching rapidly, and the ground began to shake under their tread. Midnight suddenly appeared at his side, and nuzzled close to him.

The sun broke clear of a cloudy haze; it seemed unusually large, a round orange disk that drove away the grayness. Spencer saw an elk with huge antlers drink hastily, and lope toward the western end of the lick. The forest resounded with the bellowed cries and the galloping feet of the herd.

The bulls came four abreast down the broad trace which the herd had worn through the wilderness. The largest of them, he estimated, would weigh more than two thousand pounds; he ran slightly ahead of the other bulls, and bellowed louder. Behind the bulls came the cows and calves. As the herd approached, the bulls separated and fanned out until they protected most of the lick; they began to paw the ground viciously, and to tongue the salty earth. Cows and calves drank noisily in the creek, and in their turn began to lick the sulphurous salt from the ground.

Spencer looked down on a great, blackish-brown bull, with mammoth head, crested forequarters, and weak, sloping hindquarters. He could see the great mane of hair covering the head, neck, and forequarters of the body; the short, blunt horns curving sharply outward from each side of the forehead;

the small eyes in their tubular sockets. Even with his small-bore rifle it would be easy to kill the bull. He shifted the rifle in his hands.

But what to do with the meat? He was a hunter, but he hunted for food and for furs; he had no desire to kill for the sake of the killing. Jerk he had in plenty, for the present, and it was yet too warm for meat to keep any length of time. The bull would come back after the frost and snow came; he would be there when Spencer needed him.

“Let’s go, Midnight. Maybe fresh meat for breakfast; maybe not.” Man and dog climbed to the top of the hill, and struck off along the summit. After they had passed the lick, Spencer turned in the direction of the creek, well above the herd, and walked down a gully until he came to the bank.

When he came to the first snare, he saw that a half-grown rabbit had thrown the weight; the limb had snapped up, and the rabbit was hanging in the noose. “Back, Midnight,” he said sternly, and carefully removed rabbit and hair. In the second trap was a larger rabbit.

“Wait till I look these over,” said Spencer, as Midnight danced about and leaped at the rabbits. He cuffed at the dog. There was no need to worry about Indians; later, they would be hunting buffalo or deer at the lick.

Selecting another glade, he cut out rotten wood with his knife, and started a fire. He gutted the larger rabbit, cut off its feet, slit the fur along the legs, and skinned it inside out, cutting off the head with his tomahawk. He looked closely at the rabbit for worms, but found none. He threw the skin and the young rabbit into the bushes.

“Get ’em, Midnight,” he said. “Eat well while you can.”

The dog growled, and darted into the brush.

Spencer sliced off some small pieces of meat, to cook faster, and impaled the rabbit on a stick. He squatted down, strung the bits on a second stick, and held them low over the hot fire. Each piece made a bite, and he ate them while he watched and turned the rabbit.

His breakfast over, Spencer scattered and covered the fire, and removed the traces of his visit. The rabbit’s skeleton he tossed into the cane on the opposite side of the creek. Midnight appeared, and guzzled water with his tongue.

“Good idea,” said Spencer. He cupped his big hands, filled them with water, and drank.

A restless, impatient feeling took hold of him. The rabbit had lacked flavor. He was tired of fresh meat without salt or meal.

He could make salt easily enough, a tiny bit at a time, by boiling water that had settled in low places at the lick. He had kept one of the small kettles for that, and for softening the lead. Or he could soak the meat overnight in a briny pool. But he could not make corn.

He felt a desire for movement as well as for food. Always the first few days of a hunt made him restless. Now the sense of being alone affected him the same way; and the feeling was aggravated by the fact that it was too early in the season, and too hot, for hunting. Later, he would put up bear bacon and bear oil and a buffalo hump; now, they would spoil in a few days.

After the fur season opened and hunting had reason behind it, he would lose this desire for wandering and would be content. There might be Creoles at French Lick, on the Cumberland. Two years ago, a trader named de Monbreun had built a depot there, as he called it; Mansker said it was just a plain log cabin. By this time, the Indians might have burned it. But the Lick was a favorite place with the Frenchies; they came from Natchez and from the Wabash country, and they left supplies there. If he couldn't find men, he might locate their cache.

He reckoned it was thirty or forty miles away. If he stayed north of the river, going, he could spy out the best pools for otter and beaver; coming back, he could scout the south side.

Whistling to himself, Spencer climbed to the crest of the hill and started back to his hollow tree. As he approached, he could hear a few grunts and bellows. The herd had broken up; each bull with his cow and calves had departed separately. Now there were only about twenty buffalo left, and the largest of the bulls was turning them into the trace.

He was to windward of the herd. Scent of man or dog was carried on the wind; as he rounded the sycamore, the bull turned and bellowed ferociously, and advanced slowly toward him. The cows broke into a waddling, ground-covering run.

Spencer halted. The bull snorted his challenge. The little eyes gleamed ferociously through the heavy black hair. He pawed the ground, and bellowed.

Midnight advanced slowly toward the bull. Spencer slipped the lock cover from his rifle. He felt an intense desire to kill. His blood quickened. A

wounded bull was dangerous. The maddened bull eyed the dog and looked ready to charge.

With a strong, almost physical effort, Spencer lowered his gun. He whistled to the dog. "Back, Midnight. Not now." He roared at the bull. "I'll kill you. When I want a buffalo, I'll kill you." He looked at the broad forehead. One horn was broken off, above the left eye. He would remember that.

The bull, undecided, looked at the retreating dog. Then he snorted triumphantly. In a slow and disdainful manner, he turned and loped up the trace after the cows, his hind legs seeming to fall away from him and his crested mane bobbing up and down.

VI

Return of the Two Chickasaws

Inside the tree, Spencer took from the sack two steel traps, then tied the almost empty haversack to the blanket roll and slung them over his shoulder. He debated for a moment whether to bury the traps or not, but he had the old woodsman's dislike for leaving too many things in one place. There was an oak near the crest with a hollow in the crotch; he had noticed it automatically while he watched the buffalo.

Spencer felt inside the oak, nodded, and dropped the greasy traps into the hollow. They would be rusty before he needed them, but there was grease in every wild animal in the valley; and they should be safe enough. From near the lick, he heard the gobbling call of a turkey cock. He froze instantly. This was a favorite stratagem of the Indians; it had lured many an unwary hunter to his death. He was above the cock, and could not tell if it was in a tree or on the ground. He listened attentively, and slipped the blanket roll from his shoulder. The answering call came from higher ground, but still lower than the oak. He estimated that the turkey hen was thirty or forty yards away.

Again the gobble-gobble call of the cock from near the lick, but approaching closer to him; and the answer seemed nearer. The calls had a slight guttural quality. Spencer dropped down, and pointed to the oak. Midnight lay still behind it. The pi-ou, pi-ou chatter of the turkeys commenced. It did not seem quite right. He was certain, now, that the hen was on the ground.

He was being hunted. His mind and body quickened: every muscle poised, every sense alert. Danger stimulated him. The chance that bear or buffalo might charge enlivened the chase. Now the odds were against him. He must act quickly.

Spencer dropped to the ground. Keeping under cover of the ridge, he crawled rapidly. He wanted to become the hunter, not the hunted. Momentarily he considered imitating the cry of the wild gobbler, then doubling on his tracks—but the Indians knew already where he was. They were stalking him. Spencer stopped behind a dogwood with many low-growing shoots, and looked above the ridge.

The babel-chatter ceased. Had they realized he suspected the calls? A brown head came inching out from behind a walnut tree. The coarse black hair was roached up in the middle.

The two Chickasaws. Now he knew how many Indians were stalking him. So they had abandoned the pursuit of Stone's party. Perhaps they had caught a glimpse of him as he left the tree; angry over their futile eastward chase, they wanted his scalp for a trophy.

Two to one. He must change that immediately. This was the time for boldness. He knew that Indians loaded their guns lightly: the turkey cock was yet too far away to be dangerous. But not for long. He was undoubtedly closing in. Spencer checked his rifle and its heavy charge of powder.

He would offer the hen a target. He half rose and began to creep through the bush. A clump of laurel partially screened him, but the Chickasaws could see the branches move. Spencer rose higher. Now the Indian could see him. It was an easy forty-yard shot. Spencer's body tingled. Deliberately he was tempting the Chickasaw, but with a dangerous ruse. Every movement had to be carefully timed. He saw the Indian's rifle come up, his head and shoulder visible at the side of the tree. The barrel steadied.

Spencer jumped far to the left, raising his rifle before he touched the ground. He saw the Indian's rifle flash as the powder exploded, and heard the dull plop of a bullet plowing into the ground below him. His body and his rifle were motionless, frozen. He pulled the trigger.

The brown arm jerked up and the rifle clattered to the ground. Quickly Spencer picked up the blanket roll, then worked above and over the crest, and moved rapidly away from the lick. He had aimed just below the Chickasaw's right shoulder, and his bullet had smashed through the arm. He reflected, as he kept to his low, ground-covering lope, that he could just as easily have drilled a bullet through his head, and he had been tempted.

Behind a laurel clump Spencer loaded his long rifle. With quick, sure movements he poured in a charge of powder, fitted a soft, tallow-impregnated square of doeskin around a bullet, and with his iron ramrod shoved it into the barrel.

A Cherokee, now, or a Creek. They would have hunting parties through the woods all the time. But the Chickasaws were alone; if he killed one of them, he would have to scout around until he could kill the other. He came to a gully screened with bushes, and walked down it until he came to the

cane. Finding a small path, he turned back toward the lick. Near the edge of the cane he stopped, and lay flat in a place that an elk had partially cleared.

He had come up behind the tree where the Indian had waited to ambush him, and he could see the ground underneath it. The Indian was gone. Crawled to a buffalo pit, most likely, to wait for his partner. Midnight had better be careful: a vengeful Indian would gladly shoot a white man's dog. But Midnight was an old track hound, a bear dog that knew his way through the forest. And there had been no third shot.

This was no country for two Chickasaws. He had counted on that when he aimed at the arm. A dead Indian could not get back to his tribe, but a wounded one might prefer life to the chance of vengeance.

After an hour of still waiting, Spencer raised himself to his feet, and started down an oblique path to the creek. Twenty yards farther, he turned into a gully that led him back to the crest of the hill. He flitted along, bent low, his moccasined feet making no sound and automatically avoiding every dry leaf and twig.

When he came to the oak with the hollow crotch, he rammed his hand deep in the hole. His traps were there. He could see a black hair from Midnight's tail, caught on a greenbrier.

There was no movement from the creek, but he did not go directly toward the lick. He wanted to give the Indians time to give up their revenge and get away, but he wanted, also, to be certain they had gone.

He heard a low bark. The dog was too smart to appear without warning him, Spencer thought. Midnight's fur was ruffled, and steamy with sweat, but he was loping easily, without any sign of alarm. He stopped to lick at Spencer's ankles, then loped on to the walnut tree that had sheltered the Indians. Without bothering to conceal himself, Spencer followed the dog. He could trust Midnight's nose.

Under the tree was a pool of drying blood, and some blood-soaked leaves that had been used to stanch the flow. Midnight sniffed at the blood, then turned toward the lick. The Indian's trail was plainly marked. He had abandoned his rifle, and crawled on his left hand and his knees to the nearest depression. Drops of dried reddish-brown blood had splattered on leaves and through the grass.

Apparently the second Indian had given up the chase, rescued the fallen rifle, and parleyed with his wounded comrade. He must have dressed the wound effectively. There was blood coming into the pit, and two small pools

on the dried ground; but there was no blood leaving the pit, to show the way they had gone.

Midnight sniffed around, and trotted confidently toward the creek. There were footprints near the water, and Spencer could see where the men had drunk. He grinned briefly. Even a wounded Chickasaw avoided the sulphur spring. Midnight wagged his tail impatiently, and started down the creek.

“Whoa, Midnight,” Spencer called. He walked quickly into the cane, and picked up blanket and haversack. When he returned, he spoke encouragingly to the dog. “Get going, old boy.”

It was easy to follow them to the river. They made little attempt at concealment, now, but followed the creek south, going straight through the wood when it curved but quickly coming back to the bank, until it turned eastward in a long bend. The Indians had forded the creek at the shallow bend, and continued their forced march. They were reckoning on his slowness in getting started.

They must have a pirogue concealed in the bushes, somewhere near the mouth of the creek. Spencer called Midnight from the trail, and turned to the southeast until they reached the bank of the Cumberland. He sat on a flat rock, pulled a skin bag from his pocket, and drew from it strips of jerk. But his eyes were searching the broad green river.

Below them, and in the middle of the current almost two hundred yards from the bank, he saw the pirogue. An Indian was sitting upright at the blunt stern, steering the boat with a paddle; a second Indian, hunched low in the middle of the boat, was barely visible. He was satisfied. Those Indians would not stop until they reached Chickasaw territory, and the current would carry them swiftly away from him.

He wondered if he had acted wisely. The Chickasaws were proud and warlike, and exacted stern vengeance for injuries. If the warrior recovered . . . Indians had patience, and long memories. Perhaps he should have killed them both. Spencer shook off his uneasiness. The Chickasaws were gone now; he would worry about them after they returned.

For a full minute, Midnight posed like a statue, nose and tail in air, pointing the distant boat. Then the dog whined eagerly, rolled over on the ground, and dragged himself toward his master.

Spencer tossed a piece of jerk into the air. Midnight shot up from his recumbent position and caught the meat before it hit the ground.

“Eat hearty, Midnight,” said Spencer. “Maybe we should have killed those redskins after all. We’ve got to walk to the French Lick.”

VII

Crossing the Cumberland

Spencer did not like rivers. They were useful to float down, if you had a boat; otherwise, they were at best a nuisance. He felt at home by the side of a creek, with his gun in his hand. Creek water brought game to the pools, and could obliterate a man's tracks. But in a river a man became a helpless target. It was bad enough in a boat. You could be clearly seen from the bank, and shot at by enemies whom you could not see.

Five miles above French Lick he had struck the bank of the Cumberland. Coming upon fresh signs of Indians, he had made slow time. As he walked along the river, he had searched every covert and overhanging bush for a canoe or pirogue. Now he was two miles below the Lick, and ready to turn back. He had delayed long enough. It was midafternoon. And there was no point to searching farther. Even a Frenchie would not let his boat drift farther downstream than the bend.

He must swim. Before he could start, he must get well above the Lick, for the current would sweep him downriver. A three-mile walk, then the building of a light raft . . . he must hurry.

Alertly, more suspicious of danger than usual, he walked through the forest. Once he came to a dead fire which the hunters had not bothered to scatter; near it was the partly rotted and stinking body of a deer. The Indians were numerous if they neglected all caution.

A wise man would go back home. But Spencer told himself, ruefully, that he was born bull-headed. He had started for French Lick, and he would get there. He was not afraid of the actual swimming. But he must enter the water naked and helpless, with his gun on a flimsy raft and with every chance of getting the lock wet. His rifle would be less useful than a wooden club.

Grimly he walked on. Searching the bank, watching the forest, he made slow time. Midnight shared his uneasiness. The dog circled quickly about him, sniffing the air and growling inaudibly in his throat.

When he came even with the Lick, Spencer stopped. He could see the squat log cabin the Creoles used as a trading post and station camp. It looked tightly shuttered. If they were gone, his trip might be useless. He

could see, beyond the cabin, cleared ground and a small corn patch. Indians gathered their corn half green; the patch would certainly be stripped if the cabin was deserted. But he had set out for French Lick; he meant to go there. He walked on upstream.

A mile above French Lick, Spencer stopped. The bank was low and smooth, and free of bushes. He was below a curve. The current swept close to the shore, and then swiftly out toward the center of the river. In the lowland behind him there would be cane and there might be basswood.

“Look sharp, Midnight,” he admonished the dog. He made a wide semicircle, but the ground seemed clear of Indians, for the present. When he found three basswood the size of his arm, close together, Spencer worked rapidly. He dropped the rifle at his feet, and chopped mighty strokes with the tomahawk. The muscles in his right arm were heavily knotted, and he drove the blade deep into the tree. Three strokes to fell a basswood, one stroke to lop it off six feet nearer the top, one for each branch. He left the poles on the ground, grabbed his gun, trotted over to the cane thicket, and hurriedly cut an armful of long green canes.

Midnight was scouting under the trees. Spencer added the poles to the canes in his left arm, and walked to the bank. Before he laid the gun down, he tested the lock and the load. Quickly he plaited the canes around the three poles, tying the outer ones with supple small vines to the basswood poles. Sweat dripped from his face, but he stopped only to look into the shaded forest and to note that Midnight was on guard.

When his flimsy raft was finished, Spencer set the blanket roll and haversack on it. Then he stripped off his moccasins, leggings, breechclout, and shirt. The shirt he rolled tightly, inside out; in the roll were his powder horn, bullets, wadding, pistol, knife, and tomahawk. He tossed the buckskin leggings and moccasins on the raft, picked up his loaded rifle, and stepped into the water.

“Here, Midnight,” he called sharply. “Pronto, boy.”

The dog bounded toward him. Spencer pointed to the raft. Midnight shivered, but stepped gingerly on the canes. Spencer pushed the raft sharply into the water. Midnight tightened his claws around the canes, and held on. Spencer waded out, pushing the raft with his left hand; when the water covered his hips, he grabbed the leggings and wrapped them around the lock of his rifle. The water came to his armpits. He placed the gun carefully on the raft, then grasped the basswood poles with both hands and gave a mighty shove.

It was too late for concealment. His feet churned the water. The swift current tossed the raft bobbingly about for a moment, caught it as though it were a chunk of wood, and swept man and raft downstream. In part, Spencer let it ride with the current, but his powerful threshing kicks angled it toward the opposite bank.

He waited for a shot. But the woods behind him were silent. The current was rapidly sweeping him out of range.

Spencer turned on his right side, grasping the pole with his right hand, and started using a long, smooth scissors kick. The sun glanced off the water, half blinding him. He looked back at the wilderness. It was a solid mass of green and brown, of shade and gloom. He felt very white and unprotected and naked.

He sensed the movement under the tree, rather than saw it. Instantly he drove the raft downstream, his left arm whipping through the water and his legs timed in short, quick beats. Then he drove his body under the water, until only his right arm gripping the raft showed above the surface.

The shot rang out as his head submerged. The roar of water and shot filled his ears. Instinctively he knew that the bullet had fallen short. Then he heard the sodden plump of lead burying itself in wood. He felt the raft buck in his fingers and heard a sharp frightened yelp. He jerked his head out of water, and grabbed the pole with both hands.

Frantically, Spencer steadied the craft, and spoke sharply to the dog. "Down, Midnight. Quiet." Water had splashed over his clothes and gun, but everything was on the raft. The dog shivered and whined, but lay still.

With both hands pushing the raft toward the other bank, Spencer buried his face in the water and kicked with all his strength. If a hunting party had come up, and turned loose a volley of shots at him . . . He did not want to think. He kicked steadily, grimly on, and waited. When breath failed, he turned his head and gulped air under his left arm.

The second shot rang out. This time he heard the ping of the bullet as it struck the water, yards away from him. Then only the swift, rushing noise of the current, and the frightened whines of Midnight. He calculated briefly. No Indian could have loaded that fast. A second hunter had come up. There would be a third shot. But he might, by now, be out of range. He would chance it. Submerging took too long, left the raft too much at the river's whim, and left Midnight feeling alone. The dog might jump, might upset the raft. He lengthened his kick.

Now. The hunter had a clear, white target. What was he waiting for? A slow man with a gun. The explosion, dull but loud, was a relief. His right foot drove into the water. This time, he did not hear the bullet strike.

Spencer twisted, and looked back at the forest. He saw a brown man darting along the bank, downstream. But the Indian seemed far away, across yards of water. A few more driving kicks . . . Spencer turned on his left side, changed to the scissors kick, and looked upstream. For an undetermined number of long, anxious moments he had been forced to give all his attention to putting distance between himself and the Indians.

But there was another danger. This current was boiling down at five or six miles an hour; even a small limb that crashed into his flimsy raft would wreck it. He had risked the lesser danger, because he had no choice. His eyes searched the river. A small brown chunk that should float safely behind him, and nothing else. His sigh of relief was a noisy expelling of breath.

The fourth shot sounded hollow in his ears. It was an angry gesture, and nothing more.

He was not much surprised at the shots. It was Indian nature to blast away at a white man in a river, even in the old days when the Indians were friendly. Then the hunters could get along with them. You allowed, of course, for stealing of horses and supplies, and you had to watch for stray young bucks and for strange hunting parties. You'd be on reasonable terms with a Cherokee chief, and a band of wandering Delawares or Shawnees would ambush you or pillage your camp. But if you once made friends with an Indian, you could count on him from then on, unless something happened.

Spencer's legs kept a steady rhythm. Something had happened to the Cherokees. White men were crowding the Indians out, destroying the game, killing the warriors. Last year they had fought the settlers who destroyed their hunting grounds; he sympathized with this hatred of cabin and plow. Yet he had helped, in the fall, to burn their villages. The Dragging Canoe. Spencer was sorry the story had got around that he had shot the old chief. The Indians might have noticed him easily enough, in the battles; if they marked him for special vengeance . . . He was a hunter, not an Indian fighter. A man had to step carefully enough to dodge the hunting parties, these days, without being the game they sought.

Slipping to the downstream side of the raft, he began to search for a landing place. The Lick was more dangerous than the forests. The Creoles were touchy and excitable, likely to shoot first and do their finding out later.

Yet every Indian in the woods might have heard those shots; he could not count on their assuming the victim was a deer. He needed a clear place.

The south bank shelved back in a long slope. It was out of the swifter, deeper current, and built up of gravelly sand. The trees looked to be thirty yards from the water's edge.

Without hesitating, Spencer guided the raft toward a narrow sand spit that projected into the water. When his feet touched bottom, he stood upright and walked in. Knee-deep, he stopped, moved below the raft, and steadied it with his legs. The sun was going down, and cold air bit into his wet body. He unrolled the hunting shirt and thrust his right arm into a sleeve. The shirt was wet and clammy. Spencer shivered.

He felt of the powder horn. It was dry. Quickly he unrolled his leggings, dropping them back on the raft, peeled off the lock cover, and examined his rifle. His lips set in a hard line. Moist. Two minutes before a fire, an hour otherwise . . . He laid the gun down. He tucked the lock cover into his bullet pouch. It would be no help now.

Midnight looked at him questioningly. Spencer pushed the raft onto the bank. Midnight leaped off, and galloped toward the woods. All was quiet. He forced his shivering legs into the stiff wet leggings, squeezed the moccasins, and put them on. The shirt was stickily cold, the attached belt stiff and hard to knot.

The pistol. He had forgotten about it; he had little use for short guns. It might kill a man at ten paces, but in the woods . . . He reached for the blanket roll, changed his mind, and quickly loaded the pistol. He put in as much powder as he thought the weapon would stand. Even so, it seemed little better than his tomahawk.

Shoving the pistol into his belt, he picked up the roll and slipped it over his shoulder. He lifted the rifle and shook it angrily. It was bad enough to feel helpless in the river, but to feel helpless in the woods, where he belonged . . . He set his foot against the basswood pole, and shoved the light raft far into the Cumberland. The edge of the current caught it and spun it around.

Spencer turned away from the river. Since Midnight was quiet, he was safe for the moment. With long, loping strides he sought the mottled shade under the oak trees.

VIII

The French Lick

With Midnight trailing ahead of him, Spencer made a sweeping detour through the woods. He wanted to approach de Monbreun's cabin from the west, not the east. It was better to have the sun behind a man's back, and not in his eyes.

There was no sign of Indians. And the game, also, seemed scarce. He had visited the Lick three years ago, with Mansker and Scaggs, and they had found hundreds of animals—buffalo, elk, deer, bear, wild turkeys, and abundance of small game. The buffalo had eaten away the salty ground, in places, till even their huge crests could not be seen above the pits. And they had trampled down the grass and young trees until the earth was worn almost bare. But the Creoles hunted here every winter, from as far south as Natchez and north as the Wabash; the Cherokees, the Creeks, and sometimes the Chickasaws and other tribes roamed through the forests and carried meat back to their homes; the long hunters came down from Kentucky and North Carolina and the Watauga. The Creoles had even built this small blockhouse in a clearing on the higher ground, between the lick and the river.

He was near the edge of the woods. But he did not come to the expected clear ground. Instead, there was cane, thick and tall; luxuriant cane sixteen feet high that seemed to have no animal paths through it. Spencer started to force his way through. His foot slipped on a buffalo skull. He looked closer. Under the cane he could see the bleached bones and skulls of dead buffalo. So they had fertilized the ground, and the cane had sprung up suddenly and grown with startling rapidity. He was surprised, and yet not surprised. The French killed the buffalo for their tallow and tongues, the long hunters for their robes. A few buffalo steaks, some of the meat dried and mixed with berries and fat to make pemmican—and the carcass left to rot on the ground.

He turned back from the cane, and walked on to the bank of the Cumberland. He stayed close to the cane until he came to the thin forest between it and the river. The rectangular log blockhouse, roughly sixteen by twenty feet, was set back twenty or thirty yards from the bank's edge, but on higher ground than the Lick; the brush and cane had been cleared on each side of the cabin for more than a hundred yards. It looked squat and small, grim and deserted. The sun beat upon it, showing the rough, hand-hewn logs and brown mud chinking, and the one tiny window that faced to the west. It

was tightly shuttered. Spencer could see, also, the low door in front, facing the river, and a round, chinked loophole on the side of the door nearest him. There were loopholes by the window too, one low enough down for a man to lie flat and shoot through.

At the edge of the forest, where it touched the cane, Spencer hesitated. Uneasy, prickling tremors ran along his shoulders, and down his back. He had the same defenseless feeling that had come over him when he pushed off into the river. He must step boldly forth into the clearing, and halloo the house; but that moment he gave up his own covering. He became an easy, vulnerable target.

Spencer ran his finger over the gunlock. With fresh powder, it might fire. He rubbed his finger under his nose. Still wet. He could smell the moisture, and he could feel it.

He walked quickly forward twenty or thirty yards, keeping in line with the corner of the blockhouse. By the side of a pit he stopped.

“Watch the cane, Midnight,” he said. The dog trotted back. “Ho! Anybody home?” His shout rang loud and firm through the clearing. Spencer lifted the gun above his head, in his left hand. Again he shouted. “Parlay Fransay.”

Spencer watched the portholes narrowly. At the one near the window he detected a slight movement. The chinking had been jerked inward. He tensed himself. The sun glinted on steel. Instantly he jumped into the shallow pit, and peered above the rim. He could see the barrel being worked around in the porthole. So the angle was an awkward one. He had figured on that, in approaching the corner.

The barrel steadied. He was covered, helpless until night. If that Frenchman wouldn't listen . . . he was sorry that he had ever set out on this fool jaunt. He cupped his left hand around his mouth, and yelled savagely, “Hey, there. I'm American, hunter, friend.” His mind struggled to find the proper French word, but he had used the only words that he knew. “Fransay.”

Slowly the shutter opened. He could not see through the tiny slit. The Creole must be alone. After a moment, he shoved his rifle above the pit, the barrel toward the river, and dropped it on the ground.

He heard strange, meaningless words being shouted at him. Spencer stood up, and shook his head as a sign that he did not understand. Raising one finger, then pointing it at himself, he said, “Alone. Can I come in?”

Evidently the Frenchman understood. But he took many seconds to ponder over the request. Then a hand appeared, and beckoned Spencer toward the cabin. "Come . . ." There were other words, but Spencer did not understand them.

He lifted his rifle and walked slowly toward the door. It would not do to make the Creole suspicious. As he approached, he saw that the chinking had been removed from a porthole. Contemptuously he wondered why such a frightened man should be alone in the wilderness.

The door cracked open. "Come queek," said the man inside. Midnight bounded forward. There was a startled gasp, and the door slammed.

"Quiet, Midnight," said Spencer. "You might nigh got me shot."

After a moment, the door opened again. Apparently the inspection through the hole had satisfied the Frenchman. Spencer stooped low, and entered. Midnight slunk after him. The door was quickly shut behind them, and a wooden bar dropped into its slot.

The room was dark and hot and smelly. A bed of hot, glowing coals lit the inside of a rough stone fireplace, but cast little light into the room. Spencer blinked, and stood still. He heard the other man moving about; as his eyes focused, Spencer saw that the Creole had a pistol in his hand. Spencer walked carefully to a puncheon table. He laid his gun on it, then in turn his pistol, tomahawk, knife, and blanket roll. He raised his hands palm outward, until they were even with his shoulders.

The man nodded, and slipped his pistol into his belt. He gestured toward a log bench. Spencer sat down.

The Frenchman was short, dark skinned, and thickly built. The nervousness was gone. He moved with quick steps, leaned against the wall, and spoke. "Kaintuck? Hunt? Non?" There was a question in his voice.

"That's right," answered Spencer. "Hunt. Kaintuck. Now Tennessee. I ran out of salt and meal. Thought you might have some."

The Frenchman shook his head uncomprehendingly. "Non." His face lighted. "Soupaire?"

Spencer nodded. The little man rubbed his hands, poked with a green stick at the coals, and walked briskly to a log by the wall. It had been cut flat on the bottom side, and the top third had been cut through to make a roughly fitting lid. The Frenchman lifted it and pulled out a huge chunk of meat. Spencer saw him brush something from the meat.

He got up and walked toward the trough. The Frenchman dropped the lid, and looked at him inquiringly. Spencer raised the lid, stuck his hand in, and let the salt run through his fingers. He gestured toward himself. "Salt. No got. I want some." He motioned toward the trough, and back at himself.

There was a quick nod from the squatting man. "Oui, m'sieu." In his turn he gestured, but at the wall; getting up, he took a long-handled gourd from a rough shelf on the wall and handed it to the hunter. There was a wooden peg at the end of the handle.

Spencer uncorked the gourd, and let the white crystals run out into his hand. Cupping his palm, he dropped the salt back into the gourd, and pegged it. He set the gourd on the table, slipping the handle under his blanket roll. "Many thanks, m'soo." His tongue faltered uncertainly on the word.

The Frenchman smiled briefly, and pointed to himself. "Jacques."

"Well, thanks, Jock. I'm Tom—Tom Spencer." He walked back to the bench and sat down. He could feel drops of sweat under his arms, and a moist hotness all over his body. He looked around with little interest. There were strips of light flickering through the cracks in the small shutters and the front and back doors; occasional pin-pricks of light came through tiny holes in the chinking.

He was accustomed to the open; here, he felt as though he were breathing his own dead breath, and the stale, many-days-old smell of cooked meat and of dirty sleeping men and dogs. Kegs lined the wall. Some had been made in shops and brought down the river; two of them were sections of trees which had been hollowed out by fire and knife. There were two long benches, the puncheon table, and the hollow log that held the meat. Two long hand-hewn shelves, supported by wooden pegs, held a line of gourds. These Frenchmen were great on gourds. They carried powder in them, and salt, and sometimes meal. He didn't like them. Gourds broke too easily.

He saw also, hanging from wooden pegs, two bundles of furs. Bearskin in one. That was all right. But in a smaller pack he noticed a few beaver pelts. They surely were not left over from last winter. Yet even a Creole should know that summer furs were not prime. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Talking with Jacques was too difficult.

Jacques had stooped down before the fireplace and pushed the bear steak over a pronged iron rod that projected toward the center. Grease began to spatter in the red coals with a popping, sizzling sound. Two heavy iron pans

were propped against the rough stone; on the other side of the fireplace was a huge pile of wood.

The Frenchman went to one of the kegs, picked up an open-faced gourd, and dipped nearly to the bottom. Meal, Spencer thought, and precious little of it, unless they had another keg. Jacques went on to a water keg, and dipped another gourd into it. Then he poured cold water into the meal, and worked the stiff batter with his hand, gradually adding more water to the mixture. After a few moments he set the gourd down by the fireplace. Taking the smaller pan, he held it under the steak and let the hot grease fall into it. When the bottom of the pan was covered with the hot liquid, he lifted the gourd and poured the grease into the meal. After working the batter for a moment, he turned the gourd upside down over the pan. The batter hit the iron with a sputtering plop.

Spencer paid little attention to this routine work. His eyes smarted, his skin burned. If he could slip out the door and into the woods, eat a few pieces of jerk, and roll up in his blanket, he would be content. But he knew that he could not escape. The Frenchman had not asked for company; he had very unwillingly admitted an unwanted guest. He must stay the night.

The odor of cooking meat filled the room. Jacques turned it frequently, and with a flat oak paddle occasionally turned the bread. Twice, with a piece of leather around the handle, he held the pan under the bear meat, to catch the drip. Sometimes he looked questioningly at Spencer.

When the meat was done, Jacques cut it loose from the iron rod with his knife and caught it on a flat wooden platter. He cut the meat into three parts, and tossed the smallest one under the table. Midnight leaped up from his apparent doze, and began to eat rapidly and noisily. The two men did not look at him. The Frenchman plopped the cornbread on the platter and let the pan fall noisily on the stones. He cut the bread with his knife, and pushed the bigger pieces of meat and bread to the side nearest Spencer. Jacques looked fleetingly at the table, then held the platter toward his guest.

“Thanks, Jock,” said Spencer.

The two men ate without speaking, using their hands as utensils. The bread was tough and heavy, but it was, to Spencer, a welcome change from meat, fish, and berries. He cast back in his mind. Stone’s party had run out of meal two weeks ago? Three weeks? He could not remember. This was all a man needed, if he could eat it in clean air. He searched with his fingers for crumbs of bread he had dropped, and picked up a few bits from the platter.

Jacques was slower. Spencer had wiped his hands on the lower part of his shirt, and wiped his mouth on his leather sleeve, before the Frenchman tossed a small gristly piece under the table, and stood up. He pulled from his trousers an old piece of linsey-woolsey, and wiped his mouth and hands.

Then he gestured toward a keg. “Wataire, M’sieu Tom?”

Spencer eyed the door briefly. He would have preferred to go out and find the spring, but he hesitated to say so. Creoles were touchy folks. He picked up the gourd and dipped it into the keg. The water was stale and slimy. Spencer took a long breath, held it, and drained the gourd.

When they were settled comfortably, Jacques began to talk. He used his fingers, hands, and arms as well as his tongue. Jacques was polite. His guest must have first chance. There were questions in his voice and in his gestures. But Spencer was sure that the Frenchman did not believe he was alone in the woods, or understand where his camp was. If he did understand, the directions would never lead him to Bledsoe’s Lick.

Jacques talked volubly. Spencer caught words that were half familiar. “Chauanon . . . la forêt . . . les Indiens . . . sauvage . . . Chauanon rivière . . . barbare.” He realized that Jacques was using the old name for the Cumberland, and he remembered hearing Isaac Bledsoe say that long ago the Shawnees had lived in the great bend of the Cumberland.

Although Spencer learned more from the signs than from the words, a few things were clear. With five companions, Jacques had come up the Mississippi and the Cumberland from Natchez; from the way Jacques gestured and held up one finger, he gathered they had all come in one keelboat, with poles and paddles and a sail. Two of them had gone back to Natchez in the boat, with buffalo tallow, tongues, and robes; two others had started out with knives and beads to trade with the Cherokees for last year’s furs and to make arrangements for the next winter’s kill; the fifth man had stayed with Jacques at the cabin, until two or three days ago. He had gone into the woods, and he had never returned. The little Frenchman ran his finger significantly round his own head, and tugged violently at his hair. His eyes danced with excitement. Spencer could not tell whether fear or anger was uppermost.

Jacques meant to stay in the cabin. His companions might return in one day, or five, or ten. When he held up both hands, his face lengthened and he shrugged. Until that time, he would stay tight; he pointed to himself, and then to the floor. If the traders had luck with the Cherokees, they would all go down the river soon; if not, “l’hiver.” When his guest looked puzzled,

Jacques thought hard, then added, “winteur.” Spencer had not seen any traps on the floor. Possibly those would be brought on the keelboat; anyway, he guessed that the party was better at trading than at trapping.

But talk was slow and wearing. Spencer yawned. His eyes were heavy.

The Frenchman waved his arm toward the floor and pointed to the buffalo pelts. Spencer shook his head. He opened the blanket roll, spread the deerskin on the floor under the window, and took off his clothes. Naked, he lay on the skin and pulled the blanket up to his stomach. He noticed that Jacques kept on his trousers, and slept without cover on a buffalo robe. As soon as the Frenchman’s breathing grew heavy, Spencer fished the wadding from the lowest loophole and put his nose close to the tiny opening. After a few moments, he fell asleep.

IX

Return to the Tree

The next morning, they breakfasted on deer steak and hard corn dodgers. When Jacques dipped his gourd into the meal keg, Spencer pointed at it. "Meal. I need meal, M'soo Jock." But Jacques shook his head, and plunged his hand into the keg to show how nearly empty it was. "Non, M'sieu Tom."

After breakfast, he went to the back door, and indicated to Spencer that he could gather some of the ears of nearly mature corn. The long hunter looked thoughtfully at him.

"Come on, Jock," he said. "You need fresh water, and you may need some of that corn yourself. Hey, Midnight. Look around, dog; look around."

He walked over to the half-filled keg, lifted it and balanced it under his left arm. With the rifle cradled in his right, he walked toward the door. Jacques seemed to comprehend; he pointed to the right, near the corn patch. Spencer emptied the water on the ground. Jacques went back into the cabin; a moment later he too came out, with an empty keg balanced on his left shoulder.

Jacques had remembered to bring a gourd with him—the kegs could not be fully sunk in the spring, but only tilted over and half filled. Jacques filled them both as far as he could, then emptied one into the other, filling it completely, and tilted the empty back in the spring. The second keg he completed filling with the gourd. Spencer grinned. Jacques knew part of his business, anyhow. And the Frenchman insisted that the long hunter stand guard, while he carried the kegs into the house. Jacques grunted, but he walked steadily.

He stripped the ears from the stalks with equal rapidity and sureness, until he had Spencer's haversack completely full. Then he filled his own.

Back in the house, he shut the door, nodded toward the fire, and set both pans on the coals. The two men began to shell corn. The grains were not quite dry, and they were difficult to break from the cob. Spencer's fingers grew raw and tired. As soon as his pan was filled, he stopped. His haversack was still nearly full.

"I'm going, Jock, soon as the corn parches." He waved his arm toward the forest.

Jacques talked rapidly, and gesticulated. The meaning was clear, although the words were not. Spencer should stay with him. He would be welcome as long as he wanted to stay.

The long hunter shook his head. He was going, immediately.

When Jacques finally accepted his decision, the Frenchman went to a shelf, picked out a gourd, filled it with meal, and handed it to Spencer. Again the hunter shook his head. But Jacques insisted, and laid the gourd in the open haversack.

“Thanks, Jock,” said Spencer. “I’ll do the same for you, if I get a chance.”

He remembered the Frenchman’s nervousness. It would be small thanks, but it might make him feel less alone in the wilderness. Spencer picked up a flat piece of wood and a lump of charcoal. He drew a rough curving line, and just below the largest curve he marked a heavy X. Today his directions would be accurate.

“Here,” he said. “French Lick. Fransay. Shawano River.”

Jacques nodded. “Oui, m’sieu.”

Spencer drew a series of smaller curves and bends. Then he drew one line down from the north. “Creek. Not mine.” He shook his head vigorously. He drew a second line farther eastward. He pointed to the creek, then at himself. “I’m at the second big creek, Jock. Go up it five or six miles,” he raised five fingers to indicate the distance, “and turn here.” He drew a smaller creek, and by it marked another X. “If you need help, come up Bledsoe’s Lick. Salt.” He licked his fingers and gestured at the meat log.

Jacques nodded brightly, and ran his finger along the river line. “Chauanon Rivière.” He pointed to the first X. “Jacques. Ici. Oui.” He tried to say here, mimicking Spencer, but the word sounded queer as he pronounced it. His finger went to the second X. “M’sieu Tom. Ici. Leek.” He smiled triumphantly, took the piece of wood, and placed it carefully on a shelf.

Spencer poured the corn from the skillet into his meat pouch. He tied the pouch and strapped up his haversack. After slipping sack and blanket roll on his shoulder, he picked up his rifle and walked to the door. Midnight waited impatiently until it was opened, then loped eagerly toward the trees.

“Good-bye, M’soo Jock. Thanks for the corn. Hope your folks get back soon.”

Of Jacques's farewell, Spencer was certain only of his own name. It was warm and friendly, and at last it was over. He walked rapidly toward the forest. Near the edge of it, he turned to wave good-bye; from the almost closed door, he saw a hand flutter. Then the door shut.

Midnight was waiting for him by a tangled mass of honeysuckle, with young sassafras trees growing out of the clump. They found an abandoned buffalo trace leading northeast, and turned into it. Once two men could have walked abreast easily; already blackberry bushes, wild grass, and prickly smilax covered the ground and was rapidly obscuring the path. Limbs had fallen, and young branches grew out into the open space. Walking was difficult and zigzaggy.

Suddenly Midnight leaped sideways, and tensed his body. A whirring rattle shrilled from under a dead log. Spencer stopped abruptly. He shifted his gun and reached for his tomahawk. Again the warning rattle. He saw the mottled, triangular head and thick, coiled body. With a quick overhand motion he threw the tomahawk. The snake jerked upward, thrashed on the ground, and buried itself under the log.

Using his rifle barrel as a pole, Spencer scooted the tomahawk away from the log. He wiped the blade on the grass, removing the blood and dirt. Without looking for the snake, he jumped the log and walked on. Midnight skirted around it.

The woods were quiet but hot. There was no evidence that Indians had recently been on the south side of the Cumberland. Everything seemed peaceful. But the haversack loaded with corn felt heavy on his shoulder. If he came to a good place, he would stop and shell the corn. The Frenchman's method was thrifty, but too slow and too hard on the hands. Also, he had wanted to get away from the close, odorous cabin. But he had no desire to pack the useless cobs and shucks.

They came to a deer run, more freshly used and better worn. Spencer turned into it. After a minute or two, Midnight trotted back down the trace, and followed him.

The path led to a salt lick. It was little in size, and mainly used by deer and small animals, but Spencer found one hollowed-out depression that would hide him completely from three sides. Leaving Midnight to scout through the woods, he took off his haversack and sat down. His own method of shelling the corn was rapid, but wasteful. He would shuck the ear, and scale off the grains with his hunting knife. When the grains were soft, he cut through them, as close to the cob as possible. Two ears with greenish shucks

he dropped back into the sack; five cobs that still had a good bit of corn on them he wrapped in fairly green shucks, and tossed them too into the sack.

His chore finished, Spencer ate jerk and parched corn. Then he adjusted his pack, took his rifle, and searched for a clear spring. Finding none, he went to the tiny sulphur spring and drank sparingly.

That afternoon, man and dog walked steadily on, bearing east and always slightly north—but not enough to get them entangled in the great bends of the Cumberland. They were alert, but saw nothing to trouble them. Sometimes the going was easy, along well-defined animal paths; sometimes their way led over rocky hills and through marshy low ground heavy with brambles and underbrush. Nearly two hours before sunset they came to a small creek.

“We’ll find a place here,” said Spencer. Midnight wagged his tail. They turned toward the river. Half a mile down the creek they came to a clear pool. Heavy cane grew at the upper edge. Spencer looked at the neat dam that held back the water. Beavers. He would remember this place.

The furs would not be prime until winter. At the moment, he wanted a safe place for the night. He went on. The creek, a thin rivulet now, tumbled down over limestone rocks. Spencer watched the sloping banks.

The creek turned sharply east. Under the north bank there was a shelter, almost a cave, which had been cut by floodwaters, and partly filled in with boulders and sand. Lying close against the rock wall, on the sand, a man would be protected from three sides.

He walked back to the beaver dam. With his knife he cut a long, thin cane, and sharpened the edge. He walked on upstream, until he came to a large flat rock partly in water. Spencer knelt on it, and peered at the water. There were two small perch near the rock, and a school of minnows. He got up, and went on upstream.

The second rock yielded nothing better. Patiently he kept searching the water, until he was almost at the point where he had come to the creek. There, under the overhanging bank, he saw a catfish. It would do. He leaned far over, and drove the spear into the water.

Quickly he flipped the fish out of the water and on the bank, in a continuous motion. The fish sailed off the spear, and landed in the brush. Spencer cut the cane in half, impaled the two-pound catfish on the sharpened end, and strode back toward his ledge.

Below the dam, Spencer jumped easily across the creek, and went up the bank. In a cleared place by a dead poplar he started a fire. Then he went deeper into the woods, hacked off a small limb, and hung the catfish on the stump. He skinned and cleaned it, cut off its head, and fixed it on the cane. When the fish was ready, he went back to the fire and started it to cooking. From his haversack he took the roasting ears and put them in hot ashes. Then he returned to the shadow of the trees.

Fire could be too easily seen. Its light left a man an easy target. Spencer did not linger near it. He would go, turn the fish and corn, then step back into the woods. When the food was done, he sat down under a big red oak and ate, gnawing the corn from the cobs.

Going back, he walked lightly; at the creek, he crossed on dry stones that would show no prints. Before he drank, he found a flat rock that would hold steady while he bent over the water.

Midnight was dozing on the ledge. Spencer shoved the dog over, spread his blanket close to the rock, and drew his covering around him.

The next morning, they moved steadily on. Shortly before noon, they came again to the Cumberland. Although not fearful of Indians here, Spencer again worked rapidly at making the raft, using poplar since he did not easily find basswood. He had only the current to fight. Turning on his side, he swam with a regular scissors kick until he neared the north bank. Then he drove in powerfully, dressed quickly, and hurried into the sheltering woods.

Before sunset he crawled into the sycamore tree. Nothing had been disturbed. He ate corn and jerk, walked to the spring and drank lengthily, then went to his home. He stretched his body luxuriantly on the deerskin. Before dark, he was asleep.

X

The Bear Hunt

The days passed slowly. Spencer would not admit to himself that he was lonely. He had his dog, his gun, and the woods. That should be enough. And he had spent weeks alone, before this. Always, however, on these earlier trips he had known that a station camp was, at most, a matter of two days' walking. When he needed companions he could find them.

Now his station camp was a hollow tree. And he had come into the woods too early. Each morning he looked for frost, and found light traces, or none at all; by midmorning the sun was bright and hot. The leaves were turning brown and red; the days were growing shorter.

Even the Indians had left him in peace. Twice he came upon fresh tracks; once, from the canebrake at Mansker's Lick, he watched a dozen braves stop for an hour, then go on toward Kentucky. There were enough signs to make him cautious, but not enough to keep him uneasy.

He continued to trap small game and fish, to make exploratory scouting trips, and to conserve his powder. Once he killed a small deer, and dried the meat over a fire in his cave; he cleaned the deer's bladder, and saved it to hold pemmican. Several times he killed turkey cocks, and ate a whole bird for his supper.

Five weeks went by before Spencer woke to find the ground outside the sycamore covered with a heavy white frost. His moccasins felt cold on his feet. But his blood tingled. It was cold enough. He ate rapidly.

"Bear, Midnight," he said, and grinned.

The dog's tail wagged happily in answer.

Spencer set off toward the cave. He wanted a bear, but he knew well that it was a risky business for one hunter with a small-bore gun. There was a hollow bee gum near the cave. Lightning had struck it, and torn the upper part of the trunk off. Bees had turned the gum into a hive.

When he came near the tree, Spencer examined the ground carefully. Bear tracks led to the tree, and away from it. Midnight sniffed at the tracks, but without showing excitement. There were no moccasin prints. Twenty feet from the gum was a small oak: half sapling, half tree. Spencer tested it

with his hands, and climbed ten feet above the ground. The sapling would hold his weight. He dropped down easily.

This was the ideal place. If the bear would come, soon . . . Spencer walked on toward the creek. Midnight looked at the bee gum, then at the back of his master. After a moment of indecision, he trotted after him.

At the creek, below a tiny fall where the water gurgled noisily over the rocks, Spencer baited a fishline and dropped it into a pool. He scooped up water in his hands and drank. Midnight put one tentative foot into the water, drew it back, and walked above the falls. He began to lap water rapidly.

Quietly and cautiously, they made their way back toward the bee gum. When it was clearly visible, Spencer stopped and looked around. The undergrowth was scanty. There were no clumps of cane or laurel, only a few scattered gooseberry bushes under an overcup white oak. He noticed, growing up the side of the tree, a hairy vine as thick as his arm, with branches that ended in three leaves. Poison ivy. The gooseberry bushes were not worth the risk.

He skirted the bee gum and walked on to the ledge. Near the rock, and growing up the side of the ledge, was a mass of honeysuckle. Spencer urged the dog into it, and Midnight crawled under the vines. Satisfied that there were no snakes underneath, Spencer pushed the vines to one side and sat down. He leaned back against the ledge. Midnight crawled through the vines until he lay at Spencer's side.

The bee gum trunk could be partially seen, beyond the oak sapling. He knew that, if a bear came near, Midnight would give ample warning; even so, he preferred to be able to watch for himself. At that distance, a man might not see a squirrel or a turkey, but a clumsy bear . . .

They waited. The sun's rays began to penetrate through the trees. Spencer took off his raccoon cap and loosened his shirt. From time to time he would shift position, gently and without noise. Midnight dozed. Two gray squirrels began to play under the sapling. A striped wood rat darted across the rock. Occasionally a bird flew lazily overhead. The hours dragged wearily.

This would be a good country if there were a trading post convenient, yet not too close. Say, at the French Lick. He would feel better if he knew that he could get powder whenever he needed it, and not have to cache his furs too long. Indians had a way of finding them. Scaggs had told them, bitterly, that one year the Cherokees had stolen 2,300 skins from his group,

in one raid, and carried off two white men into captivity. Probably Scaggs was stretching that bow too long. Still, it would be pleasant to take in a load while you had it, and get lead and powder and meal and peas, and perhaps talk to a pretty girl.

He didn't want cabins dotting the woods. A fort would be all right, with a stockade for horses; he wouldn't mind seeing a fort near Mansker's Lick, or even near Bledsoe's. He might, next spring, plant a corn patch himself, in the valley above Bledsoe's Lick or the low ground near the river; he might plant some peas in the corn. It would be easy to burn the cane. . . .

Spencer laughed grimly. In his meat pouch there might be a handful of parched corn, since he had eaten sparingly of it. When that was gone, he would live on meat. Even if he hoarded the corn, it would not last long—and it was no good for seed. He opened the pouch and took out some strips of jerk. Midnight looked up. Spencer dropped a piece by the dog's mouth. The man fingered the grains of corn for a moment, then tied the pouch.

After they had eaten, man and dog walked to the creek for a drink. Spencer drew out the fishline, looked at the clean hook disgustedly, and rebaited it. Then they returned to their honeysuckle shelter. Slow hours passed, with no sign of bear. An hour before sunset, Spencer got up. He stretched his stiff muscles, adjusted his pack, and started for the creek.

“Call yourself a bear dog, do you?” he growled at Midnight. “You're a good-for-nothing rabbit hound. If you want any supper, you've got to find it yourself. I'm ashamed of you.”

Midnight whined plaintively, as though uncertain what his master meant, and whether or not he was angry. There was a rustle in the brush. Midnight darted away.

At the pool, Spencer pulled the trout line from the water. A small, ugly catfish dangled, flopping and twisting, from the hook.

“You wouldn't make a bite,” said Spencer in disgust. He tossed the catfish into the pool, baited the hook, and set out for his tree.

In the white frost of early morning, the hunter walked back to the bee gum. After a quick preliminary search, Spencer and Midnight concealed themselves in the honeysuckle. Not until he was adjusting his legs and body to the rocks did he remember the fishline. It could wait. He pushed his fur cap behind his head. It might be easier to find a bear than to wait for the bear to come to him.

Midnight seemed to be asleep. One moment, he was still; the next, his ears were straight, his head pointed forward. He continued to lie there, hardly moving, but his muscles quivered and the short hairs on his neck bristled. His tongue darted in and out of his mouth.

Spencer watched the tree. Although seeing nothing, he slipped the deerskin cover from his gunlock, and quietly loaded the rifle with a heavy charge. The bear waddled clumsily yet rapidly from behind the white oak, through the gooseberry bushes, and straight to the dead tree. He sniffed suspiciously and peered around with his small eyes.

Midnight's body was lithe and hard. Spencer ran his hand over the dog's back restrainingly. His own muscles were tense. Consciously, and with an effort, man and dog stayed absolutely quiet. The shrill chatter of a blue jay broke the silence.

The bear stood up on his hind legs, and embraced the dead trunk with his front paws. His long, thick claws dug into the wood. He began to climb.

Spencer wormed his way through the honeysuckle, and crawled on through the grass toward the sapling. He held the gun carefully, and moved slowly. The bear's heavy grunts continued. The dog did not move.

Keeping his body screened by the young oak, Spencer got up deliberately, first to one knee, then to his feet. He checked the gunlock and pan. The grunting ceased. Spencer took one sideways step around the sapling, to place the bear broadside to him; he lifted his rifle to his shoulder as he moved. The bear's head was partially in the tree, its huge body black against the dead trunk and the sky.

Suddenly the head thrust upward, and turned. Spencer aimed at the heart. He saw the little red eyes glaring down at him, the claws tightening, the leg muscles gathering for a spring. The rifle held immobile, braced against the sapling. He fired.

The shot exploded deafeningly in the quiet. The bear's loud hurt roar, his sudden stiffening of muscles, his ungainly leap seemed part of a single motion.

Spencer jumped for the sapling. His right foot stretched high for the crotch of the lowest limb; his right hand clutched the trunk, his left the rifle. He heard Midnight's low growling barks as the dog rushed at the bear.

Again the hurt, vengeful roar. The bear landed, cat-fashion, on cushioned paws. The heavy body swayed the legs, threatened momentarily to crumple them. He wobbled, then sprang to the sapling, stood upright, and raked the

tree with his short foreclaws. With a savage bark, Midnight launched himself at the bear's hams.

Spencer felt the moccasin jerked from his foot. The sapling bent with his weight. He pulled his leg convulsively upward, steadied himself in a crotch, and feverishly poured powder into his rifle. The bullet between his teeth dropped in. Fearful of breaking the tree, he turned cautiously.

The bear's forepaws tried to grip at the tree. But the trunk was too small for his embrace. The dog bit deeper into his hind leg. With an infuriated coughing growl, the bear pivoted and swiped at the dog's head. Slobber ran from his mouth. Midnight leaped quickly away, lowered his head, and barked; he leaped to the side, and closed in on the flank.

Spencer snapped off a limb. Shouting loudly, he threw it at the bear's head. The beast looked upward, glaring. Infuriated, the bear ignored the dog, reared up, and tried again to grip the slender tree. His mouth opened wide.

Spencer thrust the barrel at the red throat and fired. The bear shuddered. His paws tried to hold to the wood, raked along it, and relaxed. He snarled once, shuddered, and fell. With a last convulsive stroke of his hind legs he threw Midnight away from him.

After the heavy paws had stopped their threshing, Spencer climbed down. Placing his bare foot gingerly on the grass, he looked for his moccasin. Midnight was sniffing and growling at the dead bear. Across the dog's flank was a long red streak.

The moccasin had a long tear in the heel. Spencer jammed his toes into it, and wriggled his foot. It was unhurt.

Quickly, with long sure strokes of his hunting knife, Spencer skinned the bear, cutting around the legs, the head, and the rump. The huge body was inert, now, and difficult to move. Well over three hundred pounds, possibly four hundred, he estimated. Turning the fur to the ground, he cut off great hunks of the suet that covered the flesh in a thick protective layer and dropped them on the skin. Then he cut huge steaks from the rump, and a thin slab of meat from the side. One big chunk he tossed to Midnight. The dog stopped his low growling and tore at the warm flesh.

Spencer worked rapidly. When he had cut off sufficient meat, he jabbed the knife into the ground three times, rubbed his hands first in dirt and then in grass, wiped the knife with leaves, and slipped it under his belt. Standing up, he adjusted his rifle under his arm so as to leave both hands free, pulled

the corners of the bearskin up until it made a crude sack, and walked with long strides toward the cave.

Midnight growled at the carcass, loped after Spencer, turned back, and advanced menacingly toward the dead bear. The dog limped slightly.

Spencer glanced back. “Eat it before the wolves get it. Won’t be nothing but bones tomorrow, most likely.”

XI

On the Warpath

The air in the cave was getting close and smoky. A bed of red coals glowed warmly on the ground. The odor of broiling meat filled the cavern.

Spencer blinked as he examined the bear steak. Nearly done. He turned the hickory stick that held it. The fat was frying in a small kettle at one edge of the fire; he stirred it so that the sassafras roots and wild cinnamon would flavor the oil.

From the pile of wood near the entrance, he selected four three-foot sticks, each sharpened at one end and with a pronged crotch at the other. These Spencer rammed firmly into the ground, making a small square; he set two light poles in the crotches, and across these he placed greenish canes, and crisscrossed other canes on top. Upon his rough stand he arranged the remaining steaks and the side of bacon. The canes bent slightly under their weight, but held.

Impaling the cooked steak on his knife, Spencer set it gently on top of the uncooked meat. Then he added a few chunks to the fire. The half-dry hickory burned fitfully at the edges. Whitish smoke rose through the crevices of the cane. Spencer coughed, and rubbed his eyes. Knife and steak in hand, he moved swiftly toward the opening.

The bear steak having been eaten quickly and with relish, Spencer went back into the cave and found a small whetstone in his haversack. With a sharp stick he speared a piece of bear fat in the kettle and rubbed the oily meat on the stone. Then he went outside again, sat down, and began to sharpen his knife with a rotary motion.

The meat would dry slowly. Fumes of smoke trickled from the chamber, but most of the smoke seemed to be drawn inward, and disappeared through some unknown passage. He felt lazily content. If Indians had heard the shots, they would have come long ago. It was impossible to hide the traces of his work, or the carcass, though wild animals would probably, during the night, obliterate most of the telltale signs.

When the knife had an edge to suit him, Spencer pulled out the tomahawk and began sharpening it. He heard a sudden, frightened yelp. There was a dry rustling in the honeysuckle. Spencer twisted about hurriedly

until he was lying prone, tomahawk and whetstone neglected by his side. His right hand grasped the rifle and pulled it forward.

He could see no movement. He could hear nothing. Midnight had been surprised, and had taken cover; it was not like the dog to run from an animal. Patiently he waited.

Below him, under the overcup white oak, he saw a brown shadow. The distance was too great, the leaves and limbs too thick for Spencer to be certain that the flitting movement was a man's body. Under the oak there was the same movement, more distinct; then a third, less perceptible. But the regularity was enough. Men in single file, walking three or four yards apart.

Midnight crept from the honeysuckle, and crawled along the path, keeping low so that the bushes sheltered him. There was a fresh red gash along his back. There had been no shot. Spencer guessed that an Indian had preferred the silent arrow, and the dog had flattened himself at the twang of the bow. Midnight would need all the medicine in his tongue, tonight.

He saw an Indian step warily into a glade, and stop. His lank black hair was trimmed close for speed in running, except for topknot in front; he was naked to the waist, and his skin was painted red and streaked with black. He carried a rifle in one hand, a bow and quiver slung over his back.

The second Indian stepped noiselessly forth. He too was painted red, with overlapping black streaks; on his back was a squarish deerskin box. The ark of war. Spencer had seen one in the Cherokee country; it was about two feet long, a foot broad, and a foot high, with three sides bulging out slightly and the fourth flat. It was made of wood, and covered with deerskin; it was carried only on war expeditions, and only by the chieftain or a specially selected warrior.

The warriors stood erect. A third joined them. The Indian carrying the ark set it on a flat stone; the Indians sat down, in a triangle, each facing toward the woods. The chieftain and the carrier each kept one hand on the ark.

Spencer watched them closely. He could see only parts of bodies and heads. They were too far away, and too much obscured by the trees, for him to trust fully what he could see. He guessed they were Shawnees. Their foreheads were broad and flat; in a few places where the paint did not cover their natural color, they seemed less dusky and coppery than the Cherokees or Chickasaws. And clearly they were on the warpath.

There might be three, or forty. There were rarely more, in a war company; sometimes two or three men would set out to exact vengeance after a near relative had been killed. He would wager that other Indians were spying and scouting the wood; he must lie still, and wait. Midnight crawled close to him. The dog was shivering a little, even yet.

Shawnees had lived in the great bend of the Cumberland, before Cherokees and Chickasaws drove them away; they still came down from their stronghold on the Scioto River, in the Ohio country, to get meat and to war intermittently on their ancient enemies. Perhaps they came also for ceremonial observances to their old homeland. If they noticed that his moccasin print toed outward, unlike the Indian's, they might leave him alone. Surely he was no part of their vengeance.

A fourth Indian joined the group at the rock. He came from the direction of the honeysuckle. Spencer shifted uneasily, and got his powder and shot ready. The warriors stood up, the oldest one adjusting the ark on his shoulders. The chieftain's eyes swept casually over the ledge, and on toward the creek. A moment later, the warriors disappeared into the brush. So they had located him.

Spencer crawled backward into the opening. Midnight slunk after him. Spencer checked his rifle, and inched his head, knee-high, into the sunlight. A rifle boomed. A bullet splattered against rock. Spencer dropped flat on the ground. He felt a sharp, stinging blow on the back of his left hand. He looked down. A thin sliver of rock was embedded in the flesh. Blood oozed from around it. He yanked it out, and pressed his right thumb tightly on the hole.

Anger swept over him. His blood pounded. But he forced himself to lie flat, and to crawl snake-fashion through the entrance, using the dwarf cedar as a shield. He calculated briefly. That shot had come from near the honeysuckle. The Indian would creep back to the dead oak to reload, but a second one . . . His hand touched the tomahawk. He lifted it gently. A shot rang out. He saw a wisp of smoke in the honeysuckle.

Instantly, with one long flowing motion, Spencer aimed and shot. There was a momentary threshing movement in the vines, a single gurgling half whoop, half grunt; then silence. He flattened himself close to the ledge. Slowly, keeping his arms pressed down as tightly as he could, Spencer reloaded the rifle. The Indians were shooting the smoothbore guns that the Spanish and French sold to them; the bullets were huge slugs, but the guns had little accuracy.

The leaves in a big oak seemed to move more than the light breeze warranted. The top swayed a little too much. It was too far away for a decent shot, all of two hundred yards; he doubted if the Indian would attempt one. He slid his rifle gently over the stones. The trunk had too heavy a knot on it—a reddish-brown knot. He fired.

The top swayed again. The knot disappeared. Probably he had not touched the Indian, but the bullet had gone close. He would teach them to be careful.

If these Shawnees knew their business, they would withdraw a little, fan out into a semicircle, and wait for night. His own anger died away. He crawled back into the opening. Standing up, he loaded the rifle; then he loaded the pistol and jammed it into his belt.

There was nothing to do but wait. It was folly to lie on the ledge partially exposed; the Indians might creep up from any direction, and one of them get a clear shot at him. Even if they missed, those big slugs splintered the rock and sent dangerous fragments flying.

Spencer looked at the dog licking his wounds. “Come here, Midnight,” he said. “You can doctor yourself one place as well as another.” The dog crawled over to him, and wagged his tail when Spencer patted his head. The cuts were angry looking, but apparently not deep. “Keep your smeller open.”

No Indian was likely to poke his head into that crevice. Turning quickly, Spencer walked toward the fire. He turned the meat and added a few hickory chunks to the coals. The fire made the cut on his hand sting.

Now, in the period of dull waiting, he realized that he was thirsty. A thoughtful man would have stored water in the cave and in the tree, he realized, but there was water on every side of him, and it had never occurred to him to hollow out a small log or a thick cane and fill it. He didn’t like stale water, anyhow. This afternoon, however, he could drink anything. He found a pebble, cleaned it, and slipped it into his mouth.

The close, smelly air and the deadly inactivity grew more and more tiresome. He felt of his half-sharpened tomahawk. If his whetstone was in the sack where it belonged, instead of frying in bear grease on the ledge, he could finish that job. If he had water . . . He looked at Midnight. The dog was hot; he was panting, and his tongue was hanging out.

Possibly there was water far back in the cave, in that chamber where the bats had gone. He wondered if they had found some place where the smoke

did not penetrate, or if they were half suffocated. The smoke would be too heavy for him to search for water.

He might as well get the stone, and look around. At the outer entrance he hesitated. There was a dull booming noise. Spencer listened in surprise. He had not shown himself, and no bullet had struck the rock. The opening might have muffled the explosion, but it sounded far away. Clearly a smoothbore rifle, but probably a quarter of a mile from him.

Crouching down, he waited and listened. There was no further sound. He was bewildered. Indians on the warpath would not be shooting at game. It could be a ruse to tempt him into the open, but he could not see how it would do so, or why it was done.

For long dragging minutes he squatted there. It must be midafternoon, or past. For once he was thankful that the days were getting short. Dropping flat, he squirmed through the narrow hole and onto the ledge.

He lay completely still. There was no sound, no movement, no shot. He raised his head and looked quickly around, then lowered it. His left arm stretched out until his fingers grasped the whetstone. If his motions were seen, they brought no response.

Over an hour of bright sunlight was left, two hours at least before dusk. He had intended to get honey to mix with the meat, and make a really tasty pemmican, but the cave was no longer a safe refuge. The smoked meat and flavored oil would have to do for the present, though he would pound up some of the lean meat and mix it with the oil.

Spencer lifted his head more deliberately, and risked a longer scrutiny of the honeysuckle, of the trees and brush and the distant glade. The forest looked peaceful. He was tempted to strike for the creek.

Instead, he went back into the cave, oiled the stone, and returned to the opening. As he passed Midnight, the dog whined gently, moaningly.

“Sorry, old boy. We can’t venture it yet.” He sat down to finish his work on the tomahawk. When that chore was completed, he got the bearskin and scraped the inner part, cleaning it, and working the skin in his hands. Then he cut hairs from the edge of the pelt and lined his moccasins with them. With something to do, he could almost forget the powdery dryness in his mouth.

When the sun had gone down and the light was a dull gray, Spencer crawled to the ledge. He had two long horsehairs in one hand, the haversack

on his shoulders. This time, Midnight followed him. The dog walked with a stiff limp.

Again the deliberate, careful search of trees and brush. Spencer took a horsehair and stretched it, ankle-high, across the entrance, feeling along the rock until he found splintered pieces that would hold the hair fairly taut. The second one he stretched across waist-high. Then he crawled down the ledge and began to walk cautiously, in a roundabout way, to the path.

The Frenchman's meal gourd would come in handy, after all. It could be washed out, filled with water, and stoppered. From now on, he would leave it in the cave.

He came to a marshy place thick with cane. Skirting above it, he found a deer run. Until then, Midnight had walked behind him; suddenly the dog broke into a limping trot. When Spencer reached the creek, Midnight was lapping up water as though he could not get enough. Spencer dropped to the ground and drank.

After a long drink, he forced himself to get up and make a brief search of the woods. Finding nothing, he returned to the creek and drank again, and washed his face. His eyes felt tight and bloodshot; the coolness of the water soothed them.

If he could be sure that the Shawnees had gone . . . It would be fine to lie under an oak and come down to the creek every hour or two. He shook his head at himself. It wouldn't do. He let water run into the gourd through the long handle and emptied it, several times. Then he filled and stoppered it. He leaned over, letting the creek water run into his mouth and spitting it out again; he drank, and regretfully got up. It was time to be getting back.

He walked carefully, lifting his feet high and setting them down slowly. The way the Shawnees seemed to have disappeared left him wondering; he did not like it. They might, of course, ambush him at any step. At the ledge he dropped to his hands and knees, and hugged the rock. Near the entrance he stopped, and stretched a long arm forward. The lower hair was secure. He felt upward. That too was in place.

Removing the hairs, he turned sideways and went into the cave. Midnight lay down in the opening.

XII

Tracking and Trapping

Before dawn, Spencer left the cave. He did not wish to spend another day there, and he was intensely curious to discover what had happened. The Shawnees must be gone; otherwise, they would have attempted at least once to surprise him. If a chieftain lost too many warriors, the tribal code made him start all over, as though he were a young buck; if he had killed two of them would the others have abandoned the siege? Sometimes ghostly spirits talked with Indians, and then even a war party would go home. Yet it was not like them to give up vengeance so easily.

Midnight trotted along, ten feet in front of him, without nervousness. Spencer could not make out the dog's body, but he could see the moving shape and hear his light regular pads falling on the earth.

In the east there was a dull orange-red. Trees began to take shape, first as dark masses and then, as the light increased, showing distinct limbs and leaves. The man and the dog waited patiently at the creek, by the cane patch, until the canes near them stood out as individual sticks. Then they worked toward the glade.

Frost and dew obscured the markings. But he could see a few moccasin prints coming into the glade, and one print that led away from it. Spencer went first to the honeysuckle. Midnight growled as they approached it. The vine was torn loose in one place, and a spot of dried blood covered a leaf and a tiny bit of earth. He looked closely at the edge of the honeysuckle, moving the leaves. There was one deep toe print, pointing in. He searched quickly. Grass in a few places had been deeply bruised. A Shawnee warrior had come, and either carried or helped his comrade away.

The dog edged ahead of him. Spencer stopped a moment, and reflected. He whistled softly. "Go to the cave, Midnight," he said sternly, and pointed. "Go back. Guard the cave."

Midnight looked rebellious. He sniffed at the trail, gazed appealingly at his master, and finally, dejectedly, he walked toward the ledge.

Spencer followed the tracks from the glade. He stopped under the big oak that had swayed so heavily. There were two indentations in the wood fibers that might easily be places that jumping feet had landed. So far, he

knew the story. The path led to the creek; at one place, he noticed drops of blood on a laurel bough; at another, a single deep print which had not quite been smoothed over. The Shawnees had evidently walked in single file, and the last warrior had tried to obscure their tracks.

At the creek the faint indications disappeared entirely. The Indians must have taken to the water. A little checking convinced Spencer they had gone downstream. He jumped the creek and started a wide semicircle away and back to it.

In a small dry gully, a hundred yards from the creek, he came suddenly on new traces. Men had passed through the wild clover; one had overturned a small rock; another had left a print in a moist spot. The Shawnees had made some effort to hide their tracks; he was still uncertain whether they had five warriors, or as many as ten. But these new traces, evidently, were made by a hunting party, which used the native caution that was second nature to Indians, but no more than that. By the time he had followed them fifty yards, he was certain that there were twelve or fifteen men in the group.

It was easy enough, now, to understand why he had been let alone. A Shawnee watcher had seen this larger party; either the Shawnees had fled before it, or more likely they had retreated until they could find a place from which to pick off stray Indians. This second group would be Cherokees, he thought, or possibly Creeks.

The tracks led away from the gully. He lost them completely, and struck back to the creek. His way led between two huge beech trees, the trunks about eighteen feet apart. He slanted off, to approach with one tree sheltering him. This was a good place.

Near the tree he found several blackish spots, and one fairly large one. On the ground were three or four coarse black hairs. Here the grass had not recovered its springiness where a body had fallen, and the ground was scuffed up. An Indian had been killed and scalped. Spencer wondered whether a Shawnee had been victor or victim. Probably the scalper, he guessed. The Shawnees had the better chance of hiding themselves, for they were expecting the hunting party; possibly they had lured a hunter from his companions with the elk or turkey call. But he still could not understand the single gunshot. Perhaps a Cherokee had shot at the scalper, or the falling gun had discharged when it hit the ground.

Some warrior had blundered. The ambush should have been quiet; a tomahawk or, at most, an arrow should have done the work. But the loud boom of the smoothbore had given full and instantaneous warning. The

Cherokees—and he felt reasonably sure the hunters belonged to that tribe—would have scattered, taking to the brush and trees; the Shawnees, he reckoned, had faded into the woods. Neither side wanted a battle. They preferred to lie in wait, or to creep up on an adversary.

Spencer was tempted to go on. The riddle of what had happened was only solved in part. But he knew that from here every track would be well concealed, if that was possible; the Indians would practically have vanished, so far as leaving traces went. And he was reasonably confident that they had worked away from the cave, and not toward it. A hunting party always arranged a meeting place beforehand; since this one had already passed the cave, they would separate after the shot, but gradually make their way toward the place. The Shawnees would be too occupied to come back for him today.

Reluctantly, he turned in the direction of the cave. Taking care to leave no tracks of his own, he made his way to the pool near the ledge.

As he was crossing on the stones, he remembered the fishline. By the little yellow poplar he squatted down, and pulled it in. There was a dead weight on it. As the line cleared the water, Spencer saw that he had a large snapping turtle on the hook. He looked at it disgustedly. With a quick wrenching motion he tore the turtle from the hook, and hurled it into the bushes. This pool was no good. He hooked the rawhide thong over his bullet pouch.

Midnight lay in the shaded opening. As Spencer approached, the dog rose and with a deliberate, hurt dignity walked away from him.

“Here, Midnight,” Spencer called softly and affectionately. The dog looked suspiciously at him, and stood motionless, letting Spencer come to him. The hunter tugged playfully at Midnight’s ear, and looked at the long cuts. They were healing nicely. “Good dog.” Midnight relented, and licked at his hand.

Inside the cave, Spencer blew on the dying coals until he lighted a cane torch. Then he picked out a smooth rock and, using the flat side of his tomahawk, pounded three strips of the lean meat until it was almost a pulp. This he mixed thoroughly with the spiced tallow. Taking the deer bladder from the haversack, he stuffed the pemmican into the bladder. The smoked meat he dropped into the sack. Midnight came in, and waited expectantly. Spencer tossed him a slab of smoked meat. The dog went back to the ledge.

Spencer set the kettle back on the coals. There was fire enough for what he wanted. It would be wise to stay away from the cave for a week or two; he meant to leave it prepared. Quickly he dug into the buried section of log, prying out the peg. The pig of lead was dropped into the kettle; the powder sack carefully untied; his powder horn refilled; the sack tied tightly and placed in the log. He checked the dried meat. It was good enough, though he hoped he would not have to eat it.

Making a small hole in the sewed pocket of his shirt, he worked the bullet molds out. From the soft lead he cut bullets enough to fill his pouch. The pound of lead made seventy-eight pea-sized shot.

He sealed the log, and buried the greasy kettle. Then he stamped out the fire, and raked gravel and dirt over the blackened hole. It was impossible to conceal much of his work here, and the odors would linger for days; but he wanted the cave to look like a temporary refuge. The cane and wood did not amount to anything. But he did not want Indians to notice something which might cause them to start digging. He tested the ground where he had dug, brushed over it with a leafy cane, and scattered bones and rocks in a manner that would look natural. Satisfied at last, he collected his possessions, and twisted through the opening into the sunlight.

Shortly after noon the next day, Spencer took the two traps from the crotch, and greased them with a hunk of rabbit fat which he had saved from breakfast. There was a nice pool four miles away; he would start there.

Dropping the traps into his sack, he shouldered it and began to walk through the forest. If he had thought of it, he could have asked Captain Stone to make definite arrangements with Mansker or Bledsoe or Tom's own brother to bring pack horses to him in March. Then he could have built a skin cache deep in the woods, out of buffalo hides, and killed deer and buffalo. Since the pelts would most likely have to travel east on his own back, he would stick to beaver and otter. If he took an occasional mink, that would be all right, too. He wasn't certain, though, that Stone would have promised. The captain figured he'd be dead before now.

The frost had been heavy enough, this morning. Furs should be prime. But he would examine the first pelts he got. If they showed blue, it would be better to wait. He didn't want to pack a bale out and have some glib-talking trader cut down on them. Traders liked to count two as one.

Behind him, he heard Midnight trotting up the path. Just as well if the dog had kept on chasing rabbits or squirrels; you couldn't let a dog get near a beaver pool.

He left the trace, in order to approach the pool with the wind blowing toward him. "Stay here, Midnight," he warned the dog.

He crawled above the dam until he came to an otter slide. Setting an unbaited trap, he placed it so that an otter going into the water would spring the trap; the plunging animal would force the trap into the water, and the weight of the iron would hold the otter under the surface. A man could trap otter without bait; he would start on the beavers afterward. He fastened the chain to the base of a poplar sapling.

It was slow work, for he had to set each trap so that it would not disarrange leaves or twigs, yet would be well hidden; and close enough to the water's edge for trap and animal to go easily into the pool, where the otter would be drowned. If the animal stayed on the shore, he was likely to get panicky and chew his leg off in order to escape. Spencer went on to another slide, and set a trap there.

By that time the natural gloom of the forest was getting more intense. It would be full dusk by the time they reached the sycamore. He found Midnight in almost the same position, but there was evidence that the dog had not been idle: on the ground by him were the feathers and part of the skeleton of a wild pigeon.

They had covered half the distance at a brisk pace when Spencer heard, ahead of him and to his right, the woo-woo call of a great wood owl. He took shelter behind a walnut tree. After a few seconds he heard, faint and even farther to the right, an answer. He waited. The calls seemed a little farther from him. He returned to the trail, but he allowed Midnight to go twenty paces ahead of him, and he walked alertly. At the spring he stopped to eat jerk and to drink.

It was dark when he crawled into his home, stretched out on the deerskin, rolled in his blanket, and pulled the bearskin over his feet. The dog snuggled close against him.

The next morning his feet left deep prints in the frost. The marks would be gone almost as soon as it was full light; nevertheless, he stooped and spread frost and water over the tracks leading out from the tree. The trail was still visible, but it did not look like a man's. As he walked he kept clear of the long grass. Midnight had disappeared in the forest.

Before he reached the pool, Spencer turned, and approached it with the wind in his face. He squirmed slowly and cautiously up to the first trap. It was empty. He did not touch it, but eased backward ten or twelve feet and went on to the second trap.

The chain was taut, and disappeared in the water. Spencer lifted it gently but firmly, pulling otter and trap to the bank with scarcely a ripple in the water.

Not until he was a good hundred yards from the pool did he sit down, open the trap, and loose the furred leg from the jaws. With his long knife he quickly skinned the animal, and fastened the pelt to his sack.

He rubbed twigs on the otter's glands until the pieces of wood gave off a strong, musky scent. Beavers would smell the odor; swimming with their forepaws beneath their chins, the beavers would come up to the bank and attempt to touch the baited twigs with their noses. A paw would be caught in the quickly springing trap. The struggling beaver would pull the trap into the water, be pulled under by its weight, and drowned. The castor from a beaver's glands was an even better bait; after he caught one, he would fix some other twigs.

Where was Midnight? It was not like the dog to stray for so long. He heard the padding of feet on the path. Midnight came up, and growled at the dead animal.

"It's yours if you want it," said Spencer. Trap in hand, he set off through the bush for another pool, two miles away.

Here the creek had been expertly dammed at a narrow place; behind the dam the banks curved out, and the pool was about fifty feet wide. There were little paths leading into the woods, and runways into the water. Beavers used them to get wood for their dams and houses, and came up them to nibble the tender bark of trees. In front of him, the water was a quiet, deep blue-green; near the pool were slender young tulip poplars. A sapling had been nibbled through at the base last night and the tree carried off; others bore fresh marks of their sharp teeth. The young poplars had grown quickly where big trees had been cut, and their broad heavy leaves tended to stunt and kill slower-growing shoots.

He set the trap near the dam, and circled back through the woods until he came to the upper bank of the pool. He found a sheltered place behind some small poplars, commanding a good view of two slides.

For an hour he waited. Then a small blackish-brown head appeared. There was a rippling commotion in the water. Little circles of waves spread toward the center of the pool, and lapped gently against the bank. The otter came up on the bank, its fur glistening wet and dark; in the forepaws it clutched tightly a perch. Small bright eyes darted around, surveying the brush and trees. The otter began to eat, starting at the head of the fish.

Spencer rested the rifle on his left hand, and waited until the otter's head was lifted and turned sideways to him. He aimed at the back of an eye.

The rifle cracked sharply. The otter spun completely around, and dropped, inert. Spencer loaded his rifle, crawled forward, and grabbed the animal. He looked at the fur. His shot had gone straight through; the bullet had not harmed the pelt. He walked away from the pool before skinning it.

No use to hunt there again today. Perhaps it would be best to go back to the tree and stretch these pelts on the wicker frames he had made. Hunting in the middle of the day wasn't much good, anyhow. He was glad he had stayed; this was the place for a hunter. He knew another pool that looked good. He would try it out this afternoon.

XIII

Naming a Rifle

An hour before sunset, one late October afternoon, Spencer heard the honking of wild geese overhead. They were flying low, and watching for a convenient pool on which to light. Their best place, he knew, was a mile south, where the creek spread over marshy ground. A beaver dam helped to form the pool.

He had started there, anyway. Sometimes beaver would come out for a swim in the late afternoon, and a man already hidden could get a close shot. But a big goose . . . Goose fat had a finer taste than butter, and the broiled meat would be excellent.

“Go home,” Spencer told Midnight. “Back. Go home.” The dog looked at him in puzzled astonishment; the command was repeated. Midnight turned and trotted slowly back.

Spencer made rapid time. If possible, he wanted to find a blind while the geese were circling overhead. But as he approached the pond, he moved with great care. If the geese saw him, they might fly on. Their undisturbed honking continued.

He crawled through the trees to a patch of marsh grass. Carefully he edged the rifle forward, keeping the barrel with its ivory bead under the cover of the brown grass.

The geese were slow in coming down. Perhaps his guess was bad. They might be going farther south before they stopped. It was time they landed, and started feeding. He looked closely at the pool. No beaver had yet left his hut.

The whirring of great wings came nearer. The honking seemed to fill the air above him. A white gander coasted down, circling, and dropped on the pool, skimming along the water. The flock followed its leader, until twenty geese were swimming about, approaching the bank and dipping their broad bills quickly into the water.

Spencer eyed a large, plump gander. It was swimming toward a little point near him. Behind it were several geese. He would get just one shot. He wanted it to count double. He waited until a goose was in line with the gander, aimed at the base of the neck, and fired.

There was a startled honking, a frantic flurry of beating wings as the geese rose. Spencer pushed himself upward with his hands.

Hurling bodies shoved him down again. Strong hands clutched at him; knees hit violently in his back. His face was pressed deep in the marsh grass, into the mud at its roots.

Desperately Spencer struggled to push his body upright, to get into position to fight back. But these unseen enemies had him spread-eagled, his arms stretched out. He kicked upward, backward. His foot jarred into flesh.

“You do that,” grunted a harsh voice, “me tomahawk you.” His head was jerked sideways, and the narrow, keen-edged weapon thrust close before his eyes.

Spencer cursed at his folly. He had watched the sky overhead too much, and neglected the forest around him. There was nothing he could do. The Indian would not hesitate to split his skull if he moved quickly, or resisted.

His arms were drawn firmly backward until the wrists touched. A leather thong was wrapped tightly around them, and securely tied. Risking their anger, Spencer knotted his arms, doing all that he could to enlarge his muscles and wrists as they tied him. He was jerked roughly to his feet.

The Indians were tall, but he looked down on them. One quickly hobbled his feet, tying them so he could take only short steps; a second held his smoothbore gun half lifted, ready. The third shifted his tomahawk to his belt, and gazed pointedly at Spencer’s feet. When these were satisfactorily tied, he looked sardonically at the hunter.

“White man kill meat. Indian eat it. You good to Indian.”

He looked at the pool. A headless gander and a dead goose were caught in the grass. A young buck leaned far over; using his gun barrel as a pole, he pushed the heavy birds toward the bank. Lifting them by their webbed feet, he came back.

The Indian who had spoken looked down at Spencer’s rifle. “White man’s gun don’t make big noise, but it stings.” He clapped his hands sharply together to imitate the sound. “Big Bullet take it. His gun no kill two goose with one shot.” He dropped his own gun, picked up the rifle, and started to examine it.

Spencer knew that he must act boldly, even with bravado. As long as the Cherokees respected him, they were more likely to treat him well, until they tortured him. If he once flinched or showed a hint of cowardice, they would

inflict all kinds of petty tortures on him. Since they had not murdered him at once, they probably intended to take him back to their village, where the tribe could all enjoy the sport of making him run the gauntlet before they burned him at the stake.

He spoke contemptuously to the warrior. "That gun was built for a man. It will grow angry if a young brave uses it, and won't shoot straight."

Angrily the warrior swished the long barrel at Spencer's face. At the last moment it was jerked aside, brushing past his nose. Spencer kept his head erect, his eyes open. It took all his will power to keep from batting them.

The warriors looked at him with more respect. One spoke briefly in Cherokee. The Indian with the rifle translated. "Little Arrow say maybe white man with big foot blind."

Spencer kicked his foot toward the geese. "Tell him I stepped on them. Same way I'm going to step on Little Arrow."

Two Indians laughed, but the third snarled at him. They forced him to walk rapidly along the trail, and laughed at the short crowhopping steps that he was forced to take. But they also watched him closely. Spencer was not at all sure that he could break the leather thong which hobbled his feet, but he was ready to try. With his arms tightly bound, there was no advantage in attempting escape unless he could make a getaway; he could not fight. So he walked with short, quick steps until the party came to an open place under the creek bluff.

Big Bullet pointed to an oak tree. "Sit down," he said.

Without complaining, Spencer sat with his back against the tree. Big Bullet looped another rope around his stomach and bound him loosely to the oak.

"Heap brave warrior," sneered the hunter. "Three big men afraid to leave me all tied up, but so I could move around. Three warriors scared of one white man."

Big Bullet refused to get angry. "We no lose you," he answered. "Take you Tsiyu-gunsini."

"Where's that? New village on me."

"Take you war chief Dragging Canoe," explained Big Bullet. The Indian left him, and began to help his companions in making camp. They built a fire, threw up a skin shelter, cleaned the geese and started them cooking;

they moved about freely, in and out of camp, paying little attention to their captive.

Spencer tried to get a comfortable position; finding that impossible, he began to think of how to get away, and disregarded as far as he could his cramping muscles and chafing bonds. So they would take him to the Dragging Canoe. He wasn't certain that the Indians had recognized him. He was a white man, and lawful game for torture. That might be all. But Indians concealed a lot of things. Probably they had remembered his face or body or footprints, from the Island Flats.

It wouldn't matter. Their tortures might have a little more fiendish ingenuity to them, but in either case he would be thoroughly dead in the end—and the way of dying would not be pleasant.

The geese smelled done. Big Bullet came over and untied the rope that circled the oak. With a grim, straining effort Spencer rose. He felt unsteady on his feet.

When he arrived at the fire, Little Arrow poked a slab of meat at his mouth. Spencer drew back. "Squaw men," he said harshly. "Am I a baby, that I cannot feed myself? Shall I tell the brave chief Dragging Canoe that his warriors are timid old women? Take me back to the tree, cowardly dogs."

The Indians scowled. Little Arrow fingered his tomahawk suggestively. After a moment, Big Bullet untied the thongs around his wrists. But he also picked up his loaded rifle.

Spencer squatted on his heels, and began to eat. The goose had a fine, rich flavor to it. As he ate, he let his eyes run casually over the camp.

The bluff was a small one, seven or eight feet high. But it was steep and rocky. Ten feet away from it, the creek flowed over boulders; he could hear the water, though he could not see it. A few stunted trees were making an effort to grow between the bluff and the creek, but they looked small and thin in the darkness.

His rifle was lying by the fire, on the side away from him. By it were his knife, tomahawk, pistol, powder horn, and bullet pouch. He guessed that, after supper, the Indians would divide their loot.

Again they tied his hands behind his back. Spencer walked to the creek, dropped to his knees, then let himself fall on his right shoulder, wriggled around, and finally succeeded in getting a drink. Big Bullet made sarcastic comments at his efforts.

This was bad, Spencer told himself. The Indians were giving him no chance at escaping. Always one kept a loaded rifle close at hand, and the other two had deadly tomahawks, which they could throw with accuracy, in their belts. When he stumbled, going back toward the fire, a rifle came up and a tomahawk was jerked from a belt.

By the fire, Spencer flopped to his knees, and on until he was stretched flat on the ground. They had not mentioned the oak, as yet. Instead, the Cherokees were arguing among themselves—over his weapons, probably. Big Bullet grabbed Spencer's rifle and held it firmly. The other warriors denounced him with loud and bitter words. The hunter could not understand them, but the rifle was by far the most valuable thing. The Indian whose name he did not know lifted the pistol, looked at it disdainfully, and threw it on the ground.

Spencer knotted the muscles of his arms, tightening, loosening, flexing them. The leather cut into his wrists. But he had to lie perfectly still, and not attract attention; he could get only a little leverage. If the warriors started fighting among themselves . . . Even if they did, he could do precious little. His hands were too big. They could not be slipped through the thong.

There was a faint noise in the brush on the bluff. The Indians stiffened. Little Arrow faded into the darkness. After a moment, Big Bullet piled all of Spencer's things near the shelter, and picked up his own smoothbore. The third Indian disappeared.

When they returned after what, apparently, was a fruitless search, they conferred together. This time voices were quieter and words evidently more reasonable. They glanced several times at his weapons, but no one walked toward them.

The warriors sat down by the fire. But they did not replenish it. As the blaze faded, Little Arrow took his gun and prepared to stand guard. The others got out skins, spread them, and quickly fell asleep.

Spencer was awake. He worked continually at his bonds; he found a rough ledge of stone, inched toward it, and tried to rub the leather on the edge of the stone. Sweat covered his face, and dropped from his armpits. Time was short, and his efforts unavailing. He began to give up hope.

Grimly, because there was nothing else to do, he kept on. He had lost track of time. Minutes and hours were a nightmare of keeping his body still, and working his straining, aching arm muscles constantly.

He felt the leather suddenly give a little. He pressed his forearms close against his back, and pushed his wrists outward. His great muscles popped and cracked audibly under the strain. The leather broke.

Spencer relaxed. Little Arrow had, it seemed, heard nothing. The popping which had sounded so loud in his own ears had not been audible ten or fifteen feet away. Spencer worked his fingers and wrists, trying to get suppleness and strength back into them.

Only his arms were free. Knives and rifles were many feet away, on the far side of the sleeping Indians. But he was half ready, now, for any chance. If only his legs were free . . . He did not dare try to get the thong off them.

A few minutes later, Spencer heard a stealthy movement near him. Without moving his head, he cut his eyes as far as he could toward it. He saw a small white streak in the darkness.

He felt his muscles constrict. Like all frontiersmen, he was afraid of skunks. They not only had a terrible odor, but they were scavengers; when they could find no meat around a camp, they would sometimes bite on a man, and their bites frequently caused hydrophobia. He watched the skunk steal nearer his bound feet.

Suddenly he tensed his muscles. The Indians might, for a moment, forget him. . . . He kicked at the skunk, then rolled quickly away from it, onto his stomach.

A stinking, musky, sickening odor filled the air. Little Arrow dashed up, caught a glimpse of the fleeing skunk, and instinctively fired at the animal. Flame belched from the gun. At the same instant, Spencer bounded up and made a flying leap at the Indian.

One hand caught the barrel, and wrenched the gun from the Indian's grasp. Spencer swung hard. The stock crashed thuddingly against Little Arrow's head.

He could hear wild, fumbling movements and guttural cries behind him. Leaning swiftly, Spencer jerked the knife from the Indian's belt, and slashed the thong between his feet. He darted toward the oak.

A smoothbore gun boomed heavily. He felt the bullet tear at his baggy hunting shirt. He threw himself forward, on the ground. The second gun exploded loudly. The bullet smacked into a tree.

Instantly Spencer was up, and dashing into the protecting woods. He heard loud, angry shouts and cries. Spencer turned and headed up the bluff.

At the top, he halted long enough to cut the leather from his ankles.

“I stink terrible,” he muttered. “But those Indians smell the same way.” He wrinkled his nose disgustedly. “Saved by a skunk. Huh. I’ll keep that to myself.”

But he was not safe, he knew. The Cherokees would be hot after him, angry over his escape and seeking instant revenge for Little Arrow. And he had an unloaded gun, with a cracked stock, and no bullets. It would do for a club. He didn’t even have bullet molds to fit, if he ever got an opportunity to melt lead.

“I want my gun back,” he muttered. Spencer began to crawl along the top of the bluff, toward the camp. Time was valuable. If he was ever to recover his rifle, he must strike before daylight.

His hand slipped on a rock. After that, Spencer moved even more cautiously, feeling and testing the ground before he risked a hand or knee on it. The woods were quiet. Perhaps the Indians had gone back to camp; perhaps they were silently creeping after him. He listened, but could hear no sound.

Progress was slow. It was difficult to see in the darkness. When he judged that he was even with the camp, Spencer crawled to the edge, and lay motionless. At last he heard a low murmur. He had come too far. Creeping back from the crest, he worked his way over the rock until he was directly above the shelter.

Spencer found a large rock, then waited until he again heard the low voices. He lobbed it into the air, to conceal the direction from which it came, and tossed a second rock after it. Each stone hit the ground with a thud.

There was an angry roar from below. “White man fight like squaw,” yelled a Cherokee. A gun flashed. It was aimed well to his right.

From the brush below him, and also to his right, came a hurried scampering noise. He heard an Indian move after it. Spencer lobbed the rock in his hand, and started climbing down the bank. Loose rocks slipped under his feet. He expected a shot, and, disregarding the noisiness, rushed down. He lost his footing, and half fell. He dropped on his stomach. The gun roared as he hit the ground.

A second later, Spencer rose and dashed toward the place where the blast had been. He was swinging the gun by the barrel. He felt the wood crash into soft flesh, heard the cracking of bone and of the wooden stock.

Dropping the broken gun, he ran swiftly to the skin shelter and felt around hurriedly until his fingers touched a rifle.

“Come here, Lucifer,” he said. His fingers closed on the tomahawk; he jammed it into his belt, thrust the knife and pistol with it, and with rifle, horn, and pouch in hand he ran toward the oak. For the first time, he heard the wounded Indian groaning and cursing.

Spencer dropped to his knees, and crawled toward the creek. He waded across, and walked with utmost caution away from the camp, away from the startled animal that had helped him. First a skunk, then a deer or a bear, or something. He paused to load the rifle. His fingers ran affectionately along the barrel. “Little Lucy,” he murmured. He realized that tonight was the first time he had ever called his rifle by name. Most hunters did, but he never had. Now he spoke to the rifle affectionately, as though it were a girl. “Little Lucy. I’ll take better care of you from now on.”

He started on. His clothes held the stinking odor of the skunk; he would get to the cave, and air them as well as he could. And he must hurry. The sky was graying. He had hurt two of the Cherokees, possibly killed them. There would be plenty of others in the woods. Somehow, he rather hoped it was Big Bullet who had gone after the animal. He seemed better than the other warriors.

There was a low coughing growl from a laurel clump. Spencer swung the rifle toward it. The growl changed to a welcoming bark.

“Here, Midnight,” called Spencer, almost under his breath. The dog came a few steps toward him, wrinkled his nose, and backed toward the laurel.

“I don’t blame you,” said the hunter. “So you were that animal at the camp. I guess you’ve earned the right to turn up your nose at me.”

XIV

The Buffalo Bull

The November days passed rapidly. Spencer left the tree hours before dawn, and sometimes ate as he traveled. Twice he reached a beaver pool while the sky was overcast with clouds, in time to shoot one night-working animal before it returned to the mud-and-stick house for daytime rest. The first seven days of trapping netted him eight beaver, two otter, and a mink; and in one trap that had not been pulled into the water he found the chewed-off leg of a mink. By careful still-hunting he had shot five more otter.

Then his luck slackened. The near-by pools had been thinned out, or their occupants had grown wise. Instead of three to six miles, he had to walk twelve or fifteen in order to find productive pools; sometimes he and Midnight did not return to the tree at all, but slept in a cane shelter or a little grotto on a creekbank.

The hunter was careful, with the instinctive watchfulness of a man trained in the dangers of the Indian country. The call of bird or animal registered automatically in his ears; without even thinking that he was doing so, he judged whether it was genuine or made as a lure by an Indian. His rifle was almost a part of him, in his hand or very near it. He slept lightly, and wakened quickly to a sharp alertness.

Danger was everywhere. Yet this awareness of danger was coupled with a blithe ease and enjoyment in the woods, and in hunting and trapping. Spencer did not disregard the perils; rather, he reckoned them as part of his daily living, and got from them a stimulation that was keen and mainly pleasant.

Once he was fooled thoroughly, and was disgusted with himself all the next day. It was a cloudy dusk. The day had been short, and cold. Spencer had just made up his mind that next morning he would kill a bull elk, and make himself a pair of winter boots, when he heard close by the babel-chatter of an owl. It sounded low, near the ground. He wondered if he had missed the earlier call. Treeing behind a hackberry, he surveyed a tiny glade. At the far end were two trees, and between them what might be a stump—or a man. He steadied his rifle against the hackberry, and fired at the top of the stump. The owl gave a hooting screech, spread its wings in a vain attempt to

fly, and toppled to the ground. The middle tree, he found, had years before been struck by lightning and riven off.

Next day, he waited in the cane at the edge of the lick. It would suit him just as well if, that morning, the buffalo went elsewhere for their salt. The sky turned pinkish, until the dull-orange sun was half visible. He heard the low rumbling of the herd in the distance. He wondered if the elk would be frightened away.

An elk with tawny fur and magnificent rounded antlers came nervously running through a path in the cane. It stopped, head high, listening. It was a long shot, but Spencer had a clear view of the left foreleg. And the herd was thundering nearer. He fired.

The rifle made a spiteful crack in the thin air. The buck leaped high, turned, and galloped madly away. Down the trace there was a tremendous clatter of hoofs as the buffalo herd came to an earth-shaking halt, and milled around. As he reloaded his rifle and set off in pursuit of the elk, Spencer heard them come slowly, nervously, toward the lick.

Blood spattered the cane and ground of the deer run. Ahead of him he could hear the pounding of hoofs, and Midnight's occasional short bark as he tried to close on the wounded elk. Spencer loped steadily, keeping a rapid pace, but watchful of low-hanging limbs, and of sharp cane underfoot.

He followed the elk nearly a mile. At a bend in the run, the bull had fallen sideways; it had probably been dead when it fell. Midnight stood back from it, growling. Spencer waved him aside. Working with quick, easy motions, he skinned the elk, and cut large steaks from its rump. Then he separated and cut off the longest sinews, along the backbone.

"You can have what's left," he told Midnight. The dog rushed in.

Spencer went back to the cave and started a fire in the shallow hole. His stuff had not been disturbed, but he was running short of wood and cane. He searched until he found a hickory limb on the ground, then cut a supply of canes, and took them to the cave.

Midnight was warming himself by the fire. Spencer broiled a large steak, cut the rest of the meat into long strips and started smoking it, and ate with a feeling of great contentment. That night he scraped the pelt and worked it with his fingers, before he stretched it on a wicker frame.

There was a slight drizzle the next morning. Leaving Midnight at the cave, he made the regular journey to inspect his traps, and found them both empty. After putting a twig heavy with the scent of castor by each one, he

walked on to an otter pool. For three hours he lay prone and watched, hardly moving. In that time numerous squirrels darted along the paths or rustled the leaves overhead. A fat opossum waddled through the brush. But no animal worth shooting at came near him.

Some days were lucky; some were not. A few days later, when a light hunting snow thinly coated the ground, Spencer found a beaver in one trap and a raccoon in the second. At a clear pool he shot a large otter; an hour later, he came upon a mink that was eating a young squirrel. He fired as the mink dashed away. The bullet plowed into the hind flanks. Picking up a sturdy limb, he walked toward it. The mink spit at him before the club fell.

Late in the afternoon, the honking of wild geese lured him toward a large pond. He made a quick search through the woods before taking a blind and shooting a fat gander.

Spencer went home elated. This was his best kill of the season. That night he roasted the dainty meat over a fire in the cave, and ate until he felt stuffed.

Afterward, by the light of a cane torch, he got out his old deerskin and the newer elkskin. The elk pelt was larger and thicker; as a part of his bedding, it would not need as much curing. The older fur would be more satisfactory for boots. Placing one foot on the leather side, and measuring roughly, he cut the pieces with his knife. Deer sinew served him for thread; with his moccasin awl he sewed them, leaving the fur inside. The boots reached halfway to his knees, and the tops could be tightened with thongs—but they felt stiff and cumbersome on his feet. He doubled them into a ball, and worked the leather to make them more pliable.

Three mornings later, there was a light crust of snow on the ground. Spencer pulled on his new boots, and tossed the moccasins into the haversack. He wore them on the eight-mile walk, though they felt heavy and unwieldy, and made his feet burn. While he was lying by the pool, waiting, he was conscious of sweating feet.

When a mink suddenly appeared, climbing from the water's edge onto the bank, he shot it. There was no chance for an otter now. He changed from the boots to his moccasins before skinning the mink.

It was getting time, he thought, to go on and kill that buffalo. He was beginning to need the robe; he could scrape it and stake it out within the tree. Although he didn't particularly need the meat, a buffalo tongue was

always welcome, and the smoked steaks might come in handy. These short days gave little time for snaring and cooking small game and fish.

When the sun rose, Spencer was standing at the cane's edge, by a honey locust. He had watched the bulls fan out on a good many mornings; the largest one, with the broken horn, usually took a position thirty or forty yards from the locust. His left side was toward the tree.

Spencer put in a heavy charge of powder, and rammed in the bullet. A buffalo had a thick hide, and heavy crested fur. He had seen a wounded bull charge a camp, and run over two men; one of the men had a badly gored shoulder and a broken leg. The entire herd might easily stampede, but they would, he reckoned, be likely to take the trace.

Midnight lay quiet by the sycamore. The dog had wanted to follow him; not until Spencer cuffed him heavily did Midnight slink back to the hole.

The distant rumble came faintly to Spencer's ears. He set the rifle against the tree, and loaded the pistol. He wondered if it was worth while to do so. Captain Stone had given him fourteen bullets, and he had exactly fourteen bullets left. He counted back. The pistol had been loaded three times, and later unloaded.

It was full daylight, but gray. He hoped the light would get clearer and sharper. He could feel the ground quivering. Now the bellowings and snortings could be heard above the deeper noise of the galloping hoofs. Spencer removed the deerskin cover from the lock, and primed the pan. He waited patiently.

Suddenly the great rumble seemed to fill the entire lick. The bulls spread, pawing the ground and facing outward to protect the cows. Some of the herd drank from the creek; others dug at the earth, and began to lick the salt. As the herd grew in numbers at the lick, the bulls moved forward, a few steps at a time, gradually widening their half circle.

The biggest of the bulls was coming toward him, in short, bobbing charges. He could see the curving horns and thick mane, the forepaws kicking at the ground. There was a pouch of under-hanging hair beneath the long red tongue and tiny red eyes. The snorted challenge sent bursts of white smoke through the cold air.

Spencer stood by the locust and eased his rifle upward and forward. The bull came nearer. He judged it was over forty yards from him. It bobbed forward three or four yards, the hind legs falling hard on the packed earth.

Suddenly the bull raised his head, and bellowed fiercely. The bull had challenged him many times. Today he would get an answer.

Spencer rested the barrel snugly against the tree, and aimed at the shaggy hair behind the left shoulder. Nearer the sycamore a second bull snorted loudly.

The rifle cracked, its sharpness piercing above the throaty bellows and dull pawings. The bull quivered. Then he roared an enormous hurt, trumpeting challenge. He charged at Spencer. In the lick there were frightened snorts and cries, and then the confused milling thunder of a stampeding herd.

Spencer darted behind the locust. He flattened his body against the trunk. Above the mass uproar he heard galloping feet and hard, fierce breathing as the bull charged at him. He was too big. The tree did not shelter him. He drew the pistol, and cocked it.

He risked a quick glance. The two-thousand-pound bull, eyes set and head lowered, seemed to be charging directly at the locust. Instinctively he realized it would pass on his left. Behind it, cows were running madly toward him.

The mammoth, low-set head came even with the tree, and swiped behind it. Spencer stepped back. He could feel hot, steamy breath around him. The bull plowed into the earth, skidding, and fighting to turn. A low black streak darted past him. Midnight leaped at the bull's nose. He missed, and came down running—scrambling in the effort to turn.

Spencer pointed the pistol at the bull's head, and fired. The bull wobbled unsteadily, then his great muscles seemed to bunch and tighten. His head came slowly round, to point at the tree. Near at hand, coming from the lick, was the heavy pounding of hoofs; the maddened cows and calves in their headlong panic were as dangerous as charging animals. Midnight yelped shrilly, and scampered for the hill. With grim deliberateness, the bull tensed. His charge was a heavy, wobbling run.

Dropping his rifle, Spencer leaped high into the air and grabbed a limb with both hands. He swung his legs upward, seeking the limb. He locked his feet over a thorny branch. He felt hard, painful pricks in calves and ankles.

The bull crashed into the tree. The locust quivered and bent with the shock. Spencer felt his legs torn free, and falling downward. A moccasin touched the bull's rump. He heard the enormous beast fall heavily on its side. The runaway herd broke through the cane, trampling it before them.

Spencer tried to force his legs upward, with his arms serving as levers, but he could not get his legs above the limb. His body swung backward, but he could get only a momentary purchase against the trunk. He hung, swaying, from the bough.

The jumbled clamor and din receded. It came back at him; it was no longer around him, hemming in and threatening him. The tree's violent quivering slowed gradually to a shaking motion. Under him, the bull was quiet.

Spencer dropped his feet until one of them found a steady hold on the bull's side; he turned loose of the limb, and jumped. His muscles ached, his head throbbed. For a long minute he stood there, willing his body to action, yet unable to do more than stand erect. His legs felt weak. He could feel muscles tremble as he forced himself to walk toward the bull.

A quick examination showed that it was dead, and not merely stunned. The rifle bullet had gone true; the pistol shot had been higher, above the eye, and probably worthless. But the bull had been dying when he hit the tree; his eyesight or sense of timing had failed, and he had smashed into it. The neck might be broken. The shaggy head was twisted back, the forelegs doubled under the body.

Spencer looked for his rifle. He was relieved to see the stock unshattered, lying clear. But the barrel was partially under the shoulder. He grasped the stock, and pulled the rifle along the ground until it was free. Quickly he examined the barrel, and sighted along it. The barrel looked straight. He cleaned the dirt from the end, tried the lock, and then loaded the gun.

Spencer was conscious of an almost overwhelming sense of relief. If the barrel had been twisted, or the gun ruined, he would have been forced to go back to the settlements. It looked true. He balanced the gun in his hand. Could it be trusted absolutely?

He looked around. There was a whitish spot in the sycamore tree, twenty feet above the ground. It was a good seventy-yard shot, possibly more. He stood by the bull's shoulder, using the locust as a rest, and aimed. The rifle cracked sharply. He saw a tiny black hole in the whiteness.

"Little Lucy's all right." Spencer grinned happily. "Best gal I ever had. And she doesn't kick—much."

After loading the rifle, he laid it conveniently by, and drew out his hunting knife. First the tongue, then the robe, and finally a plentiful supply

of meat cut from the hump and the rump. Midnight, steaming and odorous, loped from the woods, and waited expectantly. It would be a slow heavy job turning the bull. Spencer squatted at the bull's head, and pried at the stiffening jaws.

XV

The Cherokee Hunters

For a week Spencer had been trapping and hunting the pools near Mansker's Lick. He had established a temporary camp in a small grotto that was enclosed on three sides by rock walls, and covered by rock and earth overhead. It was shallow, and the opening was as wide as the room; but it was partly protected in front by the creek. The only trouble was that his things were too exposed; he cached his pelts in near-by holes, but each morning he had to carry with him the blanket and elkskin, as well as the haversack.

But the pools were fresh, the beaver and otter unafraid. Big game was nervous, and frightened easily, since the Indians were hunting for meat and large furs. He heard them shooting at Mansker's Lick one morning, and he went north, away from it. That night he heard wolves growling over the meat and bones; Midnight trembled, and crept behind him in the cave.

On a day that he estimated might be the first of December, Spencer lay under a wild grapevine and watched a clear green pool, two miles south of Mansker's Lick. His rifle was extended in front of him, the stock near his shoulder. Midnight snuggled close to him. The dog had left his own hunting and crawled into the covert; forcing him to get out, and beating him as he deserved, would frighten every otter in the pool.

Suddenly Midnight licked at his hand. The dog's nose and ears were twitching; otherwise, he was motionless. His eyes stared at a large hickory.

Spencer twisted carefully, and surveyed the ground under the tree. The undergrowth seemed rather heavy, but he could see nothing that looked suspicious. He continued to watch. The wind was blowing from the hickory.

Deep in the woods, fully thirty yards beyond the tree, he saw a faint movement. At the same instant he smelled the rankly fetid odor of a skunk. Had a man frightened it, or a large animal? Midnight had been tense, but not frightened; now the dog was relaxed.

Spencer eyed the pool. There was hardly a ripple in the water.

An hour before sunset, he gave up. As he approached the lick, he noticed at the south edge of the low land a big dead sycamore, a good six feet in diameter. The top had fallen; the jagged stump looked as though it had been

hit by lightning. The base was surrounded by cane. He saw a winding path leading through the cane. A bear tree. The males hibernated in thick cane, usually, but the female and her young liked a hollow tree they could enter from the top.

From the woods came the woo-woo call of a great wood owl. Spencer grinned briefly at himself. Ahead of him, from the woods nearer the lick, came the woo-woo answer. Instantly the babel-chatter commenced.

Midnight backed toward him. Spencer listened intently. It was a bad joke to mistake an owl for an Indian, but if you mistook an Indian for an owl . . . The chatter had come fast, almost too fast. He felt the dog creep past him, and into the cane-protected path.

Spencer dropped to the ground. Hardly a second later, there was the hollow boom of an Indian smoothbore. Spencer half rose, turned, and bending far over ran to the shelter of the cane. In the bear path he halted and looked back. But the Indians were securely hidden. The waning sunlight gave the woods an uneven, spotted red and brown coloring; an Indian blended too well with it. He thought the shot had come from a pea-vine clump at the side of the low land, but he was even more certain that the Indian had, by now, taken the more substantial shelter of a tree.

He did not like to leave a fight unfinished. But this one was too hazardous. He stooped low, for the cane almost joined above him, and walked with great care along the winding path. Sometimes, to avoid touching a cane and causing a movement above him, he squirmed on the ground.

Before he reached the sycamore, he found Midnight waiting for him. The dog was pointing the tree. His nose twitched and his hairs bristled. Bear, most likely, thought Spencer; he had seen dim tracks on the path. But he moved warily, watching the grayish trunk, until he came to a second bear run that led to the creek. They walked rapidly, silently down it.

At the bank, Spencer hesitated, then headed south, away from the lick. The cane was less thick on the higher ground of the bank, but no animals had made runs there. Going through it made a light rustling noise, and disturbed the cane. When he came to a shallow place with rocks showing above the surface, he reconnoitered; then, leaping from bank to rock, he crossed swiftly.

Behind him, there was the frightened bleat of a fawn crying for its mother. The cry might be real, or a signal. He zigzagged into the forest,

keeping away from the paths, and began to work back to the north.

The ambush had been deliberate, though he supposed it had been concocted on the spur of the moment. That confounded owl. The Indians had accidentally picked the one call that would have fooled him. If it hadn't been for Midnight . . . The dog had earned his keep today.

By the time they again reached the creek, the woods were gloomily dark; in more open territory, it was dusk. He had deliberately gone beyond the shallow cave; walking along the bank until he came to a deep narrow place, he jumped across. Midnight looked at the creek, whimpered, and ran on to shallower water.

Apparently the grotto was safe enough. Spencer and Midnight ate jerk, and the hunter unrolled his blankets. But the dog seemed nervous, and Spencer slept fitfully.

He waked to find Midnight uneasily moving about. Spencer rolled to the edge of the cave, and looked upward. The sky was overcast; he could not locate any stars. He tried to estimate the time from the sky and the wind. It must be three o'clock—possibly four, or later.

The dog had been right once. Moving slowly in the dark, so as to make no sudden or unusual noise, Spencer rolled his elkskin and blanket, shouldered it and his haversack, and with gun ready, squirmed out of the cave. Midnight turned north. Spencer followed the dog along the narrow shelf of rock, up the bank, and into the woods. Some thirty yards from the cave, he stopped and sat down with his back against a big ash tree. He cat-napped lightly.

The blackness changed to a purplish darkness. From the direction of the grotto came a smothered whoop of disappointment. Spencer jerked to alertness. He crawled to the other side of the ash.

For Indians to ambush a man in the woods was natural enough, whether he was white or of another tribe; there were always proddy young bucks who would grab such an opportunity. But this attack was deliberate, well planned. He thought it likely that Big Bullet or his comrade had discovered his tracks and recognized them, or had seen him as he darted into the cane. The Cherokees wanted his scalp; he was certain of that.

It was not like a hunting party to follow a man for miles, or to spy out his quarters and attack him; usually they were more interested in finding his cache, and stealing his possessions. These Indians wanted him. They were out for revenge.

Spencer crawled from the ash to a small gully. Midnight padded softly after him. Every nerve of man and dog was keenly alive. Yet Spencer was more worried than angry. His business was hunting and trapping; he had no wish to engage in a continual running fight. The Cherokees were too numerous for that, and had too big an advantage. The pools near Mansker's were playing out, anyhow; he would collect his pelts and traps, and get back to his own place.

There was light enough for his eyes to distinguish loose rocks and troublesome branches. He walked easily, keeping low. At the mouth of the dry gully, he stopped, lifted a boulder, and drew from the hole a bale of furs. After fixing them securely to the haversack, he left the creek and set out for his traps.

The woods did not seem dangerous, but he kept to cover wherever possible. He did not think the Cherokees could follow his track, but at one point he walked barefooted for sixty feet up a small, gently flowing branch, and took pains not to leave any signs when he stepped again on the bank. The water was cold, making his feet sting and tingle, but it was far above the freezing point. In icy weather, the Indians were likely to return to their villages and get into their half-underground winter homes. A good freeze might save him a lot of trouble. He stopped to obliterate one print that Midnight had made.

At the first trap, Spencer found a small otter. In a laurel clump he skinned it, leaving the body well covered; the trap and pelt he added to the load. The second trap was empty. Spencer untied it, and adjusted his stuff. From the meat pouch he took three long pieces of smoked buffalo meat. Two hundred yards up the branch, in a clump of young willows, Spencer tossed a strip of meat to the dog. Then he sat down to munch at his own breakfast.

XVI

Circle of Warriors

A cold, tickling wetness brushed his face. Spencer flung a hand upward. His wrist slipped along Midnight's ducking head. The feel of rough hair, the whistling of Midnight's breath at his ear, wakened him. Turning on his stomach, he peered over the dead log that partly blocked the opening in the tree.

His first reaction was of amazement. He had overslept. A dull grayness covered the lick, giving the dead grass and bushes a blackish coloring. But it was daylight. His eyes swept the lick, the cane, the locust tree. Something was wrong. He could not find what it was; he could not see anything amiss, but he could feel indefinable tremors of excitement through Midnight's body.

It was two days since he had seen an Indian, three since they had tried to ambush him. They should be going home, and not stopping to hunt here.

As he watched, the surrounding country changed in the clearing light from vague to distinct outlines. Spencer looked closely at the cane nearest the sycamore. The stampeding buffalo herd had forced an opening through the cane so that the ground was visible almost to the lick. The patches left standing were thin and offered little protection; the stalks on the ground had been swept by wind and trampling feet into irregular clumps. Two of them, near the locust, seemed too darkly brown.

"Don't look for an Indian," Boone had told him, once. "Look for his rifle barrel."

He watched the motionless dark clumps. He was sure that brown bodies were lying close to the earth. A ray of light was reflected from one of them. Sunlight glanced from an uncovered barrel. In the cane two warriors waited, in ambush.

It was possible these hidden Indians were waiting for the buffalo herd, but it was not likely. Although their positions were good enough, they would have no protection against charging animals. Spencer remembered the grotto. He motioned to the dog to watch the opening, stood up, and at the back of the tree began to dig into the trunk, waist-high, with his hunting knife. The work was difficult: the wood was tough, and he had to be careful

not to snap off the blade. The hole should have been cut long ago, but he had not thought of needing it. His hands kept the blade working steadily into the trunk. After a few moments of twisting and cutting, he had a tiny eyehole. He could see the woods and nothing else.

Dropping down, he looked through the opening. The two Indians were in the cane, waiting. They had trapped him properly.

If it was simply a hunting party, they would be bombarding game and cutting it up for several hours; if they were after him . . . He played with his rifle. Little Lucy would show a Cherokee that he couldn't trifle with her. These Indians were getting obstreperous. It would serve them right if he started banging at them. He set the rifle down, and loaded the pistol.

It was almost time for deer and elk and—if they were coming today—the buffalo herd to make their way to the lick. The lumps on the ground seemed clearer and larger. He peered again through the eyehole.

A Cherokee with arms loaded with deadwood was quietly approaching the tree. His face was painted red, with black streaks. Spencer was surprised, and a little frightened. The hunters had turned into warriors, and obviously he was the enemy. He cocked the pistol. He wished that he had made the hole larger. It would be a useful warning if he could put a bullet through that close-cropped head.

This time, the Cherokees meant to finish him. If the sycamore burned, he was as good as killed; there would be no escaping. They would smoke him out as though he were a hibernating bear. He watched the approaching warrior closely. Unless that redskin could be stopped . . . The Indian came stealthily on.

Spencer waited until the warrior was almost at the tree. Then he put the barrel partly into the trunk, the end close to the eyehole, and fired.

A startled cry of pain, a noise of falling wood . . . Spencer dropped quickly to the opening, grasping his rifle. There was a loud boom from the cane, and a second from the nearest buffalo pit. He smiled grimly. They were too far away for accurate shooting, with smoothbores. He eased the long barrel out, steadied it on the log, and fired at the nearest bump in the cane. He saw the Indian twitch, jump half upright, and then crawl toward the locust.

Spencer reloaded both guns, keeping watch through the eyehole as he worked. The slug had torn the wood, and made a rough, splintered opening.

He would have to keep an eye on the back; that crafty redskin had meant to burn him out. The others could have picked him off then, easily.

Prone again, he noticed that the cane was clear. He watched the buffalo pit. But that Indian, evidently, was content to lie close.

It was time for the herd to come. The deer and elk had apparently been frightened away from the lick; they would be of no help to him. But the milling confusion of hundreds of buffalo might give him a chance to break free. No distant rumble could be heard. They must be going to another lick.

His best chance was to make this siege too expensive for the Indians. They hated to lose men. Working rapidly, but with frequent interruptions to gaze out, he made two other peepholes in opposite sides of the tree. He felt reasonably safe from their bullets; the entrance was too small for them to risk a charge. But if the Cherokees once got the sycamore on fire . . .

He was thirsty. While the Indians were momentarily quiet, he might as well eat and drink. They must go easy on the water. With his tomahawk Spencer hacked a shallow trough in the upper side of the log. Then he uncorked a long section of cane, and drank sparingly of the water. He grimaced. From the meat pouch he tossed dried meat to the dog, and began to eat himself. He partly filled the shallow trough with water.

“That’s all you get,” he admonished the dog. He pegged the cane tightly. If they used water sparingly, they had enough for the day.

Through one peephole he saw a painted Cherokee squatting by the fresh-water spring, above the tree. It would be a difficult angled shot from the back hole but that was now large enough to work the rifle barrel through. He got the sight in the open, and from the darkness inside sighted along the barrel. It was a difficult job. He maneuvered the barrel, seeking a clear place through which to find the target.

Finally he located the brown head. Aiming below it, Spencer fired. The head vanished. If he was lucky, he had scored a hit; even a scratch on the arm would teach the warriors to stay well back. At least, the bullet had gone close enough for that one to know he was being shot at.

The lick was plainly lighted now, with occasional bright moments of sunshine followed by grayness. Spencer pointed the rifle toward the nearest pit, then fastened his coon cap to a stick, and pushed it very slowly into the open. A head appeared briefly in the buffalo pit. From the locust a gun fired heavily. He heard the slug plop into the sycamore. That Indian had sense enough to use plenty of powder. But not enough to wait.

He jerked the cap back, trying to give it the uneven precipitateness of a man's head when the wearer was either frightened or hurt. Dropping the stick, he grasped the rifle, and waited. The Cherokee in the pit should be curious enough to get his head above ground.

Bristly black hair and reddish-brown forehead showed dimly through the grass. Spencer lined the gun on the forehead. As the Cherokee's black eyes showed momentarily, he fired.

The Indian emitted one terrifying whoop, leaped convulsively into the air, and fell backward.

From behind the locust came an answering shot. The bullet dug into the protecting log. Midnight whimpered.

Loading quickly, Spencer looked through the eyeholes. The forest resounded with violent shouts and whoops. The warriors were warning him, insulting and threatening him. They were taunting him to come out and act a man's part, Spencer knew, though he could not understand a word of their guttural shouts; they were impugning his bravery and making dire threats of what they would do to him when they caught him. He had never seen a man tortured, but he had no desire to run the gauntlet or be burned at the stake. It was bad enough to listen, around a friendly campfire, to descriptions of the torture.

He smiled harshly. They had him treed, but they hadn't found a way to drive this particular bear out. His claws were not so numerous, but one of them could reach farther than any of theirs. He ran his finger affectionately along the fifty-inch barrel of his rifle.

The whoops and shouting gradually ceased. Occasionally a lone warrior would raise a terrifying cry, but the tree deadened most of the threat in it. He wondered how many Indians had joined in that first spontaneous outcry; certainly half a dozen, and perhaps twice that many.

The minutes dragged into hours. He knew that the Cherokees had not departed; they continued to surround the tree. And he was fairly sure they had removed the dead warrior from the pit; he had seen the cane move near the creekbank. There were hollows and depressions that would offer sufficient protection, so that he could not see them. Probably another warrior was in the pit now.

But they kept close in their shelters, or stayed at a distance. With luck, he could protect the tree, but he had no chance of attacking. They could

retire safely out of range, but he was constantly threatened—even when the Indians did nothing at all. For he could not afford to slacken his vigilance.

Once again, the casual remarks about the Dragging Canoe popped into his mind. Some of the warriors, especially those who hated the white men, would follow him anywhere, do anything at his bidding; he was the best war chief of the Cherokees, and the most relentless enemy of the settlers.

Big Bullet had threatened to take him to the Dragging Canoe; he wondered if Matt Swallow could somehow have got word to the Cherokees that Big-foot was living in their best hunting country. Perhaps these warriors were kin to Little Arrow, or belonged to the same village. There was no way of knowing. Spencer had wounded and killed Cherokees; the tribe had abandoned hunting before the end of the season to put on war paint and to ambush him.

For the first time in his life, Spencer wished that the ground would freeze, that it would snow hard. If the weather got severe enough, the Cherokees would abandon their vengeance and go back to their southern hills.

He might as well try to pick off the Indian behind the locust. The brave shot well, for an Indian, and he wasn't afraid to ram in the powder; also, he liked to shoot, as the extended cap had proved. The more bullets that hit the tree, the more lead there would be to dig out and remold to fit his own rifle.

His ruse with the cap wouldn't succeed again. Spencer got out one of his deerskin boots, and inserted a stick into it. He got his rifle in place on the log, braced against the sycamore; he lay down behind the rifle and drew a bead just to the left of the locust. Midnight moved away from him, deeper into the sycamore. With his left hand Spencer raised the boot, at the middle of the entrance; he started to balance it against the log.

The heavy gun was fired instantly. But Spencer had dropped the stick; he had seen the Indian's right shoulder and leg extending beyond the tree. His rifle cracked. The shoulder appeared to jerk before it was hastily drawn back. At the same instant, Spencer realized that his boot had been knocked back into the tree. He picked it up. There was a large hole through the foot.

He hoped that Indian was hit badly enough to get him out of the action. His gun must have some decent rifling in it, and it was aimed expertly. Give him a long rifle, and he would be deadly. Spencer watched the locust, but could make out no movement behind it.

The dreary waiting continued. Spencer ate, more to break the monotony than because he was hungry; he gave Midnight a small portion of the water, and wet his own lips and mouth. The inside of the tree was acrid and close. The furs began to stink. He hated being cooped up. But there was no sense in risking a break before dark.

There had been no shot for hours. From the far edge of the lick there was a sudden, long-drawn-out call. Spencer listened, surprised. In the woods behind him there was the loud call of a turkey gobbler. He examined the woods carefully through his peepholes, and surveyed the entire lick as far as he could see it through the opening in the sycamore. He thought, once, that he saw the cane near the bank move quickly.

The Cherokees were up to devilment. One could be certain of that, if of nothing else. The calls had ceased. The forest seemed completely deserted. Even the usual, everyday noises were stilled, as the animals had long since been frightened away from the lick.

The shrill yet muffled chatter of a blue jay broke the dead quietness. Spencer could not gauge its distance or location, or its meaning; he could not tell whether it was made by a bird or an Indian. Probably a trick. He was suspicious, but could not imagine what the Cherokees were doing. He waited, and watched.

Suddenly, at the end of the lick, he saw two moving figures. Spencer readied his gun.

A hail broke the quietness. "M'sieu Tom," cried a loud, accented voice. "M'sieu Tom."

XVII

M'soo Jock

At first, Spencer was unwilling to venture out of the tree. The voice was strongly accented, and peculiar; but his blood was attuned to the fighting, his mind was busy with the problem of escaping from the Indians. If these men could approach so carelessly, they must be friendly with the Cherokees.

"M'sieu Tom." The unusual title seemed familiar. Slowly the words seeped into his mind. His eyes searched the creekbank. "M'sieu Tom." Two men were headed up the creek. The words fitted into a pattern, and he recognized the stocky little Creole of French Lick. But he wondered where the Cherokees had gone. A man could not trust Creoles: they talked too much, in an outlandish tongue, and they got along too well with the Indians.

He waited until he could be certain, by the walk and the features, that it was Jacques. He kicked the protecting log to one side and, rifle in hand, crawled out of the tree. Fully upright and calm, but with his back protected by the sycamore, Spencer answered the hails. Midnight followed him out.

"Here, Jock. To your right." He waved his cap.

Jacques increased his walk until it almost became a run. "Oh, M'sieu Tom!" He shook Spencer's hand vigorously. Then he looked about in bewilderment. Words poured out. Spencer caught a few. "Félicité . . . cabane . . . compagnons d'armes." Suddenly Jacques stopped, and looked apologetic. "Thees Pierre. Parlay Anglais."

Pierre was taller, darker, and slower of movement. He too shook hands. "How, Meester Tom. We come long way to find you, Jacques and me." He waved toward the forest and roughly in the direction of the Cumberland River.

Spencer listened gravely, a little suspicious of them, and still watchful. He would prefer to scout the woods, and talk later; but he had the self-contained man's fear of revealing nervousness. Midnight was sniffing at the ground, and at the Frenchmen. Satisfied, he stretched and bowed his back, before rolling.

"Glad to see you," said Spencer. "You got me out of a tight hole. What did you do to make the Indians run?"

“Les Indiens?” asked Jacques.

“They were here. I hope they’re gone. But I don’t trust them.”

“We see no Indians,” answered Pierre in a puzzled voice. “They trouble you? Non?”

Spencer pointed to a bullet hole in the tree. “That’s fresh. Today. You ran them off. I didn’t.” He watched Midnight lope toward the woods, and after a moment’s sniffing and hesitation disappear in the brush. “They’re gone. The dog would know if they were around.”

Jacques beamed at him, with a tremendous pride at having been of service. But Pierre looked more puzzled than before. “Your companions, m’sieu. Where are they?”

“Companions? I haven’t any. Why, I told M’soo Jock . . .” He stopped, and laughed. So the little Frenchman had not believed that he was alone in the forest. Spencer began to understand. Thinking that a group of the American hunters were somewhere near Bledsoe’s Lick, they had come up here to trade for pelts. He could understand Jacques’s gestures of disbelief, though he could not understand a word of the torrent that spouted from his mouth.

“Jacques say no man stay alone in dark wilderness,” said Pierre. “Me, I doan know. You here. Jacques think you have much fur—you and othaires. You no got fur?”

“Some. But it’s all mine. What about it?”

“We buy. We want go Natchez before river freeze. Get home by Christmas if hurry,” said Pierre.

Jacques spoke rapidly. Pierre added, “Jacques say you go Natchez with us.”

“Reckon I can’t do that,” said Spencer. He remained uncertain and confused. Probably these Creoles had scared off the Indians, for the time being; Indians weren’t fond of daylight attacks, anyway, and had undoubtedly expected to shoot him when he came out of the tree. Midnight had thwarted that nice scheme. But Spencer’s eyes continued to rove about, examining the cane, the depressions, and the neighboring trees. His back was braced against the sycamore; his loaded rifle was held conveniently ready.

Pierre seemed to understand this doubt and uneasiness. In his broken English he went over the story, repeating himself frequently. Six of them had

come from Natchez seven months ago, under de Monbreun; two men had taken one boatload back to Natchez; he and de Monbreun had gone to trade with the Cherokees; Jacques's companion had disappeared. The remaining three had a keelboat or bateau at French Lick, almost full of furs and buffalo tongues. They were all tired of the woods, and anxious to get home with their cargo for Christmas.

The bateau wasn't completely loaded. Jacques had displayed a wooden map, and insisted they could get bales of fur at the second X marked on it. De Monbreun had been interested, and sent Pierre because he knew English. Yesterday they had paddled up the Cumberland in a pirogue; after one bad error which led them some miles out of their way, they had found his place.

Pierre was now willing to believe that Spencer was alone. However, since they had come, they would like to buy what furs he had. Jacques was harder to convince that Spencer had no companions; once persuaded, he reiterated his invitation that the hunter accompany them. The friendliness of the little Creole somewhat embarrassed him, and at the same time affected him more than he would allow himself to show.

"The furs aren't here," Spencer told them. "We'll go there, as soon as I get my stuff."

He ducked into the sycamore, and quickly gathered his possessions together. He looked at the buffalo robe staked to the floor. It wasn't finished up, and wouldn't bring much. If the Cherokees came back and stole it, he would kill another bull. He picked up the bearskin and crawled out.

Jacques was looking at him incredulously. "Cabane . . . de la maison . . ." He struggled for a second, and burst out, "Home?"

"That's it," said Spencer. "I don't know as I'd call it home, but it's where I sleep about half the time." He turned to Pierre. "The skins are about two miles from here. Would you like to go with me, or . . .?"

Pierre nodded. Spencer whistled softly for Midnight. The black dog came galloping easily out of the woods.

At a brisk pace they walked toward the cave. Spencer stopped at a deep pool in the creek to inspect two fishlines; each had a nice trout on the hook. He felt a sense of elation. It was good to have more than jerk to offer Jacques. He cut a handful of canes, and walked on.

Spencer led them to the rocky shelf, and showed them how to negotiate the entrance to the cave. Quickly he kindled a fire, and lit a torch.

The Frenchmen examined the place with frank curiosity. They were as plainly astonished at his underground room as they had been at the hollow tree; and Spencer did not explain that one reason for his choice was a lack of tools. Instead, he brought from their hiding places the bundles of pelts.

“You’ll want to look at these outdoors,” he said. “They’re mostly prime. Keep an eye out. The ledge isn’t too good a shelter.”

The trout in one hand and a bale of furs in the other, Spencer led them out. The Frenchmen squatted down, and opened the bales. After a brief examination, Jacques got up and cut a stick. As Spencer finished cleaning the trout, he saw Pierre look closely at a beaverskin, pulling the long hairs with his fingers, ruffling the short gray hairs and testing their firmness. When he set the fur by his side, Jacques tallied it with a mark in the rocky ground.

He started inside. Near the opening, Jacques stopped him.

“M’sieu Tom.” Jacques paused, and looked helplessly at Pierre, but his comrade was examining a skin. Darting inside the cave at what seemed to Spencer a hazardous pace for the crooked entrance, Jacques began to rummage in his pack.

Triumphantly, Jacques poked a gourd at the hunter. Spencer thanked him, and worked the stopper loose. He poured some very coarsely ground meal into his hand.

While the Frenchmen continued to examine the pelts, Spencer cleaned a flat stone and set it in the fire. He ran a cane through each trout, and started them to cooking. Then he got out the water gourd, emptied most of it on the ground, and mixed the remaining water with meal, adding a little oil caught under the trout. The cakes he dropped on the hot stone.

Jacques and Pierre came in with the furs. Midnight followed them.

“How many you make it?” asked Spencer.

“Thirty-eight beaver, seventeen otter, five mink, three raccoon, and one bearskin. Right?”

“Don’t know, Pierre. I never counted them. I’ll take your word.”

“We’ll count them with you,” answered Pierre. “That is better. Yes.”

“I reckon so. But let’s eat first.”

The meal quickly consumed, they tallied the furs. Pierre’s count was correct.

Spencer looked at the small piles. "I'd have killed deer and buffalo if I'd known you were coming. I've no way to pack them over the mountains. If you stay here, we could get a lot of skins in a few days."

Pierre shook his head. "Non. We go home. You need powdaire?"

"Yes," said Spencer. "How much?"

"One quart powdaire, four beaver. One pound lead, one mink."

The price seemed fair enough. Spencer nodded, and tossed the five skins to one side. "Can you spare more than that?"

Pierre talked rapidly with Jacques, then answered Spencer. "No more powder. Another pound lead."

"I'll take it." He added a mink to the pile, and waited until Jacques brought from the pack two gourds of powder and two flat sheets of lead.

Pierre gestured toward the remaining furs. "We come to buy them. The trappers from the Ouabache would not let us bring you traps. We give three louis d'or for the rest." He took a small pouch from the inside of his shirt.

Spencer was amazed. The traders back east would grudgingly pay you in money a few English shillings or a Spanish dollar or two; mostly they tried to get you to take powder or clothes, or showy baubles for the girls; they would offer you paper money that would not buy anything. Frenchmen must be rich. He weighed a gold piece in his hand, and guessed that one gold piece was worth about one pound, or somewhere near five dollars. He wasn't sure. After thinking briefly, he shook his head. "Five." He held up all the fingers on his right hand.

Jacques looked dubious, and Pierre set himself to argue vehemently. French and English words were so intermixed in his excited speech that the long hunter listened with outward gravity, but with inward amusement. He did not even try to follow Pierre's harangue.

It would be a nuisance to pack the heavy furs across the mountains, and the Indians might steal them. He saw that Pierre was rapidly convincing himself that three louis was all the furs were worth, so Spencer resorted to an old bargaining device. "Let's split the difference. You can have them for four."

Pierre stopped in mid-speech, and considered. Jacques nodded at the four upraised fingers. After an interval of hesitation, Pierre agreed. "Maybe you rob us; maybe not. But we trade." He handed Spencer the four gold pieces.

For a minute, the hunter looked at the money as though puzzling over what to do with it. While the Frenchmen tied the furs together, he took off his hunting shirt, got out his moccasin awl and a deer sinew, and made a secure little pocket inside the shirt.

The Frenchmen were ready to go. But one look at the rapidly setting sun persuaded them to stay. And they were tired. When Spencer said that he had just time to look at his traps and suggested they go with him, the Frenchmen declined. They would wait.

With Midnight frisking ahead, he set out briskly. Most likely, the Cherokees were stealthily encircling the tree again, though he'd bet they wouldn't get within range until after dark. It was just as well he was going away from the sycamore.

He found one beaver, but did not skin it. Fresh meat would be good for supper. Spencer collected his traps, and carried them along. If the Cherokees caught him, he would fight, but there was no sense to waiting around here. There were too many of them, and they might surprise him. He heard the peevish pi-ou, pi-ou of a sleepy flock of turkeys. A moment later he located the birds, high in a beech tree. Dropping his traps, he steadied his rifle against an oak trunk, and shot at a bird that was barely visible in the dim light. There was a thud as the twenty-pound turkey hit the earth. The flock took wing noisily.

That night, they ate turkey and corndodgers, and filled in the chinks with slivers cut from the beaver's tail and legs. After nibbling at the gamy meat, Pierre suggested that he might like to see that pelt too.

"I'm keeping that for seed," answered Spencer. "Some of the boys always hold one out, just for luck. Never noticed it helped them much, but after you leave I'll need more luck than common."

He enjoyed the relaxing from constant watchfulness, the occasional talk and good-fellowship. Usually he preferred to depend only on himself, and he took pride in his self-reliant individualism, his sense of being complete in himself and able to look after his own welfare and safety. Although it would not have been easy to escape from the tree, he was confident that he could have found a way. But the Frenchmen had solved that for him; the three of them, with Midnight on guard, could easily handle a band of Cherokees. It was good, at times, to be alone, but it was also good to have companions.

Early the next morning, the three men and the dog started for the river. "I'll go along," said Spencer, "far as your boat. This country's too infested

for my blood, right now. I'll trap north for a while." He watched the forest carefully, but found no fresh trails or signs.

At the long bend in the creek, Jacques halted, made a brief reckoning, and went downstream to a point where the bank was undercut. Bushes had fallen over until the tips of limbs almost touched the water. Jacques stooped and pulled the heavy, hollowed-out log from its hiding place.

Pierre's relief was plainly shown. "One hopes the pirogue will be there when one returns, but there is nothing sure till you put hand on it," he said.

The Frenchmen arranged their furs, and got in. Once more Jacques spoke urgently, and Pierre translated his invitation to go to Natchez. When that was refused, he added, "Come to the rivière with us. If the Indians follow, they think you gone in the pirogue."

Spencer rather doubted that statement. If the Indians were in the neighborhood, they would have many chances to see the boat floating down the Cumberland, and they would know immediately that there were only two small men in it. But they could follow the trail easily to this point, if they wished; the scheme might delay them.

He set Midnight in the bow, pushed the boat away from the bank, climbed in, and set down in front of Jacques, who was firmly planted in the stern. As the pirogue moved slowly down the creek, Spencer remarked, "By the way, Pierre, ask Jock what he did with that map. If you found me by it, someone else might."

After quick words in French, Pierre answered, "It will be in his pack in the bateau. Jacques say he is taking it home to his son. I did not know he had a son." Pierre fired another question at his comrade. "Jacques say he is tired of wilderness. He go home, get married. He say he have no son yet—but soon. Then he give map to him." The three men laughed softly yet heartily.

As the boat approached a rocky, shelving place, Jacques steered it near the bank. Spencer got out, stepping carefully so as to leave no footprints. He lifted Midnight from the boat. The dog wagged his tail and loped into the woods.

"Many thanks," said Spencer. "I'll be glad to see you any time."

He listened gravely to their words of farewell. The boat glided into the current, and was quickly hidden by the bushes. The hunter turned and walked with a noiseless, careful tread into the gloomy forest.

XVIII

At Drake's Lick

Briskly, yet with an unceasing alertness, Spencer headed north. There should be plenty of game near Drake's Lick, but he preferred to take an indirect way, instead of the shortest route. If the Cherokees followed his trail, they might decide that he was going over the hills and barrens into Kentucky. At this time of year, southern Indians would not relish too much a journey northward.

Shortly before noon, the sun disappeared behind gray clouds. Under the trees the light grew dim and fitful. Midnight drew close to Spencer, walking by him or just ahead.

A slow rain would soften the ground, and make it impossible for him to conceal his footprints. A downpour would wash out all trace of their passing, but it would also be a highly uncomfortable nuisance. He began to watch for a safe and comfortable refuge.

A few large drops of rain spattered noisily on the bare limbs above his head, and fell in a filmy spray on his clothes. One drop came unbroken through the sheltering branches and splashed on his rifle barrel. Spencer covered the lock with the loose tail of his buckskin shirt. The rain fell harder, the spraying changed to cold hard drops that stung his hands and face.

They came to a small open glade. Midnight barked once, and dashed away from him. Spencer followed. The dog ran to a large beech tree with a high, irregular hollow in the trunk. There was room for the hunter to stand up, or to squat down; if he sat, his feet would be in the open. It would do for the time being, but he had no intention of spending the night there.

When the rain increased in fury, Spencer got out a supply of jerk, and dropped one piece on the ground. Leaning against the inside of the trunk, with the upper part of his body well protected but with occasional little gusts of rain hitting his feet and calves, he ate the smoked buffalo. But always, through the upper part of the narrow opening, he kept his eyes on the glade. Sometimes, when the rain fell in gusty sheets, he could not see the trees on the opposite side.

For almost two hours Spencer waited. The forced inaction bored him. There was nothing to do but shift his weight from one leg to the other, in a vain attempt to find a position that would be comfortable after a few minutes. As soon as the downpour slackened to a cold drizzle, Spencer went on.

The ground was spongily soft, and the walking unpleasant. The need for intense watchfulness had passed. Now he had only to be careful not to make excessive noise, or to blunder on some Indian camp. But Midnight was less dependable than usual. The dog walked unhappily by him.

They came to a small creek, with a heavy patch of cane. The current was rushing noisily along, with the water almost to the banks. Spencer began to look for shelter. The sun was completely obscured by clouds; darkness was falling early.

Tonight there was no chance of a protecting ledge. In the dim light he found, at the edge of the cane, two oak trees with a heavy matting of leaves underneath. Telling Midnight to forage for himself, Spencer cut four poles, notched them, and made the frame for a rough lean-to. He cut long canes and interlaced them over the poles until he had a crude roof. Then he spread the deerskin on the ground and stretched himself on it.

This was the part of hunting that he most disliked. It was not so bad to get cold and soaking wet, as long as one kept moving; but he should be able to return to a hot fire, to dry his clothes thoroughly, and to sleep in comfort. His blanket was soggy, his clothes wet and smelly. He considered trying to find a dead tree, cutting some dry punk out of it, and making a fire, but he did not like the idea of deliberately signaling his whereabouts. He ate quickly, walked to the creek for water, and returning, rolled himself into his blanket. Slowly, very slowly, he got warm enough to go to sleep.

Without reluctance, the next morning, he quitted the lean-to. The air was soggy with moisture and the sky darkly overcast, but the rain had stopped. Walking soon warmed him, and gradually worked the stiffness from his muscles. The land grew hilly and rocky. There was too much water in the gullies for them to be used as paths. Spencer and Midnight had to make their way through dead bushes, under and around thick-growing cedars.

After descending a long hill into a broad valley, they came to a buffalo trace. It was thirty feet wide, almost cleared of vegetation, and with the rocky earth packed hard. Puddles of water stood in a few low places.

On the trace they could walk easily, avoiding the puddles and slippery ground. Here alertness was needed. Spencer kept to one side, and encouraged Midnight to scout ahead of him. Indian hunting parties would be seeking easy trails and convenient places to cross the Cumberland, on their way south to their winter villages; it would be easy, and calamitous, to stumble upon a group of braves. There was a chance that the Cherokee warriors might follow him, but he doubted it: the heavy rain had obliterated his tracks.

They had walked undisturbed for an hour. Then Midnight came bounding back, uttering low growls of warning. Instantly Spencer cut into the woods, lifting his feet high and taking care to hide his trail. As he walked, he checked his rifle. A group of hunters would pass quickly; if these Indians had got word about him . . . They were coming from Kentucky. They might be Creeks, or Cherokees who distrusted the Dragging Canoe. Near the crest of the hill, Spencer turned parallel with the trace.

A few minutes later, he heard the slogging noises of unshod ponies. Spencer sat on a rock that was protected by two young cedars, and waited. He could see part of the trace through a small, irregular opening in the trees, but he was confident that he could not be seen. He saw a leather-clad Cherokee pass quickly. Evidently an advance scout, since he carried no burden. Then, bunched together but apparently without set order, came the main body of hunters. He could see they were heavily loaded, and the ponies were saddled with cumbersome wicker baskets, dropping low on each side of a horse, that seemed to be chock-full of meat and skins.

It was a big party. Since he could observe, he guessed, about half of the trace, he reckoned that there were over thirty braves, and perhaps eight horses. Going home, and losing no time about it. That was good.

A harsh, guttural cry sounded. Spencer turned. Probably a scout had discovered his big footprints in the muddy trace. A brown warrior slipped into the cover of the trees. Spencer got up, and crept above the top of the ridge, and down a gully until he came to a deer path. Midnight followed him closely. They turned in the direction from which the Indians had come. Walking rapidly, he went a good five miles before he stopped to scout the woods and then to rest.

The forest would be an easier place to live in when all these Indians had gone home for the winter. Evidently this group had not followed him, but one could never be sure. He went on, keeping to the deer run. At a beech grove Spencer heard a vibrant musical call. Suddenly the call broke off in

two deep, mulish gasps. He heard the quick, labored galloping of frightened elk. If the Cherokees were pursuing him, that noisy stampede would signal his location to the warriors. With Midnight prowling ahead, Spencer turned back toward the buffalo trace. It seemed deserted. They moved rapidly along the trace.

When they reached Drake's Lick, Spencer saw in the open low ground scores of dead bodies, and skeletons that were still intact. The Indians had found good hunting, but the wolves, buzzards, and other scavengers had done their work rapidly and well. There was an unpleasant odor of rotting flesh in the air, though it was not overpowering. But he might as well avoid the place for the present.

Spencer skirted the lick and walked to the creek, and on upstream. The stream was high, but in places the banks were rocky and like small cliffs. He kept a sharp eye on them. The sun was dim, and the wind cold; the weather promised to be nasty. A dry cave would suit him best.

Three miles above the lick he found an overhanging bluff with a deep recess in the center of it. The creek gurgled noisily fifteen feet below him. The ground was moist, but solid. He explored the place. A driving rain from the east would blow in; otherwise, he would be protected. A fire built in the back could not be seen, if he dug a little pit, and he thought that the smoke would disappear through little cracks in the rock.

At the first pool in the creek, he baited and set a fishline. Half a mile farther he came to a beaver dam; working cautiously, he set the traps and left them. On the way back, he constructed a couple of twitch-up snares in a rabbit run.

These preparations completed, he walked deeper into the woods. Though steadily watchful, he was confident that the Indians had gone from the lick; however, it was possible that other parties would come, especially if some braves were after him. Under a hickory nut tree he stopped to pick up twenty or thirty nuts, selecting the driest ones and hulling them, when he could, with his fingers.

All the time, he was listening for a turkey call. At a deer run he looked about until he found a well-screened hackberry tree; he sat down, leaned his back against it, and waited. Tonight he wanted a fire. His clothes and covers needed drying, and the warmth would be grateful to his bones. A fire, and fresh meat. Turkey or deer. Whatever came handiest would do.

The light was failing rapidly when he saw an indistinct movement in the run. A small buck blended almost perfectly with the brown trees and undergrowth. Spencer aimed, but waited until the approaching buck stopped and threw up his head tremulously. The long rifle cracked.

The buck dropped, kicked feebly, and lay still. The bullet had gone through the shoulder blades. The hunter skinned it, cut off big roasts from the rumps and shoulders, and returned to his camp under the bluff. With some difficulty he gathered partly dry wood, but he sprinkled powder more heavily than usual on it, and the wood blazed fitfully, then burned. He cooked the meat in long strips, and turned himself, at first, before the fire almost as frequently as he did the meat. Midnight crowded close to the blaze. They felt lazy, and well content.

Two days passed quietly. The weather continued bad, with frequent showers and dull skies. Spencer trapped three beaver, and shot one otter; he ranged the woods hunting for promising pools. On the afternoon of the second day, the sky cleared and the wind changed to the north.

Next morning, there was a thin coat of ice on the ground. The air was sharply cold; the exhaled breath made smoky currents. Before setting out, Spencer cut hairs from the fresh deerskin and relined his moccasins.

For the first time at Drake's Lick, he heard on the thin air the distant rumble of the buffalo herd. He cast a weather eye at the clouds. Cradling his rifle and telling Midnight to shift for himself, he walked in the direction of the lick.

As he approached the end of the forest, he stopped. The lick narrowed at the north, and a big oak with a low-hanging limb stood in the open. The herd was small, but the bulls had scattered out; if he could get behind the oak without stampeding the herd, he would have a clear forty-yard shot at a fifteen-or sixteen-hundred-pound bull. He retraced his steps for twenty yards, picked his way quietly through the trees, and when he reached open country, crawled slowly to the oak.

The buffalo were preparing to leave. He heard the pawings grow slighter in noise and the bellowings increase; he saw the bull near him raise his head and roar loudly, challengingly. Spencer rose, and set the barrel on the limb. As the bull roared again, and lifted a forefoot, he fired.

The thin crack of the rifle cut through the deep rumbling. The herd moved rapidly, without stampeding. But the wounded bull swayed and wobbled, raised his head with a great effort and let out an agonized bellow.

Slowly the enormous head dropped lower and lower. Suddenly the bull pitched on his side. He struggled to rise, snorted once, and fell back heavily. Beyond him, the herd broke into a frantic run.

After waiting and listening and then scouting around, Spencer skinned the bull and cut off a generous supply of meat. He would feast tonight. He worked quickly. The kill had been easy, and profitable; but he wanted to get to his traps. Before he had finished cutting the meat, Midnight galloped into the lick, and waited expectantly until he moved away.

The traps were empty. But the pool looked promising. Adding new bait but leaving the traps untouched, he walked back toward the lick. Midnight, fat and lazy looking, was dozing peacefully in the woods. Spencer whistled to him. The dog blinked and stretched his legs; finally, protesting with grunting moans, Midnight got up and trotted at his heels. Together they set out to explore the creek below the lick.

XIX

Winter Days

After two weeks of watchfulness and of reasonably successful hunting, Spencer returned to Bledsoe's Lick. Each night he had expected a deep freeze or a heavy snow; each morning he would wake to find the ground thinly crusted and brittle, and sometimes a thin skim of ice on the shallow puddles. In such weather a man's tracks could not be hidden: his foot would seem firmly set, and then on the changing of weight it would break through into slippery mud.

The Indians had gone from the woods around Drake's Lick. He had seen old trails and found old camps, but no fresh ones; he might have stayed longer, but the creek was small and the pools were, it seemed, completely worked out. When, two days running, he found empty traps, he packed his sack, rolled the beaver and otter pelts in the buffalo robe, and turned toward the land he was beginning to think of as home.

It was midafternoon of the second day before he came to Bledsoe's Creek. Instead of going directly to his first stopping place, the cave, he struck for a near-by pool and set his traps. Then he stopped at a deer run, and sent Midnight into the woods to scare up the game.

Midnight disappeared, but no buck came galloping down the open path. Spencer waited impatiently. After thirty minutes, he cached his possessions in a laurel thicket and stole noiselessly toward a small beech grove. Before he could find a clear place to windward, he heard Midnight running toward the beech trees, and a sudden, frantic galloping of deer as they fled. Disgustedly he turned back to the laurel at the path.

The dog came trotting along the path, looking well pleased with himself. Spencer cuffed at him. "You're a fraud. Lie down, and stay down. I'll do my own hunting. You watch the stuff."

He circled the grove, and went on toward the creek. As he approached a small growth of cane, a deer bounded up. Spencer fired before it could break into a gallop. The deer crashed heavily to the ground. He saw the stiff neck hairs bristle as he approached, and heard the teeth grinding together harshly. But the deer was helpless; his bullet had broken its back. Quickly he slit the deer's throat. The yearling was small, but the meat should be tender. He set

to work. The hide would be excellent for bullet waddings, and he was running short of the square patches needed every time he fired the rifle.

When he reached the cave above Bledsoe's Creek, Spencer lit a fire, started the venison to cooking, and stretched the unfinished skins on wicker frames. Apparently nothing had been disturbed. He was pleased, and a little surprised.

His inspection and chores completed, he left the cave and made a brief examination of the woods. The rains had wiped out all signs of the Indians. Since the light was dim, he watched the dog, also. Midnight would run along a trail, pause, and dash into the woods, after a rabbit or squirrel, but making little real effort to catch them. The dog had waited at his pack until Spencer returned; then he had gone straight to the dead fawn. Spencer grinned. Midnight couldn't eat a rabbit if he caught one.

It was too dark for him to see much. But he felt satisfied. Returning to the cave, he dug out his reserve of powder and lead, refilled the horn, and set the kettle filled with lead near the fire. After he ate, he molded bullets, and filed them smooth. A Frenchman's pound weighed out light, he reflected; from the sheet he had got only sixty-seven bullets. It would be a bad trade if their gold turned out as underweight as their lead. Still, they were safe enough. It wasn't worth a trip to Natchez to collect from them, even if he could find the Frenchmen after he got there.

While he slept, a light snow was falling. When Spencer stepped out of the cave next morning, he noticed that the dwarf cedar was partly white, and the upper limbs of the poplars and oaks were glistening in the half-light of dawn. His moccasined feet crunched on the open trail; in the woods the flakes had sifted down irregularly through the limbs and brush, but in glades and openings there was a solid carpet of snow. By the time he had checked his traps, skinned two beaver, and reset the traps by another pool, the sun was shining faintly.

From the cave, after stretching the pelts, Spencer and Midnight walked on to the sycamore. The snow was beginning to melt. Drops fell from the trees and plopped with spasmodic little hissing noises upon the wet ground. Occasional drops broke on his cap and shoulders and hands. The going underfoot was soft, and in low places mushy. On the way, he dropped a fishline into the creek.

Bledsoe's Lick seemed quiet and peaceful. If the buffalo had come, that morning, they were already far away; he saw numerous gray squirrels, and twice rabbits darted from the path ahead of him. There were more bones of

deer and buffalo scattered about than when he left; the Indians had evidently killed a goodly supply.

Spencer did not enter the clear territory. He followed a gully up the hill, and walked along the crest. But he thought there was no immediate danger, for Midnight was frisky and running about freely. At the spring he stopped to drink and to fill his cane water bottle with fresh water.

The sticks that an Indian had brought as firewood remained scattered about the back of the tree. Spencer ran his fingers over the butt of the pistol. It had come in handy then.

He stooped to enter the hollow sycamore, and paused. The ground seemed rough to his fingers. Inside he realized, before his eyes could see distinctly in the gloom, that the Cherokees had stolen his buffalo hide and pouch of meat, and with knives or tomahawks had dug savagely into the ground. This futile revenge rather amused him, though it also made him angry. The robe was spoils of war, and they were entitled to it; but this stabbing and hacking might be a threat of what, later on, they would do to his own body.

He stood up and examined with his fingers the hole which contained a reserve of powder. The pouch was there; the Indians had missed that. On the ground again, he searched for the buried mold. It was gone. A long trench showed where the Indians had dug hopefully for other treasure. He was glad that he had already used up the pig of lead. The Cherokees had got precious little from him. But each warm spell might bring danger. He had killed and wounded too many warriors for Indians to forget him, even if they weren't already seeking to revenge the Island Flats and the Dragging Canoe. The Cherokees, he felt certain, would return. He crawled out of the sycamore and headed south toward the nearest otter pool.

The days and nights passed without much incident. Spencer had lost track of the exact days of the month. On what he thought was Christmas, he feasted on a turkey hen; and overcome by a strange mingled feeling of loneliness and bravado he shouted the words of a Christmas song. But he could not remember quite how the words should go, and even his deep voice sounded thin and lonely among the gaunt trees. He whooped a few times, and roused Midnight to mournful wailing. When he sternly admonished the dog to shut up, Midnight looked hurt, put his tail between his legs, and wandered off into the bushes.

But the brief fits of loneliness would pass when he was active. Always there was food to get, and skins; there were animals to avoid as well as to catch. One afternoon he climbed a mulberry to get out of the way of an evil-tempered hibernating bear that had left his den in the cane to get water at the creek; another time, he fled precipitately from a spitting skunk that he had unintentionally roused to anger, and he was conscious of an unpleasant odor that lingered about his clothes for several days. His stock of furs was building up, and the weather was cold enough to keep the Indians at home.

One crisp morning, Spencer ranged over a fertile-looking piece of ground, with long rolling hills, heavy timber, and two wide valleys. He judged it was eight or ten miles from Bledsoe's Lick, and it had the sweetest-tasting spring in the country. All this land was good, but he liked this tract better than any other. When the settlers came, they would crowd the lick too much for his taste, and might build a town there; but the springs here were not enough to provide a community of people with water. It should stay free of people. This was his choice, of all the land.

That was something to remember, and not something to work on. For this winter, all the land was his. He made good use of it. A beaver trapped at one pool meant changing the trap to another pool, and letting the animals get over their nervousness; a clear day meant hours of vigil by a beaver or otter pool. Hunting was excellent, as long as a man had quietness and stealth and endless patience. But one careless twitching of muscles could undo the careful work of two or three hours. Automatically he found himself growing wiser in the ways of the forest, and training his muscles to a firm yet relaxed discipline.

His clock was the sun. He was aware that the days were gradually getting longer, that he could spend a few more minutes in the woods. The weather was mainly clear and cold, but there were a few raw and stormy days when Spencer returned from his traps directly to the cave, built a fire, and busied himself with his furs or with repairing his clothes and equipment. Sometimes he wished that he could accept such periods with Midnight's lazy and contented air of well-being. When little chores failed, he would get restless and start through the stinging downpour, but he would soon return to warm himself by the fire.

Toward the middle of January, Spencer left the sycamore as the white sun was struggling to break through some dark clouds. The bushes were wet, and left dark streaks on his leggings, but the air felt warmer and softer than usual. As they approached the traps, Spencer ordered Midnight away from him, and crept up to the pool. The first trap was underwater. After pulling it

out, he released the dead beaver from its jaws. The second trap was empty. From the haversack Spencer pulled a twig heavy with the odor of castor, and dropped it by the trap. A few minutes later, by another pool, he arranged the empty trap under a bush and baited it.

Spencer followed the creek until he came to an otter slide. Stationing himself in a thin clump of laurel, he waited. After a three-hour vigil, his muscles began to twitch and his temper to get short. When a large, bright-eyed mink approached the water, he shot it through the head.

The sun came warmly through the trees. He ate jerk, and walked to another pool. That afternoon he had better luck, shooting an otter that in its turn had killed a trout and come up on the bank to eat it.

As he approached the lick, Spencer heard the thin crack of a rifle. Instantly he took cover, flitting from tree to tree, and keeping where possible behind sheltering bushes. From the hill crest he saw a rough skin shelter, twenty yards from the hollow sycamore. A tall, thick-set man came from behind the tree, and walked toward the shelter.

Spencer raised a loud halloo, and ran down the hill, into the open valley. "Welcome, friend and stranger," he called out.

"Hello, Pig Poy," said Casper Mansker in his strongly accented voice. "I've been resting in your haus, while the poys got some meadt. As a hausfrau, you vouldn't last a day. But you must have learnt someting, or the volves vould have et you veeks ago."

XX

The Long Hunters

The hunters had made only a temporary camp. They had cut poles and set them in open ground at the edge of the lick, and stretched buffalo skins over them to make a rough and ready tent.

“Ve camp at my lick,” said Mansker. “Here ve stay tonight.”

Spencer was disappointed. Before he could say anything, two men broke through the cane. They carried a long pole on their shoulders. Hanging from it, with his feet tied above it, was a whitetail deer. They dropped the deer at the side of the tent.

“Hello, Big-foot,” said Jim Hambrick. “Never expected to see you again. Thought the Injuns would’ve lifted your scalp long ago, and had it cured by now.” There was no surprise in his matter-of-fact tone; apparently he would have been as ready to accept Spencer’s absence and to explain it in his own mind without surprise, as he was to accept the hunter’s presence in the camp. A man took his chances, knowing what they were. Hambrick waved at his comrade. “Bill Drake. From Virginny.”

“How d’ye,” said Drake, in the time-honored frontier salutation that demanded no answer.

They would not ask about his luck, Spencer knew. To do so would be to invite disaster of some kind. Though they had come over the hills and barrens from Kentucky to see if he was alive, they would show no emotion and would minimize the hardships of the journey.

Drake took out his scalping knife and began to skin the deer. Mansker walked over to examine the pelt.

“Goot,” he said. “The vinter is mild yet, so the deer eat vell and the hair stay thick and smooth.”

“Yeah,” answered Drake. “Mebbe not prime any longer, but it’ll fetch a good price.”

Mansker waved a hand northward. “The skins not so goot, up dere. The snow it is crusting. Ve sendt the horses and skins back py Pledsoe und his hunters; ve come to pury little poy.” He laughed. “Pig poy now. He make hunter yet.”

Spencer laughed at the old German's sardonic humor. Like them, he would show no emotion. Instead, he thumped his chest, and bragged. "Big hunter now. When you get lost, I'll show you the way."

"Casper never gets lost," responded Hambrick. "Sometimes he gets a little bewildered."

"Dot's right. I show infants like Pig-foot aroundt, und dey do so many tam-fool tings I get pewildered und forget all I know." He walked away, to gather wood for a fire.

Briefly Hambrick told Spencer what news he had from the settlements. It was months old. Several men had been killed and scalped by the Indians, and during the last days of Indian summer the Overhill Cherokees had besieged Russell's Station for three days, but John Sevier had led a company to drive off the Indians. Spencer's brother had a baby boy, but Hambrick didn't know what his name was. Jim Hambrick grinned sheepishly, and added, "I left sudden."

"How come? I thought all you wanted was to get home and eat dodgers and flour cake."

"A gal," said Hambrick. "I kept alookin' at her and couldn't make up my mind. I knew if I stayed there, I'd be married in a month more—and tied up tight. So I left. Took supplies out to Boonesborough and joined Mansker. Here I am. Still couldn't make up my mind when Bledsoe went back to the forts."

"There's other good men on the Watauga," said Spencer. "She might not wait."

"That would settle things, anyhow," answered Hambrick. He approached the question of Spencer's luck obliquely. "Seen any Injuns?"

"Now and then. Some of them didn't seem to like me."

"Your friend Matt Swallow did some powwowing with them once or twice. Saw him myself."

Jim Hambrick did not add any warning. He had passed on such information as he possessed; it was up to Spencer to act on it as he pleased. From now on, it was Spencer's business.

The big hunter said nothing. But he was not greatly surprised. The Cherokees would not put on war paint for a stray hunter: they would pot-shoot him if they got a chance, but they would not be so determined to kill

him unless they had better reason than that. When spring came, they would be on his trail again.

With the casual acceptance of danger that was part of his nature, he soon forgot this threat. After all, it was in the future; here, for the first time in months, were friends. He enjoyed the fellowship. The hunters were not talkative. They broiled venison on sharpened sticks or on their ramrods, and they ate the unseasoned meat quickly and silently.

Each man did as he pleased. Drake walked off to the spring; Mansker sang under his breath a sad German ballad that set Midnight to gazing at him in a puzzled manner, and then to break into a mournful howl. Spencer kicked at the dog, and he hushed. Hambrick pulled a rag from the niche in his gunstock and began to clean his rifle.

“You got a vise and tools?” asked Spencer.

Hambrick got them. Spencer set his rifle in the vise, trued the barrel, and tightened the screws. He put a new flint in the lock, and cleaned the barrel.

Mansker yawned. Drake went into the skin shelter and started unrolling his blankets. After a few desultory words, Spencer got up and walked to the sycamore.

The next morning, in the purplish-gray dawn before the sun was fully up, he set out to run his trap line and to bring in his traps. When he returned two hours later, the men were lounging on the ground, ready to be off.

“This lick’s no good, Big-foot,” said Drake. “Nary a buffalo or buck all morning. A man could starve to death here.”

The hunters all knew that in midwinter the buffalo rarely came to the licks, but retreated into the tall cane that grew rankly in the low grounds. The men got their bundles together, and started. When they were near the spring that Spencer had picked as his own choice, he drew Mansker aside and asked him to come along. Without questioning, the German went. Midnight followed Spencer. Drake and Hambrick continued along the trace.

At the spring, the two men halted. “My land,” said Spencer laconically. It was just as well to have a witness, and Mansker’s word would be accepted unhesitatingly on the frontier.

Spencer drew his tomahawk and made a great blaze on a large beech tree. Without bothering to remove the hundred-pound pack from his shoulders, he squatted down and with his hunting knife laboriously carved his name deep in the bark. S P E N C E R. He looked at it. “That ain’t quite

right,” he said, annoyed with himself, “but it’ll have to do. I shoot better than I spell.” He waved his arm toward a piece of low ground that had been burned over some years before, evidently where lightning had struck a dead tree, and added, “That’s my cornfield. Purty, ain’t she?”

Mansker seemed quietly amused. Sooner or later, every hunter succumbed to the love of land, and claimed a tract as his own; yet nearly all of them despised the farmers and traders who followed the hunters into the frontier country.

He watched Spencer step off what the hunter judged to be 640 acres, with the spring roughly in the middle of the tract. Near three corners, the hunter found beech trees and blazed them, adding his initial under the blaze. The bark would gradually distort the lettering as the tree grew, but the marks would be legible for many years. At the fourth corner, Spencer had to be content with a sycamore.

Once or twice Mansker commented on the land, or remarked that someday Spencer would make a good squaw, if he took to planting corn and milking cows. Although he said nothing about Spencer’s method of measuring his claim, he noted with sardonic amusement the big hunter’s long strides. At the last corner, Mansker asked innocently, “Is you got full measure, Pig-foot? No need to cheat yourself; odder men vill do dot too much anyways.”

“Sure it’s right,” answered Spencer. “A step’s a yard. After the fruit ripens so the birds won’t eat all my seed, I’m agoing to seal this claim with a patch of corn. This summer.”

Mansker looked at him slyly, but said nothing. They went back to the buffalo trace, and along it to Mansker’s Lick.

Drake and Hambrick had pitched camp in a glade a hundred yards from the lick. The hunters had spread branches over the skins, so that the shelter appeared almost a natural part of the woods. Drake was sprawled on a deerskin, inside the shelter, whistling loudly but without much tune. He looked up as Mansker poked his head in. “How d’do,” he said. “I was about to go to the spring, so’s to guide you here.”

“Pouf,” retorted Mansker. “A poy could follow your tracks.”

“I ought to go set my traps,” said Spencer. “You men haven’t tasted any nice beaver tail lately.”

“It’s too stout for me,” answered Drake. “Jim said he had a hankering for turkey or goose, though I speck he’s still-hunting a buck. What I’d like is a

bear cub. And I could use even a hibernatin' bear's skin."

"It ain't goot right now," agreed Mansker, "but it keep the feet varm."

"You be axman," Spencer told Drake, "and I'll find the tree for you." Forgetting his traps, he stood up, rifle in hand.

Drake picked up the ax. "Let's go."

The three men and the dog walked to the lick and on to the edge of the cane. The big gray trunk of a sycamore rose ten feet above the highest cane.

Mansker looked at the small path, and the single blasted tree. He shook his head. "Not so goot. Dere is no cover."

They laughed at his caution. A man could step back into the cane, but he wouldn't need to. Three of them could easily kill the bears. Drake began to cut dry wood from a dead tree, and to gather chips. Mansker looked again at the tree. "Is foolhardy, but I play fool to see you poys don't get hurt. Ve vill have to shoot vidout a rest."

Bending over at times, they followed the path to the sycamore. Midnight leaped ahead of them, and began to bark violently at the base. Drake pushed the dog aside.

"Lend me yore pistol, Big-foot. It'll do to start a fire. That's all a short gun is fit for." Drake took the pistol and jammed it into his belt.

Spencer moved toward the creek until he found a spot through which he could see the tree. Mansker was right. They were used to shooting, whenever possible, with the long barrel supported on a rest; here they would have to aim and fire and take the gun's kick without any help. He called to Midnight. Reluctantly the dog came to him, and stood restlessly at his feet.

The ax bit into the deadwood. Drake worked expertly. He cut a small hole in the base of the tree. Through it and through the opening at the top came the muffled uneasy growls of the trapped bear.

When the hole was through the trunk, Drake broke the punk into bits, piled a few chips on top, and sprinkled powder on the wood. Kneeling, he snapped the pistol. The powder flashed; the punk caught and started to burn. The hollow tree served as a natural chimney. Drake added more wood to the blaze, then stationed himself in the path, ten feet from the tree.

The frightened, muffled growls increased in volume. Suddenly a half-grown cub appeared at the top and balanced for a moment. Mansker's rifle

cracked. The cub turned, half leaping and half falling to the ground. With a ferocious growl Midnight closed in.

The gaunt mother, frightened and angry, came out rapidly, dug her claws into the wood, and leaped without waiting to get poised. Spencer fired quickly. The explosion of Drake's gun followed instantly. They heard the bear land heavily on the ground.

Working with a cold fury that yet kept every motion swift and controlled, Spencer poured in powder, dropped a bullet into the barrel from his mouth, and rammed it home. While he worked, he heard the bear crashing into the cane near him. There was a second, lighter thudding sound. Mansker's rifle crashed.

Spencer saw the furious little red eyes glaring at him, saw the bloodstained foam of the bear's slobbering breath. Quickly he aimed at the bear's head, fired, and flung himself sideways into the cane. The great forepaw came down in a clumsy sweeping arc. He felt the leather and skin being raked from his leg. With all his strength, he pushed the cane aside and leaped into it.

The bear tottered, and fell. A quick backward glance told him that he could stay safe in his covert. From the tree came loud howlings and growls; along the path he could hear hurried steps.

"Py gorry, dog," shouted Mansker, "how I shoot ven you von't let the cub stay still."

From the cane, Spencer saw Drake approach the fallen bear. A paw was raised menacingly, but it fell back. With his knife Drake cut the bear's throat. "Hey, Big-foot. Did she get you?"

Spencer parted the cane, and stepped out. He heard a shot at the tree. Now he could feel blood running down his leg. "Piece of my hide," he said grimly.

Drake looked at the wound. "It ain't so bad. She got the shirt first. Casper will know what to do. I'll tend to this critter."

Spencer cut the legging a little more, and held it up with his hand. He knew that no bones were broken, but he did not like the bleeding. He limped on toward the tree.

Under the sycamore Mansker was leaning over Midnight. Two dead cubs were stretched on the ground by him. The dog was still growling, but he too lay stretched on the ground. There was a deep cut on his chest; one ear was

badly torn; and the old cut on his back had been raked open. When he saw Spencer, the dog struggled to get up.

“Lie still, Midnight,” commanded his master.

The old hunter looked up. “He vill live, if ve keep him quiet. Vot about you?” He examined the leg, and tied a piece of rawhide tightly around it, above the wound. “You walk easy, my poy, und I vill carry the houndt. He is too anxious to keep the fight all to hissself. I had to vait until the cub throwed him off pefore I could shoot.”

Mansker handed his rifle to Spencer, and lifted the dog easily in his arms. Midnight squirmed. It was difficult to hold him, but the hunter talked to the dog and quieted him, then set off slowly through the cane. Once, when he stooped low, Midnight howled.

Behind them, Spencer walked carefully. The thong was biting painfully into his leg, and numbing it. He was not certain that the bleeding had stopped.

Outside the cane they could move with greater ease. But it was slow, painful going until they reached the camp.

Mansker took command. “You lie down, und keep this bear houndt silent. I make medicine.” He hurried outside, and lighted a fire.

After a few minutes, Spencer felt that he could no longer endure the throbbing pain in his leg. He did not believe the cut was as bad as the thong. He untied it. The bleeding seemed to have stopped. Midnight watched him, then went back to licking his own wounds.

Some minutes later, Mansker came in. He cleared the leather away from Spencer’s wound and examined it carefully. “You vill live to get scalped,” he remarked, and went out. Occasionally he grunted or whistled a few bars of music as he poked at the fire or stirred the contents of a frying pan. When he was satisfied with his mixture, he set it aside to cool.

With the pan in his right hand, Mansker went back into the shelter. Squatting down, he examined the cut again, and poured the warm brownish liquid over it. The liquid stained the flesh a walnut color, and burned stingingly. Spencer’s face did not change, but his fingers closed tightly.

He jeered at Mansker. “Heap big medicine man. You’re might nigh as good as a squaw. If that dog has any gumption left, he’ll fix you so you’ll need your own brew. What is it?”

“Oak bark and yarbs,” answered the German. Midnight cowered and crawled away from him, but Mansker poured a liberal amount of the ooze from the bark on Midnight’s ear and back. Then he reached for the dog’s head. Midnight bared his teeth, but did not snap. Forcing the head back, Mansker poured liquid on the dog’s chest. Midnight howled mournfully.

“You vill stay here. I go help dot pig fool Drake cut up his pears.”

Spencer slipped one arm under his head, and stretched his legs. If that fiendish burning would stop . . . He should get up and start mending his leggings and shirt; he would have to do it sometime, and he might as well do that now as later. But he began to feel warm and drowsy. His leg felt easier. He fell asleep.

XXI

Deer and Buffalo

The four men hunted steadily. Spencer went out the next day and set his traps. Midnight looked after him longingly as he departed, but the dog made no effort to get up and follow him.

Before he completed baiting the second trap, it began to rain. The wind blew hard, driving the cold drops through the trees. He started toward the camp. But he knew that Mansker would ridicule him if he returned without a pelt, and ask if he needed more medicine. The old hunter was sentimental at times, but he hated softness.

On a day like this the deer would go to the hillsides where they could find shelter from the wind and driving rain. Game would be easy to find, though a man would have to be careful of his powder and flint.

Spencer faced the rain and walked toward the side of the valley. Little caution was needed. Bucks and does would be cowering together, unsuspecting. As he neared the hill, Spencer walked more carefully, keeping out of the open. His leather clothes were stiff and wet and uncomfortable. He would get a buck and go in. Through the trees he could see the hillside.

The herd was there, taking such shelter as it could find. He crawled behind a cedar, removed the lock cover while holding the gunlock under his loose shirt, and primed the pan. Protecting the lock from the rain was difficult, but Spencer kept leather over it until he had the gun pointed. He aimed at a medium-sized buck, and fired.

Immediately afterward, there was the snapping noise of a gun that refused to fire. Spencer heard it plainly, as the herd was dashing fearfully through the bushes. A second time the gun clicked. This time it was followed by a loud and vehement denunciation of the gun and of the unknown hunter.

Spencer stepped into the open. Mansker came out, angry and disgusted. "Vy you shoot," he demanded. "I follow the scent softly, I wait for a pig puck, und you come along and shoot a papy. I cut your ears off, I scalp you, I trade off my Nancy und get me a petter gal. She is petray me."

Spencer laughed uproariously at his friend's violent words and gestures. "Keep Nancy's lock dry, and she'll fire all right. Little Lucy did her work."

He added insulting words of his own. "You can have the forequarters if you're short of meat."

Mansker sputtered at him, and went off threatening to shoot a man-sized buck. Spencer found his deer, skinned it, and headed for the camp.

That night, inside the shelter, they listened to the steady wind and rain. "It vill snow py morning," said Mansker. "I vill not shoot a deer in the crust. I never done so, yet. Maype the frost vill not crust the snow."

The deer's sharp hoofs would cut through, where a man could stay on the surface. The hunters rarely shot such completely helpless game. But they did not relish the thought of idleness.

As though to get his mind off that unpleasant prospect, Mansker remarked, "Pig-foot vill make a goot farmer yet. It takes a stout man to pe a hunter; soon he vill get married und pring out a frau und milk the cows night und morning."

"I don't believe it," said Jim Hambrick. "For one thing, no gal would have him."

Mansker chuckled. "If she see him step, she take him fast. Pig-foot can step pooty goot. He take me to his claim, he tell me a step is a yardt, und he stretch out them long legs four or five feet. I pet you Pig-foot tomahawked eight hundredt acres, maype nine hundredt. You ask him."

"Casper's sore because his gal went back on him," said Spencer. "He'd drawn a bead on a nice big whitetail, and old Nancy just clicked. It was Little Lucy dropped that buck."

For a while the rough but pleasant badinage continued. Then from Hambrick's corner rose the sound of light snoring. Soon all the men were asleep.

Day after day the hunting continued. When there was heavy crust on the snow, they would go to the canebrakes and attempt to rouse a buffalo herd, or to a pool where they might shoot an otter. Soon after daybreak the men separated, each going his own way. Spencer was the only man with traps; each day he ran his line, collected any pelts he had taken, and moved the traps to new pools. Midnight began to accompany him, though at first the dog had hard going and made slow time. But as the days passed, Midnight's wounds healed, until he seemed as spry as before.

At night there would be the stretching and curing of furs, the mending of buckskin clothes, the whetting of knives and tomahawks, and the picking of

flints and cleaning of guns. Sometimes the men would sing or talk as they worked; frequently they were silent, without any sense of loneliness.

One afternoon Hambrick returned, greatly excited. In the course of hunting he had wandered as far as the Cumberland, and walked along its banks. Driftwood, carried downstream in the high water, had jammed behind a point; one forty-foot log had seemed rounded at the end, and slightly shaped. His curiosity aroused, Hambrick had tugged and yanked until he got the log partially on the clay bank, and turned it over. He had found a pirogue. The marks of ax and fire, where the poplar had been hollowed out, were plainly visible.

“Let’s hunt the south side,” he suggested eagerly. “This is a sign from Providence, and I don’t aim to fly in the face of it.”

The hunters were all, in some degree, superstitious. Also, they liked new country. Mansker remarked that he wouldn’t make a boat just to hunt on the other side, but only a fool would let one go to waste.

“I’ve never seen the French Lick, or crossed the Cumberland,” said Drake. “Heard of it. Let’s go tomorrow.”

They made the skin camp a little stronger by adding upright poles and braces, hid some of the furs, and checked their equipment. After some thought, Spencer decided to leave his traps. The men would be impatient to get off, and might not wait for him; and beaver or otter would likely freeze at this time of year, if caught. The skins would be safe, though there would be only two of them. He would let business go any day for the sake of fresh adventure.

The pirogue held them easily. They quickly made four rough paddles, dropped their rifles and packs in the boat, and prepared to launch it.

Mansker inspected the markings. “Shawnee,” he said. No one asked him how ax and fire marks could be read, since they were necessarily the same whether made by white man or Indian. They did not care who had made the boat, or whether it had been washed away or pushed out into the stream by some fleeing party. Here it was. That was enough.

Spencer winked at Hambrick. “Made by squaws,” he said. “She’s heavy in the front.”

“I veigh less than you,” grunted Mansker from the bow. “Maype ve should have put the dog here.”

They paddled easily, taking advantage of the current and letting it sweep them toward the opposite bank. A mile down the river they landed. The hunters lifted the boat and carried it up the bank, hiding it in a small gully so that it looked like a dead tree. There weren't many wanderers in the forest in midwinter, but they did not want to be forced to make a boat for themselves, if someone did come along.

The hunters established a temporary camp in a limestone cave overlooking the Cumberland. Next morning, contrary to their usual custom, they stayed together and in a body headed for French Lick. There was a thin powder of snow on the ground; for the first two hours they made good time on the crust. Then it began to soften, and their feet would break through. They were relieved to find a buffalo trace that had been used recently, and most of the snow packed firm or pounded away.

For miles they followed the path of the herd. When the trace dipped down a long hill and into a wide valley, they could see where groups of buffalo had split off from the main herd and forced a way into the cane.

Mansker looked at the tracks. "French Lick ain't far," he said. "I'd make it a matter of two mile. If ve could start these critters arunning, they'd vait for us there. You stay and turn 'em, Drake."

He turned into the woods. Spencer, Hambrick, and Midnight followed. At a word from Mansker, Hambrick took a station; a quarter of a mile on, Spencer and Midnight were placed. Mansker kept on.

They heard his rifle shoot, and his vociferous halloo. Instantly Spencer fired into the cane, and began to shout. Midnight barked loudly. Hambrick joined in with gun and voice.

There were uneasy, shuffling movements in the cane. Suddenly the shuffling changed to heavy, confused running, as the buffalo found paths or trampled their way through. Spencer found an opening and followed them, hallooming with all his might. But he had to dodge, change directions as the path changed, and follow old tracks through the dense growth. Midnight quickly out-distanced him.

Back on the trace, he found Drake and Hambrick waiting, and calling vainly to Midnight. Spencer whistled at the galloping dog. Midnight slowed, looked over his shoulder, and kept on. At a second whistle he stopped. Mansker came puffing up.

"Now ve get 'em," he chuckled. The hunters strode along at a fast gait until they came to the edge of the lick. Some of the buffalo were panting and

bellowing and milling around. Others were beginning to force their way into the cane.

Mansker dropped on one knee, and aimed his rifle. Then he looked up. "Ve could have some fun if ve drive them into the river," he said, "but ve kill more . . ."

Thirty yards away, Drake's rifle cracked. The nearest bull snorted in pain. Instantly the three hunters aimed, fired, and started reloading. Midnight barked angrily, but stayed well behind them. The buffalo stampeded with frantic bellows and rumblings into the cane. One by one, the four rifles cracked again.

Without waiting to reload, Mansker sprang up and dashed toward the lick. His companions hallooted with him. There was the steady crash of huge bodies against cane and trees, as the panic-stricken herd made a new trace through the woods. Two bulls and three cows were dead or dying on the ground.

Suddenly the hunters saw a man running from the cabin toward the river. Hastily he tossed the bundles in his arms into the boat, and launched the pirogue into the Cumberland. He began to paddle furiously downstream.

Mansker lay down on the ground and rolled with laughter. Spencer was sorry, and a little ashamed of their exploit. The Creole had no business in the woods if he was that big a coward. Spencer wondered briefly if he was heading for Louisiana or Indiana. He hoped that Jacques had reached home safe, and remembered that Jacques, for all his nervousness in that same cabin, had found the sycamore at Bledsoe's Lick and had rescued him from the Cherokees. While the other hunters continued after the herd, Spencer went to the cabin and looked in the open door. It was empty. But he reckoned that other Creole hunters and trappers were in the forests; they liked company and the one who ran away had not come here all by himself. He remembered the quick, friendly gestures that Jacques had made when he was inviting Spencer to go down the rivers to Natchez. Although slightly abashed by his sentimentality, the hunter knew that he wanted the cabin left secure, and untouched by his companions. There was no use letting the wolves steal the meat. Spencer closed the door, and fastened it from outside with the chain.

XXII

Breaking Camp

After a week of hunting south of the Cumberland, the four hunters abandoned the limestone cave. They carried the pirogue from the gully to the river, set it in the water, and adjusted their guns, bales of furs, and other belongings. The boat was filled. Spencer sat on a bale of his furs in order to make a free space for Midnight.

They guided the boat into shallow water, out of the direct current, and paddled upstream. It was laborious work, however. At the first small creek they beached the pirogue, unloaded it, and concealed it a hundred feet above the mouth of the branch.

“I am sorry for only one ting,” said Mansker as they made their way back to the Lick. “Ve should have broke open dot Frenchie’s cabin. I don’t like the Frenchies, nohow. Pig-foot is getting soft.”

Spencer did not answer. His companions had wanted to search the cabin for salt and meal and pelts; months ago, he might have shared their feeling. None of them wished to sleep there, but Spencer had persuaded them to leave the cabin intact only by telling them that it was empty. They weren’t convinced, and they had yielded reluctantly. He knew that Jacques was far down the river and had said he would never return; but Jacques had twice helped him—and even an Indian would stand by a friend. Spencer had not wanted them to loot the cabin.

They found the tracks of wolves at the skin camp, but no evidence that the gray beasts had discovered anything to take with them. Spencer found a beaver in each trap when he pulled them from the partly frozen pools; the skins were icy cold and seemed in good shape when he cut them off. Taking castor from one beaver’s glands, he rubbed a generous supply of the musky-smelling stuff on some twigs, carried the traps to a pool where he had noticed two freshly cut poplar saplings, and reset them. Two hours later, he watched a brownish-black otter with a small catfish in its mouth scramble from a pool; he watched it eat the head and upper part of the body before lifting its own head. He shot it through the eye.

The snow melted from the open places, and in the heat of the day was soft and mushy under the trees. It was late February or early March: they had lost track of the calendar, and kept time only by the weather. All the

men were hunting only for otter, beaver, and mink. They killed a doe when they needed the soft leather for bullet patchings, and impregnated the square pieces with tallow. Otherwise, the deerskins were hardly worth the hunting, and not worth the tremendous effort of packing them back to the settlements.

These were powwowing days for the Indians. The Cherokees on the Tennessee River and the Shawnees north on the Scioto would sit and parley and smoke; when the weather mellowed a little more, the tribes would send out hunting and scouting parties; probably they would send war parties to harass the whites.

One night Mansker held his translucent hunting horn between his eyes and the fire. He tilted it, and mumbled with his lips as though counting the dark grains through the polished horn. "I go pack," he said. "It would be easier next month, but I would starve trying to run down rabbits. I am not built for running." He looked complacently at his thick, muscular legs.

The other men agreed. The going would be slow, but their supply of powder and shot was getting dangerously scanty.

Drake spoke thoughtfully. "I ain't agoin' back to the Watauga. They got papers out on me there; Jim told me he saw them, and they're marked 'Gone to Kentucky.' Guess I'll go back where they say I've gone."

Hambrick nodded. All the men knew that, the year before, Indians had stolen Drake's horses and pelts, his traps, and all his equipment. The Indians had discovered his camp, stolen up at night, and surprised him. Only the fact that he was sleeping some yards away from the camp had saved his own scalp. He had watched helplessly while they made off with everything he owned. There seemed nothing to do but stay in Kentucky and rebuild his stake with his rifle. Boone had furnished him with powder and lead. But the trader on the Watauga had sworn out a warrant against him.

"I aim to die honest," Drake went on, "unless I die too quick. But I've got to have traps and supplies out of these pelts. If they's anything left over, I'll send it to Johnson. I won't go back till I can face him and tell him what I think of that warrant."

The hunters understood. They made no effort to dissuade him. But Drake would have to pack or send the furs east after he returned to Boonesborough. There was no reason for them to make the double trip.

Big-foot Spencer frowned with the effort of thought. Drake was a good one to have at hand in an Indian fight or on a long hunting trip. But he had never wanted to be tied down to a farm. He had not measured off a plot of

land in the new country, as Spencer and Mansker had. A few Indians had stolen everything he owned. It did not seem right that Thomas Spencer, little more than a boy, should have a fine piece of land, a heavy load of furs, and all his equipment, while Drake had only enough to make a decent beginning. Suddenly he remembered Matt Swallow, and the bet that had angered him into spending a winter in the frontier country. The bet had not been the cause, he knew; he had wanted to stay. But Swallow's taunting remarks had at least hastened his decision.

When he got back to the Watauga, he would have won that bet. Matt Swallow's farm would be his farm. Yet he couldn't even offer sympathy to Drake. That independent frontiersman did not want it, or anything else—except a friendly gesture. There was one thing he could do. He spoke in matter-of-fact tones, as though his offer amounted to very little.

“I'll go a day with you. That'll get you to the barrens.”

Mansker bobbed his head in approval. “Goot. Ve wait for you, Pig-foot.”

Drake packed his furs, blankets, and other belongings into two equal bundles. Each weighed close to a hundred pounds.

They started at dawn. Midnight trotted ahead of them. Under the trees the snow was soft enough to make walking tiresome; wherever possible, they followed the game trails. On the sheltered hills there was a slippery crust which required careful going.

Spencer and Drake plugged along steadily. Occasionally they stopped to drink or rest, slipping the packs from their shoulders; at noon they ate smoked buffalo tongue and cracked a few hickory nuts and ate them as a substitute for bread.

The country got rougher. Although they walked carefully, they slipped and skidded at times on treacherous rocks and slopes. Their wet moccasins scrunched as they walked.

Late in the afternoon, they came to a small creek. Drake looked at the opposite bank, estimating the distance. He backed up a few paces, ran forward and leaped. His foot seemed well up on the opposite bank. But the ground had been cracked in freezing weather or undermined by rains; it gave way, rocks and earth rolling into the water. Drake clutched desperately at the ground above him, but could not catch anything solid. He slipped backward until his feet touched bottom. The water was above his knees.

Spencer had expected an easy jump. Warned by his partner's ill luck, he flexed his muscles, got a running start and leaped far across the branch,

landing securely on one foot. By the time he had turned around, Drake was upright and sputtering. Grasping Spencer's hand, he slithered and fought his way up the bank. He shook himself, then tested his legs.

"No bones broken," he muttered. "But I'm frozen. Let's make camp."

In the open glade they started a fire. Drake added wood until it was crackling and roaring. Spencer went into the woods to cut poles for an open-faced shelter for the night. As usual he moved silently. Under a beech tree a flock of turkeys were feeding on beech mast as they slowly approached the creek for their evening drink. Spencer stepped behind a tree, rested the barrel against the trunk, and fired at a pompous gobbler. The headless bird flopped wildly on the ground. The flock took wing, flying rapidly through the air ten or twelve feet above the ground.

Taking the cock back to the fire, Spencer tossed it on the ground. Drake was sitting barelegged on a deerskin, wringing out a moccasin; the other one and his leggings were on sticks near the blaze. "You might clean this while you're drying out," said Spencer.

He went back into the forest to cut poles and branches. When he returned a few minutes later, the bird lay untouched where he had dropped it. Drake, leggings, and moccasins were gone. From the creek came light sounds of digging in wet earth.

Spencer walked to the bank. "What in thunder are you doing?"

"I lost my knife." Drake turned a worried face upward. "It's bound to be here. But I can't find it." Paying no attention to the icy water running over his ankles, Drake returned to his search of the ground.

This was a calamity. In the woods a hunter depended on his long knife for many important chores, especially for skinning the game he killed; and a knife was a good weapon to have at close quarters. It was second only to one's rifle.

"A man feels undressed without his knife," remarked Spencer. He joined Drake in the search. But the light was fading, the knife not to be found. At last Spencer stood up. "I'll throw up the camp. Better come on in; you'll get the rheumatics down there. We'll find it in the morning."

But the knife eluded discovery the next morning as thoroughly as it had the night before. Although they searched a full hour, they could not find it.

"I give up," Drake finally admitted bitterly. "Maybe I dropped it earlier, when I slipped."

They went back to the fire and began drying their clothes. Spencer turned his back on Drake and pulled his long knife from its sheath. The blade was tough steel; it had been narrowed by many sharpenings and whetstoning by hand had scalloped the cutting edge. But the feel and the heft of the knife was right: in his own words, he felt at home with it. But he couldn't see a friend go into the woods without some kind of knife.

He looked at the blade regretfully. Then he placed his strong fingers on the steel, and snapped it in two.

“What was that?” exclaimed Drake.

“Here,” said Spencer, holding out four inches of steel blade. “Jam this into a block of wood.” He replaced the jagged knife in his belt. “I'll whet mine tonight.”

Drake looked at him in mingled anger and amazement. “You big-footed fool. I didn't want your knife. But I won't forget it.” He held out his hand. “Thanks.” He quickly made a rough handle. The men got into their dry moccasins.

Spencer lifted his light roll to his shoulder. Drake took the one heavy pack of furs, adjusted it, and said briefly, “See you next season. Good-bye, pup. Don't kill any skunks.” They shook hands again. Drake turned northward and soon was hidden by the trees.

Midnight and Spencer crossed the branch without difficulty and started the long trek back to camp.

XXIII

The End of the Bet

The journey over the mountains was slow and hard and tiresome. Hambrick and Mansker carried packs of almost two hundred pounds; Spencer's weighed over three hundred. They followed the banks of the Cumberland in its course north and east, though breaking away from its meandering curves when they could find a trace, or prospect of fairly regular country leading in their direction. When they hit Boone's Wilderness Trail, the party cut southeast and went through the Cumberland Gap.

In Carter's Valley they tried to rent or buy a pack horse. But skins were plentiful in comparison with horses; no settler would sell one with planting time coming on. Even when Spencer twirled a gold piece before a frontiersman's startled eyes, the man refused. But he looked greedily at the bright gold.

"Don't show dot again," said Mansker. "You vill get us murdered. Furs ve vould trade for a hoss, yes; but ve vill not get one. These plowpoys need a hoss like you need a rifle. Ve sell the furs, or ve carry them on our packs."

A trader offered to buy their pelts, but he had no equipment to offer, and could pay them only in Virginia paper money. The hunters contemptuously refused his efforts at bargaining, and continued their weary plodding.

But they felt better. At Carter's Valley they had eaten corn journeycake and peas and winter greens; they had talked with men and women who, moving westward, had recently talked with their friends and relatives. They marveled, and were not pleased, at the number of families with heavily loaded pack horses they met on the trail. The settlers were barely waiting for winter to break before they moved in. Log cabins were going up or were newly finished on many desirable sites.

Spencer grunted his disgust. "Got so a man can't find a valley without bumping into cabins and cows and kids. I'm going back."

Mansker chuckled. "No vonder he goes back. Pig-foot is got a farm dere. I vatched him step it off, und nefer yet did I see two legs stretch out so far. Dot is a man-sized farm, I tell you."

"Speaking of farms," said Hambrick, "I reckon he's got two. Matt Swallow bet his farm against the ten pounds that Henderson owed Big-foot

for that exploring we done last fall that Big-foot couldn't spend a winter in the western Tennessee country. I heard the bet. Of course, that place of Matt's is only the regulation size, but it's worth collecting. Big-foot can live on one in the summer, and t'other in the winter."

Spencer looked embarrassed. "You won't make me feel rich as long as I have to play mule and tote these pelts on my back. I don't mind carrying myself, but I'd like to buy a horse or a mule."

"Vy not build a leetle vagon, load it up, und let the vorthless dog pull it?" suggested Mansker.

"Once he gets home, Big-foot might sell Swallow's place and have a good stake. He better work quiet, though, or some gal will hitch onto him like a leech."

Spencer's answer was carelessly and lightly given. But he liked the idea that Hambrick had thrown out; he had already decided to sell that farm, perhaps back to Swallow. With that, and the ten pounds Henderson owed him, and the money his pelts would bring . . . He remembered that he had four gold pieces sewed in his shirt. He would be wealthy, able to buy all the equipment a man could need.

It would take a better farm than Matt Swallow's to keep him away from his newly claimed tract. The game was rapidly disappearing from this country. A man could get salt pork and cornbread at any cabin for a shilling, and drink coffee made of parched rye or tea from sassafras roots; but he was accustomed to wild game. Even bread did not compensate for the lack of deer and buffalo.

It was late afternoon when they reached the settlement. The three men talked briefly together. Hambrick decided to go on to his father's house, a mile away. Spencer remarked that, since his brother lived five miles out, he would stay at the log hotel, trade his furs in the morning, and then go on. Since Mansker was still many miles from his family, he too halted.

The fat innkeeper greeted them heartily. "Welcome, friends and strangers. How d'do."

"How," responded Mansker. "Ve vant food. No room. Ve sleep oudt. Tomorrow ve talk about furs."

"Sure," answered the owner. "But my rooms are as clean as you'll find anywhere. The gal scrubs them every day."

"I know," said Mansker, "but I don't like dem. Ve only vant food."

The fat man lifted himself heavily and waddled out of the room. A minute later he returned. "I put your names in the pot." His eyes blinked at them curiously. "You been gone a right smart spell. I ain't asking no questions, but I can always listen."

Spencer grinned. Fat Dick was a great talker; only his curiosity would ever make him willingly sit quiet while another man held the floor. But the innkeeper knew the superstitions of hunters, and knew that he must not ask whether they had had good luck or not. To ask such a question was to bring on bad luck, surely and inevitably. Mansker busied himself with his traps. A ready talker among his cronies in the woods, he was close-mouthed and suspicious in town. Spencer answered for them.

"We been out Kentucky-Tennessee way. Seems a man gets out of the habit of talking. How's my brother?"

"Jim's all right." Fat Dick moistened his lips. If his guests did not want to give out information, he did. Yet he preferred to approach a subject indirectly, working up to it with slightly sarcastic remarks and little questions that never required an answer. "Because he farms and you hunt, do you think he can't take care of himself? Why, some folks say as he got the brains in his family, and somebody I won't name got the muscle. I'll tell you what he did. Last November he got up from the table right after noon and started back to the fields. Guess what he saw? There, acoming out of the woods, was his hogs. Jim hopped to the windows and shuttered them, called his hogs to come under the house, and loaded up his rifle. When the Indians saw he was ready for 'em, they went right on and shot Tom Smith in his cornfield and killed and scalped him."

Mansker and Spencer had smiled briefly at the innkeeper's proof of Jim's brains. A frontiersman who failed to notice such things as hogs returning at midday would not live long. For Tom Smith's death they had brief words of sympathy.

The innkeeper was launched on a flow of babbling conversation. They would find that the town was building up. "Let's see, Big-foot, how long you been away? Nine, ten months? Why, boys, you won't know the old town. They's at least a dozen new houses, and three going up right now. Of course, we have to take the bad with the good. Milkweed fever was plumb terrible this year; killed two of the Coatsworth girls, and young Wiley Harris, and maybe a dozen cows."

The hunters paid some attention to his rambling talk of deaths and births and new developments. But they were self-contained, and a little suspicious

of a man who talked much. Fat Dick had the name of being a shrewd yet honest trader, and of setting a good table: two qualities that the frontiersmen valued. But he talked like a fool or an old woman.

“Remember Matt Swallow?” asked Fat Dick. Spencer half turned, and began to listen intently. Tomorrow he meant to go by Swallow’s place and claim it; he meant to have his rifle ready, for Matt was as likely as not to shoot at him first, and worry about losing the bet later. He rather hoped Matt would put up an argument, for then he’d feel better about taking his place.

The innkeeper continued, in the same tone of voice that he had used in talking of too much rain and of sudden death, as though both were of equal importance to him. “Seems to me he went out with you, last summer. Well, Matt heard a noise at his barn one night, come New Year’s or thereabouts, and he sidled out the door to take a look-see. Thought maybe his horse was being stolen, or maybe just was akicking at the planks. His wife lay in bed, listening. Then she heard a shot. When he didn’t come back, she went out herself. She’s a good woman; marry her myself if I didn’t have a wife. She found Matt in the snow, killed and sculped, and the horse gone. It seemed mighty late for Indians, and blamed cold; and the men said next morning that the footprints toed out. No Indian walks like that.”

Spencer listened, and said nothing. But he was conscious of a sudden confusion of mind. A man might crow over Matt Swallow, but not over his widow and his children. After all, Matt could have got another farm and started over.

The innkeeper’s sigh of sympathy jerked Spencer back to attention. “She’ll have a hard time putting in a crop, without a man or a horse. They do say as young Matthew swears he’s a man now, and does the chores, and keeps a weather eye on the hogs. Claims he may hitch one up and make a horse out of it.”

A bell clanged loudly. Fat Dick lifted himself with his arms, and licked at his lips. “The best time of the day, friends,” he remarked. “Let’s eat.”

During the first part of the meal, Spencer ate with little consciousness of food. He frowned at his plate. So Matt Swallow was dead, and his kid was trying to be a man. It wouldn’t be hard to do as well as Matt, in one way; Spencer was quite certain that Swallow had passed the word on to the Indians that he was in the Tennessee country. But Matt was a fair worker, in a land where men were needed.

Between bites, Fat Dick gabbled on about the bands of renegade Tories that had taken refuge in the mountain coves; undoubtedly they had murdered Swallow, as they had murdered other settlers. But two companies of militia were being organized in Washington District, to hunt down and punish the scoundrels.

Spencer heard little of this talk. He said nothing. Mansker would occasionally grunt, or make a short comment.

No one seemed to notice Spencer's troubled abstraction. If he didn't want to talk, that was his business. Abruptly, his mind hit upon a solution. He knew what he was going to do. His face cleared. He realized suddenly that he was eating fresh beef and greens and corn bread, and he set himself to enjoy the food. To his surprise and disgust, he found that he was too full to eat. Shoving his end of the bench back, Spencer got up, complimented Dick on the meal, and walked into the other room. Mansker followed him.

Leaving their bales of furs hung on wooden pegs in the room, Mansker and Spencer went out under the trees to sleep. The next morning, the trader-landlord began tallying their furs. He would pinch and pull at the hair and peer at its color and length, and twist the leather in his fingers. "Prime buckskin," he would say in a high chant, "two does make a buck. Prime beaver. Beaver's a buck. Otter. Otter's a buck. Small otter, not prime. Half a buck. Four mink make a buck." All his counting was done in terms of buckskins. When he had finished examining Spencer's pelts and counted up the black lines and half lines he had made on the counter with a piece of charcoal, he summed up. "I make it a hundred and forty-three bucks. One mink left over. That pays supper and breakfast. Shall I keep it on the books?"

"Yeah," said Spencer. "But I want four bucks to get a new outfit made. This one's got too many snags to do for next winter." He selected the furs, and rolled them up. "I'll come in later for supplies. Right now I want some paper and a quill."

Fat Dick looked at him in amazement. But he asked no questions, and Spencer volunteered no information. Taking the equipment, Spencer went to the end of the counter. Slowly and laboriously, spelling the words with his lips as he put them on paper, he began to write.

Occasionally, as he counted Mansker's pelts, Fat Dick would interrupt his singsong, "Prime buffalo. Buffalo's a buck," to stare at Spencer.

When the tally was completed and the writing was finished, Spencer took two sheets of paper to Mansker. “Witness these for me,” he said.

Mansker grunted, and looked at the writing. He spelled the words out. “I always said Pig-foot was a pig fool,” was his only comment as he painfully scrawled his name on the paper.

“They’re just alike,” said Spencer, as Mansker looked at the second paper. The older hunter, seeming relieved at not having to read it, signed it also and returned both papers.

Spencer folded one carefully and put it into his bullet pouch. The other he handed to the landlord. “Keep this paper safe. If anything happens to me, give it to Mrs. Swallow. I’ll be in town sometime soon, and get what supplies I need.”

Fat Dick nodded, and walked over to a huge, handmade desk. “It’s safer here than it’d be in the courthouse,” he said.

The two hunters paid him no attention. “I’m going out again in May,” said Spencer. “I’d be proud to have you come along.” The old German grunted his approval. They strapped up their light bundles, shouldered them, and walked out. At the edge of town they paused briefly to shake hands and agree that Mansker should come back in May; then Mansker set off on a trail to the southeast, and Spencer continued to walk due east. For a dozen paces Midnight frolicked along at Mansker’s heels. Suddenly he stopped, half turned, and barked reproachfully at Spencer.

“Come along, doggy,” said Mansker. “My kids would like to ride on your pack. They would run some of dot fat off, I pet you.”

“Here, Midnight,” Spencer called to him. “That German will make sausage of you. Come along, boy.”

The men waved, the dog bounded happily through the low brush at the side of the crossing, and nipped playfully at Spencer’s heels. The wagon road wound into the forest. Midnight dashed into the woods, leaped into a hot and noisy pursuit of some small animal, and a few minutes later gave tongue to a loud triumphant barking.

Two miles down the road Spencer turned into a well-beaten path that led to a small log cabin. Midnight approached, looked at the trail, and turned back into the woods. The cabin was partly visible from the road, but brush that needed cutting was growing near it, and a generous supply of stumps cluttered the cleared ground. Matt Swallow hadn’t done a lick of work on the yard since he first cleared the ground for his building. Behind the house,

Spencer could see a barn and a small open field. Dreading the task ahead of him, he walked slowly toward the clapboard door.

He heard excited sounds coming from within the house. A high voice said, "Here he is, maw." Then silence.

Spencer was embarrassed. He did not know exactly what he wanted to say, or how to begin the conversation. Mrs. Swallow, most likely, had never heard of the bet. He did not know whether that would make his task easier, or harder. With reluctant steps, he went on. The door opened. A small woman in a neat calico dress walked down the steps. Her eyes looked red; but her voice was quiet and even. "Good morning, Mr. Spencer."

A shrill boyish voice interrupted her. "You get off my land," it snapped, from the corner of the house.

Spencer whirled. A long gun barrel was pushed around the side of the cabin. It wavered, then covered him steadily as the barrel rested on the end of a log. One bright eye under a mop of tow hair was gazing fixedly at him over the sight.

Abruptly, Spencer stopped. The black hole in the barrel was aimed straight at his chest. "Wait a minute, sonny," he began mildly.

"Matthew Swallow," said his mother firmly. "You . . ."

The boy interrupted her with an angry retort to Spencer. "Don't you call me sonny. I'm a man now. You get off this place or I'll drill you clean." There was desperation in his voice.

"I'll look after Matthew, Mr. Spencer," said Mrs. Swallow. "He's a good boy, but he don't understand. I don't know as I do, either, but Matt told me about how he bet the farm, and how he'd win a lot of money. He shouldn't have done us that way, but he did." She stopped, clearing her throat roughly to keep back the sobs. Her eyes were moist. She wheeled toward her son. "You, Matthew! Put that gun down. You're not too big to be licked." She started toward him.

"You keep still, maw. I ain't lettin' no man run me off my home-place. Don't you get in front of this gun."

Mrs. Swallow hesitated. Spencer looked admiringly, yet uneasily, at the boy's flushed face; his jaws were tightly set but the lips quivered. "Leave him alone, ma'am. He's a smart bantam. He'd shoot, like he says."

A huge black dog loped into the cleared ground. He seemed to smell the confusion in the air, hesitated, arched his back, and advanced growlingly

toward the boy.

“Call off your dog,” shouted the boy. The gun kept its steady aim at Spencer. “If he jumps me, I’ll kill you before I fall.”

“Here, Midnight, here. Come to me, old boy. That’s it. Now lie down.” Midnight, fur ruffled and eyes bright, crouched at his feet. “That suit you, son . . . I mean, Mr. Swallow?”

“You keep him there. I ain’t no mister, but I’m all the man there is here.” His voice broke and his eyes were bright with tears that threatened to overflow.

“Please, Mr. Spencer, don’t think bad of him,” said Mrs. Swallow. “He’s been tryin’ to hoe up ground, and he killed a deer for us.”

Spencer barely let her finish. “Now look here, ma’am. I’m not lookin’ for trouble, but I ain’t used to being run off a place with a gun. Not anybody’s place. I thought maybe we could talk peaceful, but I don’t like to talk into a gun barrel. However, all I stopped to say was—”

She broke in. “We’ll go. It’s your place when you want it.” She began to cry.

“I ain’t leaving,” began the boy. His mother stumbled toward him. The gun wavered.

“Matthew, you put that gun down. Put it down.”

The barrel was slowly withdrawn. Spencer felt hot sweat breaking out on his forehead. This was even harder than he had anticipated.

Matthew came slowly around the corner, and put one arm round his mother. “We can find us a place,” he said. “Don’t cry, maw.”

“Listen,” said Spencer desperately, “you take this and read it, ma’am.” He handed her the paper abruptly. His words came tumbling out in his anxiety to get through. “It says this farm is all yours. I wouldn’t have it. I’ve got me a place of my own. Fat Dick’s got a copy of the paper. Matt and me, we done called that bet off long ago.”

Desperately anxious to avoid their thanks, Spencer turned and started to run from the cabin. When he was safe in the road again, he began to chuckle. “Blamed funny if I had got away from all the Cherokees and that fighting bantam had knocked me over when I was safe home.” The idea amused him. He had spent six months in dangerous country; he had rarely been nearer death than when he walked toward a cabin that he could legally

have claimed as his own. “That kid would have fired, sure as thunder. I’ll take him out with me sometime, hey, Midnight?”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Because of copyright considerations, the illustrations by Edward Shenton(1895-1977) have been omitted from this etext.

Some illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

[The end of *Long Hunter* by Edd Winfield Parks]