

THE
SKELETON SCOUT;
OR,
THE BORDER BLOCK

CHAPTER I.

A YANKEE ON A LOG.

THE scene opens upon one of those great rivers of the West, in the country which Tecumseh claimed and fought for so gallantly. The forest was at rest, save only the songs of birds and the splash of the fish leaping in the river. A thicket of bushes which bordered the path down to the water, was suddenly pushed aside and a grim face peered out, a face rendered doubly fierce by its war-paint, for it was that of an Indian of Tecumseh's noble race.

Satisfying himself that no one was in sight, the Indian rose slowly, stalked out into the path, and took his course toward the river.

Another and another followed, until ten had come into view, gliding in silence down the forest-path.

Each savage was naked save the breech-cloth and moccasins. Only the man who first showed himself, was differently dressed. He was a tall, stately warrior, bearing upon his naked breast the totem of his tribe painted in bright colors, and wearing upon his dark hair the plumed head-dress of a chief.

Each Indian carried a rifle of the most approved make in the English service, together with the inevitable scalping-knife and tomahawk.

Not one of them spoke, but followed their chief's cautious steps down to the water's edge, where, sheltering themselves behind the bushes, they peered across the stream.

It was late in the afternoon, and the sun was already out of sight behind the tree-tops on the western shore. But, not upon the glories of nature did the eyes of those fierce-visaged sons of the forest rest. What then?

Upon the other shore, close to the river, stood a log cabin of the largest size, with heavy walls and doors, calculated to resist any ordinary attack. The fields around it were green with varied crops, for it was now near the end of summer.

A strong wall of logs, hewn smooth, and leaving no chance to a climber, surrounded the house. It was plain that the builder, whoever he might be, was fully awake to the dangerous position he occupied in the midst of the Indian country, but that he did not apprehend any immediate attack was apparent, for his huge stockade gates were off the hinges and leaning against the walls on either side.

The Indians lay under cover of the bushes, their gleaming eyes riveted upon their expected prize, but they made no movement, for they beheld a man standing upon the point which stretched out into the stream, a rifle in his hand, pacing up and down as if on guard.

As they gazed a strange sight greeted their astonished vision. Something was coming down the river in mid stream. It seemed to be a man, seated in a canoe.

The current swept him rapidly downward, and, as the nondescript craft came near, they saw a man seated astride of a log, keeping its head down the current by the aid of a flat stick which he held in his hand. As he neared the stockade he began to paddle vigorously, and whirled the head of the log more toward the shore. By this time the watcher on the point had run down to the water's edge, and the click of a rifle-lock sounded.

"Ahoy, there!" he shouted.

"Hello!" replied the man on the log. "How de dew?"

"Hadn't you better come ashore?" said the sentry, persuasively, pointing his rifle.

"Seeing it's *yew*, I donno but I *had*," replied the navigator, coolly. "Yew seem mighty pressing, somehow."

"I'd like to persuade you to come ashore," replied the sentry, with a laugh.

"Ain't I coming?" growled the man on the log. "Yew needn't put on sech style over me, I guess! I ain't said nothing tew yew, I judge. Don't be sech a 'tarnal fool tew keep p'inting that weepin at me. It might go off."

"It will go off, if you don't come ashore, sir," replied the sentry. "Hurry up!"

The Yankee—there could be no mistake as to his nationality—turned the head of the log toward the shore, and as it struck the land, began to rise slowly from the water. The sentry kept up his attitude of command so long as his Yankee friend

showed only the ordinary amount of bone and muscle, but his eyes opened as foot after foot rose from the water, and the Yankee stood six feet seven in his stockings! A queer looking specimen of the *genus homo* he was, such as, for the good of the race, nature rarely framed. In breadth of shoulder and girth of body he was no larger than men of ordinary size, and this added to his imposing height. His face, which did not show a particle of beard, was round, good-natured and smiling, furnished with a mouth of mighty breadth, and a nose curved like the beak of an eagle. His arms were of extraordinary length, even for so tall a man, reaching nearly to the knee. His hair was of a flaming yellow.

He was dressed in a dirty shirt of homespun, which never had known any other cleansing since first put on than that it received from the clouds or streams. A black leathern belt was strapped about his waist, but it bore no more deadly weapon than an ordinary knife. His feet were covered by moccasins rudely made and tied with buck-skin strings. Upon his head he wore a cap of beaver-skin, mangy and worn bare in spots, giving him a far from prepossessing appearance. A certain whimsical, devil-may-care air marked the fellow, which was irresistible, and the sentry laughed aloud, as the long stranger faced him on the beach. The sentry was a young man in the dress of a rifleman, with the bar of a captain on his shoulders. He was a stout-built, handsome fellow, and looked with an air of commingled amusement and astonishment, at the lofty proportions of the new-comer.

"You are a nice specimen of a prize-baby," he said, running his eyes up the long, lank body.

"Yaas, yaas! My mother always said I was a sweet little infant!" replied the Yankee. "How's all the folks?"

"Oh, they are in good health. I hope you left your own family in a good state of preservation, my long friend."

"My fam'ly allers travel with me," said the stranger. "Thar ain't so many of us so't we kin afford to sep'rate. Got a right neat little place here, ain't yew? Sort o' like the looks of it myself."

"What were you doing on that log?" demanded the sentry.

"Lord love yew, I thought you knew that! I was riding."

"Any fool knows that," replied the young man, roughly.

"Then what made *yew* ask me, if yew know'd it so well?" demanded the Yankee, indignantly. "Yew git eout! kan' a feller-being take a ride if he wants tew?"

"Certainly."

"Waal, I was a-coming down the river, and I thought I'd ruther ride than walk, so I took to the water. But look a here, darn and blast sech contrary logs as that thar. I've bin pitched neck and crop inter the water four times in the last five miles, and darn my ear ef this ain't the trewest thing I've said this good while. I got along a darned sight better when I could get my foot on the bottom and steer that way. Yes I did."

"How far have you come?"

"I dunno nothing 'bout distances in these dangerous woods. It might have bin ten miles an' it might have bin twenty, I dunno."

"Do you travel without arms?"

"Not by a darned sight, I don't! What dew yew call them things?"

He stretched out a pair of arms nearly as long as an ordinary man's leg.

"Pshaw! I mean have you no weapons."

"Got a jack-knife," replied the Yankee, coolly.

"Is that all?"

"Ain't it enough? Thunder! yew don't want a man tew be a walking armory, dew yew?"

"You are an odd chicken. Perhaps you won't object to giving me your name?"

"No, thank yew, I don't like to give away my name. I dunno whether I could git a better one."

"What is your name?"

"Oh; yew want me tew tell my name. Waal, try Seth Spink, and see how that will work. I'm the all-firedest man yew ever did see. I've traveled from St. Louis tew Bostin, and from Oswego tew New Yorleans. Thar ain't no place on this created hemisphere where I ain't set my foot. Yaas," he continued, "I've rode alligators in the bayous of Louisiana and it make it more lively for a man, 'cause he has to keep jerking up his legs to keep the young alligators from chawin' 'em off."

"There; that lets *you* out," said the young captain. "Now I'll return your confidence. This is one of the outposts of the fur company, and my father's house at the same time. His name is Matthew Floyd. My name is William Floyd, and I have the honor to be a captain in the rifles, upon the staff of Governor Harrison."

"Glad tew meet yew, William," said the Yankee, extending a hand looking like a side of mutton. "Shake."

"Confound your impudence," said the staff officer. "It passes all belief. But come into the house and get something to eat, although I am afraid that long body will breed a famine."

"Don't yew believe it! yew give me a little hog or tew and a small beef-critter for supper, and I won't complain. I like a light meal, I dew."

"A small hog or two and a beef-critter? Do you mean to eat the provisions of the entire garrison at a single meal?"

""Tain't much of a garrison that don't eat no more nor that! All right; then bring me a loaf of bread and a ham, and I'll show you how tew eat."

Captain Floyd laughed, and led the way into the house through the open gate of the stockade. The Yankee had picked up a stick on the bank and was whittling away dexterously, whistling in the minor clef, but keeping his eyes about him nevertheless. He shook his head when he saw the gates off the hinges, and muttered to himself. Floyd turned upon him quickly.

"What are you growling about there? Let me know at once."

"Git eout! Waal, if yew must know, I was thinking what a darned good pertection a gate is to a house when it's off the hinges, standing ag'in' the wall."

"You are inclined to be sarcastic, and are more observing than I gave you credit for. To tell the truth up to this time we have been in no danger. The Shawnees have been friendly, and Tecumseh himself has eaten in our house. The Prophet was here only last week."

"Who?"

"The Prophet; the brother of Tecumseh, who has built a town upon the upper Wabash near Tippecanoe."

"I dunno much about it, but it seems to me I did hear summers that that Prophet is a treacherous old cuss," said Seth.

"I have heard the same, but he appeared very friendly."

The Yankee said nothing more, and they entered the house. A girl, who was reading near a window, rose to receive them, looking surprised as she saw the stranger.

"Cousin Madge," said Floyd, in a bantering tone, "let me introduce to you an errant knight who has wandered from the paternal castle even to the banks of the Wabash. His ancestral name is Spink."

"How can you, Will?" said Madge, laughing. "I am sure Mr. Spink is very welcome."

She was very beautiful—a strange flower to bloom in the wilderness. She was not the daughter of Matthew Floyd by

blood, but the child of a dear friend, Herbert Carlyle, who had long ago gone down into the valley of the shadow, leaving her to his care. And when the hour of trial came to her adopted father, she followed him boldly, to make a new home and fortune upon the prairies of the far west. She was, as we introduce her, a young girl, with hair banded back from a lofty brow, and rolled in great braids upon her regal head; a face a little browned by exposure to the sun, but very beautiful. She came forward immediately and greeted the Yankee with cordial ease and grace, and he looked down on her with a broad smile.

"A strange place tew bring sech a gal as this, Captin' Floyd," he said. "The towns would be the safest place fur her, now."

"She will not leave my father," said Floyd. "If we could have our way she would not be here. Madge, our friend is hungry. Will you go to Phillis and ask her to get him something to eat? She probably will not do it unless you speak coaxingly to her, for a more obstinate old woman never breathed."

"W'at?" exclaimed a voice. "Who you's talking 'bout, mass' Will? You t'ink cause you's white dat dis chile gwine ter lay down so dat you can tramp on her, but she ain't; no sah! I's a nigger, but Goramity he med me black hese own self, an' all de water in Egypt can't wash me white, nohow."

"Now Phillis—" said Will.

"Oh, hold you hush, do, mass' Will! You gwine 'bout to mek mischief, dat's w'at you's gwine to do! You s'pose I gwine to dirty all my dish for dis low-lived Yankee truck, gwine 'bout in

de woods like a roarin' lion for to come for to go fur to eat ebbery t'ing? How we give *him* 'nough to eat, a great long shadder?"

Phillis had come up unobserved while they were talking, and stood in the doorway when Will made that allusion to her native obstinacy. She was a ponderous female, weighing very nearly three hundred pounds, being built on the model of the redoubtable Wouter Van Twiller, of famous memory, who was five feet six inches high, and six feet five inches in circumference. She held in one hand a dishcloth, and in the other a frying-pan which she had been washing when curiosity called her to the door.

"There's a sight to wake the finer feelings of our natur'," said the Yankee, looking at the negress with a grin. "A good fat, healthy female like that is a credit to human natur', she is, by Jehosaphat. She makes me think of my maternal grandmother, only the old lady had the misfortune to be white, more the pity! 'Cause the good Book teaches us thar was a good chaine of black men in Scriptor times. Now, my grandmother—"

"See yer," said the old housekeeper, "you's git inter trouble one of dese days, ef you fool roun' dis chile. G'way, g'way, you's makin' mischief! Oh, gosh all to pieces, you gwine stan' dar and poke fun at me all de time? Berry well; wait till I gub you any t'ing to eat, dats all!"

"But, aunty—" said Madge, coaxingly. "How can you act so?"

"Dar, dar, chile! 'Tain't dat I valley cookin' de leastest bit, it do mek me powerful mad when dey pokes fun at me."

"Did the old lady think I was funnin'?" said the Yankee, with a solemn face. "I wa'n't, now that's a fact. My grandmother was a bu'ster, now you'd better believe! Why, ef you was to put her on one end of a beam, and this old lady on the other, you'd see this old lady fly like a bird in the air. She wouldn't weigh a feather alongside of my old lady, that gal wouldn't."

"Tole 'em I wa'n't so drefful fat," said Phillis, considerably mollified. "But, dey won't none ob 'em beliebe me, nohow. Dar; I's go an' see w'at I kin pick up for de gemman. Would you like some venison?"

"Yaas."

"Or mebbe veal would suit ye better?"

"I ain't partic'lar. I'll taste 'em both. Ef ye've got some pickles handy, throw a bushel or two on the table with a couple of hams, and two or three loaves of bread. Any thing will dew for a *lunch*."

Phillis looked at him very much as she would have looked at a dangerous maniac unfit to go at large, and went slowly out into the kitchen, the floor shaking under her ponderous tread. The next moment a storm of vituperation directed at the heads of her satellites, announced that she was at work, and a savory smell was wafted to their nostrils. Seth pricked up his ears like the war-horse "that smelleth the battle afar off," and waited. When the table was set, he marched in and gave Phillis a grand exemplification of the power of a good appetite. Pone bread in huge masses leaped down his capacious maw. Slice after slice of venison followed, washed down by various cups of coffee.

Phillis, appalled at his appreciation of her cookery, watched with uplifted hands, and finally fled to Will Floyd in dismay.

"You git dat wolf outer dis house jus' as quick as you kin! He stay har one week an' he eat us out ob house an' home."

CHAPTER II.

WILLIMACK, THE WYANDOT.

By the time the Yankee had finished his repast, night had come on, and he came hurrying out of the kitchen, with his mouth full of venison steak, and ran to the window.

"How many dew yew reckon in this post, boss?" he said, turning to the young soldier.

"Myself, my father, two soldiers of the rifles, and two black boys."

"Yaas. Now let me ask yew a little question. Does it look like common sense for yew tew keep yure gates off the hinges?"

"To tell you the truth, I have some doubts myself, but the Prophet seemed to think it showed confidence in the Indians on the Wabash to leave the gates open, and it was more to please him than any thing else that we did it."

"The Prophet? Now, see here, captin; I ain't bin but a little while in this kentry, but I know what the Shawnee Prophet is. He's a treacherous old fox. He's got some plot ag'in' the people of this section, and I know it, sartin sure! Jest see the raft of villains he's got round him up thar on the Wabash. Kickapoos, Winnebagoes, Micmacs, Shawnees, and the Old Scratch knows what other nations—the riff-raff and off-scourings of the tribes. They're nice fellers to live nigh, ain't they?"

"I have often thought them dangerous," said Floyd. "But what can we do?"

"Yew kan put up yure gates, anyhow. And say; hadn't yew better call in yure men, ef yew've got any outlyin', 'cause it's gittin' dark."

"I think you are right," said Floyd.

He took down a horn, and going to the door, took a long breath and blew a gallant blast, which echoed far and wide through the depths of the forest. Shortly after, the tramp of coming feet could be heard, and there emerged from the woods behind the house four men advancing at a hurried pace. As they entered the stockade the Yankee saw that two of them were common soldiers of the American army, one an Indian of the Shawnee nation, and the fourth an old man with white hair. The Yankee swung himself up on the head of a cask standing within the stockade, and, taking out a piece of pigtail tobacco, twisted off a mighty "chaw," and sat there, rolling the sweet morsel under his tongue.

"What made you so late, father?" said young Floyd, advancing.

"Willimack got puzzled in regard to the path, and if we had not heard your horn, I do not know how long we might have stumbled about in the darkness."

The Yankee uttered a long whistle and thrust his tongue into his cheek. The sound drew the attention of the old man to him, and he scanned him curiously.

"Who is this?" he said.

"A traveler, who has stopped here for shelter," replied the young man, coming forward. "What did you mean by that whistle, Spink?"

"Sho, now! Don't be so blasted inquisitive. I wouldn't, anyhow. I'll tell yew by an by; but, the fust thing yew dew is to put up them gates, do ye hear?"

The Indian had been standing just within the gates, and, as he heard the voice of the stranger, he cast a quick glance in his direction, and his hand stole to the handle of his hatchet. But, the Yankee sat upon the cask, beating time with his heels upon the sides, and muttering to himself. The Indian stalked gravely to his side, and looked fiercely into his face. The savage was a rather good-looking brave of the Wyandot tribe, whose powerful limbs, strong shoulders, and muscular hands gave promise of great strength. The down-easter endured his fixed gaze for the space of three minutes without moving a muscle of his set face, until the savage spoke.

"Who is this?" he said. "Dare you come here to sing an evil song in the ears of my father with the gray hair, to make him distrust his brethren of the Shawnees and Wyandots?"

"Oh, git eout! Who said any thing tew yew? The most cantankerous Injin I ever see in all my born days."

"You laugh at Willimack, the chief? Why should my father put up his strong gates?"

"'Cause he's a man of sense, I guess. Now, don't rile up, Injin, *don't!* 'Tain't that I care any thing about yew, understand, but I sort o' hate to see things go this way. Willimack, they call you?"

"Willimack is my name."

"All right. Been guiding this party on a prospecting tour, so tew speak?"

"We have been exploring," said the elder Floyd.

"See any Injin signs?" asked Seth.

"A great many," replied the old man. "What of that? The Indians are friendly now."

"Glad to hear it, 'cause I didn't know it. So this man Willimack *lost his way*?"

"Yes."

"Youngster," said the Yankee, leaping off the barrel, "you come here a minnit. I want tew speak with yew."

Young Floyd went with the Yankee aside, followed by the suspicious glances of the savage, who would have gone aside with them, but Floyd signed to him sternly to keep back, and he obeyed, chafing inwardly.

"Look here," said Spink, when they were out of ear-shot. "They say we Yankees are a little gumptious, an' I guess we be, but, it don't need much smartness tew see threw *his* gilding. That Injin is a Wyandot, and knows every foot of the soil along the Wabash, and yit he *loses his way*! Now, does that sound nat'ral? I only ask yew fair."

"It does look strange."

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