

Chapter VIII – Bad Trip into Paradise

I grabbed up powder horn, possibles and pouch, threw down my blanket and fled through the forest as fast as I could. Behind me was shrieking like I had never heard before, Ben or Joe or both, calling out for me to save them. I ran down alongside of the brook, stumbling and slipping, hearing the war whoops and the shrill pleadings, hard to believe men could cry out in such voices. Ran until I thought my lungs would burst, putting as much distance as possible between me and those fiends. When my mind began to unnumb from the shock, I clumb out of the rocky watercourse, stepping on stones to hide my tracks. Then I ran due west, away from the rising sun, stopping for nothing. I was sure they must be right behind me. Moving both fast and quiet in the woods is hard for a white man, especially when he is so damn scared. I didn't try to be quiet, I just kept fleeing. The June forest was thick with new leafy growth, green and blooming. Made it difficult to see ahead. The sun was not yet high enough to penetrate the deep glades through which I ran. I got myself entangled in a thorn patch, clawed at it to get free, my face and arms scratched and bleeding. I got out and kept going.

I didn't stop running all day, just short stops for gulps of air, which were sobs as much as they were gulps. I was trying to grab distance, determined to delay my end as long as possible. I was soaked with sweat, hair completely disheveled, branches slapping my face, arms and legs. There was no way to tell if the Indians were following or not, I was too afraid to stop long enough to look.

Late afternoon a winter blowdown blocked my way. Massive trees brought down by severe winter winds and lying in a thick tangle. I had to crawl beneath some, climb over others, some of them were angled more than twenty feet in the air and swayed beneath me as I walked their length, as

if they would collapse with my weight. I was leaping, tripping, falling. Banged my head one time when I fell off one log and onto another, damn near knocking myself out. Fighting my way through this wide hilltop mess, I realized how abject flight, guided by panic, not reason, might cost me my life. I needed to keep my wits about me, otherwise I might run right back into my pursuers or box myself in a way which would permit of no escape. Or I might get away only to become so lost in the escaping, I might never find my way out of the woods. If I would get away, I must use good sense. Easy enough to tell myself but a damn hard thing to do, and when I finally got past the blow-down, I was once again running with no thought to my direction.

I ran wherever the immediate terrain allowed me to go the fastest. Knew it was wrong and didn't care, my brain numb with fear, chilled by the remembers of what I had seen and heard, the vicious warclub thumping down onto poor Bill's head, Toad's screams and the screams of the others. All day I remained certain the savages were close behind, ready to grab me did I falter, not thinking how the Indians' pursuit would be less precipitate and more thought out than my own flight. I saw laughing demonic faces in every afternoon shadow and kept on even as my overworked body and mind demanded I stop.

By sunset of this worst possible of days, I was completely exhausted and had to stop. I sat down on a rock, my head in my hands, blubbing, then, and realizing the danger in the sounds of my blubbing and heavy breathing, I made an effort, gulps of air meant to suppress it all. I got up, looked around. I was in a dry flatland situated between mountains. No sun could penetrate the thick canopy of leaves, this was perhaps the worst situation for a man already lost in the woods, perfectly flat land, no slanting sun's rays through the treetops, no landmarks, no way to determine direction. I might go in circles, even in such a small place, and already panicked, I might not ever get out. An Indian, though, could

navigate it with ease. This increased my panic. I had to get out but I didn't know the size of the area and so must proceed deliberately, even slowly, and always in one direction. I didn't know what direction I went, it might have been taking me back toward the Indians. It didn't matter. I had to get out of this flat, half-lit place. No way to tell if I was going in a straight line or in a circle until I came to more rocky ground and the sun began showing through gaps in the canopy. I felt the ground rising slightly beneath me. I was going uphill, the ground becoming steeper as I went and I burst out from beneath the trees and onto a rocky hillside.

I climbed the hill and the mountain behind it and just around dark, I reached open ledges on the other side. Scrub oak and granite boulders, patches of blueberries, the green berries reminding me how hungry I was. The sides of the mountain fell away sharply to west and south. Much too steep to scramble down. In the last light of day and rechecking my direction from the last of the sun, I looked for a way to get down off the slopes. I walked the ledges and was startled by a loud drumming from a bush close alongside me. Thought it was an Indian and realized it was a partridge, flushed. Just when I had settled down, a second bird flew off with the same effect on me, then a third. A large crow was roosting in the trees and it struck me this was the place to spend the night. Not even Indians could sneak up on me without spooking the birds. I could rest and be off at the earliest part of the dawn. I made my bed on a grassy spot under an overhanging rock ledge.

I slept fitfully, the wind blowing cold. Before morning a storm came up. At first the rain fell softly, not too bad in my exposed bed. Then it came down harder and though I was soaked and miserable, I was grateful for the rain as it would serve to erase sign of my passing. The wind whipped the rain in on me, the water poured in off the ledge. I tried to burrow deeper into the granite, which did not budge. I got up and moved beneath the sheltering boughs of a large pine tree.

There I sat, thinking sad, awful thoughts, wanting the rain to stop, the dawn to come so I could continue fleeing.

The deluge abated, yet sleep would not come. In my mind's eye was my last glimpse of Bill, the poor bastard, his brains and blood splattered, and the screams of the others, with two of them or maybe all three, tied up to trees for the inflicting of such unspeakable horrors as the savages were capable, maybe still suffering in the throes of those horrors. With them were lost our furs, the path to a quick fortune turned to ruin and death.

I shivered in the wind, awaiting the dawn, which seemed as if it would never come. Finally, it did, only to find me alternately dozing and watching the woods around me, too scared to move. My piece soaked through, it must be cleaned, the powder replaced else it would not fire. Powerful hungry, I set out to kill a partridge with a stick, but they were too wary. Gave up when I realized a partridge would have to be cooked and I could in no way risk a fire. I decided I would have to hold off cleaning my gun. Only flight mattered.

I clumb down off the mountain in first light. Not so difficult as it had looked to be last night in my panic and better than going back to the north. Once down I turned back south and east, to try and find the Hudson, if indeed it was a brook to the Hudson we had found day before yesterday. The rest of the day I walked forests of massive pine trees, and had this country ever before witnessed the footfalls of a white man? The sun mostly stayed hidden behind dark shifting clouds. I was hopelessly lost. No idea in what direction lay the Hudson River. Thought of my father's tavern, of rum and of meat roasting on a spit.

Without any sign of pursuit but in no way convinced I was not being stalked, I began now to take the precautions necessary to blur traces of my passing. I walked in cold streambeds and along the length of downed trees, leaping from one dead log to another and from rock to rock, using pine branches to sweep where my feet touched the ground.

The rain came and went, my way led through groves of huge evergreens of a species unfamiliar to me. Evidence of forest fires. Best to avoid the areas where the fires seemed most recent, my sign would be more visible there. Overhead stretched a canopy of green almost too thick for the sun to penetrate if it would come out. I spent considerable time watching my backtrack, though there has been neither sight nor sound of Indians.

One could never be sure of being safe from those devils. They had proven themselves deviously clever and relentless in hunting us down. Hoped they might have miscounted the number of our party or had been satisfied enough with what they had already gained to decline pursuing for just a single scalp. Maybe all of what they had done or were still doing to Ben and Joe had sated their lust for savagery. I remembered some of what Hugh's men had told me about what it meant to get captured, how men tied to trees might survive for days, were their torturers skillful enough. "Caressing" is what the Indians called the torture. This had greatly amused Hugh's men. I wondered if Ben and Joe's caressing was what was keeping me alive. For a short while, at least. More likely some Indians would stay for the torturing while others came after me. I resolved to fight to the death if they caught up with me. Rather go the way Bill did, horrible as it was, than get tied to a tree. The more I tried to convince myself they were not in pursuit of me, the more convinced I became they were even now close by in the shadows. Such savagery as theirs could never be sated.

Turned my nose a little more to the south and moved on once again, fast as the rough forest floor allowed. The hole in my empty stomach becoming harder to ignore.

I came to a small mountain lake, nestled beneath open ledges. Stood there studying the surroundings. The pond looked deep. A small deer showed itself along the brushy shore of the far side, having a drink. Peaceful at her ease. I relaxed a little. Probably no danger over there. As hungry as

I was, I was glad I had not cleaned my gun. No way could I have resisted shooting the deer.

The doe moved on, I made my way around the pond looking for the outlet. All day I searched for the waters which might lead to the Hudson. No luck. My bed this night was an extra layer of soggy pine needles in an aromatically scented grove of evergreens, along the side of one of the interminable mountains. This one on the lateral of its bigger brother looked like a saddle or a hump.

Early morning, rain doused me. Rivulets splashed down off rocky guts carved out of the mountains by water action of a million years. The sides of these ravines too sheer to climb, up or down. Under the slopes, bogs lay in the flat bottoms between the humps. By this time I had no idea where I had come to, nor the way home. The only thing I could tell for sure was south. And then only when the sun was out. Not too often. I passed through the most consistently rugged country imaginable. Mile after mile of rough walking, ravines to cross, steep ledges, mountain-sides so rocky as to be dangerous.

For three days I fought it out with those inhospitable mountains, and with no sign of Indians, or of anybody, I wandered through a land of old beaver dams. Untended for many years. Abandoned remnants of bygone times. The beaver is trapped out of this country.

I then traversed miles of pine forest where the walking was easier but the land beneath those trees was barren of game, almost a desert. In the few places where beech or oak grew, I saw sign of turkey and deer. I decided it was time to clean my gun. When I had it all apart on a flat rock in the open, the rain came down hard. Frustrated, I shook my fist at the sky. I dried my rifle and put it back together as best I could. I didn't reload it, still wary of shooting, or of being tempted to shoot, and anyway, what little powder I had would be best preserved in my powder horn.

I resumed trekking. From here the country took on a still wilder aspect, if such be possible. The farther into it I wandered, the worse it seemed to get. My progress was slow, I was still circling back, watching behind me for Indians. I came to a land of high rocky cliffs, the ledges barren of cover except for an occasional white birch or stunted pine clinging to life, exposed to the constantly blowing wind. Brave little things growing out of small crevasses. I set snares for rabbits with pieces of rawhide. Checked them just at dusk and was almost delirious with finding I had caught two small ones, barely enough to keep me from starving. I came to a land where the brooks began to run west and south. Must be getting near the Hudson. I had hopes that a few more days might see me in Saratoga. Had no idea how wrong a fellow could be.

Most nights on the exposed slopes, the weather was too cold and windy to sit for long, and still not daring to light a fire other than cook fires, which I kept mostly smokeless and extinguished quickly, usually before my rabbits were much more than singed, I about froze. With the rain and the wind, I reckoned to die of fever and the chills, thus cheating the savages or starvation from getting me. I regretted having tossed aside my blanket when I fled the Indian attack. Without any gear and with the nights so cold I couldn't hunker down some nights for more than a few hours and had to get up and move on, proceeding as best I could in the dark.

By observing the track of the Celestial Hunter whenever the night skies allowed, it was possible to find my way south. Slow going, but I could not sit huddled under a tree shivering in the cold. When it was not raining, the days were warm enough to dry out my clothes and rid me of the chills though the sun could not touch the dampness in my soul.

I quickly learned to avoid the lowlands as much as possible, the flats beneath the mountain slopes where the water collects into bogs. These made for slow progress and difficult navigation. Often, I got fooled. The swamp would

appear to be passable until I got deep into it, then I would find myself struggling through a wet, stinking boneyard of tall grasses, the cedar trees and stumps without branches or leaves and mostly dead or dying. Some I entered without realizing the runoff was blocked by old, unseen beaver dams forming potholes of water forcing me either to swim or retrace my steps. And always there were the swarms of bugs which sprang up each time my foot sank into the ooze.

Blackflies by the scores crawled over my exposed parts. Hordes of mosquitos came to the banquet of fresh meat. Longjaws had me swollen terrible. To prevent their worst abuse, I tried keeping all parts of me smeared with bog slime. This served to keep the devils at bay to some small extent, but they were continually searching for places to attack, and with so many holes in my clothes, they got down inside my loose hunting shirt and up my pants' legs.

I could not find the Hudson. With no clear idea where the river rises, it was like searching for a damn small pin in a mighty large haystack. I pushed on south, bent back a little east. Though, to tell the truth, maybe a little too far east. By the afternoon of whatever day of my wandering it might be, it began to seem as if I was down out of the worst of the mountains, for the land appeared to be flattening some. Crossed a small creek flowing south. There were small fish under the banks and tucked against the sides of rocks. Using my steel fishhooks and line and using grubs which I dug for bait, I took a number of the plump little seven-inch trout. They are beautiful, and hungry as I was, I stopped to admire their colors, sparkling in the sun. Their dark backs spotted with brilliant speckles of red, white, orange and blue; the bright red slashes of their bellies as colorful as a June sunset.

After my meal of fish cooked over a smokeless fire, I clumb a woody ridge where I could check my backtrack. Couldn't help but notice the mosquitoes were not as bad up high, the north wind kept them away. I could see the high peaks to the north, out where we had been when we got

attacked. The late afternoon sun reflected off the white-capped tops, shining against the backdrop of blue sky. Only now did I realize the white along the tops of the highest peaks was snow. Still snow-covered, clear into summer. I also realized we had not walked any snow country so we must not have been even as much as halfway up those incredible slopes, if we had even reached them. We had been too far east. Not even close to the Hudson. From where I now stood, I was seeing the eastern-most slopes, no telling what lay beyond. More'n likely just more mountains, and buried in there somewhere must be where the Hudson rises.

Feeling suddenly overwhelmed with the certainty I had not a chance of ever finding the river, I set myself down on a rock and was fixin' to blubber at the hopelessness and I remembered something Hugh had said as we were paddling up the Saint Sacrement and going past Bald Mountain. On the other side of the mountain was an old Mohawk trail leading to the west and a little south. "Follow yon trail seven miles 'er so and ye will strike a creek to the East Branch." I could go southeast from where I now was and strike the East Branch, if there be one, and if I missed it, I must hit either the trail or the creek, or, and if I overshot too far east, I might come to one of the lakes, Corlaer or Saint Sacrement.

But I must go more south than east. Although I had seen no sign of men and nothing on my backtrail, which I had never ceased watching most carefully, and although I was feeling safer now than at any time so far in my flight, the big lakes held too much danger. Even as I stared off toward those daunting mountains to the west, I understood the search for the East Branch, with all its potential dangers, was my only hope of getting out.

I was pretty sure it existed. Nothing Hugh had ever told me about the north woods had ever proven to be false. He said it was not a large river, much narrower than the main branch but it had to be large enough to bring down the snowmelt and rainwater from the mountains so it would be

plenty big enough to float a canoe or a raft. Except how the hell was I supposed to find it? I had crossed a number of streams, none of which seemed to go in the direction of the East Branch. They all mostly went east, some to the northeast. I reckoned I must go south, through more unknown country.

I trudged on and gradually the pine forest gave way to patches of hardwood, then into a land with as much of the white birch as I had ever seen in one place. A large grove of those majestic white-barked trees growing in clumps of three or four long slender trunks, all slanting a hundred feet skyward. I cannot help but be amazed by this tree, which does not grow much below Saratoga. Night came on me in a cedar bog. I found a patch of dry ground and tried to sleep. Another poorly chosen campsite!

Nighttime in the summer swamp is an unending clamor, noisier than Albany on a Saturday night. Bullfrogs and tree frogs, owls and peepers, the hum of longjaws buzzing at my ears. Whippoorwills, a bear carrying on. The yipping coyote catches a bigfoot rabbit, the rabbit cries like a baby. A pair of coons fighting for a meal sounds like an entire army carrying on. Each one adds its song of life and death to the concert. Then the howl of a wolf in the distance! That one brings me thoughts of Bill and the others, dead and unburied up there somewhere. Somber of mind and scared, I listen carefully to try and determine if it really is a wolf.

The mosquitoes got so bad in the swamp I could no longer endure their incessant attacks. With all the unspeakable horrors, I laughed to think the lowly insect might be my demise, driving me completely out of my mind. I splashed through muck-bottomed, ankle-deep waters, moving until my feet hit dry ground above the swamp. My arms and legs ripped by sharp branches impossible to see in the dark. I sat down and was nearly overcome with grief. Helpless. How could I ever hope to find the East Branch? How would I ever get out of this terrible country? With the wind keeping off

the bugs some, I managed to sleep awhile but awoke ravenously hungry. The few rabbits I had snared along the way were keeping me alive but what I needed was venison. I was past worrying about the risk of attracting attention with a shot.

I waited impatiently for the sun to come up, resolved to clean my rifle and hope there might be enough dry powder for a few shots. At a place in the sun hidden among rocks and out of most of the wind, I poured the last of the powder onto the remains of my shirt. The powder did not look so good to me. Most of it was damp and caked. I separated the parts of it which did not seem the worst and broke up the clumps to dry. Tried to use the wind to dry the powder without blowing it away. Lost a portion of the best of it but managed to retain enough good charge for two or possibly three shots.

Using a strip from the tattered remains of my hunting shirt, I dried and cleaned my rifle in the growing heat of the sun on the rocks. This task consumed most of the morning. Cleaning a gun is a tedious job but must be done frequently and properly or the barrel will soon be pitted and useless. I thought some more about loading the gun and decided against it. I dried out the inside of my powder horn as best I could and poured the remaining powder back in. More bitterness, pouring the inferior powder. The cost of the powder had been advanced to us by Toad's father against the expected profits of the trip and I remembered something which evoked a bitter laugh, Schaack assuring Bill and me the powder was top grade, from the best manufacturer in the world, an outfit in Spain. Looked like poorly made colonial powder to me, probably manufactured right there in Albany. Poor as it was, I figured when I got home, if I did, I would have to pay Schaack for quality powder. Bill and me had both signed the smuggling agreement, legal or not, and in the agreement the damn Dutchman would have included the inflated cost of the powder against the profits, of which now

there were none. I only hoped I might get home someday to confront him about it.

It rained on and off for three days and when the rain finally stopped and I cleaned my gun again, I decided to load it and to shoot the next deer I saw. A gunshot might bring Indians but I figured if the Indians were close enough to hear the bark of my gun, they'd find me soon enough without my having to bring them in. Besides, I was starving to death, and if I was going to die anyway, I figured to have some venison before I went.

Charged the gun up good, not at all sure the powder and flints would spark. Might even be dangerous to try. But if she did go off, the shot would be a hard one and I felt better with a loaded gun. If them Indians was out there and did they strike, I was determined to get one of them, at least.

A short rest and a drink of water and I was moving again. Later, when loud noises, footsteps from a stand of pine trees drew me up short, I felt even better about a loaded gun. Enough noise to sound like a man, maybe more than one. My fears returned at once. Huron! Or maybe Iroquois. Or Toad. Maybe there'd been a Frenchman in among the Hurons who'd attacked us and Toad's shouting about his letter had convinced the Frenchie to let Fat Boy live. Maybe they decided it would be a good joke to send him off alone into the woods, and had the city boy somehow miraculously kept himself alive long enough to find me? Had Joe or Ben somehow escaped having been tied to a tree by so many savages? Had Bill not got his head split open? Irrational, all of it, but the more likely cause of the noise, which I could still hear, was too awful to contemplate, to be grabbed by those hounds after eluding them for so long.

I didn't dare move and instead watched silently, partly exposed behind a tree. Nothing more did I hear for the longest time, listen though I might, and thought I had maybe imagined it. Then I heard those steps again. Movement in the trees. Branches snapping, limbs moving. Sure as blazes

someone was back there, and with the sun in my eyes so's I couldn't see much. Sweat ran down my brow and into my eyes, stinging. I got ready for action, figuring my end was near. I re-checked the priming, hoping the gun would fire. I fought down the bile rising in my constricted throat. Face to face again with the terror I had striven so hard to drive out over the last days.

Didn't move, and struggled to keep the gun steady, waiting for whoever it was to come out. Through a small opening in the brush there appeared a patch of buckskin. No feathers or paint did I see. I waited a long time. Whoever was in there quit moving, as though he had got wind of me. I did not think from the amount of noise it could be an Indian but could not be sure. The noise might be a ruse to get someone in behind me. I kept watch on my backtrack. My patience and nerves about done in, from out of the trees stepped a small moose. A yearling calf uncertain whether to freeze or fly. My stomach growled for meat. With the sights behind the animal's shoulder, I could not miss. But must further consider the wisdom of a shot. This caused me to hesitate until the moose began to move away. I watched until he was one step from disappearing. That was too much for me. I touched off the trigger and waited, holding the gun on target. There was a delay which seemed to be a misfire, goddamn Schaack and his cheap powder, then Kerblam! The gun bucked against my shoulder. I could not see through the smoke, then it cleared, the moose was down. Meat. I watched the moose a few moments, my stomach quivering with the anticipation. Reloaded my rifle, hoping to God nobody heard the shot. I advanced toward the dead animal. Leaned my rifle against a tree and began carving him with my knife. I would retain enough of the skin to make a cover for my gun and maybe something for myself, something I could at least drape over my shoulders. Partway through the work and so engrossed in the bloody task I did not hear Momma in the bushes. Out she charged, straight for me. Bent on mayhem.

I could not get to my rifle. The only escape from those flying hooves was to shimmy up the closest tree, a thin spruce barely stout enough to hold up my weight. For a long time I was treed, helpless while she alternately tried to lick her calf back to life and charged my tree, stomping her front feet on the ground. I spent an uncomfortable half hour swaying up there, the tree seeming to bend ever closer to the ground. My rifle close by but out of reach. A pretty easy target I was for anybody attracted by the sound of my rifle.

The cow gave up and moved off into the brush. I scrambled down from my perch, watching to ensure she did not come back, then resumed my work. I gutted the calf, left it to drain the blood while I circled the kill at a distance, searching for sign. Only when I was sure nobody was sniffing around, I returned and began a small cook fire among the rocks. Soon the aroma of sizzling steaks drove me nearly insane. The meat was not long cooked before this young hoss was into it. In my famished state, I tried not to eat too fast and make myself sick. Fresh venison can be troublesome to the system. After eating my fill and taking a drink from a stream, I resumed the skinning work. When I was finished, I placed the meat over the smoky coals and left it covered with the skin for the night. Took a rest. The south wind kept most of the mosquitoes away. In the morning, I wrapped my gun and powder horn in moose skin and packed the cooked meat into a bag made of the skin and held over my shoulder on a leather strap. Had to leave most of the meat behind, no way for me to carry so much. It would spoil within a day in the June heat. I pushed on, to see what the day might bring.

Pine forests without much underbrush. Huge trees blotting the sun. The only game, squirrels and birds, mostly jays. The forest floor littered with moss-covered logs. After a walk of two or so hours, I came to a stream that looked to flow west and south. It might go to the East Branch, grown to near mythical proportion in my mind. I followed the

stream until before me there appeared yet another of those cedar bogs. I turned, crossed the stream and began climbing once again. From a distance, I followed the stream until I came to another place where the forest had burned. Charred stumps and logs on blackened ground. Walking through the scorched land took hours. I lost the creek, found it again. Blocked up by an old beaver dam. I continued on my way until the high ground petered out. To the east a sheer ledge ran ahead for a quarter of a mile. I saw it could only be traversed with great difficulty, and while descending, I would be exposed to anyone for miles around. I found a small finger of the ridge and followed it down into the bog. Right at the dam was the only way to cross the brook. The dam was huge and had the entire lowland submerged. Got my feet wet but couldn't help marvel at how impressive was the dam. So many years must have passed since it was built and abandoned and still it held water, though in places the water had worked holes through it. I walked across the top. Must have been some colony to build it.

The day turned foul, cloudy and cool. The wind shifted to the east, the air got heavy, rain was coming. I built a crude wigwam, branches overlaid with slabs of bark. I got in and got a small fire started just before the rain commenced. Good thing, the rain was torrential.

When the downpour stopped, I didn't move. I couldn't, or wouldn't. I was sunk down so low, so completely lost, despondent of ever finding my way out. I thought I might as well just give it up, stay there and die in my crude shelter. For a long time I thought of Bill, my partner and friend, and of Toad, dead up there in the mountains. And the two men, Joe and Ben, tied to a tree and tortured so far away from anything, their corpses to hang on the tree until their flesh, what remained of it after the Indians had finished, rotted away and their bones slid to the ground. Out of all this misery, a calm, almost a serenity came over me. All those others had died and I was to die too. I felt I no longer needed

to be downcast over my bleak prospects nor needed to struggle to get home. I could go on if I chose or stay where I was and die, it didn't matter. I had chosen this life and I recalled Hugh's words, a man didn't live long up here. I ate a portion of the meat, built up my fire, curled up and went to sleep, thinking how much easier it would be did I never wake up.

I did awake, to hard rain, another deluge, coming inside, dousing my fire, soaking me, and still I stayed there, not moving. My bark shelter was falling apart around me and soon I was lying in a pool of water and shaking uncontrollably with the dampness. After a most miserable hour and with the rain not stopping, I emerged, cursing, and I began walking through the worst of the rain, gnawing on meat, ripping it from the bone with my teeth. The flies had already gotten into it, it was foul tasting, I tossed most of it aside, the foxes and mice could have it.

I thought the rain would never stop and didn't much care if it didn't. Chills still running through me, I was having another spell of light-headedness, something I was feeling more frequently. I needed sun and warmth to dry me out but the day stayed cool and blustery, Old Sol was wrapped in thick cloud. While it was raining, the bugs had stayed away but when the rain stopped, they were back, more insidious than before. The consarned infernalness of these little bastards cannot be overstated. They must be met to be truly appreciated, so ferocious and constant are they. I have heard stories of men going crazy in the mountains from the constant buzzings and harsh stingings. One might believe every story ever been told about the misery they inflict.

I walked south, my path a meandering one, and late afternoon I came to a craggy peak and still following the trail and a way up high, I came to an open ledge and got in behind some rocks and juniper bushes from where I might view the country without being seen and where I could reckon what

to do next. A pair of turkey vultures circled overhead. They had been following me most of the day, or so it seemed.

A series of ridges was before me, running east and west, athwart my intended path. They appeared to fall away gradually to the south, in parallel lines and in such a way so each in its turn must be ascended and with bogs lying between and below. A more distant view showed an unbroken swath of tree carpet and imposing gray ledges.

A fatalism came over me and I thought of something Arnold had spoken of once, how the gods found humor in giving men what they most desired but not exactly in the fashion the men anticipated. So was it with me. I had wanted a life in the mountains and here was the rest of my life, short or as long as it might be, forever doomed to wander, never getting out. The Wild Man of the Mountains, a legend to be seen by folks, white and red, glimpses to chill men around their fires. The thought made me laugh, loud enough so my laughter echoed around the woods and I cared not. The laughter became an ugly snarl and in a pique of anger, I determined to thwart the gods who had visited this cruel fate upon me. I would hurl myself off the cliff on which I now stood.

All my previous thoughts of simply putting an end to it had been fleeting, this time it was real. I set down my gun and sack and prepared to leap, it would be hundreds of feet onto trees and rocks. I was resolved to do it and a sudden noise from behind startled me. I whirled around, my gun back in my hands and raised. T'was naught but a porcupine, on a low branch, gnawing on a twig. I walked over for a look. Mister Stick-piggy, who usually fed by night, simply clumb higher into the tree. Once high enough to feel safe, he stared at me, the stupid expression in his unblinking eyes making me laugh, a much more quiet laugh than before.

I trudged off, descending down into hardwoods, oak and beech and with plenty of beechnuts and acorns for deer to feed on. Deer spoor was evident beneath the trees, the

squirrels scolding noisily at my passing. The land rocky, as is most of this North Country. I stepped from rock to rock, my feet never touching the ground for long distances. I had still not discounted the possibility the Hurons were following me and I had never stopped taking precautions, although in truth, nothing I could do would put them off my trail and it was unlikely they had ever been in pursuit of me, else by now they would have killed me.

I snuck up on a turkey and was about to shoot him for supper when another one startled me, getting up close by. Then another dozen or so flew up, one or two at a time, distracting my aim. I tried to follow them but could not. Walked on. A little later I saw two nice young bucks. They might be twins, for they were of the same size and horn growth. Forkhorns, new in the velvet, pawing the ground in mock combat. Soon enough it would be real fighting in their quest for harems. I tried to get into position for a shot but they were gone. Just as well, I had little faith in my ability to hold steady on one.

“Rather have a turkey, anyway,” I told myself.

I looked up to the height of ground above me, wondering what might lay beyond.