

Another day passed before the Frenchie returned; our bargaining was gut-wrenchingly slow. We could not get anything like the price we wanted, especially with Toad in the middle of the negotiations. The fur was poor and Bill and I twice caught the Frenchie trying to short us. Yet there was profit enough if we could get the hell out. But the weasel knew our need for haste and used it against us in haggling. It required another three days to complete our business, the skin on the back of my neck feeling more and more prickly with each passing hour. That Indian camp was hostile sounding, rowdy. Bill and I went for a check on them one night after our companions had turned in. We found the Indians not all that drunk from what I could gather, dangerous as hell they looked to me. They were still drinking when we last saw them. Heavily. But far too many were standing, too many were sharpening scalping knives. Each day when the Frenchman came by, he told us that more Indians had gone. Then another day and our trading was done. We hurried to move our furs. That night the drums stopped. Fear lent wings to the feet of even the slowest and most clumsy. We all felt the need for distance, as far away as we could get!

There were no complaints of weariness or lack of food from any of our party. All energy was expended on getting the hell out. We paddled all day and most of the night. Toad gave out early and about upset my canoe when he fell asleep. The rest of us paddled the night through, pushing on to the south towards the "Great Hunter" in the sky. We continued with few breaks well into the next day, not worrying about daylight. By late afternoon we were all pretty beat, but I insisted that we keep on. Bill laughed, called me "Hugh." I was in hopes of meeting up with one of the other smuggling parties.

If we could find another bunch to throw in with, both parties would have a better chance of getting out. But no such luck. We pushed on to the south until dark found us once again, all about ready to drop from exhaustion.

Paddling along in the late afternoon shadows, generally following the western shore, we found a large creek. The brush along the shore screened the mouth from view out on the lake. If there was pursuit, they would need to come in close to find us. Thickets grew in profusion on both banks. Here was a chance to hide and get some rest.

Our rate had slowed so in the last hour that it was senseless to continue. We agreed to hole up for a few hours and get a little sleep, then to push on again during the night and go ashore just before dawn. Then we would rest for the whole of the daylight hours. We had been sitting cramped up for so long we were certainly five bone-weary travelers.

While Bill and I tried to discuss it, Jake pointed out how much distance we had made. He reckoned we were safe from Indians now. "Hell's bells, we ain't even past Split Rock," Bill growled. The canoes shot through the brushy opening into the turbulent waters of the creek. We wound our way upstream a short distance to a series of small rapids. Then a large rock falls and we went no farther but pulled to the shore. Our camp would be less than one hundred yards from the shore of the lake. Tired as we were, we piled out of the canoes and dropped silently to the ground without any reconnoiter or watch being posted. No precaution for waking up and traveling again did we make. The whole bunch of us simply went off to sleep and we foolishly slept the night through. Nobody woke until dawn. Jake was the last to awaken, grumbling about no fire and no tea. Bill would have no nonsense today, and told him so. I did not care to listen and walked out to the point of land for a look onto the lake. It was a goddam good thing I did! Away off in the distance, far to the north I could see what appeared to be a large Ottawa or Huron war party rapidly approaching. At least four and maybe five big war canoes, each containing as many as seven or eight warriors. Hard to tell for sure. Still three or four miles away but coming fast, moving at such a rapid pace that we could never hope to outrun them. I eased

back to my companions who were about to board. "Shut up, stay down and keep hidden. Check your primings." Jake near pissed his pants when I told of the danger. His knees knocked together and try as he might he could not make them stop. "But Father said it was perfectly safe," he whined, voice quavering with fear. Nobody laughed at that. We all felt the same. Our only hope right then was that the party might pass us by. If they did not watch the banks too closely we might not be discovered. With fast sinking hearts we watched them heading south, putting themselves between us and safety. We held a hurried conference. "At the speed they are moving, they will soon know we have not gone by way of the carry to St. Sacramento, or by way of Wood Creek," Bill quietly pointed out. "They'll be back this way looking for us." "But," Toad whined hopefully that "perhaps they are not looking for us at all, simply going to Crown Point for a visit?" Nobody else thought so. "I reckon we got three or four days at the most before they figure out where we are and get hot on our trail." We considered crossing the lake and going south by way of the eastern route to the Connecticut River Valley, but Bill had to admit that he did not know how to get there from here. "We better use this time to good advantage, or we'll all be minus our topknots," he said. "There are creeks and rivers that flow down the west side of the mountains to the Hudson. Maybe we can find one, follow it downstream and escape that way." I was trying to be hopeful. There really was not much choice. By the time that war party was out of sight we had decided. Sink the canoes out in deep water and go overland, find the Hudson or one of its tributaries deep enough to float us out. This looked like our only hope. My senses jangled and every nerve tightened at the danger and unknown that lay before us. We allowed no more discussion, but began preparations.

First, Bill and I went through all the packs and discarded nearly everything but weapons and fur. After filling our canoes with stones, he and I stripped off our clothes and floated the canoes out into deep water. Tore open the bottoms with our knives and sunk them where they would not be found. We swam back to shore where the others were engaged in their inept efforts to conceal the fact we had ever been there. Bill just shook his head at the futile performance. He and I quickly dressed and finished the bungled job. Our packs were made up more to what each of us might carry rather than an even split; which meant Toad carried little and the rest of us too much. We packed all our furs, but nothing else. Pots and pans, food, extra powder and shot, all went down with the canoes. Then we shouldered our packs, took a bearing through the trees and headed out to the west, and a little south. "Well, boys, it's a long walk from here," Bill's face looked darkly troubled when he said it. My own knees were knocking. I was plenty scared of the unknown dangers that lay ahead. First we clumb a steep, rock-covered slope, walking straight away from the shore. A half mile west and we crossed a wooded plain. Those damn Indians would be hard to fool, harder to outrun. We walked and walked.

"Hey, Toad. Might as well throw away thet paper a your'n. Isn't worth nothin' now." The way Ben spoke surprised me. I didn't think he would talk like that to his boss. "Reckon them Injuns can read it," I tried to be mirthful, which I did not feel.

A big mountain stood off to the west of us. We used it as a guide to get deeper into the forest. I had hopes of reaching the far side of the mountain range in front of us by night. Bill pointed to Jake trying to keep pace with us and sneered at that idea. The going got progressively steeper and more difficult. Rocks covered with layers of leaves, covering spaces between, made slippery walking. Our pace was slow. We stepped into holes repeatedly, bruised our ankles and shins. The walk difficult for good woodsmen, to say nothing of our companions. This was country of a different sort than I was used to. Twisted my ankle which slowed me down. Jake was for throwing away the few furs he carried. I warned Bill that he and the others might do that at the

first chance they got, if we didn't watch them. As we clumb higher, the woods gave way to patches of brush and scrubby trees, reclaiming where a forest fire had burned. We lost considerable time detouring.

During the day Toad fell behind a number of times, slowing our progress. Even on my bruised ankle I went faster. His constant whining was not much help, either. At one point Bill threatened to cut him into quarters and have each of us carry one. "Jakop," he said, "we have a hell of a long way to go. We need to stick together if any of us are going to make it out." It was way late in the afternoon before we crested the first range of hills.

There with sinking hearts we realized there was another range off to the west, much higher than the one we had just crested. "Hell, we'll never get past them," Bill spoke, "not with all this fur and Toad to slow us down. That's a long ways out there." The rock-covered tops of those ridges ran off to the southwest. Many appeared quite high. Much higher than the puny things we had spent all day struggling up over. I could not see the tops of some of the higher ones, so hidden were they in clouds.

"Them mountains is shoulder to shoulder, an elbow ta elbow with each other," Ben groaned when he came up to us. "We'ns'll never find our way over thet." The four of us stood looking off to the most incredibly wild looking country, mountains higher by far than any I had ever laid eyes on. We waited on an open ledge for Jake to catch up. "I hope you don't expect us to have to climb those, too," Jake moaned, "we'll never make it."

He was right. It looked a far piece. Before dark came full upon us we were deep in a valley cut by a large stream. The pointers of the moon told me this stream flows the wrong way, back east to Champlain. Too bad, for it looked to hold near enough water to float us out. We were not across the divide between the two watersheds, which meant we still had to cross those mountains ahead of us. Our companions were near to played out, yet I insisted we push on. After a short break we waded the river and commenced climbing the other side. So steep, we kept falling back. In exasperation we called a halt and retraced our steps to the river, where pitch dark put a halt to our enterprise. Only there did we set aside our packs from weary shoulders.

"I don't reckon Jake will come back up here once he's out," Bill had to grin. He pointed to where our fat companion sat on a log removing torn fancy leather moccasins from weary, swollen feet. Rubbing his aching toes, old Toad was pretty scared and utterly exhausted. I could not help but laugh at him, "a month of this and we will have you in shape, by golly." "Bullshit," growled Bill, "not even in a year."

We ate a meager meal of half-smoked fish, a mouthful each of too-tough jerky meat and a handful of dried corn. Toad whined about making a smoky fire to drive off the bugs. I was sure those Indians were out looking for us. Their party was big enough to spread out far and wide through the forest. If they found us it would be our end right there in the deep mountains and nobody the wiser.

"No fire tonight." I would have liked one, too. The mosquitoes and black flies terrible through the whole night. Enough to drive anyone out of his mind. Flight. Flight deep into the mountains was our only chance for escape. We must cross the towering mountain ranges to the west of us, those that we had observed just before dark. The Hudson rises on the west slope of that range. But those peaks get higher and higher, each one more rugged than the range we had crossed. My legs ached and my shoulders were damn near raw from the heavy pack of skins I lugged all day. Before first light we were up again, Jake complaining of sore back and aching muscles. He needed more sleep. Who didn't?

We emptied our satchels and carry bags of more items which now seemed unnecessary; things that yesterday seemed more important. Covered this gear with rocks, hoping no Indians would find it. "Get your goddam asses in gear and let's get moving, damn it," Bill was upset. My nerves were rattled, on edge. "Come on, Bill, let's go. If they don't want to follow, let 'em stay here." Bill and I shouldered our packs and started off into the forest, heading west. Jake was having trouble with his sore feet, not moving very fast. The other two grumbled but did not want to be left behind. After we started, Jake whined, "Why can't we move more south this morning?" Bill and I said no. Getting the hell out of this valley and farther west was the only safe way to go.

Those nimrods of the forest were south of us and would be backtracking, spreading out, searching for sign. In order to avoid their net, we had to move west, across those high peaks. Put the heights between us and them somehow. Our only chance. Toad and the others can follow or be taken by the Ottawas, I didn't give a damn which, my partner really didn't care either. Soon crossed another brook, again flowing the wrong way. We walked all day, our friends strung out behind us, hurrying to keep the pace Bill set. We tried to find a pass or gap through the mountains, but could not. In front of us the way rose up much higher and steeper. The land was rough, the most God-awful country that I know of. There were no trails. I thought trappers and lone Indian hunters must wander this country from time to time and cautioned everyone to watch for blazes on trees, which often mark old paths. After the third day it became obvious we could not cross those peaks and live. Too high and too far. We were too slow. We determined to turn south some and try to find the East Branch of the Hudson. The fourth day we walked in a half-circle most of the day. Five hard days we walked away from our canoes, none of us knew where we were, most of our food was gone. We were terribly hungry. I knew that at least twice we got turned around and walked in circles. My companions were convinced that any Indians must have given up on us. Bill reckoned our main problem was to find our way out, never mind Indians. "Won't have the perseverance to follow up this long. Don't forget, they had to find where we went inland before they knew where to look." I was not at all convinced, but refrained from saying so.

Walking along, I remembered from the tavern all the stories I had heard about the dangers of this lonesome country. Not just hostile Indians, there are many others just as bad. A broken ankle, even a bad sprain, means death. We stopped to wait for Jake time after time. He made our progress painfully slow, half of what it should be, which was slow enough. I figured we were near to the summit of the peaks. How wrong I was! Our next good view revealed we were barely started.

"No fires, Jake, you eat cold corn again tonight," Bill would torment Toad every chance he got. We split the night into five watches, gave Toad the first one. I had the last. About halfway through his watch I awoke to find Jake asleep. Lying on the ground snoring loudly, his gun barrel pointing straight at his head. I stayed up the rest of his watch. Hard to sleep good with him protecting me. On watch I contemplated our fate while the glow brightened in the east. Those Ottawas are born to the woods and our progress has been so slow that they might catch up. If they ever cut our trail they would hunt us down like a pack of dogs chasing a deer in the snow. We could not feel safe until the gates of Albany shut tight behind us. I sat there thinking until I found myself staring at the very top of the sun rising over the eastern mountains. I woke Bill and the others. As the day came up bright, they got ready to move once again. Grumbling, but I couldn't blame them for complaining, I was pretty damn hungry myself.

Higher and higher, moving farther west as we clumb, trying to find a gap in the mountains which might give us the needed space from our pursuers. That day the ground became rougher

yet. Away from the lake, all the forests were pine. Bare rock ledges, long drop-offs, they seemed to fall away forever. I came out onto a ledge where I could see over a thousand feet straight down between my toes. Incredible vistas seen between the clouds, which often lay below us. Long after noon of the fifth day, we started our descent down the steep west side. Straight down. The precipitous, stunted trees began to appear once again, from small patches of earth clinging to the rocks. Rivulets of water ran to the west, down from the heights. As we descended, the waters began to collect in the many ravines, creating soggy bottoms, spruce and cedar bogs. Impossible to wade. This time of year these trickles are augmented by snowmelt into roaring little creeks, hazardous to cross. The water is cold and good tasting. We kept walking.

The creeks led to the shore of a small pond, tucked into the valley bottom, along the side of this oldest of mountains. The amount of water in the pond held back by an old abandoned beaver dam. "Here's your damn Hudson," Jake about spit the words out, he was almost vicious in his hunger, about played out.

"You may be right, Jake. This might be the lake where the Hudson is said to rise. We have only to follow the shore until we find the outlet." I was happy to find it, and did not care what Toad thought. Bill called a short rest and proclaimed our chances as improved. After this one short pause we pushed on again. For the next hour we circled the lake. The outlet was there. One could cross it in a few easy steps.

Shortly, our way downstream was blocked by a large swamp created by another huge old beaver dam inactive for a long time but still backing up plenty of water. To avoid this obstruction we were forced to climb half way back up the mountain. One thing I realized is that following creek bottoms in this country may lead you out of the woods, but while you are about it, you will encounter the most infernally damnable country imaginable. Bill and I talked about the amount of beaver there must have been at one time by the old sign.

We found no sign of humans having ever passed. The forest quickly swallows any sign of man's passing; yet we could not help but relax a little. A big fat blue jay screamed nearby, could be a sign of danger, but his was not the strident cry of an important warning, just the noisy screech of a puffy old male.

The farther south we moved, I began to think we must be approaching Iroquois country. Those Ottawa would have to be careful. If an Iroquois hunting party discovered them, their own situation would be dangerous. The hunter might become the hunted! Of course, a large party of Iroquois away out here would be a source of danger for us, too, so mired in this forest, far from any witness or law, carrying a valuable cargo. The Iroquois might be friendly, but we could not depend on it.

We rested a short while at the foot of the lowest dam. The surrounding land was marshy up to the edge of the heights. We debated which way to go. Toad wanted to build a canoe here and trust our luck. Bill dropped his pack and went ahead for a look. He was gone only a short time before he returned bringing good news. "There's an Indian trail just below the swamp which seems to lead off to the south. There's no point in building a raft yet, the creek won't support it." Everyone relaxed a little, happy with our prospects for the first time since leaving the lake. We followed Bill's lead across the swampy ground. "Well, Toad, looks like you might be home before Christmas after all," I said foolishly, "reckon we're near to finding a way out." I had hopes this trail would allow us to make better time. "This trail ain't been used in years," Bill snorted. Judging by the berry bushes and brambles, he was right. Ben spoke for one of the few times this trip, "a damn shame them blackberries ain't ripe."

Below the swampy ground, the creek ran out again with much more volume, down over rocks and small noisy waterfalls. Another hour of walking and we came to yet another of those swampy bogs. We had a difficult time finding the trail again. We were further delayed by more old beaver swamps. We had a most difficult time climbing over downed, rotting trees in every state of decay; moss-covered swampy ground that sucked the moccasins right off one's feet. Thick pools of water and mud everywhere. Plants and bushes, beautiful ferns spring north from the decaying trunks, presenting at once strange images of life and death.

The country generally descends to the south, although the lay of the land is certainly no flatter or easier walking. The going is just as tough. We were passing through a succession of rugged little mountain valleys. The steep sides hard to scramble up and down with our heavy packs. Imagine my panic when I heard a shot only a short ways behind us! We dove for cover and waited. Then found it was Jake. The damn fool had shot himself a deer. The gut-shot doe ran a short ways and keeled over. I finished her with my knife, when Jake could not bring himself to do it. He could barely stand to watch. I dressed the animal, a small one; but a loud noise to draw attention. Bill was rough on him for firing the shot. Toad retorted, "you're too jumpy. I'm hungry."

"Jumpy my ass. You goddam fool. I want to stay alive. Goddam it, we're all hungry." and I went for him. Bill grabbed me and held on. "Don't let go or I'm gonna whip his ass," I said. He laughed, "have at 'im," and let me go. I punched Jake in the face and knocked him down. He sat on the ground crying. I stood over him, waiting for him to get up. He wouldn't. Disgusted, I moved to the deer. "We are moving from here. No telling who heard that shot." Soon as the deer was quartered and each of us packed as much as he could carry, we moved on. Our powder puff rubbed his chin where I hit him and whined that the deer was his to do with as he wished. And he wanted to eat it right there, and now. But he did not get to say much before Bill shut him up. We started walking with the rest huffing and puffing to catch up. We walked another hour until Bill and I decided it was far enough. Bill laid down for a rest. I set down my too-heavy pack and started digging a hole for a good cook fire. Jake started a fire. Bill jumped up to stop him right away before he set fire to the whole woods. City-boy reckoned the only way to cook meat was with a bonfire. The smoke was pretty thick before we got it put out. Bill singed his foot and ruined a moccasin. Mad as a hornet, he took charge of the cooking. "Gotta watch you every minute, can't snooze for a second when you're loose."

I headed up our backtrack a ways along the brook to see who heard the shot. This near to sunset the birds should have been singing their last songs of the day. Instead, the woods were deathly silent. A flock of ducks rose squawking from one of the beaver ponds we passed a ways back. "Funny," I thought, "they didn't get up when we passed." Getting a mite spooky, I reckon. Big gray squirrels and reds often search for food this time of day. Today there were none. All holed up early. I watched a while longer. The woods remained silent except for the wind whistling through the trees. Then there came the cry of a jay. Meaningful? He was certainly excited about something. He kept it up and was joined by another. I listened for further clues, feeling jumpy. "Probably arguing with a crow or raven," I figured.

I waited a long time, watching, worried. Unable to discern anything except my feelings. Nothing showed. I headed back towards the camp. My stomach upset, hunger and something else churning in a bile.

The smell of that venison cooking over the fire wafting my way made me realize just how hungry I was. My mouth watered at the thought. I could probably eat the whole thing myself, poor as that deer looked to me. My pace quickened. Then I met Bill walking toward me. He

carried a good chunk of well-cooked haunch. "Grabbed it 'fore they wasn't any left. Them boys are plenty hungry," he laughed. We sat on rocks, eatin' and talking quietly.

"Green meat will give Jake the infernal runs tomorrow, no doubt," I said. "Course it'll slow us down waiting for him to clean his pants all day," Bill had to laugh despite that. "I warned them about eating too much at one time. Jake was too hungry to listen. He had it about half eaten before the meat was near done. And he is some mad with you for throwing him down. Right now he's telling Ben what he is gonna have his father do to you when we get to Albany." I ate slowly, mixing the meat with my last handfuls of dried corn. Not saying much, too bothered by the worries of what was in the woods with us.

Bill and I returned to camp. Jake and the others were getting themselves comfortable for bedding down. I insisted that we move at once. Jake thought I was picking on him. He was comfortable, with a full belly and plenty tired. Not about to move. I warned them about what I felt. They laughed at me. Said I was spooked at every shadow. We were all tired to the bone, but I insisted.

A vicious argument ensued. Even Bill, who should have known better, resisted. He sided with the others and I was outvoted. They would stay put no matter what. Jake said he was going to tell his father about my antics, trying to scare the men. He was getting a little cocky, thinking he was close to getting out. Maybe I was too spooky. "I'll whip your ass again if you say one more word," I pointed at him. The three idiots only laughed. No warning would induce them to see things my way. Bill didn't laugh. But he did think we were too far from the lake for anyone to have followed us.

"Them Injuns don't like to git this far from their boats, I reckon," he said. "Besides," he pointed out, "how could we find our way any farther in the dark?" Indeed it had turned almost pitch black.

When he said, "Everyone will do better in the morning for a good sleep tonight," I got mad. "To hell with the whole bunch of you, I am not staying in this camp, that's for sure." Mad as hell at Bill, the first time I remember being so cross with him. Waded the small creek in the dark, walked to the west, up the crest of a small hill covered with briars. Here in a fairly open spot among the bushes, sixty or seventy yards from camp, I set my gun down and fell off to sleep.