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OLIVER'S STRATAGEM.

How a Clever Lad Saved Fort Hunter from an Indian Massacre.

About sunrise of a crisp October morning in the year 1756 Oliver Lindsay, a slim sunburned lad of 15, was standing on the platform of the Fort Hunter stockade looking very discontentedly at the autumn landscape. As far as he could see russet and gold-tinted mountains sloped to the shores of the broad Susquehanna. Below him, and a few feet to one side, a stolid-looking sentry paced before the wide-open gates. From the low log structure of the fort proper, behind the lad, came the eager prattle of children, the shrill voices of women, and the rattle of tinware. In the yard, a few scattered groups of soldiers were lighting their after-breakfast pipes or polishing and cleaning their flintlock muskets.

It was more than a year after Braddock's disastrous defeat near Fort Duquesne, and the murderous Shawanese and Delawares, in their slow and unopposed advance with scalping knife and tomahawk, had penetrated to this part of the Province of Pennsylvania. At least they had been in the vicinity of Shamokin a week before, at which time the scattered settlers had flocked in haste to the recently constructed forts along the river.

A dozen families were under the protection of Fort Hunter, which was garrisoned by two sergeants and thirty-four privates. Mr. Lindsay, with his wife, had gone to Philadelphia to urge the need of more efficient protection upon the Assembly, leaving Oliver in care of neighbors at the fort. It was a dull and monotonous experience for the lad, and he heartily wished himself back at his cozy home near the base of Peter's Mountain. All through the summer he had looked forward to the joys of October. Now, instead of gathering nuts for winter, or tracking deer, and smaller game, he was a prisoner behind the tall stockade.

He could have better stood danger and excitement, but there was not even that to relieve the irksomeness of life at the fort. No Indian atrocities had occurred within thirty miles, and the scouts who went out daily reported no signs of savages. The settlers themselves were discontented, and admitted that they had been hasty in abandoning their homes, while the fact that the gates were left open by day showed plainly what the soldiers thought of the situation.

"I'd like to stretch my legs on the mountain and pick up a few chestnuts," Oliver remarked to the sentry below him. "They're just dropping out of the burrs now. I wonder if there's any danger?" Private Gideon Gimble, having an exalted idea of his own dignity and of the rigid duties of his post, frowned slightly by way of reply. But Sergeant Piper, who chanced to be passing along, overheard the latter part of Oliver's remark.

"Don't be afraid, sonny," he said reassuringly. "Your hair ain't in any danger of bein' lifted. Why, I'd make my affidavit there ain't a redskin within forty miles. They know better than to meddle with provincial troops, an' as long as you people stay in this fort you're safe."

"I didn't mean that," Oliver began, indignantly, but the sergeant had already paced out of hearing, and was negotiating a loan of tobacco from his fellow officer.

A moment later Oliver jumped down from the platform and thoughtfully crossed the yard. "Sergeant Piper says there's no danger," he reflected, "and he ought to know. I'm just ravenous for chestnuts. I needn't go far and I can easily get back before I'm missed." He entered the block-house, and when he came out the rear door two minutes afterward he had an empty powder bag stuffed into his pocket. A glance around satisfied him that the coast was clear. He mounted the stockade on the river side, climbed over and dropped lightly down in the grass.

From the bluff on which the fort stood the lad descended to the ravine of the creek, and, after following this for half a mile, he struck across the thick timber to the first mountain. The chestnuts were not so plentiful as he had expected, and he trudged up one side of the mountain and down the other. He sorely wished that he had his gun along, for quail and turkeys constantly started up before him, and once he caught a distant glimpse of a deer.

Beguilied by the beauty of the day and by the intoxication of his freedom, Oliver strayed across the valley to what was known as Little Mountain, where he filled his bag with chestnuts in a short time. It was now long past noon, and he ruefully

discovered that he was hungry and a good distance from the fort.

As he lay stretched on the sunny slope of a rock partly up the mountain a bright idea occurred to him. Only a mile and a half away the sharp face of Peter's Mountain dropped into the Susquehanna, and he could see the very clump of trees behind which the home clearing stood. He remembered that in the hasty preparation for flight he had concealed his fowl's goat under bushes at the mouth of the run. What was to prevent his getting it now and paddling down the river to the fort?

There was no obstacle so far as Oliver could see. A short tramp through the forest would bring him to his home, and the river was close by. It was far quicker and easier to return by that route than by the way he had come. Danger from Indians did not occur to him.

The more he thought of the plan the better he liked it. He felt a strong desire to see how the place looked after a week of solitude. Perhaps the chickens and ducks had not been able to scratch a living for themselves and were dying of starvation; or Brown Bess, the cow, which his father had driven far into the woods, had returned to the empty stable and missed the companionship of the two horses, who by this time had carried Mr. Lindsay and his wife to Philadelphia.

From simply wishing Oliver easily persuaded himself that it was his bounden duty to visit the settlement when so convenient an opportunity offered. With a glance at the hazy sun he scrambled down the slope to the heavy forest below, and struck briskly off in a bee line for Peter's Mountain.

Before long he recognized familiar spots. Here was the pool of the brook where he had shared the big trout, and there the clump of hazel bushes in which he had reused and shot his first pheasant.

At last he broke from the shadowy oak and chestnut timber into the meager clearing where stood the log house and stable. As he paused with a natural instinct of caution he felt a sharp pang at the contrast between his life here and at the fort.

All seemed quiet and peaceful, so he crossed a field of corn stubble to the stable. The door was still closed and there was no sign of Brown Bess. The chickens were scratching about as calmly as though they had not been at the mercy of four-footed prowlers for a week past, and the occasional quack of a happy duck came from the hidden channel of the run at the foot of the clearing.

A few steps farther brought Oliver to the house, and he opened the door and entered. He glanced carelessly through the two lower rooms, noting that what furniture had been too heavy to take to the fort was undisturbed. Next he climbed the rickety steps to the loft overhead, where he knew that some maple sugar was stored in a cranny of the rafters. He easily found it, and was rolling a delicious morsel in his mouth when a noise outside stiffened his limbs with sudden terror.

He heard footsteps on the frosty ground the cackling of frightened and fleeing fowls, and the guttural tones of several human voices. Then the intruders came into the house and moccasined feet shuffled softly over the floor.

Indians, of course, was Oliver's instant conviction. For a minute he simply could not move from fright, and his throbbing heart seemed to come clear up into his mouth. A resistless fascination kept his eyes on the opening at the head of the steps, where he expected an Indian's scalp lock to appear every second. At the same time he could see the outlines of the one shuttered window of the loft, but he dared not stir to reach it, nor could he have opened the shutter without a noisy creaking of the rusty hinges.

When the suspense was more than the lad could endure, and no prying feet had yet been planted on the steps, he noiselessly lowered himself to his hands and knees, let go of the bag of nuts, and crept a few inches to a spacious crack in the floor. He looked timidly down and saw enough to make his blood run cold.

Directly beneath him and close to the kitchen chimney, stood seven Indians, both Delawares and Shawanese. They were armed with muskets and tomahawks, and their brutal faces were hideously streaked with red and yellow ochre. One had a reeking scalp dangling from his belt, and several wore faded and greasy red coats that had evidently belonged to some of Braddock's ill-fated soldiers.

Another, to whose face a broken nose lent a most ferocious aspect, held in his hand a pair of plump hens, which he had captured and killed outside. From his words and gestures he seemed anxious to make a fire in the chimney and cook the fowls. To this the others plainly objected and after they had talked for a while in low and broken English Oliver suddenly discovered that they were on their way to attack Fort Hunter.

The lad now almost forgot his own peril as he listened keenly for further information, and before long his patience was amply rewarded. He learned that the Indians below him were the advance guard of a larger force, which they expected to join shortly at the foot of Peter's Mountain. Then they planned to push on to Fort Hunter, reach it before sunset, and rush through the gates. It appeared that scouts had apprised them of how easily the fort could be taken by surprise, and of

the feeling of confidence and security that prevailed there.

Though Oliver knew that his situation was still very critical, the uppermost thought in his mind was to thwart the threatened attack, and he saw pretty clearly how it could be done, provided the opportunity was given him. "Hurry up and go, you painted fiends," he whispered under his breath. "Then we'll see who gets to the fort first. Oh, but you'll suffer for all the settlers you've murdered."

However, the Indians were provokingly slow about going. They kept talking and gesturing, and all the time Oliver shivered and perspired for fear they would take a notion to explore the loft.

But finally, after ransacking a chest of drawers and slashing it with their tomahawks, the whole party slouched out of the door and their soft tread faded from hearing. Doubtless mere curiosity had drawn them to the house, or the hope that it was still inhabited.

Oliver did not dare to stir for several minutes, though it seemed a much longer time than that owing to his excited state of mind. Then he rose, stretched his cramped legs a bit, and cautiously descended the steps to the lower floor.

The house stood near the southwest corner of the clearing, and looked toward the river. From the door a narrow road with bushes on each side led straight for fifty yards to the thick chestnut timber; several hundred yards to the right lay the base of the mountain, and a short distance to the left the clearing was bounded by the channel of the run.

Oliver hurried first to the right-hand end of the house, and peeping through a crevice of the logs he saw the last of the Indians just vanishing in the rocky thickets of the mountain. He waited a little longer to better his chances of escaping observation, and then crawled on hands and knees out of the door. He rose to his feet as soon as he was fairly started down the road, and stooping low he ran swiftly between the bushes and tall grass.

He was close to the shelter of the trees when the sight of a copper-colored snake quivering across the path caused him to start back and spring erect. Instantly, but too late, he repented his imprudence. A musket cracked sharply on the right, and he felt a bullet whistle by his ear.

Oliver was badly frightened, but he had his share of the pluck and grit that made the settlers of those early days what they were. As he plunged into the timber a second report rang out, and a bunch of leaves was nipped from a sapling at his side. He sped on like a deer, wisely keeping to the road, where he could make the best speed. He now heard no sound of pursuit, but well he knew that the crafty savages were coming swiftly and silently on his track.

Faster and faster the lad ran. What if the boat should be gone? The thought struck a chill of terror to his heart, for in that event all hope of life was gone as well. On the boat hung his only chance of escaping the tomahawk—of saving the occupants of the fort from a like fate.

The remembrance that other lives than his own were at stake kept up his courage and strength, but he was badly wounded when he came to where the road swerved to ford the run. Here he took to the shallow channel, leaping rocks and logs and splashing through pools.

At last he caught a glimmer of the broad river ahead, and an instant later he eagerly tore apart a clump of water-birches. He uttered a low cry of delight, for there was the boat just as he had left it, the paddle still lying in the bottom.

Oliver quickly dragged the light craft over sand and gravel, and launched it on the swift current of the river. He tumbled in and began to paddle with all his might for mid-stream. Hope thrilled his heart as he glanced back between the strokes. The shore was thirty yards behind—forty—fifty.

Ah! there they were. Out from the bushes leaped the painted savages, and a blood-curdling whoop echoed from mountain to mountain. Two muskets cracked, but still the daring lad paddled on, hoping to increase the distance before dropping under cover. But a third shot tore the paddle from his grasp, and then quickly a clever ruse flashed into his mind. He uttered a cry of feigned agony, tossed up his arms, and fell limply to the bottom of the boat.

There was silence for a moment, and then the bullets began to whistle. Some flew overhead, and some splattered the water round about; half a dozen pierced the sides of the boat, but luckily did not harm the prostrate lad.

Finally the fusillade ended, and not a sound was heard but the rippling of the current. The Indians clearly believed that the fugitive was dead and not worth the waste of more powder and ball.

The boat drifted on and on, now pitching and tossing amid rapids, now grinding on submerged rocks and grass bars. Oliver did not dare to rise. He knew that the current trended toward mid-stream, and in this thought there was comfort and cheer.

For fully half an hour he lay on his back gazing up at the blue October sky. Then, satisfied that the danger was past, he sat up and looked about. Peter's Mountain was hidden by a bend of the river, and there was no trace of the Indians on the shore. With part of his shirt he plugged up several of the bullet holes that were

(Continued on Page 5.)

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