

THE WHITE SENECA

CHAPTER I

MY SISTER'S ESCAPE

FOR the entertainment of those American boys and girls who love a rugged story of adventure, I propose to write some account of my captivity by the Indians and the several years I lived in their villages. If I do not tire in the writing and I find that my young readers are interested in my story, I will continue the tale until it shall embrace a relation of the great campaign of General John Sullivan against the Iroquois in 1779, and relate my small part in that expedition, which, you know, resulted in breaking the power of the strongest Indian Confederacy ever formed, and in materially aiding the struggling thirteen colonies in securing their freedom.

In this relation, it will be necessary for me to tell something of the customs that prevailed among the Six Nations of Indians, known the world over as the Iroquois; also some of the historical events occurring between the years 1774 and 1779. I can assure those who may

read my manuscript, however, that they will find in my personal story of these years quite enough adventure to hold their attention, and if they mark well those descriptive portions of the story which may be found necessary in order to make the tale understood, they will have knowledge of the customs and usages of those Indians that is not possessed by many of their elders. This explanation out of the way, we may plunge at once into the story itself:

My father, Henry Cochrane, after whom I was named, was a settler in the Mohawk Valley, in the State of New York, where he had taken up some land for his farm in the settlement that was called German Flatts. Our family consisted of my father and mother, my sister Electa, who was two years my junior, and myself. I was fifteen years old in the summer of 1774, and at that time a boy who was fifteen years of age had to perform many kinds of work and encounter hardships about which the boys of the present day know little.

In August of that year it became necessary for my father to go to Johnstown to make some payment in furs and pearl ash upon his lands. The journey was to be made by canoe upon the

Mohawk River, and would occupy about five days, going and returning. There was believed to be little danger in my mother, my sister and myself remaining in our cabin, as we had not for a long time heard of any trouble on the part of the Indians. Indeed, if there was danger to be feared, it was from the wild animals that were then plentiful in the forests all about us, which might attack and kill the few sheep and the cow and calf which we had; but I was a sturdy lad, and could handle a rifle with a skill equal to many of my elders; and so, after numerous directions as to what care we should take, my father started out.

I never saw him again, for after transacting his business at Johnstown and embarking upon his return, he was taken violently ill on the way. A couple of days passed, and the settler at whose cabin my father had been given shelter, came to accompany my mother to the bedside of her dying husband. Years afterward, I learned that she reached him two days before he passed away, and was with him at the last.

My mother went from our home about the middle of the forenoon. Electa and I accompanied her to the river, nearly half a mile from

our clearing, where the canoe awaited her. We two, Electa and I, were to remain at home only long enough to put the sheep and our cow and calf in their pens, and then we were bidden to start out for the home of a neighbour, about two miles up the river. This neighbour, Mr. Weaver, had two sons, some years older than I, and as it was customary for the settlers in this new country to aid each other in every possible manner, it was believed that he would send one or both of them to remain with my sister and me until mother's return.

There was an Indian trail leading along the valley, and many times I had followed it through the woods to the clearing, near which it passed. Whether it would have made any difference with future events had we taken the trail this day, I do not know, but we chose to go by water, and so, soon after noon, we entered a small dugout, the product of my own handiwork, and I paddled out into the stream.

The Mohawk River was in those days, of considerable size, and batteaux, or flat-bottomed boats of large dimensions, often went up the river with supplies for traders and soldiers to the head of navigation at the Carrying Place,

returning with cargoes of furs. As its course was along a flat and swampy valley, it was a stream of numerous curves, some of which were long and graceful in their sweep, and others sharp and abrupt.

We had covered about half the distance to the Weaver clearing, when, on rounding one of the sharp bends in the river, we saw approaching us one of the large dugouts used by the Indians. In it were seated six warriors, as I knew at once from the fact that their faces were painted and that they wore bonnets or head-dresses of feathers.

Now, the sight of Indians was not a novelty to either Electa or myself. They often turned aside from the trail to come to our clearing, and my father had traded with them upon frequent occasions. He had ever treated them with fairness, and he believed that he held their friendship. I had been taught to show them no fear, and to meet them in a free and open manner, not displaying any signs of distrust. But the moment I saw the big dugout and its occupants, a fear that I could not control arose in my heart, and I thrust the paddle so unsteadily into the water that I nearly upset the light craft.

“Oh, Henry! you will tip us over,” exclaimed Electa. “Please don’t do that again. Mother would not like it.”

Electa had no fear of the water, for she could swim skillfully, and we often had sport in the river diving from the bank, or from the dugout after we had rowed to mid-stream. That day, however, she wore a new flannel dress that mother had recently made for her, and she did not relish the idea of a ducking — and the wetting of her new dress.

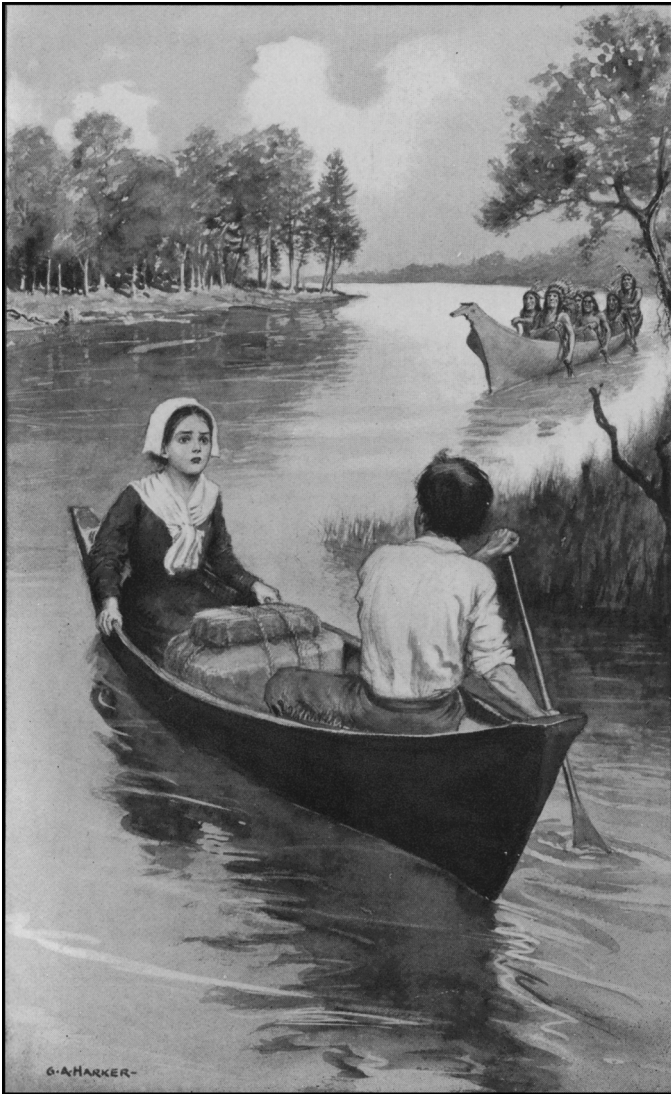
“It was a mistake, sis,” I answered, regaining my courage. “There come some Indians.”

She turned her head and saw them, now only a few rods away. I observed that her fair young cheek went pale, and as she looked again toward me, her eyes were wide with fear.

“What will we do, Henry?” she half whispered; “they may kill us.”

“Keep still, little one,” I answered. “I don’t think they will do us harm.”

I directed the prow of the dugout toward the left bank, and with several quick and powerful strokes sent the craft rapidly near the land. But the Indian steersman deftly guided their boat in the same direction, and I saw that they



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would head us off. With a quick backward sweep of the paddle and a word to Electa to lie down, I whirled our dugout quickly about and headed it for the opposite shore, toward which it shot with no dull speed.

My exertions were useless, however, for we had not passed the centre of the river before the Indians were alongside, two of them holding our tiny craft firmly against their own, and all of them grinning at our foolish attempt to escape.

I knew a few Indian words, but could recognise none in the conversation that our captors rapidly carried on as they held us a few minutes while we drifted slowly along with the sluggish current. It gave me time to think what was best to do, and so I held my hand out toward them and said:

“How, how; Cochrane’s boy and girl. My father treats Indians well.”

They nodded encouragingly, and two of them shook hands with me.

“Good day,” I continued, picking up the paddle. “We must go.”

At this they all grinned again, and one of them nodded his head till his plumes danced

and the trinkets on his head-dress tinkled musically.

“Ugh! go with Indian,” he finally exclaimed.

My heart sank, for I knew then that we were captives. However, I persisted: “No, up the river; to Weaver’s. Good day,” and I raised the paddle to dip it into the water.

I had caught Electa’s eyes and knew by her glance what she intended to do. For a moment I poised the paddle above the water, and then turning suddenly, I leaped into their dugout and catching the edge of the log on the side furthest from our boat, I turned it over like a flash, carrying its six occupants with it. I came to the surface ahead of them, and shouted in defiance as I struck out for the further shore, hoping in this manner to induce them to follow me. This they did, with much yelling and churning of water, for a man plunged under when he is not expecting it is quite apt to be confused, even if he is an Indian. Looking over my shoulder as I swam, I saw the dark heads bob up out of the water, their gay head-dresses awry or floating on the surface of the river, and their eyes blazing anger. I laughed as loudly as I could — or pre-

tended to, for at heart I was in no laughing mood.

“Good day, Indian!” I shouted. “Good day, Indian! Come again!”

I knew they would overtake me and make me pay dearly for the trick I had served them — perhaps even torture me. But what mattered that if I could keep them on my track for a few minutes, thus letting Electa escape in safety. I was a strong boy and could stand it, while she was a tender, timid girl. I mounted the bank and dashed away through the thick underbrush, still keeping up my laughter and taunts at the top of my voice. Soon I heard them coming behind me, and in another fifty yards one of them tripped me and I fell headlong. As quickly as I could, I sat up and looked about me. Yes, there were six — the last one just running up — and I believed that Electa was safe and now able to evade capture.

Though hurt by my fall, I now laughed in earnest, for I thought of the surprise these half-dozen trained warriors must have experienced when a simple lad turned the tables upon them so completely. To this day I do not forget how they stood around me, angry over their discom-

future, but still half amused at the trick. For the Indian is a humourist in his own way, and nothing more surely wins his admiration than an exhibition of daring and quick thought.

One of the party, a scowling fellow, picked up a heavy stone and raised it as if to strike me, for their weapons were lost in the river. The chief pushed him away with expressions of contempt, I judged, and held out his hand to me, smiling pleasantly. "Good," he said. "Make good Indian. Come."

We started back toward the river, and when nearly there they must have recalled the fact that my sister had accompanied me in the dugout, for in response to something said by the chief, three of them ran ahead. Two of the warriors caught me by the arms on either side and hurried me into a run until we came again to the river. The dugouts had drifted some distance and were lodged against the opposite bank, where the three Indians who had gone ahead were making examination of them. Shouts were exchanged, and I saw that the bank was being carefully inspected, evidently with a view to discovering where Electa had left the dugout and taken to the woods. After a little, I was

pushed rudely into the river and, still accompanied by my guards, swam to the northern shore.

For an hour the Indians searched to discover trace of the missing girl, but they were baffled as completely as though she had flown into the air. Indeed, I afterwards learned that some of them were of the belief that she had been spirited away over the tree tops. Two of them dove to the river bottom several times and succeeded in finding their hatchets and guns, and when these were brought to shore they again formed in a circle around me.

“Where gone? where gone?” asked the chief, flashing a hunting knife close to my eyes.

I shook my head slowly and pointed down into the water, and then buried my face in my arms.

“Swim?” asked the chief, catching me by the hair and jerking my head back so that he could look in my eyes. “Girl swim?”

I made motions with my hands to indicate that she could swim “dog fashion,” as indeed she could.

The chief released me after a few minutes, though I expected that the knife which he held

so close to my head would encircle my scalp the next instant. After brief consultation, two of the party took my dugout and paddled slowly down the river, carefully examining the bank; three in their own craft went up the river on the same errand, and one remained to guard me and make such headway as he could in extracting the wet charges from the two guns which they carried. Evidently they did not think it entirely safe to take any chances, for my wrists and ankles were securely bound before they started away.

Another hour must have passed before their return, but the time was to me almost an eternity. I think I grew older during that hour than in the course of any two years of my life. In the first place, I was torn with the fear that they would discover Electa and bring her back in triumph, probably to carry her with me into captivity. Then I became apprehensive that she might have drowned; but after a time I consoled myself with the thought that death in the river were a better fate for her than life in an Indian hut. To these thoughts was added my own misery, for the cord cut my wrists and ankles cruelly, while flies and mosquitoes lighted

upon my face and neck, from which I could not drive them, and stung me until I cried aloud with the torture and begged to be released. But even the longest suffering must have an end, and finally the Indians returned. They had not found my sister, and this knowledge gave me courage to face whatever might be ahead.

Without further delay, I was placed in the bottom of the large dugout and we started up the river. The chief, noticing the blotches on my face and neck, seized a handful of cool clay from the river bank and smeared me until I must have looked like a new species, for they all laughed at my appearance. However, as it greatly relieved the pain, I was thankful for the treatment.

Nearly four years afterward, I learned the story of Electa's escape. My sudden leap from our dugout had overturned it, and she was plunged under water. She swam as far as she could, and came to the surface just in time to see the Indians scrambling up the bank in the chase after me. She looked about her for an instant and saw, some distance below in an eddy of the river, a considerable quantity of drift-wood. Swimming to this with a few silent

strokes, she sank in the water, to come up amid the logs and branches, pieces of bark and rotted wood that formed the flotsam. Turning on her back, with her face barely above the water under a log that slanted down from the bank into the river, completely shielded by the tangled moss above her, this tender girl kept her position for more than two hours. Once an Indian walked out upon the log under which she was floating, and with his foot pushed away some of the rubbish that touched her body; but she didn't move, and in a moment the peril was over. When the Indians were absent in the dugouts searching for her, she gained a little rest by drawing nearer the bank and raising her body partly out of the water, and when they finally departed, she crawled out, cramped and chilled until she could not stand, but the hot August sun soon warmed her into life. In time she was able to walk through the tangled brush and swamps that bordered the river, several times being compelled to swim deep lagoons or intercepting streams. Electa made her way ten miles down the river to a settlement, where she told her story to the frightened men and women who had been aroused from their sleep to admit her. Two or

three days afterwards, my sister was restored to her widowed mother's arms.

Surely the girls of 1774 were born with courage in their hearts, as we shall have occasion to learn in the progress of our story.