

this clear? Menehwehna—who had preserved his life, nursed him, toiled for him cheerfully, borne with him patiently—would understand only that all these pains had been spent upon an ingrate. John tugged away from the bond of guilt only to tighten this other yet more hateful bond of gratitude. He must sever them, and in one way only could this be done. He and Menehwehna must part. “I do not fear to be a prisoner. Moreover, it will not be for long: the river leads, after all, to Quebec, and the English, if they take Louisbourg, will not delay to push up that way.”

“The white-coat used to speak wisdom once in a while,” answered Menehwehna gravely. “‘It is a great battle,’ he said, ‘that battle of If; only it has the misfortune never to be fought.’ Take heart, brother, and come with me to the Isles du Castor. When your countrymen take Quebec you shall return to them, if you still have the mind, and I will swear that we held you captive. But to tell this needless tale is a sick man’s folly.”

John could not meet the Indian’s eyes, full as they were of a wondering simplicity. He feared they might read the truth—that his desire to escape was dead. During Father Launoy’s exhortations he had lain, as it were, with his ear against its cold heart; had lain secretly whispering it to awake. But it would not. The questions and cross-questions about Douai he had answered almost inattentively. What did it all matter?

The priest had been merely tedious. Back on Lake Champlain and on the Richelieu, when the world of his ken, though lost, lay not far behind him, his hope had been to escape and seek back to it; his comfort against failure the thought that here in the north one restful, familiar face awaited him—the face of the Church Catholic. Now the hope and the consolation were gone together. Perhaps under the lengthening strain some vital spring had snapped in him, or the forests had slowly choked it, or it had died with a nerve of the brain under Muskingon’s tomahawk.