The Boy Captives

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An Incident of the Indian War of 1695

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THE township of Haverhill, even as late as the close of the seventeenth century, was a frontier settlement, occupying an advanced position in the great wilderness, which, unbroken by the clearing of a white man, extended from the Merrimac River to the French villages on the St. Francois. A tract of twelve miles on the river and three or four northwardly was occupied by scattered settlers, while in the centre of the town a compact village had grown up. In the immediate vicinity there were but few Indians, and these generally peaceful and inoffensive. On the breaking out of the Narragansett War,(1) the inhabitants had erected fortifications, and taken other measures for defence; but, with the possible exception of one man who was found slain in the woods in 1676, none of the inhabitants were molested; and it was not until about the year 1689 that the safety of the settlement was seriously threatened. Three persons were killed in that year. In 1690 six garrisons were established in different parts of the town, with a small company of soldiers attached to each. Two of these houses are still standing. They were built of brick, two stories high, with a single outside door, so small and narrow that but one person could enter at a time; the windows few, and only about two and a half feet long by eighteen inches wide, with thick diamond glass secured with lead, and crossed inside with bars of iron. The basement had but two rooms, and the chamber was entered by a ladder instead of stairs; so that the inmates, if driven thither, could cut off communication with the rooms below. Many private houses were strengthened and fortified. We remember one familiar to our boyhood,−−a venerable old building of wood, with brick between the weather−boards and ceiling, with a massive balustrade over the door, constructed of oak timber and plank, with holes through the latter for firing upon assailants. The door opened upon a stone− paved hall, or entry, leading into the huge single room of the basement, which was lighted by two small windows, the ceiling black with the smoke of a century and a half; a huge fireplace, calculated for eight−feet wood, occupying one entire side; while, overhead, suspended from the timbers, or on shelves fastened to them, were household stores, farming utensils, fishing−rods, guns, bunches of herbs gathered perhaps a century ago, strings of dried apples and pumpkins, links of mottled sausages, spare−ribs, and flitches of bacon; the fire−light of an evening dimly revealing the checked woollen coverlet of the bed in one far−off corner, while in another−−

"The pewter plates on the dresser
Caught and reflected the flame as shields of armies the
sunshine."(2)

(1) The "Narragansett War" was a name applied to that part of King Philip's War which resulted from the defection of the powerful tribe of Narragansetts, formerly allies of the English, to the standard of the Indian chief.
(2) Longfellow's *Evangeline,* lines 205, 206.

Tradition has preserved many incidents of life in the garrisons. In times of unusual peril the settlers generally resorted at night to the fortified houses, taking thither their flocks and herds and such household valuables as were

most likely to strike the fancy or minister to the comfort or vanity of the heathen marauders. False alarms were frequent. The smoke of a distant fire, the bark of a dog in the deep woods, a stump or bush, taking in the uncertain light of stars and moon the appearance of a man, were sufficient to spread alarm through the entire settlement and to cause the armed men of the garrison to pass whole nights in sleepless watching. It is said that at Haselton's garrison−house the sentinel on duty saw, as he thought, an Indian inside of the paling which surrounded the building, and apparently seeking to gain an entrance. He promptly raised his musket and fired at the intruder, alarming thereby the entire garrison. The women and children left their beds, and the men seized their guns and commenced firing on the suspicious object; but it seemed to bear a charmed life, and remained unharmed. As the morning dawned, however, the mystery was solved by the discovery of a black quilted petticoat hanging on the clothes−line completely riddled with balls.

As a matter of course, under circumstances of perpetual alarm and frequent peril, the duty of cultivating their fields, and gathering their harvests, and working at their mechanical avocations, was dangerous and difficult to the settlers. One instance will serve as an illustration. At the garrison−house of Thomas Dustin, the husband of the far−famed Mary Dustin (who, while a captive of the Indians, and maddened by the murder of her infant child, killed and scalped, wit the assistance of a young boy, the entire band of her captors, ten in number), the business of brick−making was carried on. The pits where the clay was found were only a few rods from the house; yet no man ventured to bring the clay to the yard within the inclosure, without the attendance of a file of soldiers. An anecdote relating to this garrison has been handed down to the present time. Among its inmates were two young cousins, Joseph and Mary Whittaker; the latter a merry, handsome girl, relieving the tedium of garrison−duty with her light−hearted mirthfulness and−−

"Making a sunshine in that shady place."(1)

(1) "Her angel's face
As the great eye of heaven shyned bright
And made a sunshine in the shadie place;
Did never mortal eye behold such heavenly grace."

Spenser: *The Faerie Queene,* bk. I. canto iii. st. 4.

Joseph, in the intervals of his labors in the double capacity of brick−maker and man−at−arms, was assiduous in his attentions to his fair cousin, who was not inclined to encourage him. Growing desperate, he threatened one evening to throw himself into the garrison well. His threat only called forth the laughter of his mistress; and, bidding her farewell, he proceeded to put it in execution. On reaching the well he stumbled over a log; whereupon, animated by a happy idea, he dropped the wood into the water instead of himself, and, hiding behind the curb, awaited the result. Mary, who had been listening at the door, and who had not believed her lover capable of so rash an act, heard the sudden plunge of the wooden Joseph. She ran to the well, and, leaning over the curb and peering down the dark opening, cried out, in tones of anguish and remorse, "O Joseph, if you're in the land of the living, I 'll have you!" "I 'll take ye at your word," answered Joseph, springing up from his hiding−place and avenging himself for her coyness and coldness by a hearty embrace.

Our own paternal ancestor, owing to religious scruples in the matter of taking arms even for defence of life and property, refused to leave his undefended house and enter the garrison. The Indians frequently came to his house; and the family more than once in the night heard them whispering under the windows, and saw them put their copper faces to the glass to take a view of the apartments. Strange as it may seem, they never offered any injury or insult to the inmates.

In 1695 the township was many times molested by Indians, and several persons were killed and wounded. Early in the fall a small party made their appearance in the northerly part of the town, where, finding two boys at work in an open field, they managed to surprise and capture them, and, without committing further violence, retreated through the woods to their homes on the shore of Lake Winnipiseogee. Isaac Bradley, aged fifteen, was a small

but active and vigorous boy; his companion in captivity, Joseph Whittaker, was only eleven, yet quite as large in size, and heavier in his movements. After a hard and painful journey they arrived at the lake, and were placed in an Indian family, consisting of a man and squaw and two or three children. Here they soon acquired a sufficient knowledge of the Indian tongue to enable them to learn from the conversation carried on in their presence that it was designed to take them to Canada in the spring. This discovery was a painful one. Canada, the land of Papist priests and bloody Indians, was the especial terror of the New England settlers, and the anathema maranatha(1) of Puritan pulpits. Thither the Indians usually hurried their captives, where they compelled them to work in their villages or sold them to the French planters. Escape from thence through a deep wilderness, and across lakes, and mountains, and almost impassable rivers, without food or guide, is regarded as an impossibility. The poor boys, terrified by the prospect of being carried still farther from their home and friends, began to dream of escaping from their masters before they started for Canada. It was now winter; it would have been little short of madness to have chosen for flight that season of bitter cold and deep snows. Owing to exposure and want of proper food and clothing, Isaac, the eldest of the boys, was seized with a violent fever, from which he slowly recovered in the course of the winter. His Indian mistress was as kind to him as her circumstances permitted,−−procuring medicinal herbs and roots for her patient, and tenderly watching over him in the long winter nights. Spring came at length; the snows melted; and the ice was broken up on the lake. The Indians began to make preparations for journeying to Canada; and Isaac, who had during his sickness devised a plan of escape, saw that the time of putting it in execution had come. On the evening before he was to make the attempt he for the first time informed his younger companion of his design, and told him, if he intended to accompany him, he must be awake at the time appointed. The boys lay down as usual in the wigwam in the midst of the family. Joseph soon fell asleep; but Isaac, fully sensible of the danger and difficulty of the enterprise before him, lay awake, watchful for his opportunity. About midnight he rose, cautiously stepping over the sleeping forms of the family, and securing, as he went, his Indian master's flint, steel, and tinder, and a small quantity of dry moose−meat and corn−bread. He then carefully awakened his companion, who, starting up, forgetful of the cause of his disturbance, asked aloud, "What do you want?" The savages began to stir; and Isaac, trembling with fear of detection, lay down again and pretended to be asleep. After waiting a while he again rose, satisfied, from the heavy breathing of the Indians, that they were all sleeping; and fearing to awaken Joseph a second time, lest he should again hazard all by his thoughtlessness, he crept softly out of the wigwam. He had proceeded but a few rods when he heard footsteps behind him; and, supposing himself pursued, he hurried into the woods, casting a glance backward. What was his joy to see his young companion running after him! They hastened on in a southerly direction as nearly as they could determine, hoping to reach their distant home. When daylight appeared they found a large hollow log, into which they crept for concealment, wisely judging that they would be hotly pursued by their Indian captors.

(1) *Anathema maranatha* occurs at the close of St. Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, and in the English version is made to appear as a composite phrase. It has so passed into common use, *maranatha* being taken as intensifying the curse contained in *anathema*. The words are properly to be divided, *maranatha* signifying "The Lord cometh."

Their sagacity was by no means at fault. The Indians, missing their prisoners in the morning, started off in pursuit with their dogs. As the young boys lay in the log they could hear the whistle of the Indians and the barking of dogs upon their track. It was a trying moment; and even the stout heart of the elder boy sank within him as the dogs came up to the log and set up a loud bark of discovery. But his presence of mind saved him. He spoke in a low tone to the dogs, who, recognizing his familiar voice, wagged their tails with delight, and ceased barking. He then threw to them the morsel of moose−meat he had taken from the wigwam. While the dogs were thus diverted, the Indians made their appearance. The boys heard the light, stealthy sound of their moccasins on the leaves. They passed close to the log; and the dogs, having devoured their moose− meat, trotted after their masters. Through a crevice in the log the boys looked after them, and saw them disappear in the thick woods. They remained in their covert until night, when they started again on their long journey, taking a new route to avoid the Indians. At daybreak they again concealed themselves, but travelled the next night and day without resting. By this time they had consumed all the bread which they had taken, and were fainting from hunger and weariness. Just at the close of the third day they were providentially enabled to kill a pigeon and a small tortoise, a part of which they ate raw,

not daring to make a fire, which might attract the watchful eyes of savages. On the sixth day they struck upon an old Indian path, and, following it until night, came suddenly upon a camp of the enemy. Deep in the heart of the forest, under the shelter of a ridge of land heavily timbered, a great fire of logs and brushwood was burning; and around it the Indians sat, eating their moose−meat and smoking their pipes.

The poor fugitives, starving, weary, and chilled by the cold spring blasts, gazed down upon the ample fire, and the savory meats which the squaws were cooking by it, but felt no temptation to purchase warmth and food by surrendering themselves to captivity. Death in the forest seemed preferable. They turned and fled back upon their track, expecting every moment to hear the yells of pursuers. The morning found them seated on the bank of a small stream, their feet torn and bleeding, and their bodies emaciated. The elder, as a last effort, made search for roots, and fortunately discovered a few ground−nuts (*glycine apios*), which served to refresh in some degree himself and his still weaker companion. As they stood together by the stream, hesitating and almost despairing, it occurred to Isaac that the rivulet might lead to a larger stream of water, and that to the sea and the white settlements near it; and he resolved to follow it. They again began their painful march; the day passed, and the night once more overtook them. When the eighth morning dawned, the younger of the boys found himself unable to rise from his bed of leaves. Isaac endeavored to encourage him, dug roots, and procured water for him; but the poor lad was utterly exhausted. He had no longer heart or hope. The elder boy laid him on leaves and dry grass at the foot of a tree, and with a heavy heart bade him farewell. Alone he slowly and painfully proceeded down the stream, now greatly increased in size by tributary rivulets. On the top of a hill he climbed with difficulty into a tree, and saw in the distance what seemed to be a clearing and a newly−raised frame building. Hopeful and rejoicing, he turned back to his young companion, told him what he had seen, and, after chafing his limbs awhile, got him upon his feet. Sometimes supporting him, and at others carrying him on his back, the heroic boy staggered towards the clearing. On reaching it he found it deserted, and was obliged to continue his journey. Towards night signs of civilization began to appear,−−the heavy, continuous roar of water was heard; and, presently emerging from the forest, he saw a great river dashing in white foam down precipitous rocks, and on its bank the gray walls of a huge stone building, with flankers, palisades, and moat, over which the British flag was flying. This was the famous Saco Fort, built by Governor Phips,(1) two years before, just below the falls of the Saco River. The soldiers of the garrison gave the poor fellows a kindly welcome. Joseph, who was scarcely alive, lay for a long time sick in the fort; but Isaac soon regained his strength, and set out for his home in Haverhill, which he had the good fortune to arrive at in safety.

(1) An interesting account of Sir William Phips will be found in Parkman's *Frontenac and New France under Louis XIV.* Hawthorne also tells his romantic story in *Fanshawe and Other Pieces.*

Amidst the stirring excitements of the present day, when every thrill of the electric wire conveys a new subject for thought or action to a generation as eager as the ancient Athenians for some new thing, simple legends of the past like that which we have transcribed have undoubtedly lost in a great degree their interest. The lore of the fireside is becoming obsolete, and with the octogenarian few who still linger among us will perish the unwritten history of border life in New England.