

HUMON'S  
LAKE

*Longitude West from Berlin*

Book 1 of The Neophyte Warrior series

KATABAKU OF  
ONTARIO LAKE

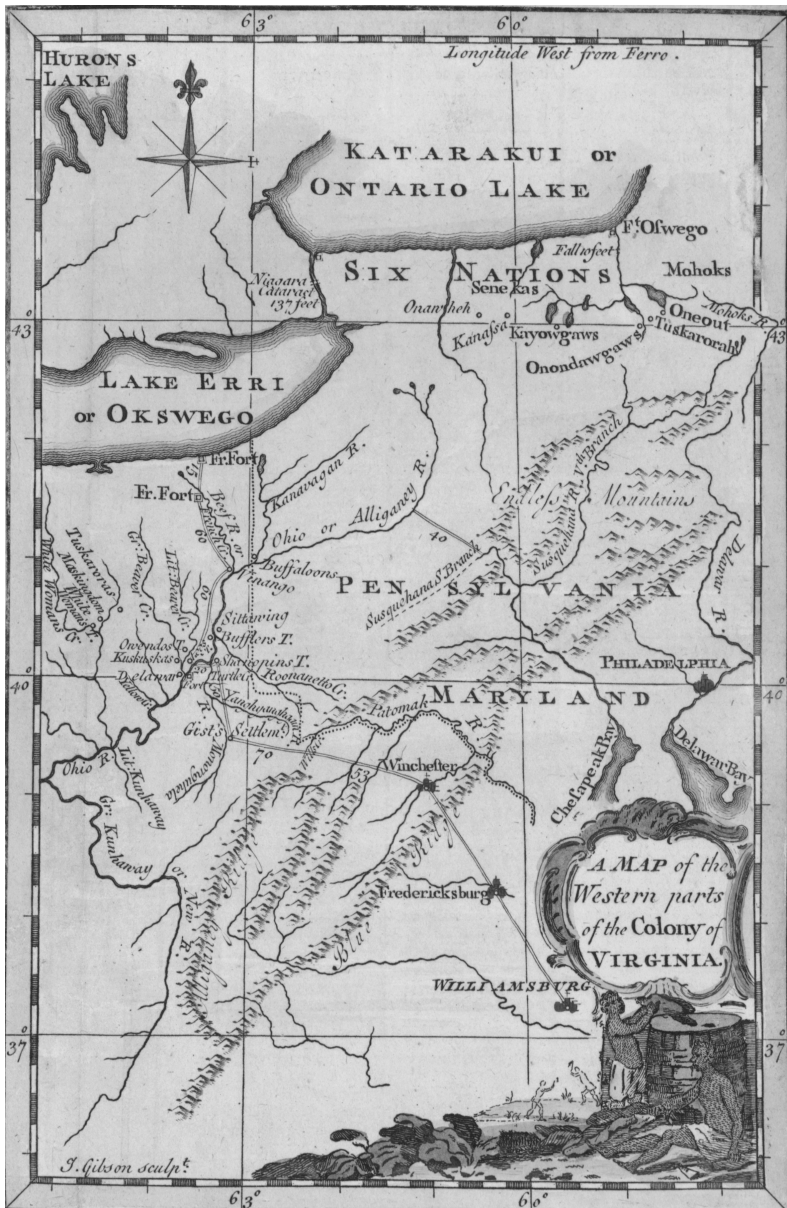


*Mahaka*

# *His Majesty's Envoy*



RICHARD PATTON





THE NEOPHYTE WARRIOR 1

*His Majesty's Envoy*

RICHARD PATTON



ZUMAYA YESTERDAYS

2011

AUSTIN TX

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HIS MAJESTY'S ENVOY

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*For Jo, and all the wondrous people she  
made for me...*

# CHAPTER 1



*December 2, 1753*  
*The Endless Forest near Venango*

**O**LD SMOKE LOOKED DOWN AT THE HANDSOME, ALMOST PRETTY FACE of the boy lying prone on the ground. He prayed silently to whatever God or Great Spirit might be listening that Pariah West not be dead. Otherwise, it would be very embarrassing.

The snow Pariah had dislodged from the tree during his fall was still sliding down. To avoid it, Old Smoke stepped aside then looked at his other companion, sixteen-year-old Thomas Patton.

"I warned him, didn't I?" he said.

Patton, pudgy and none too bright, nodded.

"Yeah, you did. But Pariah don't listen. I told you. He does what he wants."

That, the Shawnee decided, is precisely the problem...



No more than five minutes earlier, Old Smoke had been shaking his head in disbelief as he tried to keep his eye on the young Vir-

ginian called Pariah, who was climbing a tall sycamore. Although he was no more than ten years older than Pariah, the Shawnee felt like an anxious parent. He could not help thinking how much this foolish adolescent would have benefited from Jesuit instruction. The Jesuit priests at the settlement in Canada would have long ago exorcised such undisciplined behavior from the youth's immortal soul.

Pariah, he concluded, was what happened to a white youth on becoming orphaned. According to the boy, his parents had been killed by a band of renegades two years earlier. Pariah had wandered from farm to farm, searching for food and shelter until, at age fifteen, he was taken in by a minister and his wife. If he had been Shawnee, like Old Smoke, the tribe would have named a surrogate parent and provided for the youngster. It would have been the civilized thing to do.

Old Smoke backed away from the tree to a better vantage point.

"Pariah, come down from there," he cried in frustration. "You won't be able to see anything. And if you fall and get hurt, Tanacharison will roast me over a slow fire."

"I'm almost there. Don't worry, I won't fall."

Old Smoke craned his neck and spied his charge fifteen meters above him.

"You can't get high enough to see over the entire forest. Come down!"

"I want to see the fort."

"It's not a fort. It's just a building, and you'll see it tomorrow."

"I want to see it today. I want to see it first."

Only a white man could act so foolishly. The whole society of Long Knives seemed to be based on a dubious ethic of dazzling accomplishment tempered by gross stupidity.

Old Smoke glanced at Pariah West's companion, Thomas Patton, to determine his reaction. More personable than his willful friend, Patton's response to the situation was no more complex than mild amusement; his piggish features did not permit a broad repertoire of emotional expression. By contrast, Pariah West had the darting, restless eyes of a zealot.

In casual conversation, he was an ordinary adolescent—self-absorbed and moderately rebellious. But there was something darker, more sinister, behind the youthful mask. Pariah West

would often stare at something as if trying to seize it with his mind. His eyes were like tunnels to an alternate universe of a soul that was accessible from only one side—his.

“Thomas, can you do something, say something?” the Shawnee appealed.

Patton’s expression became more quizzical. He shrugged.

“He won’t listen to me. Pariah does what he wants.”

This was something that Old Smoke, to his chagrin, already knew. He sighed and tried to be patient. Perhaps he had spent too many of his formative years in the presence of priests and missionaries. Pariah West, he had to admit, might be more self-absorbed but was probably no more undisciplined than the average Shawnee youth.

Unlike whites, the Shawnee cultivated a degree of wanton behavior in their offspring; it was considered a necessary apprenticeship for warriors. Old Smoke was not, and had no intention of becoming, a warrior, but he was a hunter, which still commanded respect. His status as a hunter was the reason his uncle, Buffalo Hair, had been able to convince Tanacharison to take him along on the trip to Venango.

His uncle, he knew, had other, clandestine motives for wanting him to go. Old Smoke only wished he knew what they were.

Suddenly, a shower of moist, clumped snow enveloped him, and the sharp report of wood cracking battered his eardrums. He heard Thomas Patton cry out and briefly glimpsed the plump youngster pointing an uncertain finger skyward as the limp form of Pariah West came crashing, unconscious, to the ground. Landing first on its right shoulder, the flaccid form rolled over once, twice, and came to rest face-up directly in front of the Shawnee. Then it lay quite still...



As Pariah came to, he saw Old Smoke standing over him, hands on hips, looking concerned but disgusted. He discovered an intense pain at the back of his skull and began moaning. Thomas rushed over and stooped to offer assistance, but the Indian stood stoically, frowning, glowered down at him with black antelope eyes, offering no sign of compassion.

“Is anything damaged but your head?” Old Smoke asked in a tone barely beyond apathetic.



Pariah tested his muscles and found some in his right shoulder pulsating with a dull ache.

"My shoulder," he replied, grasping it with his left hand. "It hurts."

Old Smoke nodded and offered his hand. Pariah took it, tried to stand, succeeded on the second try. He brushed the snow off his wool coat and began searching for his fur hat.

"It didn't come down with you," the Shawnee said.

Pariah made a move toward the tree but felt Old Smoke's hand restraining him.

"Oh, no, not again. I'll get it. You two start marching back to camp. You know the way."

Whining and rubbing his head, Pariah West supported himself on Thomas's shoulder as they began the final leg of the day's sojourn. Since Patton had two good shoulders, he rested their muskets on the other one.

At the behest of Tanacharison, Old Smoke had taken the boys for a hike in the woods, ostensibly to teach them the rudiments of hunting and tracking but actually to keep them occupied while the adults set up camp and formulated plans for dealing with the French. Old Smoke and the two boys had managed to shoot four rabbits and a ruffed grouse. Three rabbits and the grouse had been brought down by Old Smoke; they had all shot at the fourth rabbit.

"Did you see anything?" Thomas asked.

"Nah. I could've, if I'd climbed higher, though."

"If you'd climbed higher and fell, you'd be dead!"

"Aaa-ahh...I ain't bad hurt. Them damn tree limbs was just too slippery."

Thomas was glad they were not in hearing range of Mr. Gist or Major Washington; Pariah would have received a severe tongue-lashing for his foul language. But Pariah always acted differently when adults were not around, seemed to enjoy being wicked.

"Wait, stop for a minute." Pariah moaned again. "My head's hurtin'."

While Pariah was regaining his composure, Old Smoke removed his deerskin tunic and the black-dyed deerskin headband with the single eagle feather he wore and climbed the sycamore almost as far as the boy had gotten. He bounded up two more

branch levels, reached for and grabbed the dark fur hat that had caught on a small, protruding offshoot.

As he removed the cap from the dead branch that had snatched it from the boy's head, he noticed a stick figure sewn into its top surface. He had not been aware of the figure before because Pariah always wore the cap when outdoors and stuffed it into his haversack when indoors.

The figure reminded Old Smoke of the quillwork done by unskilled Shawnee girls, except that it was made of white yarn. It was of a man or a boy running desperately and, though crude, conveyed a distinct sense of grace in motion. Old Smoke took a moment to admire its simplicity. Even the forward tilt of the stick figure's head contributed to the dynamic effect.

It was an odd depiction of a head, making the running man look as if he'd been decapitated and an inverted pot placed over the stub of his neck, except that the neck was too long to be just a neck. *A man wearing a hat?*

Something was wrong with the legs, too. There were either three of them or the figure was mounted on a stick. The more he looked at it the more Old Smoke favored the latter interpretation because, at its uppermost point, the stick made a sharp downturn, like the snout of a horse. *A boy, riding a toy horse, perhaps.* He gazed at the running figure, wondering briefly at its meaning, then banished it from his thoughts.

Old Smoke grasped the hat between his teeth so his hands would be free. Before starting his descent, the agile Shawnee paused to toss his long plaited queue of black hair back over his shoulder. His descent was quick, punctuated by a deft leap to the ground. Soon, he had his clothing and snowshoes on, tossed the pouch with the game over one shoulder, his rifle over the other, and waved.

"Keep going. I'll catch up," he shouted.

Thomas waved his understanding and obeyed, in silent awe of the Shawnee's effortless grace. The trek back to camp was only a half-mile, awkward for Old Smoke because of his snowshoes. The trail led north from the meadow with the tall sycamore, through the woods, with a dogleg east to the campsite. There had been a variety of weather during the day, starting with a cold overcast of drizzling rain, almost a mist, and ending now with an almost clear sky. To their left, a huge orange sun was sinking below the hori-

zon, taking with it the blue sky and exposing the black of the abyss. A robe of purple, red, and orange clothed the setting sun in somnolent dignity as it retired.

Old Smoke soon caught up. The boys heard him and turned to see him approaching, his strides long and purposeful. Thomas made a mental comparison of his two companions. Both had swarthy complexions and dark hair, both were athletic, both stood just under six feet, with similar builds. They were strikingly different, nonetheless. Pariah's features were sharp—an angular chin and nose framed by a skull that looked as if it had been hammered onto the thick neck, muscular jowls swelling outward to escape the impact. Pariah's citrus-green eyes sparkled, gemlike and feral, like those of a hungry wolf.

By contrast, Old Smoke's face and wiry physique were without angles, elastic, sinuous. The furtive, almond-shaped eyes of the forest dweller betrayed nothing more than keen awareness.

Which was why it was such a shock when Old Smoke reached for West's shoulder and probed the muscles beneath. Pariah shrieked in pain.

"Don't be a baby, Pariah," the Shawnee scolded, then removed his hand. "Nothing's broken. You may have some difficulty lifting your right arm for a while, but no more."

Pariah tried his arm. "It works now."

"It will die later, after you've gone to sleep. Tomorrow, it will be stiff."

As he spoke, the tip of Old Smoke's snowshoes snagged on a rock protruding above the snow.

"Why don't you take them things off, Old Smoke?" scolded Thomas Patton. "Don't need 'em. The snow's not that deep."

"My feet are dry," the Shawnee replied. "Are yours?"

Thomas looked at his and Pariah's boots. They were beneath the snow, and although he could speak only for his own feet, he felt sure his friend's were as damp and cold.

He changed the subject. "You said the Half-King would skin you alive. What is he, your chief?"

"I said he would roast me over a slow fire. No. He is Seneca. I am Shawnee," Old Smoke said impassively. "My people have no rights on this land. It belongs to the Iroquois."

"You just said the Half-King was Seneca." It was Pariah.

"The Seneca are one of the Six Nations of the Iroquois, the keepers of the western door, as they say."

Thomas was puzzled. "Well, if he's not your chief, what is he to you?"

Old Smoke hesitated, seemed to want to avoid the subject. When finally he did respond, there was a momentary shadow of bitterness on his face.

"He watches over us, makes sure we don't do anything the Iroquois sachems wouldn't like. The same way your Governor Dinwiddie watches over you."

The last was delivered with an abrupt but unconvincing laugh.

Pariah West reacted suddenly. "Wait a minute. I thought this land belonged to Virginia. That's why we're here. That's why the major's here...to get the French to leave."

"Pariah's right," Thomas Patton responded. "The British bought it—"

"Pennsylvania bought land east of here," Old Smoke interrupted with studied patience. "But not *this* land."

"Pennsylvania! Then why ain't they here instead of us?" Pariah demanded, the sunset dancing in his fanatical eyes.

"Because the Pennsylvania Assembly is dominated by Quakers, who don't believe in armed conflict," Old Smoke answered, remembering what a Moravian missionary he had worked for had told him in a moment of vexation.

Thomas Patton raised his hand. "Just a second. Why do the British want this land? They didn't come with us."

"They want it because they don't want the French to have it. If the French have it, the British will have to defend the frontier, and that would be very expensive."

"Do the French own it?"

Old Smoke continued patiently. "They think they do. One of their explorers sailed down the river eighty or so years ago and claimed all the land bordering it. La Salle, I think, was his name."

The conversation had ceased to interest Pariah. He faced forward and became more attentive to his head bruise.

"Can they do that?" Patton asked, amazed by the temerity of the French. "Does that make sense?"

The Shawnee shrugged.

"Not to me it doesn't, but I'm not a European. I can't think like a European," he said. It was a small lie. To live with and be taught

by the Jesuits meant learning to think like a European, or at least like the Canadian emulation thereof.

The bewildering world of frontier politics was too much for Thomas Patton.

"If the French and the British don't own it, and the Iroquois sold it, who does own it?" he stammered.

"Rightfully, whoever has been here the longest, I suppose. That would be the Cat People."

"The Cat People?"

"The Erie," Old Smoke explained, having a little fun. "But the Iroquois threw them out a long time ago. They live in Canada now."

Patton pleaded feebly, "Who, then?"

"The Shawnee and Delaware moved here about forty years ago from the Susquehanna Valley." Old Smoke let the thought languish which, he mused, was exactly what his people were doing. A fitting anticlimax.

Thomas shook his head. "It's all very confusing."

"Yeah, real confusing," Pariah interjected, as if he had been listening with attentive ears.

Old Smoke could not suppress a chuckle.

"It belongs to anyone who can take it and hold it," he said. The truth. For all times, all places. World without end, amen.

They had almost made it to the dogleg leading to camp. The mellow flames of two campfires could be seen among the barren trees to their right. After a day in the snow and mud of the forest floor, it was a welcome sight.

The boys promptly spotted the fires and began running toward them. Thomas glanced to see if Old Smoke was doing the same. The Shawnee had not increased his pace and seemed to be content with a leisurely stroll, if tramping in snowshoes could be described as strolling.

"Come on, Old Smoke, take those things off," Thomas admonished, beckoning the straggler forward with a wave. "I bet you're as cold as I am. Come on."

"You and Pariah go ahead," was Old Smoke's reply. "Don't worry about me."

As well as it could, Thomas's face transmitted a message of reproach. He turned around and double-timed with Pariah toward the camp. Rather than follow the path to where it met the

dogleg, they cut across what looked like a snow-covered downhill grade forming the hypotenuse of the dogleg triangle. They were four or five feet into it before they sank up to their armpits in the pile of crusted wet snow that had looked so palpable a few seconds before.

As he passed by on the surface of the snow, Old Smoke could not restrain a smug grin.

“Oh, I forgot to mention. Another reason I wear these is in case of snowdrifts. You never know when you might run into one.”

The image of Old Smoke the supple Shawnee, laughing and striding toward camp in floppy snowshoes with the plaited queue of black hair jostling at the top of his haversack, would forever remain one of Thomas Patton’s most poignant memories.

Thomas knew his mind was not much good at thinking, but it was good at remembering—better than most. Old Smoke was locked there in his head, as were Major Washington, Mr. Gist, the funny Dutchman named Van Braam, and the Indian chief they called the Half-King. For a farm boy from a tiny settlement south of the Potomac, the journey to Venango had been nothing less than a grand odyssey. He had seen much that was new and exotic after leaving Wills Creek, especially the place they had passed by in late November where the Allegheny River came together with another one bearing the strange Indian name he had so much trouble pronouncing—*Mon-on-ga-he-la*.

After pulling himself free of the snowdrift and walking back to camp with a sullen Pariah West at his side, Thomas felt a sudden, cumulative weariness from the day’s activities. Tonight would be a good time to think, he decided. Before falling asleep, he would visualize all the wondrous things he’d seen. He might even think about the answers Old Smoke had given to the questions he’d asked and try to understand what the Shawnee meant.

No, thinking about questions and answers would be too hard. It might even keep him awake. Better just to bring up the pictures he’d saved in his head, close his eyes, and look at them until he dozed off.

They were so pretty.



It was a prize that all coveted but none truly desired. At the point where two rivers met to beget a third was a realm of unadorned

beauty. The French, who knew it best, called the northern river *La Belle Riviere*—the “beautiful river.” It was that, flowing quietly southward along the western edge of the mountains, its sand-and-stone banks overhung by oaks, maples, sycamores, and other deciduous growth of opportunity.

The southern river was, perhaps, not as pleasing to the eye but was more dramatic—athletic, agile, sweeping north from its source within the mountains. The offspring of their merger, the third river, flowed westward to the Mississippi and was the most ravishing of the three. As if to invite admirers to view the lady of grace and grandeur He had made, God built a balcony, in the form of an insuperable mount, on the southernmost shore of the elegant confluence.

The lady could be a sensual mistress but, as easily, an obdurate shrew. The sylvan sub-alpine land over which she reigned was not easy. The winters were cold, and the summers oppressively humid. The soil could be farmed but was not rich; hills were sculpted of harsh, barren stuff like clay, shale, and granite. Rarely imposing but always steep, they merged with each other in complex, three-dimensional curves that were as sheer as the mounds themselves, and ill-suited to getting the occasional traveler from here to there, as the eagle soars.

To create further annoyance, the lush forest vegetation—a gauntlet of thorns, tangled vines, and tightly packed tree trunks—made passage by horse a challenge, by vehicle a nightmare. It was a place to behold at a distance but to be avoided otherwise, as most did.

The few who did choose to live with the lady in her perverse domain—the hapless Delawares, the landless Shawnee, a small band of outcast Seneca called Mingo, the white traders who supplied them with everything from trinkets to scalping knives, the settlers who served as convenient objects of their rage—would have preferred to be somewhere else. But “elsewhere”—the myriad of serpentine river valleys on the eastern mountain slopes—was already overcrowded.

To her other would-be paramours, the lady was less an object of desire than of unsated appetite. The Europeans wanted to control the inland trade to the Gulf of Mexico. The French arrived first, laying claim to all the land “drained” by the three rivers—everything from the mountains to the Mississippi. This was a

bold if tenuous rationale but was of sounder international legitimacy than anything the British could muster. In essence, the British asserted a my-tribe-can-lick-your-tribe dialectic—the Iroquois were the reigning native power of the northeast. Therefore, the British, their allies, also held sway over everyone and everything in the Iroquois sphere of influence including, oddly enough, the Iroquois. According to British imperial logic, everyone knew this, except for the self-serving French, of course.

The next-door neighbors had more pragmatic reasons for coveting the lady's charms. The Iroquois demanded her by right of conquest over other tribes, or of treaty with the Europeans and colonials. Both rights were recognized in theory, and occasionally in practice, but were ultimately ignored. The colonials, comfortable and smug in the narrow coastal civilization they had built behind the mountains, had no use for the lady and her verdant kingdom but thought they should have them anyway, so that the French and Indian hostiles would not.

But stealthily, patiently lurking within this mire of complacency were entrepreneurs, businessmen, religious minorities, and assorted malcontents who had no use for claims—they simply wanted land.

The lady was a territory, the place where the rivers Monongahela and Allegheny meet to form the Ohio. In 1753, her domain was simply the "Ohio country." She did not yet have a name, nor did the land she reigned over have a settled identity. Hers was a realm in which history would be made, empires contested, nations conceived, and new breeds of men would first glimpse the distant foothills of their terrible, glorious destinies.



## CHAPTER 2



*December 4, 1753  
Encamped near Venango*

*T*HE GORGET WOULD BE A NICE TOUCH. SHINY METAL ALWAYS looked good on a soldier, no matter where it was.

Gist popped his head through the tent flap and said, "It's time to be ready, George."

Major George Washington of the Virginia Militia finished buttoning the waistcoat of his new regimental uniform, tucked in his white lingerie stock, and donned the black tricorne hat with the white ribbon cockade as he gazed approvingly at his reflection in the water of the wash basin.

"I'll be there in a minute, Christopher," he replied without breaking concentration.

For a moment, Gist studied his young colleague. Then he shook his head and pulled it back through the tent flap.

The young officer cocked his head this way and that as he studied his reflection, trying for a suitably stern yet placid visage with which to accompany Dinwiddie's foredoomed ultimatum.

The tricorne was a little fancy for a newly commissioned major, especially in this place, but he could use all the status—earned or borrowed—he could get. His opposite number, Captain Philippe Joncaire of the French forces on the Ohio, was an experienced frontier soldier. He, George Washington, was a twenty-one-year-old Virginia surveyor with no military experience. It was an abysmal match-up.

But Washington was strangely comforted by the knowledge that the demands he would present to Joncaire—the return of the Ohio Valley to its rightful owners, the British—would be summarily rejected. Everyone knew they would be, but the formalities of eighteenth-century diplomacy demanded that a polite but forceful warning be made before arms were engaged. The governor had put it well in the message Washington was to deliver: *There will be dire consequences if the French loiter a day longer on His Majesty King George II's possessions in North America.*

Or something like that. The fact there were no British or colonial forces currently available to back up the threat was a secondary consideration that would have to wait until the French officially proclaimed their refusal to accept the ultimatum.

Washington was putting on his blue coat with the buff facings and white buttons and praying to his God when the tent flap rustled and Christopher Gist returned.

“Are you ready, George?”

Gist, twenty-six years his senior, was the Maryland equivalent of a Virginia planter, an educated man whose priorities were adventure, wealth, and accomplishment, not necessarily in that order and not necessarily all at the same time. Six feet to Washington's six-three, Gist wore his age and experience as a badge of rank, if not command. His weathered face and the phlegmatic, gray-eyed gaze adorning it understated the thousand-page text beneath.

His attire was more suited to the frigid weather than Washington's—hunting dress with deerskin Cossack, beaver fur cap, ankle boots, and wool for whatever skin remained exposed. A tomahawk in his cartridge belt and a musket in his grip completed the portrait of a man in harmony with his chosen habitat.

Washington glanced around to see if he had forgotten anything and discovered his journal lying on the table with the single entry “December 4, 1753” at the top of the open page. He picked it

up, slid it into an inside pocket of his coat, and inspected his boots and breeches.

"Almost," he said, and took from his bunk a crescent-shaped piece of shiny silver metal attached to a chain. He removed the tricorne and hung the chain around his neck so the gorget fell just below the Adam's apple.

"Will I need this, Christopher? Do you think Joncaire will go for the throat?" he remarked, alluding to the original purpose of a gorget. Its only military function now was to identify the wearer as an officer.

Gist granted a tentative chuckle.

"If he does, George, that little thing won't help. I think your scalp would be more interesting to the Frenchman."

Washington's eyebrows lifted abruptly. Surprise registered in his eyes, which focused on the older man from between amber locks of already thinning hair.

"Oh, is the captain of mixed parentage?"

"I'd bet on it, he and his brother," Gist responded with disdain in his voice. His face registered no emotion. "But it's hard to tell. All the frog-eaters, especially the Canadians, are a bit wild. *Coureurs de bois* they call them. Some white men, some with more than a little Indian blood, but all wild. They'd as soon scalp you as shake your hand."

The Virginian considered the comment and its ill-concealed undertones, wondering if there was an English version of the *coureur de bois* and, if so, whether there were any in his party. Finding nothing in his own experience to weigh these thoughts against, he set them aside and returned his attention to his appearance. He replaced the tricorne, buttoned and straightened the coat, and glanced at Gist.

"Well, how do I look?"

The frontiersman, who privately considered the young man before him to be naive, immature, likable, and essential to the success of the mission, replied, "Well, George, it is surely a handsome outfit, but they'll know you're not a regular major."

Gist was referring to the British regular forces, whose bright-red coats and white spatterdash leggings shocked the eyeballs like nothing else, with the possible exception of the occasional Indian chief making a fashion statement. Garish eyesore though it was,

the uniform of the British regular soldier bestowed on its wearer a distinction and status colonial militia attire could not.

Washington shrugged. "Nothing to be done about that. A Virginia major will have to do," he muttered stoically, starting toward the open tent flap. "Are Jacob and the horses ready?"

Gist followed, his exhaled breath forming a crystal mist in the cold winter air.

"They will be, but there *is* a problem," he announced tersely. "The Indians want to go with us."

Washington groaned. "How many?"

"All of them. The Half-King and his whole entourage."

"Even the non-Iroquois?"

"All of them," Gist repeated.

"I don't want them to go, Christopher," Washington stated forcefully, wishfully. "We have enough trouble keeping their loyalty as it is. We certainly don't need them talking to the French."

They had had this conversation before, with no obvious resolution. Gist realized Washington was gearing himself for a confrontation with the Indians. It was how the young man carried the burden of command. It was not likely to work.

"I don't want them to go, either, George, but I don't think we'll have much say in the matter, especially if there's rum."

Washington nodded fatalistically. "And Joncaire *will* have rum, won't he?"

The corners of Gist's lips broke into a grin. "He was raised with the Iroquois. His father had Indian wives. He knows what they want."

The Virginian slowly shook his head in silent protest at the impossibility of conducting international diplomacy while dealing with drunken Indians. Despite the cold, he tossed his triple-caped serge greatcoat over one arm and exited the tent. He wanted to be seen in uniform.

Outside, the temperature was low enough to be painful to exposed skin, especially fingers, ears, and nose tips. Washington was awestruck by the beauty of the winter night's work. After the miserable rain of yesterday, the dawn sun peeked through the blanket of mist that, like a lingering relative, never seemed to be quite willing to depart these mountains. As usual, the morning was overcast, but it was also cold and damp. It was as if the dense for-

est vegetation had captured the moisture in the air and would not let it escape.

The filtered, diffuse light insisted that the sun had, indeed, risen, but there were no shadows and no discernible orb in the sky to reveal its presence. The pines and deciduous trees were dressed in a new-fallen mantle of snow, an ice veneer from the refrozen melt-water encasing their bark and leaves like gleaming cocoons. It was just as well the sky was overcast—a bright sun reflecting off the snow and refracting through the myriad lenses of ice would have been breathtaking but blinding.

It was a wonderland nonetheless, a set from a French ballet, accented by the music of frozen twigs snapping and the crunching of translucent needles of grass against hoarfrost as the feet of the recently awakened trudged around the encampment.

Approaching the group of frontiersmen, Washington was again struck by the similarities between these men and the Indians. Except for the profusion of facial hair on light skin and their physical robustness—the Indians tended to starve between feasts—they had the same look: a wary affability that could quickly turn to unbridled glee or murderous violence, whichever the occasion demanded. The exception to the rule was the Iroquois Half-King, Tanacharison.

Standing by the fire on the Indian side of the camp, he looked old and frail, in desperate need of the heat supplied by the flames. Today, he was bedecked in the finery of his station—a red woolen scalplock-rimmed mantle rested on his shoulders; a toque of bird's breasts and eagle plumes adorned his head. A silver medallion around his neck and a gold nose ring accented his aura of regal authority.

Seemingly in reverie, the ancient Seneca chieftain pulled the mantle tightly around his torso to the base of his neck. Still, his thin lips quivered, and the amber parchment that was his skin stretched taut, precariously, over the high cheekbones, grand brow ridges and prominent nose of his gaunt face. A white man in his condition would probably have been bedridden, Washington reflected.

A series of horse-whistles, guffaws, and bawdy remarks burst from the buckskinned, coon-capped assembly of frontiersmen. The skin on Washington's face turned a peach pink as he realized the source of their amusement—his uniform. Looking himself

over, he had to admit the creased, brightly colored, polished attire was definitely incongruous in a place where the works of God not only overwhelmed but seemed to be arrayed against the works of man.

“Hey, Major, ni-i-i-ice duds.”

“Better watch out, sir. The frog-eaters are liable to think you’re King George and hand you your head on a pole.”

“Nah, they’ll think he’s a French colonel come down from Montreal,” another objected, referring to the similarity in the French and Virginia military blues.

Washington took the gibes in stride. He had no choice—these men of hardship and experience thought of him as a boy, regimentals or no regimentals. To convince them otherwise, he had to play the part of commanding officer long enough to learn it, before anyone recognized the fraud.

He glanced toward the Half-King’s party at the other fire to appraise their reactions to the banter. The befuddled expressions on the faces of the Indians sparked a playful mood in him. He would have some fun. Indians liked a good show; he would give them one *and* impress his men at the same time.

He straightened, stretched his posture to its full height, elevated his aristocratic chin slightly, and paced before his audience like a Roman conqueror.

“Men, I have grown weary these many months of fighting these tall mountains, the dense underbrush of this tangled forest, and especially the wet cold of this winter,” he pontificated in a voice ponderous with weariness and mock sincerity.

“Aye,” his comrades shouted back, not yet getting the joke.

“All to expel a few thieving Frenchmen from His Majesty’s domains on the Ohio.”

Louder mutterings of agreement burbled forth. The Indians were mesmerized, knowing only that something was up.

“Gentlemen, I propose that we abandon our diplomatic mission,” Washington whispered, but loudly enough for the Indians to hear. Drawing his sword from its sheath, he pointed it skyward and cried, “And cut the throat of every lying brigand of a Frenchman at Venango!”

With his free hand, the Virginian furtively motioned for applause. He was gratified by the roar from his audience, some of whom had begun to comprehend the farce. With one eye, he

glimpsed the Indians. Still bewildered, they were chattering and gesturing to each other, clearly enjoying the prospect of garroting Frenchmen.

“And we won’t stop until every last Frenchman and Canadian between here and Montreal is detached from his head.”

Another roar exploded from the frontiersmen, along with several sly winks of appreciation.

Gist was shaking his head. He cupped one hand to the side of his face closest to the Indians and said, “George, I think you’re getting a bit carried away. Even they...” He nodded toward the Half-King and his entourage. “Even they, as much as they enjoy a good bloodletting, are not going to believe you’re ready to chase the French all the way back to Montreal.”

Washington waggishly raised an eyebrow. “Have I overacted? Too much bombast?”

“I’d say by a good exhortation or two, Major,” was Gist’s staid response.

“Do they have any idea what I’m saying?”

“I think they’ve got the *gist* of it, sir.”

Washington started to speak but caught himself as the guide’s remark sank in.

“Christopher, that’s droll,” he said, grinning. “I didn’t know you had it in you.”

A smile, which might easily have been taken for a sneer but for the mischievous sparkle in his eyes, appeared on the left side of Gist’s face.

“Family joke,” he explained then allowed the smile to expand in both directions.

“Getting back to my question, let’s assume they have some idea of what I’m saying. Do they believe I’m sincere?” Washington asked. “Didn’t you tell me they appreciated good oratory, that it was the best way to convince them of our good intentions?”

“I did,” Gist agreed, a spark of concern appearing on his otherwise neutral visage. He glanced at the Half-King. Washington’s gaze followed.

The Seneca chief was gesticulating vigorously with his arms, head, and body, muttering what to the white men were only savage grunts and an assortment of dissonant barks that seemed to set the other Indians into resonance. The symbiosis of verbal and

sign language into a single medium of communication was fascinating but utterly baffling.

Gist continued in a measured tone.

“But if I were you, I’d strut a little less and proselytize a little more, unless I was prepared to lead them into battle.”

Washington studied his friend’s face for further guidance, but there was nothing discernible in the rugged countenance. Gist seemed to be content, even insistent, that the young Virginian be the unchallenged leader of the expedition.

Washington was certainly not prepared to lead anyone into battle, least of all himself. A quiet sigh slowly escaped through his nostrils. He wished he understood these people better.

“What are they doing now?” he asked in a nervous whisper.

“Prattling away,” Gist answered curtly, enjoying his friend’s discomfiture. It would be a good lesson.

Washington sucked in his broad midsection, filled his lungs with air, and prepared to expostulate in a safer direction. He pushed the front of his tricorne back with the tip of his sword and tried to look relaxed. Then he launched into an encore.

“On the other hand,” he continued, louder than before. “We *do* have a diplomatic mission to fulfill, and we must not be deflected by the outrageous behavior of a few heavy-handed foreign interlopers.” The last he nearly shouted, as if to chastise anyone who might misinterpret his previous declamation. He looked hopefully at Gist.

“How was that?”

The guide gave him a skeptical nod. “Heavy-handed foreign interlopers?”

Washington huffed, “Well, I’m sure they’ll get the *gist* of it.”

The guide groaned and nodded in the direction of the Indians. Washington risked a glance and found they had stopped babbling and gesticulating but, far from getting the *gist* of what he had said, radiated a collective aura of perplexity through blank, disappointed stares. He found comfort in the fact that, while they clearly did not comprehend his mood reversal or the rhetoric accompanying it, the Indians no longer seemed anxious to go into battle.

He decided to abandon the posturing technique and rethink his strategy. He turned his attention to the pack of frontiersmen and found their faces were still aglow with the merriment his per-



formance had kindled. Still, it was not the reaction he wanted. He wanted, above all else, to be taken seriously. That none of these men, white or Indian, could quite grant him that privilege fueled a slow fire in him he could not afford to let spread.

It was maddening and frustrating to be so inexperienced and ignorant and yet be responsible for handling a situation like this one. Should he be concerned about the allegiance of the Half-King? How should he deal with the Canadian Joncaire, a man who had become a wilderness legend among the French, the Indians, and even the English?

He simply did not know. He did not even fully understand why he had been chosen for this mission. In retrospect, it seemed a reckless thing for Robert Dinwiddie to have done.

But, in spite of his doubts, Washington knew he would persevere—it was his nature. Why it was, he could not say. He didn't feel brave or bold. Those "virtues" were reserved for men who could, however briefly, expunge any thoughts of consequences from their minds, like severed limbs, or a load of grapeshot to the testicles. He thought too much about consequences for that kind of courage to dwell long in his breast.

If a single characteristic could be said to typify his disposition it was impatience. At twenty-one years of age, George Washington could not tolerate constant inaction. Better to test the water than to stand in mute terror imagining monstrous creatures lurking beneath its surface.

Set these thoughts aside, he told himself, and eat breakfast. He donned his greatcoat and gestured for a cup of coffee. Squatting to drink it, he spotted Pariah West sitting on a fallen oak log to his left, scooping charbroiled rabbit meat into his mouth.

"Pariah, what happened to you? There's a purple bruise on your forehead."

Embarrassed, the youngster set his jaw and stuttered a reply. "I...uh...I fell out of a tree."

Washington paused, not knowing whether to laugh or groan. "You fell out of a tree?"

"I was lookin' for the French fort," Pariah nervously explained. "I thought if I climbed a tree I could find it."

The Virginian gazed at the youngster, wanting to reprimand him but not knowing quite how. Pariah was seventeen years old, only four years younger than Washington, and had been thrust on

him, along with Thomas Patton, by Lord Thomas Fairfax. The grand lord had told a friend of his, a minister named Sedgewick, that he would take in the two orphans as stable boys, and had asked Washington to pick them up in Wills Creek, Maryland, where the diplomatic expedition to the forks of the Ohio was to begin. He had grudgingly agreed to Fairfax's request.

Bill Jenkins, a burly trader with a build like a brown bear and a beard to match, offered Washington a plate with bread, a fork, and a leg of rabbit on it. With a grin of appreciation, Washington thanked him and gratefully took the food.

"It's not a fort, Pariah. It's John Frazier's cabin," Washington explained. "The French have stolen it from him and are calling it a fort, but it's not. It's just a cabin."

At the mention of the French action, the band of colonials muttered their agreement. John Frazier was one of their own. What had happened to him could happen to them. It was in the hopes of preventing such thefts in the future that they had joined this expedition.

"Well, don't fall out of any more trees, Pariah. Don't even climb any," Washington scolded gently. "You won't be able to see anything but more trees anyway, as I'm sure you found out. And Mr. Sedgewick will have my hide if I let you get hurt."

He heard a peal of laughter to his left and looked to find the other half of his babysitting problem, Thomas Patton, trying to keep partially chewed food from escaping his mouth.

"That's what Old Smoke told him, sir," Patton gurgled. "Almost the very same thing. Told him not to climb any more trees. Told him the Half-King would have roasted him alive if..."

As the pale, pudgy Patton prattled on, Pariah West's face turned from pastel pink to evening-sky scarlet. Washington felt sorry for the young man. His own first experience on the frontier had been more pleasant.

At sixteen, he had been invited by Lord Fairfax to accompany a group of surveyors beyond the Blue Ridge to the Shenandoah Valley. Although the exhausting labor of defining the boundaries and extent of Lord Fairfax's holdings in Virginia had been the purpose of that journey, Washington discovered frontier life to be an exciting, challenging adventure. He had been in awe of the woodsmen who could create food, clothing, and shelter out of nothing but the forest and its resources. To be a frontiersman was

like being an Indian and a civilized man at the same time, a concept that titillated Washington's fancy. It was too bad Pariah was not enjoying himself.

"Old Smoke. Do you mean the Shawnee?" the Virginian asked. He glanced at the circle of Indians at the other fire and suddenly realized only the Half-King and the two known as Jeskakake and White Thunder were present. "Where is he, and the other one...?"

"The Hunter," Barnaby Currin filled in between vigorous chomps on a chunk of biscuit. He was another big man, but rounder and with a more rubicund complexion. "Him and the Shawnee went to look for game."

"In this weather?"

Currin seemed puzzled.

"They're Indians, Major," he said quizzically.

Washington found it hard to believe anyone could find game to hunt—or would want to try—in this weather, but he deferred to Currin's judgment. He was keenly aware of his own shortcomings as a soldier and, to a lesser extent, as a backwoodsman.

The absence of the Shawnee was more vexing. Because of an ancient incident, the Iroquois were inclined to favor alliances with the British over the French if they could afford to. Other tribes, most notably the Delaware and the itinerant Shawnee—whose misfortunes in war had left them without a homeland—suffered no such Francophobia. They had few reservations about allying themselves with anyone, white or Indian, if it was in their best interests. The colonials, British, and French took a similar approach with the Indians. Loyalty was an uncommon virtue in this land. The Iroquois were the rare exception.

Washington's concern was tempered by a budding interest in the man called Old Smoke. The Shawnee was like no Indian he had ever met. Conversant in English, French, and several Indian tongues, he exuded a calm intelligence that belied his savage exterior. Was the Shawnee a spy, he wondered, and, if so, for whom?

## CHAPTER 3



*C*HRISTOPHER GIST BRUSHED THE SNOW FROM AN OLD FALLEN MAPLE on the side of the fire farthest from the Indians. There remained a covering of ice, but he and Washington sat down anyway — there was no way to stay completely dry on a day like this.

Washington put on his command face and gestured for the rest to circle round him. Jenkins and Currin were already sitting cross-legged on a blanket to his left, devouring sizable slabs of bacon befitting their robust bulks. Two of the others, John MacGuire, tall and sanguine, and Henry Steward, short and morose, both nearly as emaciated as the Indians, finished feeding the horses and sauntered over. Captain Jacob Van Braam, the emigrant Dutchman who had been Washington's fencing instructor, and John Davison, the only two white members of the expedition who understood French and Iroquois, ceased a conversation they were having in front of their shared tent and became attentive.

Washington spoke quietly but authoritatively.

"Gentlemen, Mr. Gist informs me we are only five miles from Venango."

He paused to survey the assembled faces. Only those of the youngsters showed any surprise. Although none knew the country as well as Gist—he had explored it three years earlier at the behest of the Ohio Company—all had a general familiarity with the lay of the land and its abundant waterways.

Washington took a sip of coffee.

“It’s my intention to take a small party consisting of Mr. Gist, Mr. Van Braam, and myself to meet with the French commander this morning. We will take four of the horses. Jacob, would you mind getting the horses now?”

Looking surprised to hear his name, Van Braam nodded, muttered something probably in Dutch, and aimed himself at the clump of trees where the horses were tethered. Van Braam was nearly as tall as Washington, and his lean frame made him appear to achieve a greater height. With oversize hands and feet, and a hips-forward gait, he walked like a marionette being manipulated by an unseen puppeteer. His fur coat, cone-shaped cap of wolf fur, and the wooden pipe he smoked set him off from the others and enhanced the caricature. A jovial disposition, ready smile, and bushy, animated eyebrows, completed the image of a transmogrified doll, strutting and fretting its hour upon the stage of life. One had the impression that, if the invisible strings were cut, Jacob would fall into an abstract tangle of limbs and joints.

Washington continued. “What we need to do is to have our encounter with M’sieur Joncaire without our Indian allies present. Do you all understand why?”

He scanned their faces, searching for a hint of understanding. Instead, he found puzzled expressions and blank stares. A quick glance at Gist to gauge his reaction revealed nothing. Gist was as inscrutable as ever and was not ready to enter the discussion voluntarily.

The Virginian snatched and swallowed a greasy sliver of bacon from a smoking skillet that John MacGuire had recently removed from the fire.

“We may be on the verge of hostilities with the French, and we have to avoid any possibility of contact between them and the Iroquois. If war breaks out, we need Indian allies—it’s that simple. And the Iroquois are all we have right now. God knows what the French are willing to offer them in return for a military alliance.”

Some of the men visibly winced at Washington's reference to the Creator in casual speech, but he maintained his composure. Audacity was sometimes called for.

Barnaby Currin hesitantly stepped out to face him and said, "Major, I get along fine with the Indians. Have to if you do what I do for a livin'. But I can't say I'm partic'ly fond of 'em. Even so, I don't see why you're so worried about the Half-King. He's about as good as they ever get—"

"All the more reason for keeping him away from the French," Washington interrupted.

"He's gonna go anyway," the torpid voice of Henry Steward rejoined. At first, Washington could not find the small man but then discovered him between Jenkins and Currin.

"What do you mean by that, Mr. Steward?"

"I mean he's gonna go anyway." Steward insisted. "We can't tell 'em what to do. They make up their own minds, whether we like it or not."

A growing anxiety was beginning to overtake the young Virginian. He did not want to argue with these men; he wanted to get on with his mission. Hopefully, he turned to his guide.

"You see my point, don't you, Mr. Gist?"

Christopher Gist paused to think before answering, not happy to be forced into an overt opinion.

"Yes," he replied laconically. "But Henry is right. The Half-King will do what he pleases."

Not much help there, Washington mused, studying Gist's impenetrable countenance for helpful signs. As usual, there were none.

There followed a silence, not quite an impasse but a recognition that a clear difference of opinion existed as to how the Indians should be dealt with. Washington moodily sipped his coffee, his mind groping for an answer to the dilemma.

The truth was that, in a contest of wills between himself and the Frenchman Joncaire, he would lose. He had neither the diplomatic experience nor the easy familiarity with the natives Joncaire had gained simply by living among them. The captain was one of the few Frenchmen the Iroquois truly admired—in fact, accepted as one of their own. Whatever the outcome of the meeting, Washington had to find a way to prevent the colony of Virginia, the British crown, and himself from being totally embarrassed.

He stood fully erect and began pulling on his woolen mittens. He disposed of the final drops of his coffee with a splash into the fire. The liquid sizzled and steamed in complaint. Ready or not, it was time for command.

"Gentlemen," he barked with a confidence he did not feel, "I need you to keep the Half-King and his party occupied for a few days. Entertain him, if you can, but keep him *here*."

The last statement dispelled all notions of compromise. It was an order and, wise or not, had to be obeyed. Washington sensed Gist rising to a stand beside him, looked his way, and found the guide preparing to go.

"Major, do you have any suggestions how we should entertain 'em?" John MacGuire playfully requested in his heavy brogue. Grinning, he leapt up and executed a bizarre maneuver with gangling arms and legs that vaguely resembled a dance move. "Maybe we could do a little jig..."

Pleased by MacGuire's good nature, Washington said, "I was thinking more in terms of a quiet evening exchanging stories."

This suggestion was greeted with amiable sarcasm.

"Like what, Pocahontas and John Smith?" Barnaby Currin kidded. "Bill, you can be Pocahontas. You've got a pretty little rump."

"*Little rump*, you say," John MacGuire gibed, "More like the tail end of a sow."

Even Henry Steward, normally the most sober of the group, joined in.

"Let's teach 'em how to play poker and get some o' those duds o' theirs. I kinda like that black bearskin robe White Thunder's got."

"How about them fancy earrings that Je...Ja..." Bill Jenkins struggled.

"Jeskakake," Christopher Gist offered.

"Yeah, Jesk-a-kaky," Jenkins finally managed. "My wife would look good in those." Then he reconsidered, chuckling, "'Cept they're almost as big as her head. Might have to hang 'em off her bosom."

The merry mood continued relentlessly, lifting Washington's spirits and diverting his fears. Then, John MacGuire, with mischief in his face and on his mind, said, "Major, I know one sure way to keep 'em here." Surreptitiously, he exposed a brown jug he had

maneuvered beneath his coat. "Rye whiskey! We got four of 'em," he whispered.

Henry Steward was dryly skeptical. "Ain't enough. Them buggers could drink that much in one sittin'."

The thought of plying the Indians with liquor disturbed Washington's sense of propriety, but much to his surprise, he found himself giving it serious consideration. It was at this moment Jacob Van Braam reappeared leading three of the horses, a gray and two bays. He caught Washington's attention as he approached then glanced at the horses. The Virginian followed his gaze.

"They don't look well," he said.

Van Braam nodded. "Dey are *not* vell. I tink it is not so much de cold as de damp."

The lethargic shuffling and slouching posture of the animals was distressing. They had a long way to go and much to do before returning to Williamsburg.

Washington had just mounted his gray, the healthiest of the three, when he heard the breaking-glass sound of ice-burdened underbrush being crushed by plodding hooves. It came from the northwest, where the trail to Venango tunneled through the forest. Whirling his head in that direction, he saw the two missing Indians—the Hunter and Old Smoke—advancing on foot, juxtaposed on either side of the only horse the Indians had, an aging white mare with a bonnet of eagle feathers decorating her snarled mane.

Draped over the mare's back was a white-tailed buck. Matted dried blood surrounded a rifle ball wound in its skull and the slit where its throat had been cut. The two hunters were wrapped in deerskin robes with the scalp-skin draped over their heads. The Half-King, Jeskakake, and White Thunder rushed to greet their comrades, expressions of joy on their faces and congratulatory overtones in their greetings. In their lexicon of life's priorities, finding food was second only to eating it.

Washington decided to join them and nudged his horse in their direction. He reached down to touch the deer's antlers. A ten-pointer, if his count was correct.

"That's a big one, Mr. Old Smoke," he commented admiringly. "Where did you get him?"

The Shawnee smiled and pointed in the direction he had come from.



"There's a valley maybe a mile that way. We made him think we were females," Old Smoke said, pulling the doe headpiece farther over his head and wriggling his hips suggestively, "and lured him into a snowdrift. It was easy after that. Guyasuta shot him," he added, gesturing toward his companion, whom the whites had previously known only as the Hunter, a stocky Seneca with close-cropped hair, dark skin, and a detached demeanor. "I finished him off with my knife."

It was the kind of casual banter that would have been natural in a woodsman, but which, somehow, seemed odd in an Indian. The smile, despite the Shawnee's high cheekbones and black antelope eyes, was different, too. For most white men, including Washington, the Indian visage was a terrifying sight until a smile appeared, when it was transformed into the face of a child. Old Smoke's countenance was neither terrifying nor childlike, with or without a grin.

Washington leaned on the pommel of his saddle, wondering if this ingenuous man would grant him a favor. As he pondered how to ask, his gaze wandered.

The forest was groaning awake as the phantom sun rose in an invisible sky, heating the ice cocoons on the tree branches until audible snaps could be heard. An occasional whoosh-thud of a falling branch or tree could be heard in the distance as the weight of encrusted ice violated structural limits. The gray mist was no longer continuous but rose from the ground in discrete wavering columns, ghosts dancing to a haunting refrain only they could hear. There were no forest creatures to be seen. The few birds that remained made raucous, dissonant complaint, lamenting their lack of foresight at not having flown to parts more southern for the winter.

The Virginian gestured for John Davison, the man he had recruited as interpreter in Logstown, to come over. If Old Smoke were not cooperative, Davison could do the translating he needed.

"Mr. Old Smoke, Mr. Davison, I need to talk to the Half-King, and I need one of you to interpret for me." He glanced from one to the other. "I suppose I would like Mr. Old Smoke to at least listen, to minimize the chances of a misunderstanding. Is that all right with you, John? You can let me know if you have a different rendering."

The soft-spoken man from the Ohio River nodded. They waited for the Shawnee to respond.

"Yes, if I can," Old Smoke said with a diffident shrug.

Relieved, Washington began.

"First, would you please tell him that His Majesty King George the Second deeply values the friendship and support of the Half-King and his people."

Old Smoke translated that much. The aging Half-King and his entourage listened carefully to every word, obviously as eager to maintain good communications as Washington was. When the Shawnee nodded, Washington continued.

"And that, in our meeting with the commander of the French forces, we will express not only the displeasure of the British crown but also the outrage of the leaders of the Six Nations at the illegal incursion of the French and Canadians into territory that is the rightful possession of the Six Nations and their resolute ally, Great Britain."

Having said what he knew was a mouthful and on a touchy subject—he had conceived and memorized the speech before going to sleep the night before—Washington paused again. Old Smoke stared at him, mouth agape, then looked hopefully at Davison. They both laughed and discussed a simplified translation. Then Old Smoke spoke again to the Half-King.

Washington watched the ancient weathered face of the Indian leader, trying to read his expression as his subordinate delivered Washington's encomium in a language ill-suited to English grandiloquence. Languidly, the Half-King again nodded his understanding and his desire to continue.

Washington knew what he intended to say next would be the most difficult. He would have to be careful. The Iroquois must be reassured the Ohio Valley was theirs to control, that the British were there only at their indulgence. Yet, what he wanted, what Robert Dinwiddie and the Ohio Company wanted, was a forfeiture of that power, or a portion of it, to the British.

Suddenly realizing he was holding his breath, Washington reasserted himself.

"Would you please tell the Half-King that, because of the delicacy of the situation and our considerable experience in dealing with the French in matters such as these, we think it would be in our mutual interest if he would graciously permit us to express his

concerns to the French commander rather than doing so himself? Mr. Gist, Captain Van Braam, and I should be gone only a short time, during which the Half-King and his...associates are welcome to partake of our food and provisions and to enjoy the camaraderie that has developed among the members of our two parties."

The "camaraderie" part was perhaps a little too flamboyant, he thought, but the speech as a whole had emerged as he had planned, assertive but diplomatic. Yet, the placid bronze face of Old Smoke frowned at him.

"Mr. Old Smoke, you may rephrase anything I've said as you see fit. It may also be well to assure the Half-King that His Majesty King George the Second would be pleased if—"

"Major, excuse me, but he won't accept that."

The interruption was delivered firmly but dispassionately.

"But he must..." The Virginian struggled with frustration then took command of himself. "Please, Mr. Old Smoke, I implore you to use your considerable linguistic skills to let him know, as courteously as possible, that we...I do not wish him to go."

"You don't understand, Major. He *will* go."

The Shawnee's expression revealed no anger, or even displeasure. It was as if he were explaining the setting of the sun to a small child. But there was an undercurrent of emotion Washington sensed rippling beneath the surface. They stared impassively at each other. Then Old Smoke spoke.

"He has to go. He has to return the black speech belt to the French. It's the traditional way of dissolving relations."

The frustration of dealing with an impossible situation finally shattered the last vestiges of Washington's reserve. Now he had to concern himself with the etiquette of savages. It was too much.

"Tradition! My God, man," he raged, "we are here to avoid a war, not to engage in some...unnecessary ritual. Don't you know what's at stake here?"

It had been a close call. He had almost said "savage ritual." That would have been a fine end to his brief career as a diplomat.

Though he could not see his guide, Washington could feel Gist's icy stare fixed on his back. Or perhaps it was the cold glare from the Shawnee that made him anticipate the same from Gist. Old Smoke backed away, his eyes darting between Washington and a subdued Davison, then to the Half-King and the other Indi-

ans. It was clear he, too – instinctively, reluctantly – was weighing the impact of his words.

“What were you *going* to say, Major? Savage ritual?” The Shawnee glanced away momentarily and then turned to face Washington again. “Major Washington, am I to understand you expect this mission of yours to succeed? That the French, after you demand in the name of King George that they pack their muskets and cannon and remove themselves from *British* territory – yes, that is how you think of it – that the French will cower in abject terror and actually depart?”

“I don’t think you really expect that. Nor do I think your masters in Williamsburg expect that. And if success is not the object of your mission, then what purpose does it serve, except as a ritual statement of grievance? Perhaps, to you, the return of a peace belt is a primitive way of expressing disapproval, but it is honest, and it does not require the humiliation of an inexperienced emissary before hostilities are announced.”

Had he not been astounded by the Shawnee’s eloquence, Washington would have been completely embarrassed. Was this an example of the renowned oratorical skills of these people, translated into his own language? He was impressed, and would like to have talked further with this man, but there was no time.

He cast a glance at Gist, looking for a cue. The guide was shaking his head and mouthing the words *calm down*.

“Mr. Old Smoke,” he stammered, removed the tricorne and pushed the reddish-brown hair off his forehead. “I...I must humbly apologize. My temper sometimes gets the best of me, and I have lately been oppressed by a persistent frustration. Please accept my apologies for any offense I may have caused you or your colleagues.”

Though none noticed, a glow had appeared on the Half-King’s face. The old man had no idea what had transpired, only that there had been a debate, and that the young Shawnee had eloquently made his point. Though he was a Seneca chief and Old Smoke a Shawnee and, therefore, his subject, pride shone through. The young *Ontoagannha* – the less-than-flattering Iroquois name for Shawnee, the “persons of unintelligible speech” – had acquitted himself surprisingly well.

The dark eyes of the young Shawnee continued to bore into Washington, accusing, uncompromising. Then his gaze dropped,

hesitated, and turned sharply toward Guyasuta, the dark, muscular enigmatic Seneca who was ten yards on the other side of the Indians' fire.

Spread out on a woven blanket, the deer had already been cleaned, and Guyasuta was beginning the process of butchering. The head would be removed first, a fine trophy to display on a prominent wall of the longhouse. Seeing his colleague quietly, efficiently dismembering the animal seemed to pacify Old Smoke. He glanced back towards Washington and nodded his acceptance of the apology.

Pausing first to assure himself of Old Smoke's good temper, the Virginian said, "I still need you to tell him I want him to stay here."

Old Smoke moved to a position where he could be seen and heard by all three chiefs. Gesturing as he spoke, the Shawnee continued for two or three minutes, which were punctuated by questions from his superiors. As their understanding grew, they cast increasingly troubled glances at Washington.

When Old Smoke finished, he turned his back to the white men. The Half-King, his annoyance developing into genuine anger, called to Guyasuta. The younger Seneca put down the knife he was using to butcher the buck and brought the white horse over to the Half-King, handing him the reins. The elderly chief mounted, secured the collar of his woolen mantle and, pointing to the northeast, cried, "Venango!" The pursed lips and taut muscles of his ancient face left no doubt of his intent or of his resolve.

"I don't think I have to translate that, do I, Major?" the Shawnee said, his back still turned.

No, you certainly do not, Washington agreed, noting the sarcasm in Old Smoke's voice. He appealed again to the Shawnee's good graces.

"Is there any way the Half-King could be persuaded to delay his confrontation with the French commander for a day or two?"

Old Smoke turned toward Washington, moved directly in front of him next to the horse Van Braam had brought and gently stroked its neck. The petulance was gone, or was under measured control.

"Major Washington, I am Shawnee, not Iroquois. In this land, my people are subservient to the Seneca, their *children*, as we say. To the Half-King, I am essentially a vassal. As a Shawnee, you

must know that I have no particular allegiance to or love for the British. It may not be in my interest, or yours, for me to act as intermediary."

The Virginian recognized that the Shawnee was cautioning him against the naïveté of trust, and admired the man's frankness. But there was really no choice

"I have no such qualms, Mr. Old Smoke," he replied, a small lie.

Without enthusiasm, but pleased by Washington's reaction, Old Smoke said, "All right. But I need to give him a good reason why he should stay. Do you have one?"

Washington gritted his teeth silently and gestured to John MacGuire. The tall, buoyant frontiersman withdrew the brown jug from underneath his deerskin Cossack and held it up for all to see, especially the Indians. Except for Old Smoke, their reaction was instantaneous and enthusiastic.

When he realized what the "good reason" for detaining the Indians was to be, the Shawnee's coal-black eyes glared accusingly at Washington, and he moved quickly to join Gwaysuta, knowing that reason and compromise were of no further value.

Washington nudged his horse around to face the frontiersmen, then gave orders not to break camp until he returned, which he expected to be later in the day. He could feel the horse's heavy breathing beneath his thighs and again felt anxiety. Pressing his palm to its neck, he did not find reassurance—the animal was cold, its pulse weak. He motioned to John MacGuire.

"Mr. MacGuire, let me have a swig of that..."

Happy to oblige, MacGuire swung the jug up to Washington's level. The Virginian took a long gulp and returned it to the spirited Irishman.

"Thank you, Mr. MacGuire," he exclaimed, then said in explanation, "I think it will be a very long day."

Washington gently spurred his horse in the direction of the trail to Venango, waving at Gist and Van Braam to join him. They mounted and complied. The trail was wide enough to accommodate only two horses, so Gist came abreast of Washington and Van Braam fell in a length behind.

The Virginian allowed his mount to canter at its own pace, hoping to avoid further aggravating its health. Soon, they were enclosed above and on both sides by an ice lattice of tree branches.

The sounds of the horse's hooves were muffled to a blunt whisper by the thick blanket of snow. The undulant rush of hot, moist air through the steeds' nostrils provided the only audible signs of animate presence.

It was good to be leaving camp, to disengage his mind, if only for a little while. It was ludicrous; he was mentally exhausted and hadn't even met Joncaire. Maybe the exhaustion was a good thing. If he'd had the energy, Washington was afraid he might break into hysterical laughter. He felt like a character in a Shakespearean comedy whose predicament was so absurd and pathetic that it could be resolved only by Providence or the playwright.

"I haven't done very well so far, have I, Christopher?"

"Things could be better," Gist replied matter-of-factly.

Washington wiped away a frozen droplet that had dribbled down his cheek. To deflect attention from the gesture, he turned to study his two companions. Both looked uncharacteristically fierce with their abundant weaponry—tomahawks and knives—dangling by their sides. He laughed. They grinned back.

"You're not a failure yet, George," Gist said.

"What will Joncaire be like?"

"Worse than the Shawnee."

"We will fail, though, won't we?"

"Of course."

"Then the Shawnee was right."

"From his point of view, yes." Gist stared with something like sympathy at his young companion. "We have to get this behind us. It's a job for a soldier, an officer. The British won't send one, not for this. You're all we have. You're indispensable."

At this, they both broke into laughter. Van Braam, who had lived in the colonies for only a year and did not fully comprehend Americans or their humor, decided that getting the joke was not necessary and joined in the mirth.

Gist waited until the final guffaw had been snorted and pulling his musket from its carrying case began sighting along the barrel. Sensing distress in his young companion, he grinned.

"Don't worry, George, I'm only checking it out," he said. The grin became a wry, cunning smile. "I don't think the French will shoot at us just yet."