



PADDLE TO ELIZABETHTOWN

Spring of 1747 burst on the upper Connecticut Valley as abruptly as turning a page in a book. One dark, gray day in early April, with a final blast of wintry fury, it had rained, hailed, and snowed all within the space of time it took to hitch Dun and Dee to the plow. His hands numb and red with cold, Ian M'Kethe had cupped them around his mouth and had blown a prolonged blast of warm air from his lungs. Tingling and aching with the cold, Ian had felt certain that winter would never end and spring would never come.

But spring had come, bursting with new life and beauty like no other spring Ian could remember. It felt, looked, and smelled like a new world being born. Ian filled his lungs with the sweet-scented morning air. It must have been very much like this that long-ago morning, he mused, when God first made the springtime with all its untainted colors, its unfouled odors, its undinning oratories of sound filling the world.

Slowly Ian expelled the air from his lungs. He smiled as a pair of robins cavorted in the deep blue overhead, now diving low, their wings nearly skimming the glassy surface of the river

as they cut and dodged and dipped their way, then disappearing in the branches of a willow bending low over the river's edge.

"Aye," came a voice from behind Ian. "Elizabethtown is many strokes of the paddle from these waters."

Ian looked at the paddle lying idle athwart the canoe, droplets of water falling from the blade like golden honey. How long it had lain idle, he wasn't sure. The narrow birch bark craft had continued to skim effortlessly downstream through the river. Sometimes Ian wondered just how much his strokes contributed to its movement. Watookoog seemed never to tire, and Ian had never seen any man alive, Indian or white, who could get so much out of each stroke.

Ian marveled at how the big Indian slipped the narrow blade of his paddle soundlessly into the water and, with an almost imperceptible movement of his wrist, made the boat turn precisely where he wanted. And Watookoog seemed always to know where he wanted it to go. To Ian it all just looked like water. But Watookoog, long in advance, by narrowing his dark eyes and studying the surface of the river and the configuration of the terrain along the banks, knew where the back eddies were and where the current would best serve his purpose.

"Leave it to me, Watookoog," said Ian with a laugh. "We'll never get to Elizabethtown."

"And college," said the Indian.

Glancing over his shoulder, Ian timed the re-entry of his paddle with Watookoog's stroke. The Indian liked the word "college" and said it with a drawn-out first syllable and a punctuated finality to the second.

"And college," agreed Ian.

"College," repeated Watookoog in his way.

Ian wasn't sure the Indian had any real idea what college was all about. Come to think of it, he wasn't sure he knew

what it was all about. His grandfather had first spoken of the new college forming in New Jersey shortly after Ian and Watookoog had returned with Roland from the doings at Louisbourg. They had returned just in time for the autumn harvest.

Ian remembered wondering how so much on his family's farm in Wallop could be just as he had left it—and at one and the same time so different. After fighting in Nova Scotia, everything was different. Maybe it had made him into a man. He hoped so. Sometimes he wondered if it had only scarred him for life.

The massive guns whose recoil still woke him in the night, reverberating in the very marrow of his bones. The cries of battle—and of death. The pinching odor of blood that lay all about. The clutching hands of fear that enveloped him as he drew near the enemy. The gnawing hunger, the bone-numbing weariness, the loneliness and longing for home. And at the last, triumph, victory, conflict ended. But even victory had its confusions. He sometimes had wondered if the joy he'd felt with victory was merely relief.

At other times, as he lay awake in his bed at night, it all seemed very far away, as if it had never occurred: no thundering guns at Louisbourg, no volley fire into the ranks of French and their Indian allies, no haunting anguish in his night musings: "How many men did I send to hell today?" And at other times there was the guilt he felt when he thought of those of his comrades who fell and died, whose mangled bodies he had helped lay to rest in the earth. Why did they die and he lived? He seemed never able to find an answer.

And then he would think of his cousin Roland chained in that rat-infested prison, the cruel evil of the French, the frontier families slaughtered by them, the ships seized by their foul piracy, crews conscripted or killed, the double-dealing and

betrayal. At times like these, Ian knew that he had done right to go and fight alongside the colonial militia at Louisbourg. At times like these, of this he was certain: troubling as it often was to his mind, his mind would be less at ease had he failed to do his duty and fight.

And then after harvest, his grandfather had told him about the new college in New Jersey. He'd heard a great deal about the ancient stone cloisters and magnificent halls and high stone vaulted chapels at the colleges in the old country—in Scotland. His grandfather had seen Edinburgh, and he'd heard a good deal about colleges at St. Andrews, especially St. Mary's, where Mr. Rutherford had taught—and died.

“Donnae think the college ye're off to, Ian,” his grandfather had said, “will be like those grand places. Rough-hewn logs for cut stones, and maple and elm branches for soaring arches and high ribbed vaulting. Expect no more,” he'd said with a wink,” and ye'll not be disappointed.”

Yet Ian hardly knew what to expect.

“Never scorn humble beginnings,” his grandfather had continued. “Never despise the day of small things. It's the Almighty's way to work through small things. It's what ye learn that matters, and what ye do for God, lad, with what ye learn. That's finally what matters. Make no mistake of it.”

“Your stroke, Ian.” It was Watookoog's voice gently chiding him.

“How many miles do you reckon from here to Elizabethtown?” asked Ian, bending to his paddle.

“Miles?” said Watookoog. “One moon, maybe less, maybe more. Surely more if I alone do the paddling.”

Ian shifted onto one knee for greater leverage, and he buried his paddle in the glassy surface of the mighty Connecticut River. As he did, the package his grandfather had handed him as they cast off no more than two hours ago gouged into the

muscles of his left leg. His grandfather had said it was from Gavin, a distant cousin from Scotland.

“Ye’ll find Gavin has the gift of the gab, lad,” his grandfather had said. “But ye’ll nae be able to put it down, of that I can assure ye.”

Letters came from Scotland several times a year, and Ian’s family read them around the hearth many times over in the weeks and even months that followed. But this one was different. Aside from the fact that it was no proper letter—it was the size of a book and wrapped in broadcloth—Grandfather had read this one alone. And he’d told them very little about its contents.

“Read it around the fire,” his grandfather had said, “with Watookoog.”

Later that evening, north of the rapids at Windsor, they hefted the canoe and all their things along the forest path that bordered the river. Under a mighty white oak tree, they made camp for the night.

After supper, as the stars shone brilliant against the darkening sky, Ian and Watookoog lounged companionably around the campfire.

“Now you read,” said Watookoog, amber light from the fire flickering on his leathery features.

“Aye, the letter,” said Ian. Draining his coffee mug, he took up the first page and shifted onto his right elbow to gain more light from the fire. Clearing his throat, he began reading.