

Chapter 2
THE INDIANS!

“The Indians are coming!”

“No! They can't be!”

“Look out the window!”

Margaret's dark brown curls quivered a little as she hastily turned to obey the command. She had known her sister had seen the Indians before her own eyes rested upon them. She was only trying vainly to adjust her thoughts to the terrifying reality. Tall, straight, and menacing in their approach to the Neely home, the braves advanced first in the line of march, a few small arms dangling from their belts. The squaws followed, some burdened with great loads of baskets made of splints from the green timber.

Margaret's heart throbbed wildly. She found their appearance most alarming.

The two younger girls, pale and trembling, joined their sisters. Leone began removing their wraps and whispered, “Let us try not to look frightened. It will only make the Indians bolder to see that we are afraid. I do not think they will harm us, only take our food.”

Margaret turned from her survey at the window, white and shaking, “You are afraid yourself,” she said weakly.

Leone tried to smile reassuringly as she acknowledged what was so obvious. “I am more than afraid.” With a rather sorry attempt at playfulness, she added, “Let's try to play pretend.”

“Let's hide,” faltered Marie, her arms clinging tightly about Henrietta, the youngest of the group.

“We cannot do that. There is no place secure from them. If they found us scared and hiding, our situation would be worse,” Leone advised.

Margaret agreed quickly, “No! No, we must not try that, but what will we do? I cannot face them!”

“You must!” said Leone convincingly. “Mother and Dad would expect you to. You are the oldest. I will help all I can.”

The time was late winter. A light snow had fallen. Their parents had taken Bill and gone to town for supplies. There was a hint of early spring in the air, at a period when the red man was still something to be reckoned with in the State of Michigan's early history. The terrified girls formed a little group at the doorway when the Indians came on the front porch. The uninvited guests stomped the snow from their moccasins as they crowded upon the doorstep and pounded loudly for admittance. Margaret timidly opened the door slightly and peeked out. The door was pushed rudely from her trembling fingers. The youngsters hastily maneuvered themselves out of the way in fear of being trampled by the crowding intruders as they came rushing in.

“Where your father?” a big fellow demanded. “Me know him, Robert Neely. He buy basket. Me, John Pepa. Where he go?”

“He is out getting the cow,” said Margaret as bravely as her dry lips would permit.

“Where your ma? She gettum cow too?” his sharp penetrating eyes upon her. “Me seeum track go village.”

Leone, true to her promise, attempted to help. "That was Mr. Peary's track," she interposed.

The burly red man turned his piercing gaze to her. "Mr. Peary track," he mimicked, "go, no come. White girl lie. Pa, Ma both go to village. You buyum John Pepa's basket!" At this juncture, as though pre-arranged, the squaws began showing the attractive features of their rather nice baskets while the braves, numerous enough to swarm the entire premises at once, were soon in possession of the several loaves of bread baked by Julia Neely the previous day. Some cooked meat was following the wake of the bread. The milk crocks, which contained the milk and cream so necessary to the family's subsistence, were lifted like cups and quickly emptied by the unwelcome guests.

"How much do you want for this basket?" Margaret asked meekly.

"Me takeum meat," The girls turned to look in the direction he indicated. Through the window could be seen the red men now making off with the meat supply taken from the little storage building adjoining the house.

He showed her another basket. "Me takeum flour, this basket."

Leone went to the pantry and removed the scale from its hook. In the meantime Margaret uncovered the barrel where the flour was kept and was busy dipping the powdery mass into a milk bucket to be weighed as Leone returned and hooked on the scale. The glance they exchanged told volumes as they went to work knowing that regardless of the weight, they could only stop shoveling flour when John Pepa permitted. They found the activity to be somewhat of a relief as they tried to reassure their two frightened younger sisters.

The Indians soon showed signs of terminating their visit. A small number of them began forming a line at the gate, as they had taken everything they wished in the way of food. What they did not consume on the spot had now disappeared amid the bags made from skins and in the baskets that the women members of the party carried.

John Pepa placed in the center of the room some baskets of his own selection. The girls understood him to mean that he considered this good value in return for all the plunder that had been so ruthlessly taken by his followers.

He grabbed the flour from Margaret's reluctant hands, threw it into a bag, tossed the bucket back, slammed the door with a bang that shook the house, and with that the Indians were gone. Relieved of the ordeal, the girls all started sobbing at once. Pressed close to the glass window, tear-wet faces watched the departure of their recent tormentors who followed one another in a single file down the lane, their bright colors flashing in the sunshine.

A few hours passed before Robert, Julia, and little Bill Neely came home to the distressed family members. Robert was a hard and stern man. Had he been present when the Indian put in his appearance with a number of his tribe, it is safe to say that John Pepa would not have presumed to have been quite so bold in his daring visit. The young parents looked about in deep concern at the apparent wreck of their once neat little home. Their children were terrified, and to the parents' great dismay, the little store of supplies had been ruthlessly foraged. Robert Neely looked at his empty shelves bitterly; the gentle Julia clasped her daughters to her in deep gratitude. Losing their food was a major calamity, and to this there was no question. However, Julia's heart was filled with thanksgiving that the villainous red men had only frightened the girls and had not done them any harm.