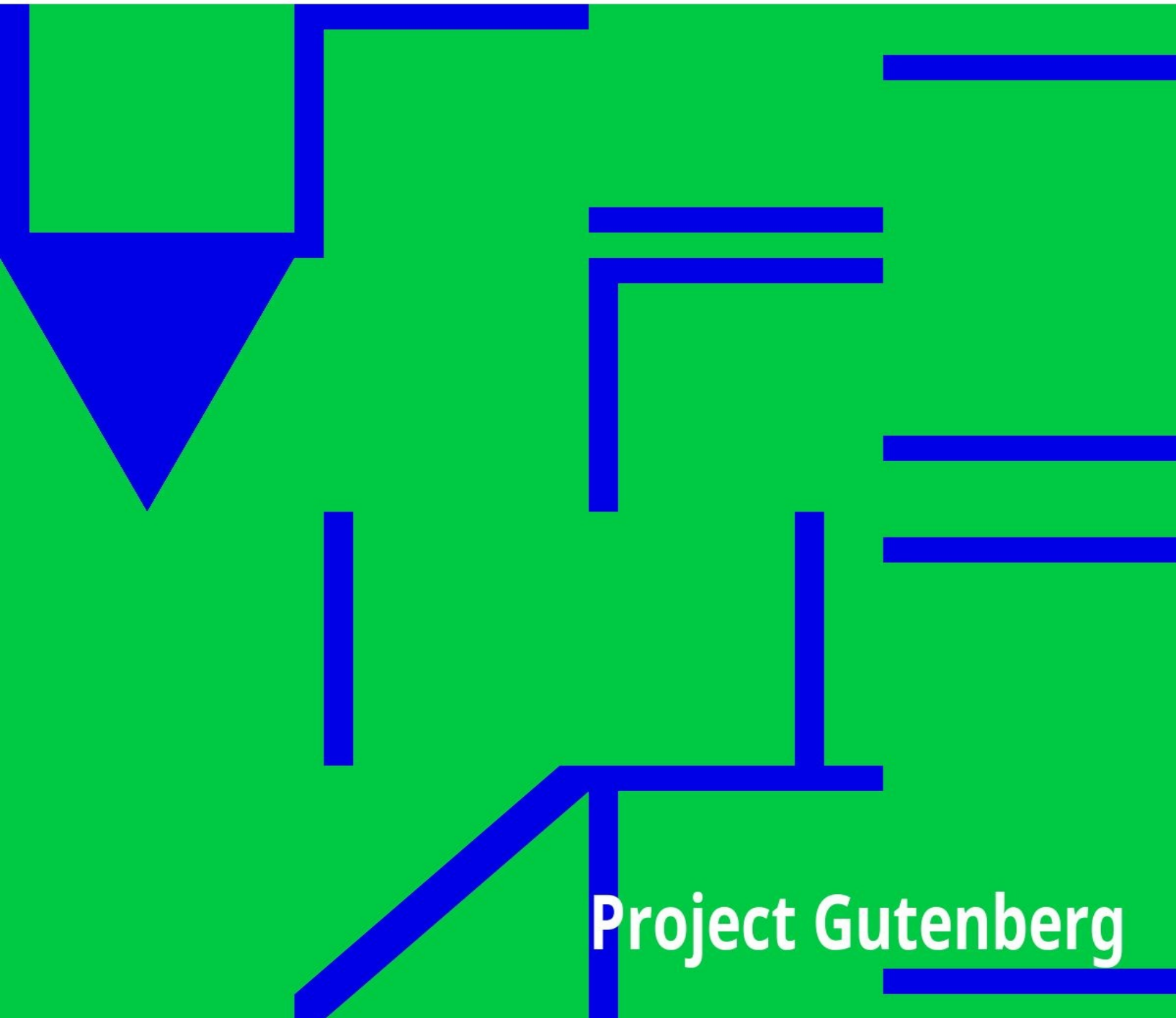
Lords of the North

Agnes C. Laut



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LORDS

OF THE

NORTH

BY

A. C. LAUT

TORONTO
WILLIAM BRIGGS

Entered according to Act of the Parliament of Canada, in the year one thousand nine hundred, by WILLIAM BRIGGS, at the Department of Agriculture.

TO THE

Pioneers and their Descendants

WHOSE

HEROISM WON THE LAND,

THIS WORK

IS RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT.

The author desires to express thanks to pioneers and fur traders of the West for information, details and anecdotes bearing on the old life, which are herein embodied; and would also acknowledge the assistance of the history of the North-West Company and manuscripts of the *Bourgeois*, compiled by Senator L. R. Masson; and the value of such early works as those of Dr. George Bryce, Gunn, Hargraves, Ross and others.

THE TRAPPER'S DEFIANCE.

"The adventurous spirits, who haunted the forest and plain, grew fond of their wild life and affected a great contempt for civilization."

You boxed-up, mewed-up artificials,
Pent in your piles of mortar and stone,
Hugging your finely spun judicials,
Adorning externals, externals alone,
Vaunting in prideful ostentation
Of the Juggernaut car, called Civilization—
What know ye of freedom and life and God?

Monkeys, that follow a showman's string,
Know more of freedom and less of care,
Cage birds, that flutter from perch to ring,
Have less of worry and surer fare.
Cursing the burdens, yourselves have bound,
In a maze of wants, running round and round—
Are ye free men, or manniken slaves?

Costly patches, adorning your walls,
Are all of earth's beauty ye care to know;
But ye strut about in soul-stifled halls
To play moth-life by a candle-glow—
What soul has space for upward fling,
What manhood room for shoulder-swing,
Coffined and cramped from the vasts of God?

The Spirit of Life, O atrophied soul,
In trappings of ease is not confined;
That touch from Infinite Will 'neath the Whole
In Nature's temple, not man's, is shrined!
From hovel-shed come out and be strong!
Be ye free! Be redeemed from the wrong,
Of soul-guilt, I charge you as sons of God!

INTRODUCTION.

I, Rufus Gillespie, trader and clerk for the North-West Company, which ruled over an empire broader than Europe in the beginning of this century, and with Indian allies and its own riotous *Bois-Brulés*, carried war into the very heart of the vast territory claimed by its rivals, the Honorable Hudson's Bay Company, have briefly related a few stirring events of those boisterous days. Should the account here set down be questioned, I appeal for confirmation to that missionary among northern tribes, the famous priest, who is the son of the ill-fated girl stolen by the wandering Iroquois. Lord Selkirk's narration of lawless conflict with the Nor'-Westers and the verbal testimony of Red River settlers, who are still living, will also substantiate what I have stated; though allowance must be made for the violent partisan leaning of witnesses, and from that, I—as a Nor'-Wester—do not claim to be free.

On the charges and counter-charges of cruelty bandied between white men and red, I have nothing to say. Remembering how white soldiers from eastern cities took the skin of a native chief for a trophy of victory, and recalling the fiendish glee of Mandanes over a victim, I can only conclude that neither race may blamelessly point the finger of reproach at the other.

Any variations in detail from actual occurrences as seen by my own eyes are solely for the purpose of screening living descendants of those whose lives are here portrayed from prying curiosity; but, in truth, many experiences during the thrilling days of the fur companies were far too harrowing for recital. I would fain have tempered some of the incidents herein related to suit the sentiments of a milk-and-water age; but that could be done only at the cost of truth.

There is no French strain in my blood, so I have not that passionate devotion to the wild daring of *l'ancien régime*, in which many of my rugged companions under *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest* gloried; but he would be very sluggish, indeed, who could not look back with some degree of enthusiasm to the days of gentlemen adventurers in no-man's-land, in a word, to the workings of the great fur trading companies. Theirs were the trappers and runners, the *Coureurs des Bois* and *Bois-Brulés*, who traversed the immense solitudes of the pathless west; theirs, the brigades of gay *voyageurs* chanting hilarious refrains in unison with the rhythmic sweep of paddle blades and

following unknown streams until they had explored from St. Lawrence to MacKenzie River; and theirs, the merry lads of the north, blazing a track through the wilderness and leaving from Atlantic to Pacific lonely stockaded fur posts—footprints for the pioneers' guidance. The whitewashed palisades of many little settlements on the rivers and lakes of the far north are poor relics of the fur companies' ancient grandeur. That broad domain stretching from Hudson Bay to the Pacific Ocean, reclaimed from savagery for civilization, is the best monument to the unheralded forerunners of empire.

RUFUS GILLESPIE.

WINNIPEG—ONE TIME FORT GARRY
FORMERLY RED RIVER SETTLEMENT,
19th June, 18—

Transcriber's note: Minor typos have been corrected.

CONTENTS

LORDS OF THE NORTH

CHAPTER I

WHEREIN A LAD SEES MAKERS OF HISTORY

"Has any one seen Eric Hamilton?" I asked.

For an hour, or more, I had been lounging about the sitting-room of a club in Quebec City, waiting for my friend, who had promised to join me at dinner that night. I threw aside a news-sheet, which I had exhausted down to minutest advertisements, stretched myself and strolled across to a group of old fur-traders, retired partners of the North-West Company, who were engaged in heated discussion with some officers from the Citadel.

"Has any one seen Eric Hamilton?" I repeated, indifferent to the merits of their dispute.

"That's the tenth time you've asked that question," said my Uncle Jack MacKenzie, looking up sharply, "the tenth time, Sir, by actual count," and he puckered his brows at the interruption, just as he used to when I was a little lad on his knee and chanced to break into one of his hunting stories with a question at the wrong place.

"Hang it," drawled Colonel Adderly, a squatty man with an over-fed look on his bulging, red cheeks, "hang it, you don't expect Hamilton? The baby must be teething," and he added more chaff at the expense of my friend, who had been the subject of good-natured banter among club members for devotion to his first-born.

I saw Adderly's object was more to get away from the traders' arguments than to answer me; and I returned the insolent challenge of his unconcealed yawn in the faces of the elder men by drawing a chair up to the company of McTavishes and Frobishers and McGillivrays and MacKenzies and other retired veterans of the north country.

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen," said I, "what were you saying to Colonel Adderly?"

"Talk of your military conquests, Sir," my uncle continued, "Why, Sir, our men

have transformed a wilderness into an empire. They have blazed a path from Labrador on the Atlantic to that rock on the Pacific, where my esteemed kinsman, Sir Alexander MacKenzie, left his inscription of discovery. Mark my words, Sir, the day will come when the names of David Thompson and Simon Fraser and Sir Alexander MacKenzie will rank higher in English annals than Braddock's and——"

"Egad!" laughed the officer, amused at my uncle, who had been a leading spirit in the North-West Company and whose enthusiasm knew no bounds, "Egad! You gentlemen adventurers wouldn't need to have accomplished much to eclipse Braddock." And he paused with a questioning supercilious smile. "Sir Alexander was a first cousin of yours, was he not?"

My uncle flushed hotly. That slighting reference to gentlemen adventurers, with just a perceptible emphasis of the *adventurers*, was not to his taste.

"Pardon me, Sir," said he stiffly, "you forget that by the terms of their charter, the Ancient and Honorable Hudson's Bay Company have the privilege of being known as gentlemen adventurers. And by the Lord, Sir, 'tis a gentleman adventurer and nothing else, that stock-jobbing scoundrel of a Selkirk has proved himself! And he, sir, was neither Nor'-Wester, nor Canadian, but an Englishman, like the commander of the Citadel." My uncle puffed out these last words in the nature of a defiance to the English officer, whose cheeks took on a deeper purplish shade; but he returned the charge good-humoredly enough.

"Nonsense, MacKenzie, my good friend," laughed he patronizingly, "if the Right Honorable, the Earl of Selkirk, were such an adventurer, why the deuce did the Beaver Club down at Montreal receive him with open mouths and open arms and——"

"And open hearts, Sir, you may say," interrupted my Uncle MacKenzie. "And I'd thank you not to 'good-friend' me," he added tartly.

Now, the Beaver Club was an organization at Nor'-Westers renowned for its hospitality. Founded in 1785, originally composed of but nineteen members and afterwards extended only to men who had served in the *Pays d'En Haut*, it soon acquired a reputation for entertaining in regal style. Why the vertebrae of colonial gentlemen should sometimes lose the independent, upright rigidity of self-respect on contact with old world nobility, I know not. But instantly, Colonel Adderly's reference to Lord Selkirk and the Beaver Club called up the picture of a banquet in Montreal, when I was a lad of seven, or thereabouts. I had been

tricked out in some Highland costume especially pleasing to the Earl—cap, kilts, dirk and all—and was taken by my Uncle Jack MacKenzie to the Beaver Club. Here, in a room, that glittered with lights, was a table steaming with things, which caught and held my boyish eyes; and all about were crowds of guests, gentlemen, who had been invited in the quaint language of the club, "To discuss the merits of bear, beaver and venison." The great Sir Alexander MacKenzie, with his title fresh from the king, and his feat of exploring the river now known by his name and pushing through the mountain fastnesses to the Pacific on all men's lips—was to my Uncle Jack's right. Simon Fraser and David Thompson and other famous explorers, who were heroes to my imagination, were there too. In these men and what they said of their wonderful voyages I was far more interested than in the young, keen-faced man with a tie, that came up in ruffles to his ears, and with an imperial decoration on his breast, which told me he was Lord Selkirk.

I remember when the huge salvers and platters were cleared away, I was placed on the table to execute the sword dance. I must have acquitted myself with some credit; for the gentlemen set up a prodigious clapping, though I recall nothing but a snapping of my fingers, a wave of my cap and a whirl of lights and faces around my dizzy head. Then my uncle took me between his knees, promising to let me sit up to the end if I were good, and more wine was passed.

"That's enough for you, you young cub," says my kinsman, promptly inverting the wine-glass before me.

"O Uncle MacKenzie," said I with a wry face, "do you measure your own wine so?"

Whereat, the noble Earl shouted, "Bravo! here's for you, Mr. MacKenzie."

And all the gentlemen set up a laugh and my uncle smiled and called to the butler, "Here, Johnson, toddy for one, glass of hot water, pure, for other."

But when Johnson brought back the glasses, I observed Uncle MacKenzie kept the toddy. "There, my boy, there's Adam's ale for you," said he, and into the glass of hot water he popped a peppermint lozenge.

"Fie!" laughed Sir Alexander to my uncle's right, "Fie to cheat the little man!"

"His is the best wine of the cellar," vowed His Lordship; and I drank my peppermint with as much gusto and self-importance as any man of them.

Then followed toasts, such a list of toasts as only men inured to tests of strength could take. Ironical toasts to the North-West Passage, whose myth Sir Alexander had dispelled; toasts to the discoverer of the MacKenzie River, which brought storms of applause that shook the house; toasts to "our distinguished guest," whose suave response disarmed all suspicion; toasts to the "Northern winterers," poor devils, who were serving the cause by undergoing a life-long term of Arctic exile; toasts to "the merry lads of the north," who only served in the ranks without attaining to the honor of partnership; toasts enough, in all conscience, to drown the memory of every man present. Thanks to my Uncle Jack MacKenzie, all my toasts were taken in peppermint, and the picture in my mind of that banquet is as clear to-day as it was when I sat at the table. What would I not give to be back at the Beaver Club, living it all over again and hearing Sir Alexander MacKenzie with his flashing hero-eyes and quick, passionate gestures, recounting that wonderful voyage of his with a sulky crew into a region of hostiles; telling of those long interminable winters of Arctic night, when the great explorer sounded the depths of utter despair in service for the company and knew not whether he faced madness or starvation; and thrilling the whole assembly with a description of his first glimpse of the Pacific! Perhaps it was what I heard that night—who can tell—that drew me to the wild life of after years. But I was too young, then, to recognize fully the greatness of those men. Indeed, my country was then and is yet too young; for if their greatness be recognized, it is forgotten and unhonored.

I think I must have fallen asleep on my uncle's knee; for I next remember sleepily looking about and noticing that many of the gentlemen had slid down in their chairs and with closed eyes were breathing heavily. Others had slipped to the floor and were sound asleep. This shocked me and I was at once wide awake. My uncle was sitting very erect and his arm around my waist had the tight grasp that usually preceded some sharp rebuke. I looked up and found his face grown suddenly so hard and stern, I was all affright lest my sleeping had offended him. His eyes were fastened on Lord Selkirk with a piercing, angry gaze. His Lordship was not nodding, not a bit of it. How brilliant he seemed to my childish fancy! He was leaning forward, questioning those Nor'-Westers, who had received him with open arms, and open hearts. And the wine had mounted to the head of the good Nor'-Westers and they were now also receiving the strange nobleman with open mouths, pouring out to him a full account of their profits, the extent of the vast, unknown game preserve, and how their methods so far surpassed those of the Hudson's Bay, their rival's stock had fallen in value from 250 to 50 per cent.

The more information they gave, the more His Lordship plied them with questions.

"I must say," whispered Uncle Jack to Sir Alexander MacKenzie, "if any Hudson's Bay man asked such pointed questions on North-West business, I'd give myself the pleasure of ejecting him from this room."

Then, I knew his anger was against Lord Selkirk and not against me for sleeping.

"Nonsense," retorted Sir Alexander, who had cut active connection with the Nor'-Westers some years before, "there's no ground for suspicion." But he seemed uneasy at the turn things had taken.

"Has your Lordship some colonization scheme that you ask such pointed questions?" demanded my uncle, addressing the Earl. The nobleman turned quickly to him and said something about the Highlanders and Prince Edward's Island, which I did not understand. The rest of that evening fades from my thoughts; for I was carried home in Mr. Jack MacKenzie's arms.

And all these things happened some ten or twelve years before that wordy sword-play between this same uncle of mine and the English colonel from the Citadel.

"We erred, Sir, through too great hospitality," my uncle was saying to the colonel. "How could we know that Selkirk would purchase controlling interest in Hudson's Bay stock? How could we know he'd secure a land grant in the very heart of our domain?"

"I don't object to his land, nor to his colonists, nor to his dower of ponies and muskets and bayonets to every mother's son of them," broke in another of the retired traders, "but I do object to his drilling those same colonists, to his importing a field battery and bringing out that little ram of a McDonell from the Army to egg the settlers on! It's bad enough to pillage our fort; but this proclamation to expel Nor'-Westers from what is claimed as Hudson's Bay Territory——"

"Just listen to this," cries my uncle pulling out a copy of the obnoxious proclamation and reading aloud an order for the expulsion of all rivals to the Hudson's Bay Company from the northern territory.

"Where can Hamilton be?" said I, losing interest in the traders' quarrel as soon as they went into details.

"Home with his wifie," half sneered the officer in a nagging way, that irritated me, though the remark was, doubtless, true. "Home with his wifie," he repeated in a sing-song, paying no attention to the elucidation of a subject he had raised. "Good old man, Hamilton, but since marriage, utterly gone to the bad!"

"To the what?" I queried, taking him up short. This officer, with the pudding cheeks and patronizing insolence, had a provoking trick of always keeping just inside the bounds of what one might resent. "To the what, did you say Hamilton had gone?"

"To the domestics," says he laughing, then to the others, as if he had listened to every word of the explanations, "and if His Little Excellency, Governor MacDonell, by the grace of Lord Selkirk, ruler over gentlemen adventurers in no-man's-land, expels the good Nor'-Westers from nowhere to somewhere else, what do the good Nor'-Westers intend doing to the Little Tyrant?"

"Charles the First him," responds a wag of the club.

"Where's your Cromwell?" laughs the colonel.

"Our Cromwell's a Cameron, temper of a Lucifer, oaths before action," answers the wag.

"Tuts!" exclaims Uncle Jack testily. "We'll settle His Lordship's little martinet of the plains. Warrant for his arrest! Fetch him out!"

"Warrant 43rd King George III. will do it," added one of the partners who had looked the matter up.

"43rd King George III. doesn't give jurisdiction for trial in Lower Canada, if offense be committed elsewhere," interjects a lawyer with show of importance.

"A Daniel come to judgment," laughs the colonel, winking as my uncle's wrath rose.

"Pah!" says Mr. Jack MacKenzie in disgust, stamping on the floor with both feet. "You lawyers needn't think you'll have your pickings when fur companies quarrel. We'll ship him out, that's all. Neither of the companies wants to advertise its profits—"

"Or its methods—ahem!" interjects the colonel.

"And its private business," adds my uncle, looking daggers at Adderly, "by going

to court."

Then they all rose to go to the dining-room; and as I stepped out to have a look down the street for Hamilton, I heard Colonel Adderly's last fling—"Pretty rascals, you gentlemen adventurers are, so shy and coy about law courts."

It was a dark night, with a few lonely stars in mid-heaven, a sickle moon cutting the horizon cloud-rim and a noisy March wind that boded snow from The Labrador, or sleet from the Gulf.

When Eric Hamilton left the Hudson's Bay Company's service at York Factory on Hudson Bay and came to live in Quebec, I was but a student at Laval. It was at my Uncle MacKenzie's that I met the tall, dark, sinewy, taciturn man, whose influence was to play such a strange part in my life; and when these two talked of their adventures in the far, lone land of the north, I could no more conceal my awe-struck admiration than a girl could on first discovering her own charms in a looking-glass. I think he must have noticed my boyish reverence, for once he condescended to ask about the velvet cap and green sash and long blue coat which made up the Laval costume, and in a moment I was talking to him as volubly as if he were the boy and I, the great Hudson's Bay trader.

"It makes me feel quite like a boy again," he had said on resuming conversation with Mr. MacKenzie. "By Jove! Sir, I can hardly realize I went into that country a lad of fifteen, like your nephew, and here I am, out of it, an old man."

"Pah, Eric man," says my uncle, "you'll be finding a wife one of these days and renewing your youth."

"Uncle," I broke out when the Hudson's Bay man had gone home, "how old is Mr. Hamilton?"

"Fifteen years older than you are, boy, and I pray Heaven you may have half as much of the man in you at thirty as he has," returns my uncle mentally measuring me with that stern eye of his. At that information, my heart gave a curious, jubilant thud. Henceforth, I no longer looked upon Mr. Hamilton with the same awe that a choir boy entertains for a bishop. Something of comradeship sprang up between us, and before that year had passed we were as boon companions as man and boy could be. But Hamilton presently spoiled it all by fulfilling my uncle's prediction and finding a wife, a beautiful, fair-haired, frail slip of a girl, near enough the twenties to patronize me and too much of the young lady to find pleasure in an awkward lad. That meant an end to our rides

and walks and sails down the St. Lawrence and long evening talks; but I took my revenge by assuming the airs of a man of forty, at which Hamilton quizzed me not a little and his wife, Miriam, laughed. When I surprised them all by jumping suddenly from boyhood to manhood—"like a tadpole into a mosquito," as my Uncle Jack facetiously remarked. Meanwhile, a son and heir came to my friend's home and I had to be thankful for a humble third place.

And so it came that I was waiting for Eric's arrival at the Quebec Club that night, peering from the porch for sight of him and calculating how long it would take to ride from the Chateau Bigot above Charlesbourg, where he was staying. Stepping outside, I was surprised to see the form of a horse beneath the lantern of the arched gateway; and my surprise increased on nearer inspection. As I walked up, the creature gave a whinny and I recognized Hamilton's horse, lathered with sweat, unblanketed and shivering. The possibility of an accident hardly suggested itself before I observed the bridle-rein had been slung over the hitching-post and heard steps hurrying to the side door of the club-house.

"Is that you, Eric?" I called.

There was no answer; so I led the horse to the stable boy and hurried back to see if Hamilton were inside. The sitting room was deserted; but Eric's well-known, tall figure was entering the dining-room. And a curious figure he presented to the questioning looks of the club men. In one hand was his riding whip, in the other, his gloves. He wore the buckskin coat of a trapper and in the belt were two pistols. One sleeve was torn from wrist to elbow and his boots were scratched as if they had been combed by an iron rake. His broad-brimmed hat was still on, slouched down over his eyes like that of a scout.

"Gad! Hamilton," exclaimed Uncle Jack MacKenzie, who was facing Eric as I came up behind, "have you been in a race or a fight?" and he gave him the look of suspicion one might give an intoxicated man.

"Is it a cold night?" asked the colonel punctiliously, gazing hard at the still-strapped hat.

Not a word came from Hamilton.

"How's the cold in your head?" continued Adderly, pompously trying to stare Hamilton's hat off.

"Here I am, old man! What's kept you?" and I rushed forward but quickly

checked myself; for Hamilton turned slowly towards me and instead of erect bearing, clear glance, firm mouth, I saw a head that was bowed, eyes that burned like fire, and parched, parted, wordless lips.

If the colonel had not been stuffing himself like the turkey guzzler that he was, he would have seen something unspeakably terrible written on Hamilton's silent face.

"Did the little wifie let him off for a night's play?" sneered Adderly.

Barely were the words out, when Hamilton's teeth clenched behind the open lips, giving him an ugly, furious expression, strange to his face. He took a quick stride towards the officer, raised his whip and brought it down with the full strength of his shoulder in one cutting blow across the baggy, purplish cheeks of the insolent speaker.

CHAPTER II

A STRONG MAN IS BOWED

The whole thing was so unexpected that for one moment not a man in the room drew breath. Then the colonel sprang up with the bellow of an enraged bull, overturning the table in his rush, and a dozen club members were pulling him back from Eric.

"Eric Hamilton, are you mad?" I cried. "What do you mean?"

But Hamilton stood motionless as if he saw none of us. Except that his breath was labored, he wore precisely the same strange, distracted air he had on entering the club.

"Hold back!" I implored; for Adderly was striking right and left to get free from the men. "Hold back! There's a mistake! Something's wrong!"

"Reptile!" roared the colonel. "Cowardly reptile, you shall pay for this!"

"There's a mistake," I shouted, above the clamor of exclamations.

"Glad the mistake landed where it did, all the same," whispered Uncle Jack MacKenzie in my ear, "but get him out of this. Drunk—or a scandal," says my uncle, who always expressed himself in explosives when excited. "Side room—here—lead him in—drunk—by Jove—drunk!"

"Never," I returned passionately. I knew both Hamilton and his wife too well to tolerate either insinuation. But we led him like a dazed being into a side office, where Mr. Jack MacKenzie promptly turned the key and took up a posture with his back against the door.

"Now, Sir," he broke out sternly, "if it's neither drink, nor a scandal——" There, he stopped; for Hamilton, utterly unconscious of us, moved, rather than walked, automatically across the room. Throwing his hat down, he bowed his head over both arms above the mantel-piece.

My uncle and I looked from the silent man to each other. Raising his brows in question, Mr. Jack MacKenzie touched his forehead and whispered across to me

—"Mad?"

At that, though the word was spoken barely above a breath, Eric turned slowly round and faced us with blood-shot, gleaming eyes. He made as though he would speak, sank into the armchair before the grate and pressed both hands against his forehead.

"Mad," he repeated in a voice low as a moan, framing his words slowly and with great effort. "By Jove, men, you should know me better than to mouth such rot under your breath. To-night, I'd sell my soul, sell my soul to be mad, really mad, to know that all I think has happened, hadn't happened at all—" and his speech was broken by a sharp intake of breath.

"Out with it, man, for the Lord's sake," shouted my uncle, now convinced that Eric was not drunk and jumping to conclusions—as he was wont to do when excited—regarding a possible scandal.

"Out with it, man! We'll stand by you! Has that blasted red-faced turkey——"

"Pray, spare your histrionics, for the present," Eric cut in with the icy self-possession bred by a lifetime's danger, dispelling my uncle's second suspicion with a quiet scorn that revealed nothing.

"What the——" began my kinsman, "what did you strike him for?"

"Did I strike somebody?" asked Hamilton absently.

Again my uncle flashed a questioning look at me, but this time his face showed his conviction so plainly no word was needed.

"Did I strike somebody? Wish you'd apologize——"

"Apologize!" thundered my uncle. "I'll do nothing of the kind. Served him right. 'Twas a pretty way, a pretty way, indeed, to speak of any man's wife——" But the word "wife" had not been uttered before Eric threw out his hands in an imploring gesture.

"Don't!" he cried out sharply in the suffering tone of a man under the operating knife. "Don't! It all comes back! It is true! It is true! I can't get away from it! It is no nightmare. My God, men, how can I tell you? There's no way of saying it! It is impossible—preposterous—some monstrous joke—it's quite impossible I tell you—it couldn't have happened—such things don't happen—couldn't happen—

to her—of all women! But she's gone—she's gone——"

"See here, Hamilton," cried my uncle, utterly beside himself with excitement, "are we to understand you are talking of your wife, or—or some other woman?"

"See here, Hamilton," I reiterated, quite heedless of the brutality of our questions and with a thousand wild suspicions flashing into my mind. "Is it your wife, Miriam, and your boy?"

But he heard neither of us.

"They were there—they waved to me from the garden at the edge of the woods as I entered the forest. Only this morning, both waving to me as I rode away—and when I returned from the city at noon, they were gone! I looked to the window as I came back. The curtain moved and I thought my boy was hiding, but it was only the wind. We've searched every nook from cellar to attic. His toys were littered about and I fancied I heard his voice everywhere, but no! No—no—and we've been hunting house and garden for hours——"

"And the forest?" questioned Uncle Jack, the trapper instinct of former days suddenly re-awakening.

"The forest is waist-deep with snow! Besides we beat through the bush everywhere, and there wasn't a track, nor broken twig, where they could have passed." His torn clothes bore evidence to the thoroughness of that search.

"Nonsense," my uncle burst out, beginning to bluster. "They've been driven to town without leaving word!"

"No sleigh was at Chateau Bigot this morning," returned Hamilton.

"But the road, Eric?" I questioned, recalling how the old manor-house stood well back in the center of a cleared plateau in the forest. "Couldn't they have gone down the road to those Indian encampments?"

"The road is impassable for sleighs, let alone walking, and their winter wraps are all in the house. For Heaven's sake, men, suggest something! Don't madden me with these useless questions!"

But in spite of Eric's entreaty my excitable kinsman subjected the frenzied man to such a fire of questions as might have sublimated pre-natal knowledge. And I stood back listening and pieced the distracted, broken answers into some sort of

coherency till the whole tragic scene at the Chateau on that spring day of the year 1815, became ineffaceably stamped on my memory.

Causeless, with neither warning nor the slightest premonition of danger, the greatest curse which can befall a man came upon my friend Eric Hamilton. However fond a husband may be, there are things worse for his wife than death which he may well dread, and it was one of these tragedies which almost drove poor Hamilton out of his reason and changed the whole course of my own life. In broad daylight, his young wife and infant son disappeared as suddenly and completely as if blotted out of existence.

That morning, Eric light-heartedly kissed wife and child good-by and waved them a farewell that was to be the last. He rode down the winding forest path to Quebec and they stood where the Chateau garden merged into the forest of Charlesbourg Mountain. At noon, when he returned, for him there existed neither wife nor child. For any trace of them that could be found, both might have been supernaturally spirited away. The great house, that had re-echoed to the boy's prattle, was deathly still; and neither wife, nor child, answered his call. The nurse was summoned. She was positive *Madame* was amusing the boy across the hall, and reassuringly bustled off to find mother and son in the next room, and the next, and yet the next; to discover each in succession empty.

Alarm spread to the Chateau servants. The simple *habitant* maids were questioned, but their only response was white-faced, blank amazement.

Madame not returned!

Madame not back!

Mon Dieu! What had happened? And all the superstition of hillside lore added to the fear on each anxious face. Shortly after Monsieur went to the city, *Madame* had taken her little son out as usual for a morning airing, and had been seen walking up and down the paths tracked through the garden snow. Had *Monsieur* examined the clearing between the house and the forest? *Monsieur* could see for himself the snow was too deep and crusty among the trees for *Madame* to go twenty paces into the woods. Besides, foot-marks could be traced from the garden to the bush. He need not fear wild animals. They were receding into the mountains as spring advanced. Let him take another look about the open; and Hamilton tore out-doors, followed by the whole household; but from the Chateau in the center of the glade to the encircling border of snow-laden evergreens there was no trace of wife or child.

Then Eric laughed at his own growing fears. Miriam must be in the house. So the search of the old hall, that had once resounded to the drunken tread of gay French grandees, began again. From hidden chamber in the vaulted cellar to attic rooms above, not a corner of the Chateau was left unexplored. Had any one come and driven her to the city? But that was impossible. The roads were drifted the height of a horse and there were no marks of sleigh runners on either side of the riding path. Could she possibly have ventured a few yards down the main road to an encampment of Indians, whose squaws after Indian custom made much of the white baby? Neither did that suggestion bring relief; for the Indians had broken camp early in the morning and there was only a dirty patch of littered snow, where the wigwams had been.

The alarm now became a panic. Hamilton, half-crazed and unable to believe his own senses, began wondering whether he had nightmare. He thought he might waken up presently and find the dead weight smothering his chest had been the boy snuggling close. He was vaguely conscious it was strange of him to continue sleeping with that noise of shouting men and whining hounds and snapping branches going on in the forest. The child's lightest cry generally broke the spell of a nightmare; but the din of terrified searchers rushing through the woods and of echoes rolling eerily back from the white hills convinced him this was no dream-land. Then, the distinct crackle of trampled brushwood and the scratch of spines across his face called him back to an unendurable reality.

"The thing is utterly impossible, Hamilton," I cried, when in short jerky sentences, as if afraid to give thought rein, he had answered my uncle's questioning. "Impossible! Utterly impossible!"

"I would to God it were!" he moaned.

"It was daylight, Eric?" asked Mr. Jack MacKenzie.

He nodded moodily.

"And she couldn't be lost in Charlesbourg forest?" I added, taking up the interrogations where my uncle left off.

"No trace—not a footprint!"

"And you're quite sure she isn't in the house?" replied my relative.

"Quite!" he answered passionately.

"And there was an Indian encampment a few yards down the road?" continued Mr. MacKenzie, undeterred.

"Oh! What has that to do with it?" he asked petulantly, springing to his feet. "They'd moved off long before I went back. Besides, Indians don't run off with white women. Haven't I spent my life among them? I should know their ways!"

"But my dear fellow!" responded the elder trader, "so do I know their ways. If she isn't in the Chateau and isn't in the woods and isn't in the garden, can't you see, the Indian encampment is the only possible explanation?"

The lines on his face deepened. Fire flashed from his gleaming eyes, and if ever I have seen murder written on the countenance of man, it was on Hamilton's.

"What tribe were they, anyway?" I asked, trying to speak indifferently, for every question was knife-play on a wound.

"Mongrel curs, neither one thing nor the other, Iroquois canoemen, French half-breeds intermarried with Sioux squaws! They're all connected with the North-West Company's crews. The Nor'-Westers leave here for Fort William when the ice breaks up. This riff-raff will follow in their own dug-outs!"

"Know any of them?" persisted my uncle.

"No, I don't think I—Let me see! By Jove! Yes, Gillespie!" he shouted, "Le Grand Diable was among them!"

"What about Diable?" I asked, pinning him down to the subject, for his mind was lost in angry memories.

"What about him? He's my one enemy among the Indians," he answered in tones thick and ominously low. "I thrashed him within an inch of his life at Isle à la Crosse. Being a Nor'-Wester, he thought it fine game to pillage the kit of a Hudson's Bay; so he stole a silver-mounted fowling-piece which my grandfather had at Culloden. By Jove, Gillespie! The Nor'-Westers have a deal of blood to answer for, stirring up those Indians against traders; and if they've brought this on me——"

"Did you get it back?" I interrupted, referring to the fowling-piece, neither my uncle, nor I, offering any defense for the Nor'-Westers. I knew there were two sides to this complaint from a Hudson's Bay man.

"No! That's why I nearly finished him; but the more I clubbed, the more he jabbered impertinence, '*Cooloo! cooloo! qu' importe!* It doesn't matter!' By Jove! I made it matter!"

"Is that all about Diable, Eric?" continued my uncle.

He ran his fingers distractedly back through his long, black hair, rose, and, coming over to me, laid a trembling hand on each shoulder.

"Gillespie!" he muttered through hard-set teeth. "It isn't all. I didn't think at the time, but the morning after the row with that red devil I found a dagger stuck on the outside of my hut-door. The point was through a fresh sprouted leaflet. A withered twig hung over the blade."

"Man! Are you mad?" cried Jack MacKenzie. "He must be the very devil himself. You weren't married then—He couldn't mean——"

"I thought it was an Indian threat," interjected Hamilton, "that if I had downed him in the fall, when the branches were bare, he meant to have his revenge in spring when the leaves were green; but you know I left the country that fall."

"You were wrong, Eric!" I blurted out impetuously, the terrible significance of that threat dawning upon me. "That wasn't the meaning at all."

Then I stopped; for Hamilton was like a palsied man, and no one asked what those tokens of a leaflet pierced by a dagger and an old branch hanging to the knife might mean.

Mr. Jack MacKenzie was the first to pull himself together.

"Come," he shouted. "Gather up your wits! To the camping ground!" and he threw open the door.

Thereupon, we three flung through the club-room to the astonishment of the gossips, who had been waiting outside for developments in the quarrel with Colonel Adderly. At the outer porch, Hamilton laid a hand on Mr. MacKenzie's shoulder.

"Don't come," he begged hurriedly. "There's a storm blowing. It's rough weather, and a rough road, full of drifts! Make my peace with the man I struck."

Then Eric and I whisked out into the blackness of a boisterous, windy night. A moment later, our horses were dashing over iced cobble-stones with the clatter of

pistol-shots.

"It will snow," said I, feeling a few flakes driven through the darkness against my face; but to this remark Hamilton was heedless.

"It will snow, Eric," I repeated. "The wind's veered north. We must get out to the camp before all traces are covered. How far by the Beauport road?"

"Five miles," said he, and I knew by the sudden scream and plunge of his horse that spurs were dug into raw sides. We turned down that steep, break-neck, tortuous street leading from Upper Town to the valley of the St. Charles. The wet thaw of mid-day had frozen and the road was slippery as a toboggan slide. We reined our horses in tightly, to prevent a perilous stumbling of fore-feet, and by zigzagging from side to side managed to reach the foot of the hill without a single fall. Here, we again gave them the bit; and we were presently thundering across the bridge in a way that brought the keeper out cursing and yelling for his toll. I tossed a coin over my shoulder and we galloped up the elm-lined avenue leading to that Charlesbourg retreat, where French Bacchanalians caroused before the British conquest, passed the thatch-roofed cots of *habitants* and, turning suddenly to the right, followed a seldom frequented road, where snow was drifted heavily. Here we had to slacken pace, our beasts sinking to their haunches and snorting through the white billows like a modern snow-plow.

Hamilton had spoken not a word.

Clouds were massing on the north. Overhead a few stars glittered against the black, and the angry wind had the most mournful wail I have ever heard. How the weird undertones came like the cries of a tortured child, and the loud gusts with the shriek of demons!

"Gillespie," called Eric's voice tremulous with anguish, "listen—Rufus—listen! Do you hear anything? Do you hear any one calling for help? Is that a child crying?"

"No, Eric, old man," said I, shivering in my saddle. "I hear—I hear nothing at all but the wind."

But my hesitancy belied the truth of that answer; for we both heard sounds, which no one can interpret but he whose well beloved is lost in the storm.

And the wind burst upon us again, catching my empty denial and tossing the words to upper air with eldritch laughter. Then there was a lull, and I felt rather

than heard the choking back of stifled moans and knew that the man by my side, who had held iron grip of himself before other eyes, was now giving vent to grief in the blackness of night.

At last a red light gleamed from the window of a low cot. That was the signal for us to turn abruptly to the left, entering the forest by a narrow bridle-path that twisted among the cedars. As if to look down in pity, the moon shone for a moment above the ragged edge of a storm cloud, and all the snow-laden evergreens stood out stately, shadowy and spectral, like mourners for the dead.

Again the road took to right-about at a sharp angle and the broad Chateau, with its noble portico and numerous windows all alight, suddenly loomed up in the center of a forest-clearing on the mountain side. Where the path to the garden crossed a frozen stream was a small open space. Here the Indians had been encamped. We hallooed for servants and by lantern light examined every square inch of the smoked snow and rubbish heaps. Bits of tin in profusion, stones for the fire, tent canvas, ends of ropes and tattered rags lay everywhere over the black patch. Snow was beginning to fall heavily in great flakes that obscured earth and air. Not a thing had we found to indicate any trace of the lost woman and child, until I caught sight of a tiny, blue string beneath a piece of rusty metal. Kicking the tin aside, I caught the ribbon up. When I saw on the lower end a child's finely beaded moccasin, I confess I had rather felt the point of Le Grand Diable's dagger at my own heart than have shown that simple thing to Hamilton.

Then the snow-storm broke upon us in white billows blotting out everything. We spread a sheet on the ground to preserve any marks of the campers, but the drifting wind drove us indoors and we were compelled to cease searching. All night long Eric and I sat before the roaring grate fire of the hunting-room, he leaning forward with chin in his palms and saying few words, I offering futile suggestions and uttering mad threats, but both utterly at a loss what to do. We knew enough of Indian character to know what not to do. That was, raise an outcry, which might hasten the cruelty of Le Grand Diable.

CHAPTER III.

NOVICE AND EXPERT.

Though many years have passed since that dismal storm in the spring of 1815, when Hamilton and I spent a long disconsolate night of enforced waiting, I still hear the roaring of the northern gale, driving round the house-corners as if it would wrench all eaves from the roof. It shrieked across the garden like malignant furies, rushed with the boom of a sea through the cedars and pines, and tore up the mountain slope till all the many voices of the forest were echoing back a thousand tumultuous discords. Again, I see Hamilton gazing at the leaping flames of the log fire, as if their frenzied motion reflected something of his own burning grief. Then, the agony of our utter helplessness, as long as the storm raged, would prove too great for his self-control. Rising, he would pace back and forward the full length of the hunting-room till his eye would be caught by some object with which the boy had played. He would put this carefully away, as one lays aside the belongings of the dead. Afterwards, lanterns, which we had placed on the oak center table on coming in, began to smoke and give out a pungent, burning smell, and each of us involuntarily walked across to a window and drew aside the curtains to see how daylight was coming on. The white glare of early morning flooded the room, but the snow-storm had changed to driving sleet and the panes were iced from corner to corner with frozen rain-drift. How we dragged through two more days, while the gale raved with unabated fury, I do not know. Poor Eric was for rushing into the blinding whirl, that turned earth and air into one white tornado; but he could not see twice the length of his own arm, and we prevailed on him to come back. On the third night, the wind fell like a thing that had fretted out its strength. Morning revealed an ocean of billowy drifts, crusted over by the frozen sleet and reflecting a white dazzle that made one's eyes blink. Great icicles hung from the naked branches of the sheeted pines and snow was wreathed in fantastic forms among the cedars.

We had laid our plans while we waited. After lifting the canvas from the camping-ground and seeking in vain for more trace of the fugitives, we despatched a dozen different search-parties that very morning, Eric leading those who were to go on the river-side of the Chateau, and I some well-trained bushrangers picked from the *habitants* of the hillside, who could track the forest

to every Indian haunt within a week's march of the city. After putting my men on a trail with instructions to send back an Indian courier to report each night, I hunted up an old *habitant* guide, named Paul Larocque, who had often helped me to thread the woods of Quebec after big game. Now Paul was habitually as silent as a dumb animal, and sportsmen had nicknamed him The Mute; but what he lacked in speech he made up like other wild creatures in a wonderful acuteness of eye and ear. Indeed, it was commonly believed among trappers that Paul possessed some nameless sense by which he could actually *feel* the presence of an enemy before ordinary men could either see, or hear. For my part, I would be willing to pit that "feel" of Paul's against the nose of any hound that dog-fanciers could back.

"Paul," said I, as the *habitant* stood before me licking the short stem of an inverted clay pipe, "there's an Indian, a bad Indian, an Iroquois, Paul,"—I was particular in describing the Indian as an Iroquois, for Paul's wife was a Huron from Lorette—"An Iroquois, who stole a white woman and a little boy from the Chateau three days ago, in the morning."

There, I paused to let the facts soak in; for The Mute digested information in small morsels. Grizzled, stunted and chunky, he was not at all the picturesque figure which fancy has painted of his class. Instead of the red toque, which artists place on the heads of *habitants*, he wore a cloth cap with ear flaps coming down to be tied under his chin. His jacket was an ill-fitting garment, the cast-off coat of some well-to-do man, and his trousers slouched in ample folds above brightly beaded moccasins. When I paused, Paul fixed his eyes on an invisible spot in the snow and ruminated. Then he hitched the baggy trousers up, pulled the red scarf, that held them to his waist, tighter, and, taking his eyes off the snow, looked up for me to go on.

"That Iroquois, who belongs to the North-West trappers——"

"*Pays d'En Haut?*" asks Paul, speaking for the first time.

"Yes," I answered, "and they all disappeared with the woman and the child the day before the storm."

The Mute's eyes were back on the snow.

"Now," said I, "I'll make you a rich man if you take me straight to the place where he's hiding."

Paul's eyes looked up with the question of how much.

"Five pounds a day." This was four more than we paid for the cariboo hunts.

Again he stood thinking, then darted off into the forest like a hare; but I knew his strange, silent ways, and confidently awaited his return. How he could get two pair of snow-shoes and two poles inside of five minutes, I do not attempt to explain, unless some of his numerous half-breed youngsters were at hand in the woods; but he was back again all equipped for a long tramp, and as soon as I had laced on the racquets, we were skimming over the drift like a boat on billows. In the mazy confusion of snow and underbrush, no one but Paul would have found and kept that tangled, forest path. Where great trunks had fallen across the way, Paul planted his pole and took the barrier at a bound. Then he raced on at a gait which was neither a run nor a walk, but an easy trot common to the *coureurs-des-bois*. The encased branches snapped like glass when we brushed past, and so heavily were snow and icicles frozen to the trees we might have been in some grotesque crystal-walled cavern. The *habitant* spoke not a word, but on we pressed over the brushwood, now so packed with snow and crusted ice, our snow-shoes were not once tripped by loose branches, and we glided from drift to drift. In vain I tried to discern a trail by the broken thicket on either side, and I noticed that my guide was keeping his course by following the marks blazed on trees. At one place we came to a steep, clear slope, where the earth had fallen sheer away from the hillside and snow had filled the incline. First prodding forward to feel if the snow-bank were solid, Paul promptly sat down on the rear end of his snow-shoes, and, quicker than I can tell it, tobogganed down to the valley. I came leaping clumsily from point to point with my pole, like a ski-jumping Norwegian, risking my neck at every bound. Then we coursed along the valley, the *habitant's* eyes still on the trees, and once he stopped to emit a gurgling laugh at a badly hacked trunk, beneath which was a snowed-up sap trough; but I could not divine whether Paul's mirth were over a prospect of sugaring-off in the maple-woods, or at some foolish *habitant* who had tapped the maple too early. How often had I known my guide to exhaust city athletes in these swift marches of his! But I had been schooled to his pace from boyhood and kept up with him at every step, though we were going so fast I lost all track of my bearings.

"Where to, Paul?" I asked with a vague suspicion that we were heading for the Huron village at Lorette. "To Lorette, Paul?"

But Paul condescended only a grunt and whisked suddenly round a headland up

a narrow gorge, which seemed to lead to the very heart of the mountains and might have sheltered any number of fugitives. In the gorge we stopped to take a light meal of gingerbread horses—a cake that is the peculiar glory of the *habitant*—dried herrings and sea biscuits. By the sun, I knew it was long past noon and that we had been traveling northwest. I also vaguely guessed that Paul's object was to intercept the North-West trappers, if they had planned to slip away from the St. Lawrence through the bush to the Upper Ottawa, where they could meet north-bound boats. But not one syllable had my taciturn guide uttered. Clambering up the steep, snowy banks of the gorge, we found ourselves in the upper reaches of a mountain, where the trees fell away in scraggy clumps and the snow stretched up clear and unbroken to the hill-crest. Paul grunted, licked his pipe-stem significantly and pointed his pole to the hill-top. The dark peak of a solitary wigwam appeared above the snow. He pointed again to the fringe of woods below us. A dozen wigwams were visible among the trees and smoke curled up from a central camp-fire.

"*Voilà, Monsieur?*" said the *habitant*, which made four words for that day.

The Mute then fell to my rear and we first approached the general camp. The campers were evidently thieves as well as hunters; for frozen pork hung with venison from the branches of several trees. The sap trough might also have belonged to them, which would explain Paul's laugh, as the whole paraphernalia of a sugaring-off was on the outskirts of the encampment.

"Not the Indians we're after," said I, noting the signs of permanency; but Paul Larocque shoved me forward with the end of his pole and a curious, almost intelligent, expression came on the dull, pock-pitted face. Strangely enough, as I looked over my shoulder to the guide, I caught sight of an Indian figure climbing up the bank in our very tracks. The significance of this incident was to reveal itself later.

As usual, a pack of savage dogs flew out to announce our coming with furious barking. But I declare the *habitant* was so much like any ragged Indian, the creatures recognized him and left off their vicious snarl. Only the shrill-voiced children, who rushed from the wigwams; evinced either surprise or interest in our arrival. Men and women were haunched about the fire, above which simmered several pots with the savory odor of cooking meat. I do not think a soul of the company as much as turned a head on our approach. Though they saw us plainly, they sat stolid and imperturbable, after the manner of their race, waiting for us to announce ourselves. Some of the squaws and half-breed women

were heaping bark on the fire. Indians sat straight-backed round the circle. White men, vagabond trappers from anywhere and everywhere, lay in all variety of lazy attitudes on buffalo robes and caribou skins.

I had known, as every one familiar with Quebec's family histories must know, that the sons of old seigneurs sometimes inherited the adventurous spirit, which led their ancestors of three centuries ago to exchange the gayeties of the French court for the wild life of the new world. I was aware this spirit frequently transformed seigneurs into bush-rangers and descendants of the royal blood into *coureurs-des-bois*. But it is one thing to know a fact, another to see that fact in living embodiment; and in this case, the living embodiment was Louis Laplante, a school-fellow of Laval, whom, to my amazement, I now saw, with a beard of some months' growth and clad in buckskin, lying at full length on his back among that villainous band of nondescript trappers. Something of the surprise I felt must have shown on my face, for as Louis recognized me he uttered a shout of laughter.

"Hullo, Gillespie!" he called with the saucy nonchalance which made him both a favorite and a torment at the seminary. "Are you among the prophets?" and he sat up making room for me on his buffalo robe.

"I'll wager, Louis," said I, shaking his hand heartily and accepting the proffered seat, "I'll wager it's prophets spelt with an 'f' brings you here." For the young rake had been one of the most notorious borrowers at the seminary.

"Good boy!" laughed he, giving my shoulder a clap. "I see your time was not wasted with me. Now, what the devil," he asked as I surveyed the motley throng of fat, coarse-faced squaws and hard-looking men who surrounded him, "now, what the devil's brought you here?"

"What's the same, to yourself, Louis lad?" said I. He laughed the merry, heedless laugh that had been the distraction of the class-room.

"Do you need to ask with such a galaxy of nut-brown maidens?" and Louis looked with the assurance of privileged impudence straight across the fire into the hideous, angry face of a big squaw, who was glaring at me. The creature was one to command attention. She might have been a great, bronze statue, a type of some ancient goddess, a symbol of fury, or cruelty. Her eyes fastened themselves on mine and held me, whether I would or no, while her whole face darkened.

"The lady evidently objects to having her place usurped, Louis," I remarked, for

he was watching the silent duel between the native woman's questioning eyes and mine.

"The gentleman wants to know if the lady objects to having her place usurped?" called Louis to the squaw.

At that the woman flinched and looked to Laplante. Of course, she did not understand our words; but I think she was suspicious we were laughing at her. There was a vindictive flash across her face, then the usual impenetrable expression of the Indian came over her features. I noticed that her cheeks and forehead were scarred, and a cut had laid open her upper lip from nose to teeth.

"You must know that the lady is the daughter of a chief and a fighter," whispered Louis in my ear.

I might have known she was above common rank from the extraordinary number of trinkets she wore. Pendants hung from her ears like the pendulum of a clock. She had a double necklace of polished bear's claws and around her waist was a girdle of agates, which to me proclaimed that she was of a far-western tribe. In the girdle was an ivory-handled knife, which had doubtless given as many scars as its owner displayed.

"What tribe, Louis?" I asked.

"I'll be hanged, now, if I'm not jealous," he began. "You'll stare the lady out of countenance——" But at this moment the Indian who had come up the bank behind us came round and interrupted Laplante's merriment by tossing a piece of bethumbed paper between my comrade's knees.

"The deuce!" exclaimed Louis, bulging his tongue into one cheek and glancing at me with a queer, quizzical look as he unfolded and read the paper.

If he had not spoken I might not have turned; but having turned I could not but notice two things. Louis jerked back from me, as if I might try to read the soiled note in his hand, and in raising the paper displayed on the back the stamp of the commissariat department from Quebec Citadel.

Neither Laplante's suppressed surprise, nor my observations of his movement, escaped the big squaw. She came quickly round the fire to us both.

"Give me that," she commanded, holding out her hand to the French youth.

"The deuce I will," he returned, twisting the paper up in his clenched fist. Half in jest, half in earnest, just as Louis used to be punished at the seminary, she gave him a prompt box on the ear. He took it in perfect good-nature. And the whole encampment laughed. The squaw went back to the other side of the fire. Laplante leaned forward and threw the paper towards the flames; but without his knowledge, he overshot the mark; and when the trader was looking elsewhere the big squaw stooped, picked up the coveted note and slipped it into her skirt pocket.

"Now, Louis, nonsense aside," I began.

"With all my soul, if I have one," said he, lying back languidly with a perceptible cooling of the cordiality he had first evinced.

I told him my errand, and that I wished to search every wigwam for trace of the lost woman and child. He listened with shut eyes.

"It isn't," I explained in a low voice, eager to arouse his interest, "it isn't in the least, Laplante, that we suspect these people; but you know the kidnappers might have traded the clothing to your people——"

"Oh! Go ahead!" he interjected impatiently. "Don't beat round the bush! What do you want of me?"

"To go through the tents with me and help me. By Jove! Laplante! I thought at least a spark of the man would suggest that without my speaking," I broke out hotly.

He was on his feet with an alacrity that brought old Paul Larocque round to my side and the squaw to his.

"Curse you," he cried out roughly, shoving the squaw back. For a moment I was uncertain whether he were addressing the woman or myself. "You mind your own business and go to your Indian! Here, Gillespie, I'll do the tents with you. Get off with you," he muttered at the squaw, rumbling out a lingo of persuasive expletives; and he led the way to the first wigwam.

But the squaw was not to be dismissed; for when I followed the Frenchman, she closed in behind looking thunder, not at her abuser, but at me; and The Mute, fearing foul play and pole in hand, loyally brought up the rear of our strange procession. I shall not retail that search through robes and skins and blankets and boxes, in foul-smelling, vermin-infested wigwams. It was fruitless. I only recall the lowering face of the big squaw looking over my shoulder at every turn, with heavy brows contracted and gashed lips grinning an evil, malicious challenge. I thought she kept her hands uncomfortably near the ivory handle in the agate belt; but Larocque, good fellow, never took his beady eyes off those same hands and kept a grip of the leaping pole.

Thus we examined the tents and made a circuit of the people round the fire, but found nothing to reveal the whereabouts of Miriam and the child. Laplante and I

were on one side of the robe, Larocque and the squaw on the other.

"And why is that tent apart from the rest and who is in it?" I asked Laplante, pointing to the lone tepee on the crest of the hill.

The fire cracked so loudly I became aware there was ominous silence among the loungers of the camp. They were listening as well as watching. Up to this time I had not thought they were paying the slightest attention to us. Laplante was not answering, and when I faced him suddenly I found the squaw's eyes fastened on his, holding them whether he would or no, just as she had mine.

"Eh! man?" I cried, seizing him fiercely, a nameless suspicion getting possession of me. "Why don't you answer?"

The spell was broken. He turned to me nonchalantly, as he used to face accusers in the school-days of long ago, and spoke almost gently, with downcast eyes, and a quiet, deprecating smile.

"You know, Rufus," he answered, using the schoolboy name. "We should have told you before. But remember we didn't invite you here. We didn't lead you into it."

"Well?" I demanded.

"Well," he replied in a voice too low for any of the listeners but the squaw to hear, "there's a very bad case of smallpox up in that tent and we're keeping the man apart till he gets better. That, in fact, is why we're all here. You must go. It is not safe."

"Thanks, Laplante," said I. "Good-by." But he did not offer me his hand when I made to take leave.

"Come," he said. "I'll go as far as the gorge with you;" and he stood on the embankment and waved as we passed into the lengthening shadows of the valley.

Now, in these days of health officers and vaccination, people can have no idea of the terrors of a smallpox scourge at the beginning of this century. The *habitant* is as indifferent to smallpox as to measles, and accepts both as dispensations of Providence by exposing his children to the contagion as early as possible; but I was not so minded, and hurried down the gorge as fast as my snow-shoes would carry me. Then I remembered that the Indian population of the north had been

reduced to a skeleton of its former numbers by the pestilence in 1780, and recalled that my Uncle Jack had said the native's superstitious dread of this disease knew no bounds. That recollection checked my sudden flight. If the Indians had such fear, why had this band camped within a mile of the pest tent? It would be more like Indian character to reverse Samaritan practises and leave the victim to die. This man might, of course, be a French-Canadian trapper, but I would take no risks of a trick, so I ordered Paul to lead me back to that tepee.

The Mute seemed to understand I had no wish to be seen by the campers. He skirted round the base of the hill till we were on the side remote from the tribe. Then he motioned me to remain in the gorge while he scrambled up the cliff to reconnoitre. I knew he received a surprise as soon as his head was on a level with the top of the bank; for he curled himself up behind a snow-pile and gave a low whistle for me. I was beside him with one bound. We were not twenty pole-lengths from the wigwam. There was no appearance of life. The tent flaps had been laced up and a solitary watch-dog was tied to a stake before the entrance. Down the valley the setting sun shone through the naked trees like a wall of fire, and dyed all the glistening snow-drifts primrose and opal. At one place in the forest the red light burst through and struck against the tent on the hill-top, giving the skins a peculiar appearance of being streaked with blood. The faintest breath of wind, a mere sigh of moving air-currents peculiar to snow-padded areas, came up from the woods with far-away echoes of the trappers' voices. Perhaps this was heard by the watch-dog, or it may have felt the disturbing presence of my half-wild *habitant* guide; for it sat back on its haunches and throwing up its head, let out the most doleful howlings imaginable.

"Oh! *Monsieur*," shuddered out the superstitious habitant shivering like an aspen leaf, "sick man moan,—moan,—moan hard! He die, *Monsieur*, he die, he die now when dog cry lak dat," and full of fear he scrambled down into the gorge, making silent gestures for me to follow.

For a time—but not long, I must acknowledge—I lay there alone, watching and listening. Paul's ears might hear the moans of a sick man, mine could not: nor would I return to the Chateau without ascertaining for a certainty what was in that wigwam. Slipping off the snow-shoes, I rose and tip-toed over the snow with the full intention of silencing the dog with my pole; but I was suddenly arrested by the distinct sound of pain-racked groaning. Then the brute of a dog detected my approach and with a furious leaping that almost hung him with his own rope set up a vicious barking. Suddenly the black head of an Indian, or trapper, popped through the tent flaps and a voice shouted in perfect English

—"Go away! Go away! The pest! The pest!"

"Who has smallpox?" I bawled back.

"A trader, a Nor'-Wester," said he. "If you have anything for him lay it on the snow and I'll come for it."

As honor pledged me to serve Hamilton until he found his wife, I was not particularly anxious to exchange civilities at close range with a man from a smallpox tent; so I quickly retraced my way to the gorge and hurried homeward with The Mute. My old school-fellow's sudden change towards me when he received the letter written on Citadel paper, and the big squaw's suspicion of my every movement, now came back to me with a significance I had not felt when I was at the camp. Either intuitions like those of my *habitant* guide, which instinctively put out feelers with the caution of an insect's antennæ for the presence of vague, unknown evil, lay dormant in my own nature and had been aroused by the incidents at the camp, or else the mind, by the mere fact of holding information in solution, widens its own knowledge. For now, in addition to the letter from the Citadel and the squaw's animosity, came the one missing factor—Adderly. I felt, rather than knew, that Louis Laplante had deceived me. Had he lied? A lie is the clumsy invention of the novice. An expert accomplishes his deceit without anything so grossly and tangibly honest as a lie; and Louis was an expert. Though I had not a vestige of proof, I could have sworn that Adderly and the squaw and Louis were leagued against me for some dark purpose. I was indeed learning the first lessons of the trapper's life: never to open my lips on my own affairs to another man, and never to believe another man when he opened his lips to me.

CHAPTER IV

LAUNCHED INTO THE UNKNOWN

"You should have knocked that blasted quarantine's head off," ejaculated Mr. Jack MacKenzie, with ferocious emphasis. I had been relating my experience with the campers; and was recounting how the man put his head out of the tent and warned me of smallpox. But my uncle was a gentleman of the old school and had a fine contempt for quarantine.

"Knocked his head off, knocked his head off, Sir," he continued, explosively. "Make it a point to knock the head off anything that stands in your way, Sir——"

"But you don't suppose," I expostulated, about to voice my own suspicions.

"*Suppose!*" he roared out. "I make it a point never to *suppose* anything. I act on facts, Sir! You wanted to go into that wigwam; didn't you? Well then, why the deuce didn't you go, and knock the head off anything that opposed you?"

Being highly successful in all his own dealings, Mr. Jack MacKenzie could not tolerate failure in other people. A month of vigilant searching had yielded not the slightest inkling of Miriam and the child; and this fact ignited all the gunpowder of my uncle's fiery temperament. We had felt so sure Le Grand Diable's band of vagabonds would hang about till the brigades of the North-West Company's tripmen set out for the north, all our efforts were spent in a vain search for some trace of the rascals in the vicinity of Quebec. His gypsy nondescripts would hardly dare to keep the things taken from Miriam and the child. These would be traded to other tribes; so day and night, Mr. MacKenzie, Eric and I, with hired spies, dogged the footsteps of trappers, who were awaiting the breaking up of the ice; shadowed *voyageurs*, who passed idle days in the dram-shops of Lower Town, and scrutinized every native who crossed our path, ever on the alert for a glimpse of Diable, or his associates. Diligently we tracked all Indian trails through Charlesbourg forest and examined every wigwam within a week's march of the city. Le Grand Diable was not likely to be among his ancestral enemies at Lorette, but his half-breed followers might have traded with the Hurons; and the lodges at Lorette were also searched. Watches were set along the St. Lawrence, so no one could approach an opening before the ice broke up, or launch a canoe

after the water had cleared, without our knowledge. But Le Grand Diable and his band had vanished as mysteriously as Miriam. It was as impossible to learn where the Iroquois had gone as to follow the wind. His disappearance was altogether as unaccountable as the lost woman's, and this, of itself, confirmed our suspicions. Had he sold, or slain his captives, he would not have remained in hiding; and the very fruitlessness of the search redoubled our zeal.

The conviction that Louis Laplante had, somehow or other, played me false, stuck in my mind like the depression of a bad dream. Again and again, I related the circumstances to my uncle; but he "pished," and "tushed," and "pooh-poohed," the very idea of any kidnappers remaining so near the city and giving me free run of their wigwams. My reasonless persistence was beginning to irritate him. Indeed, on one occasion, he informed me that I had as many vagaries in my head as a "bed-ridden hag," and with great fervor he "wished to the Lord there was a law in this land for the ham-stringing of such fool idiots, as that *habitant* Mute, who led me such a wild-goose chase."

In spite of this and many other jeremiades, I once more donned snow-shoes and with Paul for guide paid a second visit to the campers of the gorge. And a second time, I was welcomed by Louis and taken through the wigwams. The smallpox tent was no longer on the crest of the hill; and when I asked after the patient, Louis without a word pointed solemnly to a snow-mound, where the man lay buried. But I did not see the big squaw, nor the face that had emerged from the tent flaps to wave me off; and when I also inquired after these, Louis' face darkened. He told me bluntly I was asking too many questions and began to swear in a mongrel jargon of French and English that my conduct was an insult he would take from no man. But Louis was ever short of temper. I remembered that of old. Presently his little flare-up died down, and he told me that the woman and her husband had gone north through the woods to join some crews on the Upper Ottawa. From the talk of the others, I gathered that, having disposed of their hunt to the commissariat department at the Citadel, they intended to follow the same trail within a few days. I tried without questioning to learn what crews they were to join; but whether with purpose, or by chance, the conversation drifted from my lead and I had to return to the city without satisfaction on that point.

Meanwhile, Hamilton rested neither night nor day. In the morning with a few hurried words he would outline the plan for the day. At night he rode back to the Chateau with such eager questioning in his eyes when they met mine, I knew he had nothing better to report to me, than I to him. After a silent meal, he would

ride through the dark forest on a fresh mount. How and where he passed those sleepless nights, I do not know. Thus had a month slipped away; and we had done everything and accomplished nothing. Baffled, I had gone to confer with Mr. Jack MacKenzie and had, as usual, exasperated him with the reiterated conviction that Adderly and the Citadel writing paper and Louis Laplante had some connection with the malign influence that was balking our efforts.

"Fudge!" exclaims my uncle, stamping about his study and puffing with indignation. "You should have knocked that blasted quarantine's head off!"

"You've said that several times already, Mr. MacKenzie," I put in, having a touch of his own peppery temper from my mother's side. "What about Adderly's rage?"

"Adderly's been in Montreal since the night of the row. For the Lord's sake, boy, do you expect to find the woman by believing in that bloated bugaboo?"

"But the Citadel paper?" I persisted.

"Of course you've never been told, Rufus Gillespie," he began, choking down his impatience with the magnitude of my stupidity, "that the commissariat buys supplies from hunters?"

"That doesn't explain the big squaw's suspicions and Louis' own conduct."

"That Louis!" says my uncle. "Pah! That son of an inflated old seigneur! A fig for the buck! Not enough brains in his pate to fill a peanut!"

"But there might be enough evil in his heart to wreck a life," and that was the first argument to pierce my uncle's scepticism. The keen eyes glanced out at me as if there might be some hope for my intelligence, and he took several turns about the room.

"Hm! If you're of that mind, you'd better go out and excavate the smallpox," was his sententious conclusion. "And if it's a hoax, you'd better——" and he puckered his brows in thought.

"What?" I asked eagerly.

"Join the traders' crews and track the villains west," he answered with the promptitude of one who decides quickly and without vacillation. "O Lord! If I were only young! But to think of a man too stout and old to buckle on his own snow-shoes hankering for that life again!" And my uncle heaved a deep sigh.

Now, no one, who has not lived the wild, free life of the northern trader, can understand the strange fascinations which for the moment eclipsed in this courteous and chivalrous old gentleman's mind all thought of the poor woman, with whom my own fate was interwoven. But I, who have lived in the lonely fastnesses of the splendid freedom, know full well what surging recollections of danger and daring, of success and defeat, of action in which one faces and laughs at death, and calm in which one sounds the unutterable depths of very infinity—thronged the old trader's soul. Indeed, when he spoke, it was as if the sentence of my own life had been pronounced; and my whole being rose up to salute destiny. I take it, there is in every one some secret and cherished desire for a chosen vocation to which each looks forward with hope up to the meridian of life, and to which many look back with regret after the meridian. Of prophetic instincts and intuitions and impressions and feelings and much more of the same kind going under a different name, I say nothing, I only set down as a fact, to be explained how it may, that all the way out to the gorge, with Paul, The Mute leading for a third time, I could have sworn there would be no corpse in that snow-covered grave. For was it not written in my inner consciousness that destiny had appointed me to the wild, free life of the north? So I was not surprised when Paul Larocque's spade struck sharply on a box. Indians sleep their last sleep in the skins of the chase. Nor was I in the least amazed when that same spade pried up the lid of cached provisions instead of a coffin. Then I had ocular proof of what I knew before, that Louis in word and conduct—but chiefly in conduct, which is the way of the expert had—lied outrageously to me.

When the ice broke up at the end of April, hunters were off for their summer retreats and *voyageurs* set out on the annual trip to the *Pays d'En Haut*. This year the Hudson's Bay Company had organized a strong fleet of canoemen under Mr. Colin Robertson, a former Nor'-Wester, to proceed to Red River settlement by way of the Ottawa and the Sault instead of entering the fur preserve by the usual route of Hudson Bay and York Factory. From Le Grand Diable's former association with the North-West Company it was probable he would be in Robertson's brigade. Among the *voyageurs* of both companies there was not a more expert canoeman than this treacherous, thievish Iroquois. As steersman, he could take a crew safely through knife-edge rocks with the swift certainty of arrow flight. In spite of a reputation for embodying the vices of white man and red—which gave him his unsavory title—it seemed unlikely that the Hudson's Bay Company, now in the thick of an aggressive campaign against its great rival, and about to despatch an important flotilla from Montreal to Athabasca by way of the Nor'-Westers' route, would dispense with the services of this dexterous

voyageur. On the other hand, the Nor'-Westers might bribe the Iroquois to stay with them.

Acting on these alternative possibilities, Hamilton and I determined to track the fugitives north. We could leave hirelings to shadow the movements of Indian bands about Quebec. Eric could re-engage with the Hudson's Bay and get passage north with Colin Robertson's brigade, which was to leave Lachine in a few weeks. My uncle had been a famous *Bourgeois* of the great North-West Company in his younger days, and could secure me an immediate commission in the North-West Company. Thus we could accompany the *voyageurs* and runners of both companies.

Hamilton's arrangements were easily made; and my uncle not only obtained the commission for me, but, with a hearty clap on my back and a "Bravo, boy! I knew the fur trader's fever would break out in you yet!" pinned to the breast of my inner waistcoat the showy gold medallion which the *Bourgeois* wore on festive occasions. In very truth I oft had need of its inspiriting motto: *Fortitude in Distress*.

Feudal lords of the middle ages never waged more ruthless war on each other than the two great fur trading companies of the north at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Pierre de Raddison and Grosselier, gentlemen adventurers of New France, first followed the waters of the Outawa (Ottawa) northward, and passed from Lake Superior (the *kelche gamme* of Indian lore) to the great unknown fur preserve between Hudson Bay and the Pacific Ocean; but the fur monopolists of the French court in Quebec jealously obstructed the explorers' efforts to open up the vast territory. De Raddison was compelled to carry his project to the English court, and the English court, with a liberality not unusual in those days, promptly deeded over the whole domain, the extent, locality and wealth of which there was utter ignorance, to a fur trading organization,—the newly formed "Company of Adventurers of England, trading into Hudson's Bay," incorporated in 1670 with Prince Rupert named as first governor. If monopolists of New France, through envy, sacrificed Quebec's first claim to the unknown land, Frontenac made haste to repair the loss. Father Albanel, a Jesuit, and other missionaries led the way westward to the *Pays d'En Haut*. De Raddison twice changed his allegiance, and when Quebec fell into the hands of the British nearly a century later, the French traders were as active in the northern fur preserve as their great rivals, the Ancient and Honorable Hudson's Bay Company; but the Englishmen kept near the bay and the Frenchmen with their *coureurs-des-bois* pushed westward along the chain of water-ays leading

from Lake Superior and Lake Winnipeg to the Saskatchewan and Athabasca. Then came the Conquest, with the downfall of French trade in the north country. But there remained the *coureurs-des-bois,* or wood-rangers, the *Metis,* or French half-breeds, the *Bois-Brulés,* or plain runners—so called, it is supposed, from the trapper's custom of blazing his path through the forest. And on the ruins of French barter grew up a thriving English trade, organized for the most part by enterprising citizens of Quebec and Montreal, and absorbing within itself all the cast-off servants of the old French companies. Such was the origin of the X. Y. and North-West Companies towards the beginning of the nineteenth century. Of these the most energetic and powerful—and therefore the most to be feared by the Ancient and Honorable Hudson's Bay Company—was the North-West Company, "*Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest,*" as the partners designated themselves.

From the time that the North-Westers gratuitously poured their secrets into the ears of Lord Selkirk, and Lord Selkirk shrewdly got control of the Hudson's Bay Company and began to infuse Nor'-Westers' zeal into the stagnant workings of the older company, there arose such a feud among these lords of the north as may be likened only to the pillaging of robber barons in the middle ages. And this feud was at its height when I cast in my lot with the North-West Fur Company, Nor'-Westers had reaped a harvest of profits by leaving the beaten track of trade and pushing boldly northward into the remote MacKenzie River region. This year the Hudson's Bay had determined to enter the same area and employed a former Nor'-Wester, Mr. Colin Robertson, to conduct a flotilla of canoes from Lachine, Montreal, by way of the Nor'-Westers' route up the Ottawa to the Saskatchewan and Athabasca. But while the Hudson's Bay Company could ship their peltries directly to England from the bay, the Nor'-Westers labored under the disadvantage of many delays and trans-shipments before their goods reached seaboard at Montreal. Indeed, I have heard my uncle tell of orders which he sent from the north to England in October. The things ordered in October would be sent from London in March to reach Montreal in mid-summer. There they would be re-packed in small quantities for portaging and despatched from Montreal with the Nor'-Western *voyageurs* the following May, and if destined for the far north would not reach the end of their long trip until October—two years from the time of the order. Yet, under such conditions had the Nor'-Westers increased in prosperity, while the Hudson's Bay, with its annual ships at York Factory and Churchill, declined.

When Lord Selkirk took hold of the Hudson's Bay there was a change. Once a

feud has begun, I know very well it is impossible to apportion the blame each side deserves. Whether Selkirk timed his acts of aggression during the American war of 1812-1814, when the route of the Nor'-Westers was rendered unsafe—who can say? Whether he brought colonists into the very heart of the disputed territory for the sake of the colonists, or to be drilled into an army of defense for The Hudson's Bay Company—who can say? Whether he induced his company to grant him a vast area of land at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine rivers—against which a minority of stockholders protested—for the sake of these same colonists, or to hold a strategical point past which North-Westers' cargoes must go—who can say? On these subjects, which have been so hotly discussed both inside and outside law courts, without any definite decision that I have ever heard, I refuse to pass judgment. I can but relate events as I saw them and leave to each the right of a personal decision.

In 1815, Nor'-Westers' canoes were to leave Ste. Anne de Beaupré, twenty miles east of Quebec, instead of Ste. Anne on the Ottawa, the usual point of departure. We had not our full complement of men. Some of the Indians and half-breeds had gone northwest overland through the bush to a point on the Ottawa River north of Chaudière Falls, where they were awaiting us, and Hamilton, through the courtesy of my uncle, was able to come with us in our boats as far as Lachine.

I was never a grasping trader, but I provided myself before setting out with every worthless gew-gaw and flashy trifle that could tempt the native to betray Indian secrets. Lest these should fail, I added to my stock a dozen as fine new flint-locks as could corrupt the soul of an Indian, and without consideration for the enemy's scalp also equipped myself with a box of wicked-looking hunting-knives. These things I placed in square cases and sat upon them when we were in barges, or pillowed my head upon them at night, never losing sight of them except on long portages where Indians conveyed our cargo on their backs.

A man on a less venturesome quest than mine could hardly have set out with the brigades of canoemen for the north country and not have been thrilled like a lad on first escape from school's leading strings. There we were, twenty craft strong, with clerks, traders, one steersman and eight willowy, copper-skin paddlers in each long birch canoe. No oriental prince could be more gorgeously appareled than these gay *voyageurs*. Flaunting red handkerchiefs banded their foreheads and held back the lank, black hair. Buckskin smocks, fringed with leather down the sleeves and beaded lavishly in bright colors, were drawn tight at the waist by sashes of flaming crimson, green and blue. In addition to the fringe of leather

down the trouser seams, some in our company had little bells fastened from knee to ankle. It was a strange sight to see each of these reckless denizens of forest and plain pause reverently before the chapel of *La Bonne Sainte Anne*, cross himself, invoke her protection on the voyage and drop some offering in the treasury box before hurrying to his place in the canoe. One Indian left the miniature of a carved boat in the hands of the priest at the porch. It was his votive gift to the saint and may be seen there to this day.

As we were embarking I noticed Eric had not come down and the canoes were already gliding about the wharf awaiting the head steersman's signal. I had last seen him on the church steps and ran back from the river to learn the cause of his delay. Now Hamilton is not a Catholic; neither is he a Protestant; but I would not have good people ascribe his misfortunes to this lack of creed, for a trader in the far north loses denominational distinctions and a better man I have never known. What, then, was my surprise to meet him face to face coming out of the chapel with tears coursing down his cheeks and floor-dust thick upon his knees? Women know what to do and say in such a case. A man must be dumb, or blunder; so I could but link my arm through his and lead him silently down to my own canoe.

A single wave of the chief steersman's hand, and out swept the paddles in a perfect harmony of motion. Then someone struck up a *voyageurs'* ballad and the canoemen unconsciously kept time with the beat of the song. The valley seemed filled with the voices of those deep-chested, strong singers, and the chimes of Ste. Anne clashed out a last sweet farewell.

"Cheer up, old man!" said I to Eric, who was sitting with face buried in his hands. "Cheer up! Do you hear the bells? It's a God-speed for you!"

CHAPTER V

CIVILIZATION'S VENEER RUBS OFF

My uncle accompanied our flotilla as far as Lachine and occupied a place in my division of canoes. Many were the admonitions he launched out like thunderbolts whenever his craft and mine chanced to glide abreast.

"If you lay hands on that skunk," he had said, the malodorous epithet being his designation for Louis Laplante, "If you lay hands on that skunk, don't be a simpleton. Skin him, Sir, by the Lord, skin him! Let him play the ostrich act! Keep your own counsel and work him for all you're worth! Let him play his deceitful game! By Jove! Give the villain rope enough to hang himself! Gain your end! Afterwards forget and forgive if you like; but, by the Lord, remember and don't ignore the fact, that repentance can't turn a skunk into an innocent, pussy cat!"

And so Mr. Jack MacKenzie continued to warn me all the way from Quebec to Montreal, mixing his metaphors as topers mix drinks. But I had long since learned not to remonstrate against these outbursts of explosive eloquence—not though all the canons of Laval literati should be outraged. "What, Sir?" he had roared out when I, in full conceit of new knowledge, had audaciously ventured to pull him up, once in my student days. "What, Sir? Don't talk to me of your book-fangled balderdash! Is language for the use of man, or man for the use of language?" and he quoted from Hamlet's soliloquy in a way that set me packing my pedant lore in the unused lumber-room of brain lobes. And so, I say, Mr. Jack MacKenzie continued to pour instructions into my ear for the venturesome life on which I had entered. "The lad's a fool, only a fool," he said, still harping on Louis, "and mind you answer the fool according to his folly!"

"Most men are fools first, and then knaves, knaves because they have been fools," I returned to my uncle, "and I fancy Laplante has graduated from the fool stage by this time, and is a full diploma knave!"

"That's all true," he retorted, "but don't you forget there's always fool enough left in the knave to give you your opportunity, if you're not a fool. Joint in the armor, lad! Use your cutlass there."

Apart from the peppery discourses of my kinsman, I remember very little of the trip up the St. Lawrence from Ste. Anne to Lachine with Eric sitting dazed and silent opposite me. We, of course, followed the river channel between the Island of Orleans and the north shore; and whenever our boats drew near the mainland, came whiffs of crisp, frosty air from the dank ravines, where snow patches yet lay in the shadow. Then the fleet would sidle towards the island and there would be the fresh, spring odor of damp, uncovered mold, with a vague suggestiveness of violets and May-flowers and ferns bursting with a rush through the black clods. The purple folds of the mountains, with their wavy outlines fading in the haze of distance, lay on the north as they lie to-day; and everywhere on the hills were the white cots of *habitant* hamlets with chapel spires pointing above tree-tops. At the western end of the island, where boats sheer out into mid-current, came the dull, heavy roar of the cataract and above the north shore rose great, billowy clouds of foam. With a sweep of our paddles, we were opposite a cleft in the vertical rock and saw the shimmering, fleecy waters of Montmorency leap over the dizzy precipice churning up from their own whirling depths and bound out to the river like a panther after prey.

Now the Isle of Orleans was vanishing on our rear and the bold heights of Point Levis had loomed up to the fore; and now we had poked our prows to the right and the sluggish, muddy tide of the St. Charles lapped our canoes, while a forest of masts and yard-arms and flapping sails arose from the harbor of Quebec City. The great walls of modern Quebec did not then exist; but the rude fortifications, that sloped down from the lofty Citadel on Cape Diamond and engirt the whole city on the hillside, seemed imposing enough to us in those days.

It was late in the afternoon when we passed. The sunlight struck across the St. Charles, brightening the dull, gray stone of walls and cathedrals and convents, turning every window on the west to fire and transforming a multitude of towers and turrets and minarets to glittering gold. Small wonder, indeed, that all our rough tripmen stopped paddling and with eyes on the spire of Notre Dame des Victoires muttered prayers for a prosperous voyage. For some reason or other, I found my own hat off. So was Mr. Jack MacKenzie's, so was Eric Hamilton's. Then the *voyageurs* fell to work again. The canoes spread out. We rounded Cape Diamond and the lengthening shadow of the high peak darkened the river before us. Always the broad St. Lawrence seemed to be winding from headland to headland among the purple hills, in sunlight a mirror between shadowy, forest banks, at night, molten silver in the moon-track. Afternoon slipped into night and night to morning, and each hour of daylight presented some new panorama

of forests and hills and torrents. Here the river widened into a lake. There the lake narrowed to rapids; and so we came to Lachine—La Chine, named in ridicule of the gallant explorer, La Salle, who thought these vast waterways would surely lead him to China.

At Lachine, Mr. Jack MacKenzie, with much brusque bluster to conceal his longings for the life he was too old to follow and many cynical injunctions about "skinning the skunk" and "knocking the head off anything that stood in my way" and "always profiting from the follies of other men"—"mind, have none yourself,"—parted from us. Here, too, Eric gripped my hand a tense, wordless farewell and left our party for the Hudson's Bay brigade under Colin Robertson.

It has always been a mystery to me why our rivals sent that brigade to Athabasca by way of Lachine instead of Hudson Bay, which would have been two thousand miles nearer. We Nor'-Westers went all the way to and from Montreal, solely because that was our only point of access to the sea; but the Hudson's Bay people had their own Hudson Bay for a starting place. Why, in their slavish imitation of the methods, which brought us success, they also adopted our disadvantages, I could never understand. Birch canoes and good tripmen could, of course, as the Hudson's Bay men say, be most easily obtained in Quebec; but with a good organizer, the same could have been gathered up two thousand miles nearer York Factory, on Hudson Bay. Indeed, I have often thought the sole purpose of that expedition was to get Nor'-Westers' methods by employing discarded Nor'-Westers as trappers and *voyageurs*. Colin Robertson, the leader, had himself been a Nor'-Wester; and all the men with him except Eric Hamilton were renegades, "turn-coat traders," as we called them. But I must not be unjust; for neither company could possibly exceed the other in its zeal to entice away old trappers, who would reveal opponents' secrets. Acting on my uncle's advice, I made shift to pick up a few crumbs of valuable information. Had the Hudson's Bay known, I suppose they would have called me a spy. That was the name I gave any of them who might try such tricks with me. The General Assembly of the North-West partners was to meet at Fort William, at the head of Lake Superior. I learned that Robertson's brigade were anxious to slip past our headquarters at Fort William before the meeting and would set out that very day. I also heard they had sent forward a messenger to notify the Hudson's Bay governor at Fort Douglas of their brigade's coming.

Almost before I realized it, we were speeding up the Ottawa, past a second and third and fourth Ste. Anne's; for she is the *voyageurs'* patron saint and her name dots Canada's map like ink-blots on a boy's copybook. Wherever a Ste. Anne's is

now found, there has the *voyageur* of long ago passed and repassed. In places the surface of the river, gliding to meet us, became oily, almost glassy, as if the wave-current ran too fast to ripple out to the banks. Then little eddies began whirling in the corrugated water and our paddlers with labored breath bent hard to their task. By such signs I learned to know when we were stemming the tide of some raging waterfall, or swift rapid. There would follow quick disembarking, hurried portages over land through a tangle of forest, or up slippery, damp rocks, a noisy launching far above the torrent and swifter progress when the birch canoes touched water again. Such was the tireless pace, which made North-West *voyageurs* famous. Such was the work the great *Bourgeois* exacted of their men. A liberal supply of rum, when stoppages were made, and of bread and meat for each meal—better fare than was usually given by the trading companies—did much to encourage the tripmen. Each man was doing his utmost to out-distance the bold rivals following by our route. The *Bourgeois* were to meet at Fort William early in June. At all hazards we were determined to notify our company of the enemy's invading flotilla; and without margin for accidents we had but a month to cross half a continent.

At nightfall the fourth day from the shrine, after a tiresome nine-mile traverse past the Chaudière Falls of the Ottawa, glittering camp-fires on the river bank ahead showed where a fresh relay of canoemen awaited us. They were immediately taken into the different crews and night-shifts of paddlers put to work. It was quite dark, when the new hands joined us; but in the moonlight, as the chief steersman told off the men by name, I watched each tawny figure step quickly to his place in the canoes, with that gliding Indian motion, which scarcely rocked the light craft. There came to my crew Little Fellow, a short, thick-set man, with a grinning, good-natured face, who—despite his size—would solemnly assure people he was equal in force to the sun. With him was La Robe Noire, of grave aspect and few words, mighty in stature and shoulder power. There were five or six others, whose names in the clangor of voices I did not hear. Of these, one was a tall, lithe, swift-moving man, whose cunning eyes seemed to gleam with the malice of a serpent. This canoeman silently twisted into sleeping posture directly behind me.

The signal was given, and we were in mid-stream again. Wrapping my blanket about me, half propped by a bale of stuff and breathing deep of the clear air with frequent resinous whiffs from the forest I drowsed off. The swish of waters rushing past and the roar of torrents, which I had seen and heard during the day, still sounded in my ears. The sigh of the night-wind through the forest came like

the lonely moan of a far-distant sea, and I was sleepily half conscious that cedars, pines and cliffs were engaged in a mad race past the sides of the canoe. A bed in which one may not stretch at random is not comfortable. Certainly my cramped limbs must have caused bad dreams. A dozen times I could have sworn the Indian behind me had turned into a snake and was winding round my chest in tight, smothering coils. Starting up, I would shake the weight off. Once I suddenly opened my eyes to find blanket thrown aside and pistol belt unstrapped. Lying back eased, I was dozing again when I distinctly felt a hand crawl stealthily round the pack on which I was pillowed and steal towards the dagger handle in the loosened belt. I struck at it viciously only to bruise my fist on my dagger. Now wide awake, I turned angrily towards the Indian. Not a muscle of the still figure had changed from the attitude taken when he came into the canoe. The man was not asleep, but reclined in stolid oblivion of my existence. His head was thrown back and the steely, unflinching eyes were fixed on the stars.

"It may not have been you, my scowling sachem," said I to myself, "but snakes have fangs. Henceforth I'll take good care you're not at my back."

I slept no more that night. Next day I asked the fellow his name and he poured out such a jumbled mouthful of quick-spoken, Indian syllables, I was not a whit the wiser. I told him sharply he was to be Tom Jones on my boat, at which he gave an evil leer.

Without stay we still pushed forward. The arrowy pace was merciless to red men and white; but that was the kind of service the great North-West Company always demanded. Some ten miles from the outlet of Lake Nipissangue (Nipissing) foul weather threatened delay. The *Bourgeois* were for proceeding at any risk; but as the thunder-clouds grew blacker and the wind more violent, the head steersman lost his temper and grounded his canoe on the sands at *Point à la Croix*. Springing ashore he flung down his pole and refused to go on.

"Sacredie!" he screamed, first pointing to the gathering storm and then to the crosses that marked the fate of other foolhardy *voyageurs*, "Allez si vous voulez! Pour moi je n'irai pas; ne voyez pas le danger!"

A hurricane of wind, snapping the great oaks as a chopper breaks kindling wood, enforced his words. Canoes were at once beached and tarpaulins drawn over the bales of provisions. The men struggled to hoist a tent; but gusts of wind tossed the canvas above their heads, and before the pegs were driven a great wall of

rain-drift drenched every one to the skin. By sundown the storm had gone southeast and we unrighteously consoled ourselves that it would probably disorganize the Hudson's Bay brigade as much as it had ours. Plainly, we were there for the night. *Point à la Croix* is too dangerous a spot for navigation after dark. With much patience we kindled the soaked underbrush and finally got a pile of logs roaring in the woods and gathered round the fire.

The glare in the sky attracted the lake tribes from their lodges. Indians, half-breeds and shaggy-haired whites—degenerate traders, who had lost all taste for civilization and retired with their native wives after the fashion of the north country—came from the Nipissangue encampments and joined our motley throng. Presently the natives drew off to a fire by themselves, where there would be no white-man's restraint. They had either begged or stolen traders' rum, and after the hard trip from Ste. Anne, were eager for one of their mad *boissons*—a drinking-bout interspersed with jigs and fights.

Stretched before our camp, I watched the grotesque figures leaping and dancing between the firelight and the dusky woods like forest demons. With the leaves rustling overhead, the water laving the pebbles on the shore, and the washed pine air stimulating one's blood like an intoxicant, I began wondering how many years of solitary life it would take to wear through civilization's veneer and leave one content in the lodges of forest wilds. Gradually I became aware of my sulky canoeman's presence on the other side of the camp-fire. The man had not joined the revels of the other *voyageurs* but sat on his feet, oriental style, gazing as intently at the flames as if spellbound by some fire-spirit.

"What's wrong with that fellow, anyhow?" I asked a veteran trader, who was taking last pulls at a smoked-out pipe.

"Sick—home-sick," was the laconic reply.

"You'd think he was near enough nature here to feel at home! Where's his tribe?"

"It ain't his tribe he wants," explained the trader.

"What, then?" I inquired.

"His wife, he's mad after her," and the trader took the pipe from his teeth.

"Faugh!" I laughed. "The idea of an Indian sentimental and love-sick for some fat lump of a squaw! Come! Come! Am I to believe that?"

"Don't matter whether you do, or not," returned the trader. "It's a fact. His wife's a Sioux chief's daughter. She went north with a gang of half-breeds and hunters last month; and he's been fractious crazy ever since."

"What's his name?" I called, as my informant vanished behind the tent flaps.

Again that mouthful of Indian syllables, unintelligible and unspeakable for me was tumbled forth. Then I turned to the fantastic figures carousing around the other camp fire. One form, in particular, I seemed to distinguish from the others. He was gathering the Indians in line for some native dance and had an easy, rakish sort of grace, quite different from the serpentine motions of the redskins. By a sudden turn, his profile was thrown against the fire and I saw that he wore a pointed beard. He was no Indian; and like a flash came one of those strange, reasonless intuitions, which precede, or proceed from, the slow motions of the mind. Was this the *avant-courier* of the Hudson's Bay, delayed, like ourselves, by the storm? I had hardly spelled out my own suspicion, when to the measured beatings of the tom-tom, gradually becoming faster, and with a low, weird, tuneless chant, like the voices of the forest, the Indians began to tread a mazy, winding pace, which my slow eyes could not follow, but which in a strange way brought up memories of snaky convolutions about the naked body of some Egyptian serpent-charmer. The drums beat faster. The suppressed voices were breaking in shrill, wild, exultant strains, and the measured tread had quickened from a walk to a run and from a swaying run to a swift, labyrinthine pace, which has no name in English, and which I can only liken to the wiggling of a green thing under leafy covert. The coiling and circling and winding of the dancers became bewildering, and in the centre, laughing, shouting, tossing up his arms and gesticulating like a maniac, was the white man with the pointed beard. Then the performers broke from their places and gave themselves with utter abandon to the wild impulses of wild natures in a wild world; and there was such a scene of uncurbed, animal hilarity as I never dreamed possible. Savage, furious, almost ferocious like the frisking of a pack of wolves, that at any time may fall upon and destroy a weaker one, the boisterous antics of these children of the forest fascinated me. Filled with the curiosity that lures many a trader to his undoing, I rose and went across to the thronging, shouting, shadowy figures. A man darted out of the woods full tilt against me. 'Twas he of the pointed beard, my *suspect* of the Hudson's Bay Company. Quick as thought I thrust out my foot and tripped him full length on the ground. The light fell on his upturned face. It was Louis Laplante, that past-master in the art of diplomatic deception. He snarled out something angrily and came to himself in sitting posture. Then he recognized

me.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he muttered beneath his breath, momentarily surprised into a betrayal of astonishment. "You, Gillespie?" he called out, at once regaining himself and assuming his usual nonchalance. "Pardon, my solemncholy! I took you for a tree."

"Granted, your impudence," said I, ignoring the slight but paying him back in kind. I was determined to follow my uncle's advice and play the rascal at his own game. "Help you up?" said I, as pleasantly as I could, extending my hand to give him a lift; and I felt his palm hot and his arm tremble. Then, I knew that Louis was drunk and this was the fool's joint in the knave's armor, on which Mr. Jack MacKenzie bade me use my weapons.

"Tra-la!" he answered with mincing insult. "Tra-la, old tombstone! Good-by, my mausoleum! Au revoir, old death's-head! Adieu, grave skull!" With an absurdly elaborate bow, he reeled back among the dancers.

"Get up, comrade," I urged, rushing into the tent, where the old trader I had questioned about my canoeman was now snoring. "Get up, man," and I shook him. "There's a Hudson's Bay spy!"

"Spy," he shouted, throwing aside the moose-skin coverlet. "Spy! Who?"

"It's Louis Laplante, of Quebec."

"Louis Laplante!" reiterated the trader. "A Frenchman employed by the Hudson's Bay! Laplante, a trapper, with them! The scoundrel!" And he ground out oaths that boded ill for Louis.

"Hold on!" I exclaimed, jerking him back. He was for dashing on Laplante with a cudgel. "He's playing the trapper game with the lake tribes."

"I'll trapper him," vowed the trader. "How do you know he's a spy?"

"I don't *know*, really know," I began, clumsily conscious that I had no proof for my suspicions, "but it strikes me we'd better not examine this sort of suspect at too long range. If we're wrong, we can let him go."

"Bag him, eh?" queried the trader.

"That's it," I assented.

"He's a hard one to bag."

"But he's drunk."

"Drunk, Oh! Drunk is he?" laughed the man. "He'll be drunker," and the trader began rummaging through bales of stuff with a noise of bottles knocking together. He was humming in a low tone, like a grimalkin purring after a full meal of mice—

"Rum for Indians, when they come,
Rum for the beggars, when they go,
That's the trick my grizzled lads
To catch the cash and snare the foe."

"What's your plan?" I asked with a vague feeling the trader had some shady purpose in mind.

"Squeamish? Eh? You'll get over that, boy. I'll trap your trapper and spy your spy, and Nor'-Wester your H. B. C.! You come down to the sand between the forest and the beach in about an hour and I'll have news for you," and he brushed past me with his arms full of something I could not see in the half-light.

Then, as a trader, began my first compromise with conscience, and the enmity which I thereby aroused afterwards punished me for that night's work. I knew very well my comrade, with the rough-and-ready methods of traders, had gone out to do what was not right; and I hung back in the tent, balancing the end against the means, our deeds against Louis' perfidy, and Nor'-Westers' interests against those of the Hudson's Bay. It is not pleasant to recall what was done between the cedars and the shore. I do not attempt to justify our conduct. Does the physician justify medical experiments on the criminal, or the sacrificial priest the driving of the scape-goat into the wilderness? Suffice it to say, when I went down to the shore, Louis Laplante was sitting in the midst of empty drinking-flasks, and the wily, old Nor'-Wester was tempting the silly boy to take more by drinking his health with fresh bottles. But while Louis Laplante gulped down his rum, becoming drunker and more communicative, the tempter threw glass after glass over his shoulder and remained sober. The Nor'-Wester motioned me to keep behind the Frenchman and I heard his drunken lips mumbling my own name.

"Rufush—prig—stuck-up prig—serve him tam right! Hamilton's—sh—sh—prig too—sho's his wife. Serve 'em all tam right!"

"Ask him where she is," I whispered over his head.

"Where's the gal?" demanded the trader, shoving more liquor over to Louis.

"Shioux squaw—Devil's wife—how you say it in English? Lah Grawnd Deeahble," and he mouthed over our mispronunciation of his own tongue "Joke, isn't it?" he went on. "That wax-face prig—slave to Shioux Squaw. Rufush—a

fool. Stuffed him to hish—neck. Made him believe shmall-pox was Hamilton's wife. I mean, Hamilton's wife was shmall-pox. Calf bellowed with fright—ran home—came back—'tamme,' I say, 'there he come again' 'shmall-pox in that grave,' say I. Joke—ain't it?" and he stopped to drain off another pint of rum.

"Biggest joke out of jail," said the Nor'-Wester dryly, with meaning which Louis did not grasp.

"Ask him where she is," I whispered, "quick! He's going to sleep." For Louis wiped his beard on his sleeve and lay back hopelessly drunk.

"Here you, waken up," commanded the Nor'-Wester, kicking him and shaking him roughly. "Where's the gal?"

"Shioux—*Pays d'En Haut*," drawled the youth. "Take off your boots! Don't wear boots. *Pays d'En Haut*—moccasins—softer," and he rolled over in a sodden sleep, which defied all our efforts to shake him into consciousness.

"Is that true?" asked the Nor'-Wester, standing above the drunk man and speaking across to me. "Is that true about the Indian kidnapping a woman?"

"True—too terribly true," I whispered back.

"I'd like to boot him into the next world," said the trader, looking down at Louis in a manner that might have alarmed that youth for his safety. "I've bagged H. B. dispatches anyway," he added with satisfaction.

"What'll we do with him?" I asked aimlessly. "If he had anything to do with the stealing of Hamilton's wife——"

"He hadn't," interrupted the trader. "'Twas Diable did that, so Laplante says."

"Then what shall we do with him?"

"Do—with—him," slowly repeated the Nor'-Wester in a low, vibrating voice. "Do—with—him?" and again I felt a vague shudder of apprehension at this silent, uncompromising man's purpose.

The camp fires were dead. Not a sound came from the men in the woods and there was a gray light on the water with a vague stirring of birds through the foliage overhead. Now I would not have any man judge us by the canons of civilization. Under the ancient rule of the fur companies over the wilds of the north, 'twas bullets and blades put the fear of the Lord in evil hearts. As we

stooped to gather up the tell-tale flasks, the drunken knave, who had lightly allowed an innocent white woman to go into Indian captivity, lay with bared chest not a hand's length from a knife he had thrown down. Did the Nor'-Wester and I hesitate, and look from the man to the dagger, and from the dagger to the man; or is this an evil dream from a black past? Miriam, the guiltless, was suffering at his hands; should not he, the guilty, suffer at ours? Surely Sisera was not more unmistakably delivered into the power of his enemies by the Lord than this man; and Sisera was discomfited by Barak and Jael. Heber's wife—says the Book—drove a tent nail—through the temples—of the sleeping man—and slew him! Day was when I thought the Old Volume recorded too many deeds of bloodshed in the wilderness for the instruction of our refined generation; but I, too, have since lived in the wilderness and learned that soft speech is not the weapon of strong men overmastering savagery.

I know the trader and I were thinking the same thoughts and reading each other's thoughts; for we stood silent above the drunk man, neither moving, neither uttering a word.

"Well?" I finally questioned in a whisper.

"Well," said he, and he knelt down and picked up the knife. "'Twould serve him right." He was speaking in the low, gentle, purring voice he had used in the tent. "'Twould serve him jolly right," and he knelt over Louis hesitating.

My eyes followed his slow, deliberate motions with horror. Terror seemed to rob me of the power of speech. I felt my blood freeze with the fear of some impending crime. There was the faintest perceptible fluttering of leaves; and we both started up as if we had been assassins, glancing fearfully into the gloom of the forest. All the woods seemed alive with horrified eyes and whisperings.

"Stop!" I gasped, "This is madness, the madness of the murderer. What would you do?" And I was trying to knock the knife out of his hand, when among the shadowy green of the foliage, an open space suddenly resolved itself into a human face and there looked out upon us gleaming eyes like those of a crouching panther.

"Squeamish fool!" muttered the Nor'-Wester, raising his arm.

"Stop!" I implored. "We are watched. See!" and I pointed to the face, that as suddenly vanished into blackness.

We both leaped into the thicket, pistol in hand, to wreak punishment on the interloper. There was only an indistinct sound as of something receding into the darkness.

"Don't fire," said I, "'twill alarm the camp."

At imminent risk to our own lives, we poked sticks through the thicket and felt for our unseen enemy, but found nothing.

"Let's go back and peg him out on the sand, where the Hudson's Bay will see him when they come this way," suggested the Nor'-Wester, referring to Laplante.

"Yes, or hand-cuff him and take him along prisoner," I added, thinking Louis might have more information.

But when we stepped back to the beach, there was no Louis Laplante.

"He was too drunk to go himself," said I, aghast at the certainty, which now came home to me, that we had been watched.

"I wash my hands of the whole affair," declared the trader, in a state of high indignation, and he strode off to his tent, I, following, with uncomfortable reflections trooping into my mind. Compunctions rankled in self-respect. How near we had been to a brutal murder, to crime which makes men shun the perpetrators. Civilization's veneer was rubbing off at an alarming rate. This thought stuck, but for obvious reasons was not pursued. Also I had learned that the worst and best of outlaws easily justify their acts at the time they commit them; but afterwards—afterwards is a different matter, for the thing is past undoing.

I heard the trader snorting out inarticulate disgust as he tumbled into his tent; but I stood above the embers of the camp fire thinking. Again I felt with a creepiness, that set all my flesh quaking, felt, rather than saw, those maddening, tiger eyes of the dark foliage watching me. Looking up, I found my morose canoeman on the other side of the fire, leaning so close to a tree, he was barely visible in the shadows. Thinking himself unseen by me, he wore such an insolent, amused, malicious expression, I knew in an instant, who the interloper had been, and who had carried Louis off. Before I realized that such an act entails life-long enmity with an Indian, I had bounded over the fire and struck him with all my strength full in the face. At that, instead of knifing me as an Indian ordinarily would, he broke into hyena shrieks of laughter. He, who has

heard that sound, need hear it only once to have the echo ring forever in his ears; and I have heard it oft and know it well.

"Spy! Sneak!" I muttered, rushing upon him. But he sprang back into the forest and vanished. In dodging me, he let fall his fowling-piece, which went off with a bang into the fire.

"Hulloo! What's wrong out there?" bawled the trader's voice from the tent.

"Nothing—false alarm!" I called reassuringly. Then there caught my eyes what startled me out of all presence of mind. There, reflecting the glare of the firelight was the Indian's fowling-piece, richly mounted in burnished silver and chased in the rare design of Eric Hamilton's family crest. The morose canoeman was Le Grand Diable.

A few hours later, I was in the thick of a confused re-embarking. Le Grand Diable took a place in another boat; and a fresh hand was assigned to my canoe. Of that I was glad; I could sleep sounder and he, safer. The *Bourgeois* complained that too much rum had been given out.

"Keep a stiffer hand on your men, boy, or they'll ride over your head," one of the chief traders remarked to me.

CHAPTER VI

A GIRDLE OF AGATES RECALLED

To unravel a ball of yarn, with which kittens have been making cobwebs, has always seemed to me a much easier task than to unknot the tangled skein of confused influences, that trip up our feet at every step in life's path. Here was I, who but a month ago had a supreme contempt for guile and a lofty confidence in uprightness and downrightness, transformed into a crafty trader with all the villainous tricks of the bargain-maker at my finger-tips. We had befooled Louis into a betrayal of his associates but how much reliance could be placed on that betrayal? Had he incriminated Diable to save himself? Then, why had Diable rescued his betrayer? Where was Louis in hiding? Was the Sioux wife with her white slave really in the north country, or was she near, and did that explain my morose Iroquois' all-night vigils? We had cheated Laplante; but had he in turn cheated us? Would I be justified in taking Diable prisoner, and would my company consent to the demoralization of their crews by such a step? Ah, if life were only made up of simple right and simple wrong, instead of half rights and half wrongs indistinguishably mingled, we could all be righteous! If the path to the goal of our chosen desire were only as straight as it is narrow, instead of being dark, mysterious and tortuous, how easily could we attain high ends! I was launched on the life for which I had longed, but strange, shadowy forms like the storm-fiends of sailors' lore, drunkenness, deceit and crime—on whose presence I had not counted—flitted about my ship's masthead. And there was not one guiding star, not one redeeming influence, except the utter freedom to be a man. I was learning, what I suppose everyone learns, that there are things which sap success of its sweets.

Such were my thoughts, as our canoes sped across the northern end of Lake Huron, heading for the Sault. The Nor'-Westers had a wonderful way of arousing enthusiastic loyalty among their men. Danger fanned this fealty to white-heat. In the face of powerful opposition, the great company frequently accomplished the impossible. With half as large a staff in the service as its rivals boasted, it invaded the hunting-ground of the Hudson's Bay Company, and outrunning all competition, extended fur posts from the heart of the continent to the foot-hills to the Rockies, and from the international boundary to the Arctic Circle. I had

thought no crews could make quicker progress than ours from Lachine to *Point à la Croix*; but the short delay during the storm occasioned faster work. More *voyageurs* were engaged from the Nipissangue tribes. As soon as one lot fagged fresh shifts came to the relief. Paddles shot out at the rate of modern piston rods, and the waters whirled back like wave-wash in the wake of a clipper. Except for briefest stoppages, speed was not relaxed across the whole northern end of those inland seas called the Great Lakes. With ample space on the lakes, the brigades could spread out and the canoes separated, not halting long enough to come together again till we reached the Sault. Here, orders were issued for the maintenance of rigid discipline. We camped at a distance from the lodges of local tribes. No grog was given out. Camp-fire conviviality was forbidden, and each man kept with his own crew. We remained in camp but one night; and though I searched every tent, I could not find Le Grand Diable. This worried and puzzled me. All night, I lay awake, stretching conscience with doubtful plans to entrap the knave.

Rising with first dawn-streak, I was surprised to find Little Fellow and La Robe Noire, two of my canoemen, setting off for the woods. They had laid a snare—so they explained—and were going to examine it. Of late I had grown distrustful of all natives. I suspected these two might be planning desertion; so I went with them. The way led through a dense thicket of ferns half the height of a man. Only dim light penetrated the maze of foliage; and I might easily have lost myself, or been decoyed—though these possibilities did not occur to me till we were at least a mile from the beach. Little Fellow was trotting ahead, La Robe Noire jogging behind, and both glided through the brake without disturbing a fern branch, while I—after the manner of my race—crunched flags underfoot and stamped down stalks enough to be tracked by keen-eyed Indians for a week afterwards. Twice I saw Little Fellow pull up abruptly and look warily through the cedars on one side. Once he stooped down and peered among the fern stems. Then he silently signaled back to La Robe Noire, pointed through the undergrowth and ran ahead again without explanation. At first I could see nothing, and regretted being led so far into the woods. I was about to order both Indians back to the tent, when Little Fellow, with face pricked forward and foot raised, as if he feared to set it down—for the fourth time came to a dead stand. Now, I, too, heard a rustle, and saw a vague sinuous movement distinctly running abreast of us among the ferns. For a moment, when we stopped, it ceased, then wiggled forward like beast, or serpent in the underbrush. Little Fellow placed his forefinger on his lips, and we stood noiseless till by the ripple of the green it seemed to scurry away.

"What is it, Little Fellow, a cat?" I asked; but the Indian shook his head dubiously and turned to the open where the trap had been set.

Bending over the snare he uttered an Indian word, that I did not understand, but have since heard traders use, so conclude it was one of those exclamations, alien races learn quickest from one another, but which, nevertheless, are not found in dictionaries. The trap had been rifled of game and completely smashed.

"Wolverine!" muttered the Indian, making a sweep of his dagger blade at an imaginary foe. "No wolverine! Bad Indians!"

Scarcely had he spoken when La Robe Noire leaped into the air like a wounded rabbit. An arrow whizzed past my face and glanced within a hair's-breadth of the Indian's head. Both men were dumb with amazement. Such treachery would have been surprising among the barbarous tribes of the Athabasca. The Sault was the dividing line between Canada and the Wilderness, between the east and the west, and there were no hostiles within a thousand miles of us. Little Fellow would have dragged me pell-mell back to the beach, but I needed no persuasion. La Robe Noire tore ahead with the springs of a hunted lynx. Little Fellow loyally kept between me and a possible pursuer, and we set off at a hard run. That creature, I fancied, was again coursing along beneath the undergrowth; for the foliage bent and rose as we ran. Whether it were man or beast, we were three against one, and could drive it out of hiding.

"See here, Little Fellow!" I cried, "Let's hunt that thing out!" and I wheeled about so sharply the chunky little man crashed forward, knocking me off my feet and sending me a man's length farther on.

That fall saved my life. A flat spear point hissed through the air above my head and stuck fast in the bark of an elm tree. Scrambling up, I promptly let go two or three shots into the fern brake. We scrutinized the underbrush, but there was no sign of human being, except the fern stems broken by my shots. I wrenched the stone spear-head from the tree. It was curiously ornamented with such a multitude of intricate carvings I could not decipher any design. Then I discovered that the medley of colors was produced by inlaying the flint with small bits of a bright stone; and the bright stones had been carved into a rude likeness of some birds.

"What are these birds, Little Fellow?" I asked.

He fingered them closely, and with bulging eyes muttered back, "L'Aigle!

L'Aigle!"

"Eagles, are they?" I returned, stupidly missing the possible meaning of his suppressed excitement. "And the stone?"

"Agate, *Monsieur*."

Agate! Agate! What picture did agate call back to my mind? A big squaw, with malicious eyes and gaping upper lip and girdle of agates, watching Louis Laplante and myself at the encampment in the gorge.

"Little Fellow!" I shouted, not suppressing my excitement. "Who is Le Grand Diable's wife?"

And the Indian answered in a low voice, with a face that showed me he had already penetrated my discovery, "The daughter of L'Aigle, chief of the Sioux."

Then I knew for whom those missiles had been intended and from whom they had come. It was a clever piece of rascality. Had the assassin succeeded, punishment would have fallen on my Indians.

CHAPTER VII

THE LORDS OF THE NORTH IN COUNCIL

Beyond the Sault, the fascinations of the west beckoned like a siren. Vast waterways, where a dozen European kingdoms could be dropped into one lake without raising a sand-bar, seemed to sweep on forever and call with the voice of enchantress to the very ends of the earth. With the purple recesses of the shore on one side and the ocean-expanse of Lake Superior on the other, all the charms of clean, fresh freedom were unveiling themselves to me and my blood began to quicken with that fevered delight, which old lands are pleased to call western enthusiasm. Lake Huron, with its greenish-blue, shallow, placid waters and calm, sloping shores, seemed typical of the even, easy life I had left in the east. How those choppy, blustering, little waves resembled the jealousies and bickerings and bargainings of the east; but when one came to Lake Superior, with its great ocean billows and slumbering, giant rocks and cold, dark, fathomless depths, there was a new life in a hard, rugged, roomy, new world. We hugged close to the north coast; and the numerous rocky islands to our left stood guard like a wall of adamant between us and the heavy surf that flung against the barrier. We were rapidly approaching the headquarters of our company. When south-bound brigades, with prisoners in hand-cuffs, began to meet us, I judged we were near the habitation of man.

"Bad men?" I asked Little Fellow, pointing to the prisoners, as our crews exchanged rousing cheers with the Nor'-Westers now bound for Montreal.

"*Non, Monsieur!* Not all bad men," and the Indian gave his shoulders an expressive shrug, "*Les traitres anglais*."

To the French *voyageur*, English meant the Hudson's Bay people. The answer set me wondering to what pass things had come between the two great companies that they were shipping each other's traders gratuitously out of the country. I recalled the talk at the Quebec Club about Governor McDonell of the Hudson's Bay trying to expel Nor'-Westers and concluded our people could play their own game against the commander of Red River.

We arrived in Fort William at sundown, and a flag was flying above the

courtyard.

"Is that in our honor?" I asked a clerk of the party.

"Not much it is," he laughed. "We under-strappers aren't oppressed with honors! It warns the Indians there's no trade one day out of seven."

"Is this Sunday?"

I suddenly recollected as far as we were concerned the past month had been entirely composed of week-days.

"Out of your reckoning already?" asked the clerk with surprise. "Wonder how you'll feel when you've had ten years of it."

Situated on the river bank, near the site of an old French post, Fort William was a typical traders' stronghold. Wooden palisades twenty feet high ran round the whole fort and the inner court enclosed at least two hundred square yards. Heavily built block-houses with guns poking through window slits gave a military air to the trading post. The block-houses were apparently to repel attack from the rear and the face of the fort commanded the river. Stores, halls, warehouses and living apartments for an army of clerks, were banked against the walls, and the main building with its spacious assembly-room stood conspicuous in the centre of the enclosure. As we entered the courtyard, one of the chief traders was perched on a mortar in the gate. The little magnate condescended never a smile of welcome till the *Bourgeois* came up. Then he fawned loudly over the chiefs and conducted them with noisy ostentation to the main hall. Indians and half-breed *voyageurs* quickly dispersed among the wigwams outside the pickets, while clerks and traders hurried to the broad-raftered dining-hall. Fatigued from the trip, I took little notice of the vociferous interchange of news in passage-way and over door-steps. I remember, after supper I was strolling about the courtyard, surveying the buildings, when at the door of a sort of barracks where residents of the fort lived, I caught sight of the most grateful object my eye had lighted upon since leaving Quebec. It was a tin basin with a large bar of soap—actual soap. There must still have been some vestige of civilization in my nature, for after a delightful half-hour's intimate acquaintance with that soap, I came round to the groups of men rehabilitated in self-respect.

"Athabasca, Rocky Mountain and Saskatchewan brigades here to-morrow," remarked a boyish looking Nor'-Wester, with a mannish beard on his face. Involuntarily I put my hand to my chin and found a bristling growth there. That

was a land where young men could become suddenly very old; and many a trader has discovered other signs of age than a beard on his face when he first looked at a mirror after life in the *Pays d'En Haut*.

"I say," blurted out another young clerk. "There's a man here from Red River, one of the Selkirk settlers. He's come with word if we'll supply the boats, lots of the colonists are ready to dig out. General Assembly's going to consider that to-morrow."

"Oh! Hang the old Assembly if it ships that man out! He's got a pretty daughter, perfect beauty, and she's here with him!" exclaimed the lad with the mannish beard.

"Go to, thou light-head!" declared the other youth, with the air of an elder in Israel. "Go to! You paraded beneath her window for an hour to-day and she never once laid eyes on you."

All the men laughed.

"Hang it!" said the first speaker. "We don't display our little amours——"

"No," broke in the other, "we just display our little contours and get snubbed, eh?"

The bearded youth flushed at the sally of laughter.

"Hang it!" he answered, pulling fiercely at his moustache. "She is a bit of statuary, so she is, as cold as marble. But there is no law against looking at a pretty bit of statuary, when it frames itself in a window in this wilderness."

To which, every man of the crowd said a hearty amen; and I walked off to stretch myself full length on a bench, resolving to have out a mirror from my packing case and get rid of those bristles that offended my chin. The men began to disperse to their quarters. The tardy twilight of the long summer evenings, peculiar to the far north, was gathering in the courtyard. As the night-wind sighed past, I felt the velvet caress of warm June air on my face and memory reverted to the innocent boyhood days of Laval. How far away those days seemed! Yet it was not so long ago. Surely it is knowledge, not time, that ages one, knowledge, that takes away the trusting innocence resulting from ignorance and gives in its place the distrustful innocence resulting from wisdom. I thought of the temptations that had come to me in the few short weeks I had been adrift, and how feebly I had resisted them. I asked myself if there were not in the moral

compass of men, who wander by land, some guiding star, as there is for those who wander over sea. I gazed high above the sloping roofs for some sign of moon, or star. The sky was darkling and overcast; but in lowering my eyes from heaven to earth, I saw what I had missed before—a fair, white face framed in a window above the stoop directly opposite my bench. The face seemed to have a background of gold; for a wonderful mass of wavy hair clustered down from the blue-veined brow to the bit of white throat visible, where a gauzy piece of neck wear had been loosened. Evidently, this was the statuary described by the whiskered youth. But the statuary breathed. A bloom of living apple-blossoms was on the cheeks. The brows were black and arched. The very pose of the head was arch, and in the lips was a suggestion of archery, too,—Cupid's archery, though the upper lip was drawn almost too tight for the bow beneath to discharge the little god's shaft. Why did I do it? I do not know. Ask the young Nor'-Wester, who had worn a path beneath the selfsame window that very day, or the hosts of young men, who are still wearing paths beneath windows to this very day. I coughed and sat bolt upright on the bench with unnecessarily loud intimations of my presence. The fringe of black lashes did not even lift. I rose and with great show of indifference paraded solemnly five times past that window; but, in spite of my pompous indifference, by a sort of side-signalling, I learned that the owner of the heavy lashes was unaware of my existence. Thereupon, I sat down again. It *was* a bit of statuary and a very pretty bit of statuary. As the youth said, there was no law against looking at a bit of statuary in this wilderness, and as the statuary did not know I was looking at it, I sat back to take my fill of that vision framed in the open window. The statuary, unknown to itself, had full meed of revenge; for it presently brought such a flood of longing to my heart, longings, not for this face, but for what this face represented—the innocence and love and purity of home, that I bowed dejectedly forward with moist eyes gazing at the ground.

"Hullo!" whispered a deep voice in my ear. "Are you mooning after the Little Statue already?"

When I looked up, the man had passed, but the head in the window was leaning out and a pair of swimming, lustrous, gray eyes were gazing forward in a way that made me dizzy. "Ah," they said in a language that needed no speaking, "there are two of us, very, very home-sick."

"The guiding star for my moral compass," said I, under my breath.

Then the statue in a live fashion suddenly drew back into the dark room. The

window-shutter flung to, with a bang, and my vision was gone. I left the bench, made a shake-down on one of the store counters, and knew nothing more till the noise of brigades from the far north aroused the fort at an early hour Monday morning. The arrival of the Athabasca traders was the signal for tremendous activity. An army returning from victory could not have been received with greater acclaim. *Bourgeois* and clerks tumbled promiscuously from every nook in the fort and rushing half-dressed towards the gates shouted welcome to the men, who had come from the outposts of the known world. They were a shaggy, ragged-looking rabble, those traders from mountain fastnesses and the Arctic circle. With long white hair, hatless some of them, with beards like oriental patriarchs, and dressed entirely in skins of the chase, from fringed coats to gorgeous moccasins, the unkempt monarchs of northern realms had the imperious bearing of princes.

"Is it you, really you, looking as old as your great grandfather? By Gad! So it is," came from one quondam friend.

"Powers above!" ejaculated another onlooker, "See that old Father Abraham! It's Tait! As you live, it's Tait! And he only went to the Athabasca ten years ago. He was thirty then, and now he's a hundred!"

"That's Wilson," says another. "Looks thin, doesn't he? Slim fare! He's the only man from Great Slave Lake that escaped being a meal for the Crees,—year of the famine; and they hadn't time to pick his bones!"

A running fire of such comments went along the spectators lining each side of the path. There was a sad side to the clamorous welcomes and handshakes and surprised recognitions. Had not these men gone north young and full of hope, as I was going? Now, news of the feud with the Hudson's Bay brought them out old before their time and more like the natives with whom they had traded than the white race they had left. Here and there, strong men would fall in each other's arms and embrace like school-girls, covering their emotion with rounded oaths instead of terms of endearment.

All day the confusion of unloading boats continued. The dull tread of moccasined feet as Indians carried pack after pack from river bank to the fort, was ceaseless. Faster than the clerks could sort the furs great bundles were heaped on the floor. By noon, warehouses were crammed from basement to attic. Ermine taken in mid-winter, when the fur was spotlessly white, but for the jet tail-tip, otter cut so deftly scarcely a tuft of fur had been wasted along the opened

seam, silver fox, which had made the fortune of some lucky hunter—these and other rare furs, that were to minister to the luxury of kings, passed from tawny carriers to sorters. Elsewhere, coarse furs, obtained at greater risk, but owing to the abundance of big game, less valuable for the hunter, were sorted and valued. With a reckless underestimate of the beaver-skin, their unit of currency, Indians hung over counters bartering away the season's hunt. I frankly acknowledge the Company's clerks on such occasions could do a rushing business selling tawdry stuff at fabulous prices.

Meanwhile, in the main hall, the *Bourgeois*, or partners, of the great North-West Company were holding their annual General Assembly behind closed doors. Clerks lowered their voices when they passed that room, and well they might; for the rulers inside held despotic sway over a domain as large as Europe. And what were they decreeing? Who can tell? The archives of the great fur companies are as jealously guarded as diplomatic documents, and more remarkable for what they omit than what they state. Was the policy, that ended so tragically a year afterwards, adopted at this meeting? Great corporations have a fashion of keeping their mouths and their council doors tight shut and of leaving the public to infer that catastrophes come causeless. However that may be, I know that Duncan Cameron, a fiery Highlander and one of the keenest men in the North-West service, suddenly flung out of the Assembly room with a pleased, determined look on his ruddy face.

"Are ye Rufus Gillespie?" he asked.

"That's my name, Sir."

"Then buckle on y'r armor, lad; for ye'll see the thick of the fight. You're appointed to my department at Red River." And he left us.

"Lucky dog! I envy you! There'll be rare sport between Cameron and McDonell, when the two forts up in Red River begin to talk back to each other," exclaimed a Fort William man to me.

"Are you Gillespie?" asked a low, mellow, musical voice by my side. I turned to face a tall, dark, wiry man, with the swarthy complexion and intensely black eyes of one having strains of native blood. Among the *voyageurs*, I had become accustomed to the soft-spoken, melodious speech that betrays Indian parentage; and I believe if I were to encounter a descendant of the red race in China, or among the Latin peoples of Southern Europe, I could recognize Indian blood by that rhythmic trick of the native tongue.

"I'm Gillespie," I answered my keen-eyed questioner. "Who are you?"

"Cuthbert Grant, warden of the plains and leader of the *Bois-Brulés*," was his terse response. "You're coming to our department at Fort Gibraltar, and I want you to give Father Holland a place in your canoes to come north with us. He's on his way to the Missouri."

At that instant Duncan Cameron came up to Grant and muttered something. Both men at once went back to the council hall of the General Assembly. I heard the courtyard gossips vowing that the Hudson's Bay would cease its aggressions, now that Cameron and Cuthbert Grant were to lead the Nor'-Westers; but I made no inquiry. Next to keeping his own counsel and giving credence to no man, the fur trader learns to gain information only with ears and eyes, and to ask no questions. The scurrying turmoil in the fort lasted all day. At dusk, natives were expelled from the stockades and work stopped.

Grand was the foregathering around the supper table of the great dining hall that night. *Bourgeois*, clerks and traders from afar, explorers, from the four corners of the earth—assembled four hundred strong, buoyant and unrestrained, enthusiastically loyal to the company, and tingling with hilarious fellowship over this, the first reunion for twenty years. Though their manner and clothing be uncouth, men who have passed a lifetime exploring northern wilds have that to say, which is worth hearing. So the feast was prolonged till candles sputtered low and pitch-pine fagots flared out. Indeed, before the gathering broke up, flagons as well as candles had to be renewed. Lanterns swung from the black rafters of the ceiling. Tallow candles stood in solemn rows down the centre of each table, showing that men, not women, had prepared the banquet. Stuck in iron brackets against the walls were pine torches, that had been dipped in some resinous mixture and now flamed brightly with a smell not unlike incense. Tables lined the four walls of the hall and ran in the form of a cross athwart the middle of the room. Backless benches were on both sides of every table. At the end, chairs were placed, the seats of honor for famous *Bourgeois*. British flags had been draped across windows and colored bunting hung from rafter to rafter.

"Ah, mon! Is no this fine? This is worth living for! This is the company to serve!" Duncan Cameron exclaimed as he sank into one of the chairs at the head of the centre table. The Scotchman's heart softened before those platters of venison and wild fowl, and he almost broke into geniality. "Here, Gillespie, to my right," he called, motioning me to the edge of the bench at his elbow. "Here, Grant, opposite Gillespie! Aye! an' is that you, Father Holland?" he cried to the

stout, jovial priest, with shining brow and cheeks wrinkling in laughter, who followed Grant. "There's a place o' honor for men like you, Sir. Here!" and he gave the priest a chair beside himself.

The *Bourgeois* seated, there was a scramble for the benches. Then the whole company with great zest and much noisy talk fell upon the viands with a will.

"Why, Cameron," began a northern winterer a few places below me, "it's taken me three months fast travelling to come from McKenzie River to Fort William. By Jove! Sir, 'twas cold enough to freeze your words solid as you spoke them, when we left Great Slave Lake. I'll bet if you men were up there now, you'd hear my voice thawing out and yelling get-epp to my huskies, and my huskies yelping back! Used a dog train, whole of March. Tied myself up in bag of buffalo robes at night and made the huskies lie across it to keep me from freezing. Got so hot, every pore in my body was a spouting fountain, and in the morning that moisture would freeze my buckskin stiff. Couldn't stand that; so I tried sleeping with my head out of the bag and froze my nose six nights out of seven."

The unfortunate nose corroborated his evidence.

"Ice was sloppy on the Saskatchewan, and I had to use pack-horses and take the trail. I was trusting to get provisions at Souris. You can imagine, then, how we felt towards the Hudson's Bays when we found they'd plundered our fort. We were without a bite for two days. Why, we took half a dozen Hudson's Bays in our quarters up north last winter, and saved them from starvation; and here we were, starving, that they might plunder and rob. I'm with you, Sir! I'm with you to the hilt against the thieves! There's a time for peace and there's a time for war, and I say this is a very good time for war!"

"Here's confusion to the old H. B. C's! Confusion, short life, no prosperity, and death to the Hudson's Bay!" yelled the young whiskered Nor'-Wester, springing to his feet on the bench and waving a drinking-cup round his head. Some of the youthful clerks were disposed to take their cue from this fire-eater and began strumming the table and applauding; but the *Bourgeois* frowned on forward conduct.

"Check him, Grant!" growled Cameron in disapproval.

"Sit down, bumptious babe!" said the priest, tugging the lad's coat.

"Here, you young show-off," whispered Grant, leaning across the priest, and he

knocked the boy's feet from under him bringing him down to the bench with a thud.

"He needs more outdoor life, that young one! It goes to his head mighty fast," remarked Cameron. "What were you saying about your hard luck?" and he turned to the northern winterer again.

"Call that hard luck?" broke in a mountaineer, laughing as if he considered hardships a joke. "We lived a month last winter on two meals a day; soup, out of snow-shoe thongs, first course; fried skins, second go; teaspoonful shredded fish, by way of an entrée!"

The man wore a beaded buckskin suit, and his mellow intonation of words in the manner of the Indian tongue showed that he had almost lost English speech along with English customs. His recital caused no surprise.

"Been on short, rations myself," returned the northerner. "Don't like it! Isn't safe! Rips a man's nerves to the raw when Indians glare at him with hungry eyes eighteen hours out of the twenty-four."

"What was the matter?" drawled the mountaineer. "Hudson's Bay been tampering with your Indians? Now if you had a good Indian wife as I have, you could defy the beggars to turn trade away——"

"Aye, that's so," agreed the winterer, "I heard of a fellow on the Athabasca who had to marry a squaw before he could get a pair of racquets made; but that wasn't my trouble. Game was scarce."

"Game scarce on MacKenzie River?" A chorus of voices vented their surprise. To the outside world game is always scarce, reported scarce on MacKenzie River and everywhere else by the jealous fur traders; but these deceptions are not kept up among hunters fraternizing at the same banquet board.

"Mighty scarce. Some of the tribe died out from starvation. The Hudson's Bay in our district were in bad plight. We took six of them in—Hadn't heard of the Souris plunder, you may be sure."

"More fools they to go into the Athabasca," declared the mountaineer.

"Bigger fools to send another brigade there this year when they needn't expect help from us," interjected a third trader.

"You don't say they're sending another lot of men to the Athabasca!" exclaimed the winterer.

"Yes I do—under Colin Robertson," affirmed the third man.

"Colin Robertson—the Nor'-Wester?"

"Robertson who used to be a Nor'-Wester! It's Selkirk's work since he got control of the H. B."

"Robertson should know better," said the northerner. "He had experience with us before he resigned. I'll wager he doesn't undertake that sort of venture! Surely it's a yarn!"

"You lose your bet," cried the irrepressible Fort William lad. "A runner came in at six o'clock and reported that the Hudson's Bay brigade from Lachine would pass here before midnight. They're sooners, they are, are the H. B. C's.," and the clerk enjoyed the sensation of rolling a big oath from his boyish lips.

"Eric Hamilton passing within a stone's throw of the fort!" In astonishment I leaned forward to catch every word the Fort William lad might say.

"To Athabasca by our route—past this fort!" Such temerity amazed the winterer beyond coherent expression.

"Good thing for them they're passing in the night," continued the clerk. "The half-breeds are hot about that Souris affair. There'll be a collision yet!" The young fellow's importance increased in proportion to the surprise of the elder men.

"There'll be a collision anyway when Cameron and Grant reach Red River—eh, Cuthbert?" and the mountaineer turned to the dark, sharp-featured warden of the plains. Cuthbert Grant laughed pleasantly.

"Oh, I hope not—for their sakes!" he said, and went on with the story of a buffalo hunt.

The story I missed, for I was deep in my own thoughts. I must see Eric and let him know what I had learned; but how communicate with the Hudson's Bay brigade without bringing suspicion of double dealing on myself? I was turning things over in my mind in a stupid sort of way like one new at intrigue, when I heard a talker, vowing by all that was holy that he had seen the rarest of hunter's

rarities—a pure white buffalo. The wonder had appeared in Qu'Appelle Valley.

"I can cap that story, man," cried the portly Irish priest who was to go north in my boat. "I saw a white squaw less than two weeks ago!" He paused for his words to take effect, and I started from my chair as if I had been struck.

"What's wrong, young man?" asked the winterer. "We lonely fellows up north see visions. We leap out of our moccasins at the sound of our own voices; but you young chaps, with all the world around you"—he waved towards the crowded hall as though it were the metropolis of the universe—"shouldn't see ghosts and go jumping mad."

I sat down abashed.

"Yes, a white squaw," repeated the jovial priest. "Sure now, white ladies aren't so many in these regions that I'd be likely to make a mistake."

"There's a difference between squaws and white ladies," persisted the jolly father, all unconscious that he was emphasizing a difference which many of the traders were spelling out in hard years of experience.

"I've seen papooses that were white for a day or two after they were born——"

"Effect of the christening," interrupted the youth, whose head, between flattered vanity and the emptied contents of his drinking cup, was very light indeed.

"Take that idiot out and put him to bed, somebody," commanded Cameron.

"For a day or two after they were born," reiterated the priest; "but I never saw such a white-skinned squaw!"

"Where did you see her?" I inquired in a voice which was not my own.

"On Lake Winnipeg. Coming down two weeks ago we camped near a band of Sioux, and I declare, as I passed a tepee, I saw a woman's face that looked as white as snow. She was sleeping, and the curtain had blown up. Her child was in her arms, and I tell you her bare arms were as white as snow."

"Must have been the effect of the moonlight," explained some one.

"Moonlight didn't give the other Indians that complexion," insisted the priest.

It was my turn to feel my head suddenly turn giddy, though liquor had not passed my lips. This information could have only one meaning. I was close on the track

of Miriam, and Eric was near; yet the slightest blunder on my part might ruin all chance of meeting him and rescuing her.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LITTLE STATUE ANIMATE

The men began arguing about the degrees of whiteness in a squaw's skin. Those, married to native women, averred that differences of complexion were purely matters of temperament and compared their dusky wives to Spanish belles. The priest was now talking across the table to Duncan Cameron, advocating a renewal of North-West trade with the Mandanes on the Missouri, whither he was bound on his missionary tour. To venture out of the fort through the Indian encampments, where natives and outlaws were holding high carnival, and my sleepless foe could have a free hand, would be to risk all chance of using the information that had come to me.

I did not fear death—fear of death was left east of the Sault in those days. On my preservation depended Miriam's rescue. Besides, if either Le Grand Diable or myself had to die, I came to the conclusion of other men similarly situated—that my enemy was the one who should go.

Violins, flutes and bag-pipes were striking up in different parts of the hall. Simple ballads, smacking of old delights in an older land, songs, with which home-sick white men comforted themselves in far-off lodges—were roared out in strident tones. Feet were beating time to the rasp of the fiddles. Men rose and danced wild jigs, or deftly executed some intricate Indian step; and uproarious applause greeted every performer. The hall throbbed with confused sounds and the din deadened my thinking faculties. Even now, Eric might be slipping past. In that deafening tumult I could decide nothing, and when I tried to leave the table, all the lights swam dizzily.

"Excuse me, Sir!" I whispered, clutching the priest's elbow. "You're Father Holland and are to go north in my boats. Come out with me for a moment."

Thinking me tipsy, he gave me a droll glance. "'Pon my soul! Strapping fellows like you shouldn't need last rites——"

"Please say nothing! Come quickly!" and I gripped his arm.

"Bless us! It's a touch of the head, or the heart!" and he rose and followed me

from the hall.

In the fresh air, dizziness left me. Sitting down on the bench, where I had lain the night before, I told him my perplexing mission. At first, I am sure he was convinced that I was drunk or raving, but my story had the directness of truth. He saw at once how easily he could leave the fort at that late hour without arousing suspicion, and finally offered to come with me to the river bank, where we might intercept Hamilton.

"But we must have a boat, a light cockle-shell thing, so we can dart out whenever the brigade appears," declared the priest, casting about in his mind for means to forward our object.

"The canoes are all locked up. Can't you borrow one from the Indians? Don't you know any of them?" I asked with a sudden sinking of heart.

"And have the whole pack of them sneaking after us? No—no—that won't do. Where are your wits, boy! Arrah! Me hearty, but what was that?"

We both heard the shutter above our heads suddenly thrown open, but darkness hid anyone who might have been listening.

"Hm!" said the priest. "Overheard! Fine conspirators we are! Some eavesdropper!"

"Hush!" and remembering whose window it was, I held him; for he would have stalked away.

"Are you there?" came a clear, gentle voice, that fell from the window in the breaking ripples of a fountain plash.

The bit of statuary had become suddenly animate and was not so marble-cold to mankind as it looked. Thinking we had been taken for an expected lover, I, too, was moving off, when the voice, that sounded like the dropping golden notes of a cremona, called out in tones of vibrating alarm:

"Don't—don't go! Priest! Priest! Father! It's you I'm speaking to. I've heard every word!"

Father Holland and I were too much amazed to do aught but gape from each other to the dark window. We could now see the outlines of a white face there.

"If you'd please put one bench on top of another, and balance a bucket on that, I

think I could get down," pleaded the low, thrilling voice.

"An' in the name of the seven wonders of creation, what for would you be getting down?" asked the astonished priest.

"Oh! Hurry! Are you getting the bench?" coaxed the voice.

"Faith an' we're not! And we have no thought of doing such a thing!" began the good man with severity.

"Then, I'll jump," threatened the voice.

"And break your pretty neck," answered the ungallant father with indignation.

There was a rustling of skirts being gathered across the window sill and outlines of a white face gave place to the figure of a frail girl preparing for a leap.

"Don't!" I cried, genuinely alarmed, with a mental vision of shattered statuary on the ground. "Don't! I'm getting the benches," and I piled them up, with a rickety bucket on top. "Wait!" I implored, stepping up on the bottom bench. "Give me your hand," and as I caught her hands, she leaped from the window to the bucket, and the bucket to the ground, with a daintiness, which I thought savored of experience in such escapades.

"What do you mean, young woman?" demanded Father Holland in anger. "I'll have none of your frisky nonsense! Do you know, you baggage, that you are delaying this young man in a matter that is of life-and-death importance? Tell me this instant, what do you want?"

"I want to save that woman, Miriam! You're both so slow and stupid! Come, quick!" and she caught us by the arms. "There's a skiff down among the rushes in the flats. I can guide you to it. Cross the river in it! Oh! Quick! Quick! Some of the Hudson's Bay brigades have already passed!"

"How do you know?" we both demanded as in one breath.

"I'm Frances Sutherland. My father is one of the Selkirk settlers and he had word that they would pass to-night! Oh! Come! Come!"

This girl, the daughter of a man who was playing double to both companies! And her service to me would compel me to be loyal to him! Truly, I was becoming involved in a way that complicated simple duty. But the girl had darted ahead of us, we following by the flutter of the white gown, and she led us

out of the courtyard by a sally-port to the rear of a block-house. She paused in the shadow of some shrubbery.

"Get fagots from the Indians to light us across the flats," she whispered to Father Holland. "They'll think nothing of your coming. You're always among them!"

"Mistress Sutherland!" I began, as the priest hurried forward to the Indian camp-fires, "I hate to think of you risking yourself in this way for——"

"Stop thinking, then," she interrupted abruptly in a voice that somehow reminded me of my first vision of statuary.

"I beg your pardon," I blundered on. "Father Holland and I have both forgotten to apologize for our rudeness about helping you down."

"Pray don't apologize," answered the marble voice. Then the girl laughed. "Really you're worse than I thought, when I heard you bungling over a boat. I didn't mind your rudeness. It was funny."

"Oh!" said I, abashed. There are situations in which conversation is impossible.

"I didn't mind your rudeness," she repeated, "and—and—you mustn't mind mine. Homesick people aren't—aren't—responsible, you know. Ah! Here are the torches! Give me one. I thank you—Father Holland—is it not? Please smother them down till we reach the river, or we'll be followed."

She was off in a flash, leading us through a high growth of rushes across the flats. So I was both recognized and remembered from the previous night. The thought was not displeasing. The wind moaned dismally through the reeds. I did not know that I had been glancing nervously behind at every step, with uncomfortable recollections of arrows and spear-heads, till Father Holland exclaimed:

"Why, boy! You're timid! What are you scared of?"

"The devil!" and I spoke truthfully.

"Faith! There's more than yourself runs from His Majesty; but resist the devil and he will flee from you."

"Not the kind of devil that's my enemy," I explained. I told him of the arrow-shot and spear-head, and all mirth left his manner.

"I know him, I know him well. There's no greater scoundrel between Quebec and Athabasca."

"My devil, or yours?"

"Yours, lad. Let your laughter be turned to mourning! Beware of him! I've known more than one murder of his doing. Eh! But he's cunning, so cunning! We can't trip him up with proofs; and his body's as slippery as an eel or we might ——"

But a loon flapped up from the rushes, brushing the priest's face with its wings.

"Holy Mary save us!" he ejaculated panting to keep up with our guide. "Faith! I thought 'twas the devil himself!"

"Do you really mean it? Would it be right to get hold of Le Grand Diable?" I asked. Frances Sutherland had slackened her pace and we were all three walking abreast. A dry cane crushed noisily under foot and my head ducked down as if more arrows had hissed past.

"Mane it?" he cried, "mane it? If ye knew all the evil he's done ye'd know whether I mane it." It was his custom when in banter to drop from English to his native brogue like a merry-andrew.

"But, Father Holland, I had him in my power. I struck him, but I didn't kill him, more's the pity!"

"An' who's talking of killin', ye young cut-throat? I say get howld of his body and when ye've got howld of his body, I'd further advise gettin' howld of the butt end of a saplin'——"

"But, Father, he was my canoeman. I had him in my power."

Instantly he squared round throwing the torchlight on my face.

"Had him in your power—knew what he'd done—and—and—didn't?"

"And didn't," said I. "But you almost make me wish I had. What do you take traders for?"

"You're young," said he, "and I take traders for what they are——"

"But I'm a trader and I didn't——" Though a beginner, I wore the airs of a veteran.

"Benedicite!" he cried. "The Lord shall be your avenger! He shall deliver that evil one into the power of the punisher!"

"Benedicite!" he repeated. "May ye keep as clean a conscience in this land as you've brought to it."

"Amen, Father!" said I.

"Here we are," exclaimed Frances Sutherland as we emerged from the reeds to the brink of the river, where a skiff was moored. "Go, be quick! I'll stay here! 'Twill be better without me. The Hudson's Bay are keeping close to the far shore!"

"You can't stay alone," objected Father Holland.

"I shall stay alone, and I've had my way once already to-night."

"But we don't wish to lose one woman in finding another," I protested.

"Go," she commanded with a furious little stamp. "You lose time! Stupids! Do you think I stay here for nothing? We may have been followed and I shall stay here and watch! I'll hide in the rushes! Go!" And there was a second stamp.

That stamp of a foot no larger than a boy's hand cowed two strong men and sent us rowing meekly across the river.

"Did ye ever—did ever ye see such a little termagant, such a persuasive, commanding little queen of a termagant?" asked the priest almost breathless with surprise.

"Queen of courage!" I answered back.

"Queen of hearts, too, I'm thinking. Arrah! Me hearty, to be young!"

She must have smothered her torch, for there was no light among the reeds when I looked back. We crossed the river slowly, listening between oar-strokes for the paddle-dips of approaching canoes. There was no sound but the lashing of water against the pebbled shore and we lay in a little bay ready to dash across the fleet's course, when the boats should come abreast.

We had not long to wait. A canoe nose cautiously rounded the headland coming close to our boat. Instantly I shot our skiff straight across its path and Father Holland waved the torches overhead.

"Hist! Hold back there—have a care!" I called.

"Clear the way!" came an angry order from the dark. "Clear—or we fire!"

"Fire if you dare, you fools!" I retorted, knowing well they would not alarm the fort, and we edged nearer the boat.

"Where's Eric Hamilton?" I demanded.

"A curse on you! None of your business! Get out of the way! Who are you?" growled the voice.

"Answer—quick!" I urged Father Holland, thinking they would respect holy orders; and I succeeded in bumping my craft against their canoe.

"Strike him with your paddle, man!" yelled the steersman, who was beyond reach.

"Give 'im a bullet!" called another.

"For shame, ye saucy divils!" shouted the priest, shaking his torch aloft and displaying his garb. "Shame to ye, threatenin' to shoot a missionary! Ye'd be much better showin' respect to the Church. Whur's Eric Hamilton?" he demanded in a fine show of indignation, and he caught the edge of their craft in his right hand.

"Let go!" and the steersman threateningly raised a pole that shone steel-shod.

"Let go—is ut ye're orderin' me?" thundered the holy man, now in a towering rage, and he flaunted the torch over the crew. "Howld y'r imp'dent tongues!" he shouted, shaking the canoe. "Be civil this minute, or I'll spill ye to the bottom, ye load of cursin' braggarts! Faith an' ut's a durty meal ye'd make for the fush! Foine answers ye give polite questions! How d'y' know we're not here to warn ye about the fort? For shame to ye. Whur's Eric Hamilton, I say?"

Some of the canoemen recognized the priest. Conciliatory whispers passed from man to man.

"Hamilton's far ahead—above the falls now," answered the steersman.

"Then, as ye hope to save your soul," warned Father Holland not yet appeased, "deliver this young man's message!"

"Tell Hamilton," I cried, "that she whom he seeks is held captive by a band of Sioux on Lake Winnipeg and to make haste. Tell him that and he'll reward you well!"

"Vary by one word from the message," added the priest, "and my curses'll track your soul to the furnace."

Father Holland relaxed his grasp, the paddles dipped down and the canoe was lost in the darkness.

More than once I thought that a shadowy thing like an Indian's boat had hung on our rear and the craft seemed to be dogging us back to the flats. Father Holland raised his torch and could see nothing on the water but the glassy reflection of our own forms. He said it was a phantom boat I had seen; and, truly, visions of Le Grande Diable had haunted me so persistently of late, I could scarcely trust my senses. Frances Sutherland's torch suddenly appeared waving above the flats. I put muscle to the oar and before we had landed she called out—

"An Indian's canoe shot past a moment ago. Did you see it?"

"No," returned Father Holland.

"I think we did," said I.

"How can I thank you for what you have done?" I was saying to Frances Sutherland as we entered the fort by the same sally-port.

"Do you really want to know how?"

"Do I?" I was prepared to offer dramatic sacrifice.

"Then never think of it again, nor speak of it again, nor know me any more than if it hadn't happened——"

"The conditions are hard."

"And——"

"And what?" I asked eagerly.

"And help me back the way I came down. For if my father—oh! if my father

knew—he would kill me!"

"Faith! So he ought!" ejaculated the priest. "Risking such precious treasure among vandals!"

Again I piled up the benches. From the bench, she stepped to the bucket, and from the bucket to my shoulder, and as the light weight left my shoulder for the window sill, unknown to her, I caught the fluffy skirt, now bedraggled with the night dew, and kissed it gratefully.

"Oh—ho—and oh-ho and oh-ho," hummed the priest. "Do *I* scent matrimony?"

"Not unless it's in your nose," I returned huffily. "Show me a man of all the hundreds inside, Father Holland, that wouldn't go on his marrow-bones to a woman who risks life and reputation, which is dearer than life, to save another woman!"

"Bless you, me hearty, if he wouldn't, he'd be a villain," said the priest.

CHAPTER IX

DECORATING A BIT OF STATUARY

I frequently passed that window above the stoop next day. Once I saw a face looking down on me with such withering scorn, I wondered if the disgraceful scene with Louis Laplante had become noised about, and I hastened to take my exercise in another part of the courtyard. Thereupon, others paid silent homage to the window, but they likewise soon tired of that parade ground.

Eastern notions of propriety still clung to me. Of this I had immediate proof. When our rough crews were preparing to re-embark for the north, I was shocked beyond measure to see this frail girl come down with her father to travel in our company. Not counting her father, the priest, Duncan Cameron, Cuthbert Grant and myself, there were in our party three-score reckless, uncurbed adventurers, who feared neither God nor man. I thought it strange of a father to expose his daughter to the bold gaze, coarse remarks, and perhaps insults of such men. Before the end of that trip, I was to learn a lesson in western chivalry, which is not easily explained, or forgotten. As father and daughter were waiting to take their places in a boat, a shapeless, flat-footed woman, wearing moccasins—probably the half-breed wife of some trader in the fort—ran to the water's edge with a parcel of dainties, and kissing the girl on both cheeks, wished her a fervent God-speed.

"Oh!" growled the young Nor'-Wester, who had been carried from the banquet hall, and now wore the sour expression that is the aftermath of banquets. "Look at that fat lump of a bumblebee distilling honey from the rose! There are others who would appreciate that sort of thing! This *is* the wilderness of lost opportunities!"

The girl seated herself in a canoe, where the only men were Duncan Cameron, her father and the native *voyageurs*; and I dare vouch a score of young traders groaned at the sight of this second lost opportunity.

"Look, Gillespie! Look!" muttered my comrade of the banquet hall. "The Little Statue set up at the prow of yon canoe! I'll wager you do reverence to graven images all the way to Red River!"

"I'll wager we all do," said I.

And we did. To change the metaphor—after the style of Mr. Jack MacKenzie's eloquence—I warrant there was not a young man of the eight crews, who did not regard that marble-cold face at the prow of the leading canoe, as his own particular guiding star. And the white face beneath the broad-brimmed hat, tied down at each side in the fashion of those days, was as serenely unconscious of us as any star of the heavenly constellations. If she saw there were objects behind her canoe, and that the objects were living beings, and the living beings men, she gave no evidence of it. Nor was the Little Statue—as we had got in the habit of calling her—heartless. In spite of the fears which she entertained for her stern father, her filial affection was a thing to turn the lads of the crews quite mad. Scarcely were we ashore at the different encampments before father and daughter would stroll off arm in arm, leaving the whole brigade envious and disconsolate. Was it the influence of this slip of a girl, I wonder, that a curious change came over our crews? The men still swore; but they did it under their breath. Fewer yarns of a quality, which need not be specified, were told; and certain kinds of jokes were no longer greeted with a loud guffaw. Still we all thought ourselves mightily ill-used by that diminutive bundle of independence, and some took to turning the backs of their heads in her direction when she chanced to come their way. One young spark said something about the Little Statue being a prig, which we all invited him to repeat, but he declined. Had she played the coquette under the innocent mask of sympathy and all other guiles with which gentle slayers ambush strong hearts, I dare affirm there would have been trouble enough and to spare. Suicides, fights, insults and worse, I have witnessed when some fool woman with a fair face came among such men. "Fool" woman, I say, rather than "false"; for to my mind falsity in a woman may not be compared to folly for the utter be-deviling of men.

With our guiding star at the prow of the fore canoe, we continued to wind among countless islands, through narrow, rocky channels and along those endless water-ways, that stretch like a tangled, silver chain with emerald jewels, all the way from the Great Lakes to the plains. Somewhere along Rainy River, where there is an oasis of rolling, wooded meadows in a desert of iron rock, we pitched our tents for the night. The evening air was fragrant with the odor of summer's early flowers. I could not but marvel at the almost magical growth in these far northern latitudes. Barely a month had passed since snow enveloped the earth in a winding sheet, and I have heard old residents say that the winter's frost penetrated the ground for a depth of four feet. Yet here we were in a very tropic

of growth run riot and the frost, which still lay beneath the upper soil, was thawing and moistening the succulent roots of a wilderness of green. The meadow grass, swaying off to the forest margin in billowy ripples, was already knee-high. The woods were an impenetrable mass of foliage from the forest of ferns about the broad trunks to the high tree-tops, nodding and fanning in the night breeze like coquettish dames in an eastern ball-room. Everywhere—at the river bank, where our tents stood, above the long grass, and in the forest—clear, faint and delicate, like the bloom of a fair woman's cheek, or the pensive theme of some dream fugue, or the sweet notes of some far-off, floating harmonies, was an odor of hidden flowers. A trader's nature is, of necessity, rough in the grain, but it is not corrupt with the fevered joys of the gilded cities. Even we could feel the call of the wilds to come and seek. It was not surprising, therefore, that after supper father and daughter should stroll away from the encampment, arm in arm, as usual. As their figures passed into the woods, the girl broke away from her father's arm and stooped to the ground.

"Pickin' flowers," was the laconic remark of the trader, who had helped me with Louis Laplante on the beach; and the man lay back full length against a rising knoll to drink in the delicious freshness of the night. Every man of us watched the vanishing forms.

"Smell violets?" asked a heterogeneous combination of sun-brown and buckskin.

"This ground's a perfect wheat-field of violets," exclaimed the whiskered youngster.

"Lots o' Mayflowers and night-shades in the bush," declared a ragged man, who was one of the worst gamblers in camp, and was now aimlessly shuffling a greasy, bethumbed pack of cards.

"Oh!" came simultaneously from half a dozen. Personally, it struck me one might pick flowers for a certain purpose in the bush without being observed.

"Mayflowers in June!" scoffed the boy.

"Aye, babe! Mayflowers in June! May is June in these here regions," asserted the man. "Ladies-and-gentlemen, too, many's you could pick in the bush!"

"Ladies-and-gentlemen! Sounds funny in this desert, don't it?" asked the lad. "What *are* ladies-and-gentlemen?"

"Don't you know?" continued the gambler, unfolding a curious lore of flowers.

"Those little potty, white things, split up the middle with a green head on top—grow under ferns. Come on. Cards are ready! Who's going to play?"

"Durn it! Them's Dutchman's breeches!" exclaimed the sun-browned trapper. "O Goll! If that Little Stature finds any Dutchman's breeches, she that's so scared of us men! O Goll! Won't she blush? Say, babe, why don't y'r fill y'r hat with 'em and put 'em in her tent?" and the big trapper set up a hoarse guffaw which led a general chorus. Then the men gathered round, to play.

"Faith, lads!" interrupted the voice of the Irish priest, who had come upon the group so quietly the gambler scarcely had time to tuck the tell-tale cards under his buckskin smock, "I'm thinking ye've all developed a mighty sudden interest in botany. Are there any bleeding hearts in the bush?"

"There may be here," suggested the boy.

"It all comes of the Little Statute!" declared the big trapper.

"Oh! You and your Stature and Statute! Why can't you say Statue?" asked the lad with the pompous scorn of youthful knowledge.

"Because, oh, babe with the chicken-down," answered the man, giving his corrector a thud with his broad palm and sticking heroically by his slip of the tongue, "I says the words I means and don't play no prig. She don't pay more attention to you than if you wuz a stump, that's why she's a statue, ain't it? And the fellows've got to stretch their necks to come up to her ideas of what's proper, that's why she's a stature, ain't it? And not a man of us, if His Reverence'll excuse me for saying so, dare let out a cuss afore her. That's why she's a statute, ain't it?"

And when I walked off to the bush with as great a show of indifference as I could muster, I heard the priest crying "Bravo!" to the man's defence. How came it that I was in the woods slushing through damp mold up to my ankles in black ooze? I no longer had any fear of an ambushed enemy; for Le Grand Diable, the knave, had forfeited his wages and deserted at Fort William. He was not seen after the night of the meeting with the Hudson's Bay canoe off the flats. I drew Father Holland's attention to this, and the priest was no longer so sceptical about that phantom boat. But it was not of these things I thought, as I tore a great strip of bark from the trunk of a birch tree and twisted the piece into a huge cornucopia. Nor had I the slightest expectation of encountering father and daughter in the woods. That marble face was too much in earnest for the vainest

of men to suppose its indifference assumed; and no matter how fair the eyes, no man likes to be looked at, by eyes that do not see him, or see him only as a blur on the landscape. Still that marble face stood for much that is dear to the roughest of hearts and about which men do not talk. So I went on packing damp moss into the bottom of the bark horn, arranging frail lilies and night shades about the rim and laying a solid pyramid of violets in the centre. The mold, through which I was floundering, seemed to merge into a bog; but the lower reaches were hidden by a thicket of alder bushes and scrub willows. I mounted a fallen tree and tried to get cautiously down to some tempting lily-pads. Evidently some one else on the other side of the brush was after those same bulbs; for I heard the sucking sound of steps plunging through the mire of water and mud.

"Why, Gillespie," called a voice, "what in the world are you doing here?" and the boy emerged through the willows gaping at me in astonishment.

"Just what I want to know of you," said I.

He presented a comical figure. His socks and moccasins had been tied and slung round his neck. With trousers rolled to his knees, a hatful of water-lilies in one hand and a sheaf of ferns in the other, he was wading through the swamp.

"You see," he began sheepishly. "I thought she couldn't—couldn't conveniently get these for herself, and it would be kind of nice—kind of nice—you know—to get some for her——"

"Don't explain," I blurted out. "I was trying that same racket myself."

"You know, Gillespie," he continued quite confidentially, "when a man's been away from his mother and sisters for years and years and years——"

"Yes, I know, babe; you're an octogenarian," I interrupted.

"And feels himself going utterly to the bow-wows without any stop-gear to keep him from bowling clean to the bottom, a person feels like doing something decent for a girl like the Little Statue," and the youth plucked half a dozen yellow flowers as well as the coveted white ones. "Have some for your basket," said he. His face was puckered into pathetic gravity. "It's so hanged easy to go to the bow-wows out here," he added.

"Not so easy as in the towns," I interjected.

"Ah! but I've been there, gone all through 'em in the towns," he explained.

"That's why the pater packed me off to this wilderness."

And that, thought I, is why the west gets all the credit for the wild oats gathered in old lands and sown in the new world. I pulled him up to the log on which I was balanced, and seating himself he dangled his feet down and began to souse the mud off his toes.

"Say!" he exclaimed. "How are you going to get 'em to her?"

"Take them to the tent."

"Well, Gillespie, when you take yours up, take mine along, too, will you? There's a good fellow! Do!" He was drawing on his socks.

"Not much I will. If there's any proxy, you can take mine," I returned.

"Say! Do you think Father Holland would take 'em up?" He had tied his moccasins and was standing.

"Can't say I think he would."

"He'd let you hear about it to all eternity, too, wouldn't he?" reflected the lad. "Come on, then; but you go first." And he followed me up the log, both of us feeling like shame-faced schoolboys. We stole into the tent, the one tent of all others that had interest for us that night, and deposited our burden of flowers on the couch of buffalo robes.

"Hurry," whispered my companion. "Stack these ferns round somewhere! Hurry! She'll be back." And leaving me to do the arranging he bolted for the tent flaps. "Oh! Open earth and swallow me!" he almost screamed, and I heard the sound of two persons coming in violent collision at the entrance.

"The babe, as I live! The rascally young broth of a babe! Ye rogue, ye!" burred the deep bass tones of the trader whom I had met over Louis Laplante. "What are ye doin' here?"

"Oh, is it only you? Thank fortune!" ejaculated the boy, dodging back. "What are you doing yourself? Great guns! You scared the wits out of me! Ho! Here's a lark! Gillespie, my pal, look here!" I turned to see the sheepish, guilty, smirking faces of the trader, the rough-tongued, sunburned trapper and the ragged gambler grouped at the entrance, and each man's arms were full of flowers.

"Well, I'm durned!" began the rough man.

"As she's jack-spotted us all," drawled the gentle, liquid tones of the gambler, "we'd better go ahead and——"

"And decorate a bit of statuary," shouted the lad with a laugh.

It was a long tent, like the booth of a fair, with supports at each end, and we were festooning it from pole to pole with moss and ferns when somebody rasped at the door. "Mon alive! What's goin' on here?" We started from our work with the guilty alacrity of burglars. There stood Frances Sutherland's father, much aghast at the proceedings, and by his side was a face with cheeks flaming poppy red and lips twitching in merriment. There was a sudden snow-storm of flowers being tossed down, and five men brushed past the two spectators and dashed into the hiding of gathering dusk. At the foot of the knoll I ran against the priest.

"That," roared Father Holland, shaking with laughter. "That's what I call good stuff in the rough! Faith, but ye'll give me good stuff in the rough. I want none o' yer gilded chivalry from the tinsel towns!"

There was a wreath of night-shades in the Little Statue's hat when the canoes set out next morning. Mayflowers were at her throat, violets in her girdle and I know not what in a basket at her feet. The face was unconscious of us as ever, but about the downcast eyelids played a tender gentleness which was not there before. Once I caught her glancing back among us as if she would pick out the culprits; and when her eyes for a moment rested on me, my heart set up a silly thumping. But she looked just as pointedly at the others, and I know every man's heart of them responded; for the boy began such a floundering I thought he would spill his canoe. A quick trip brought us to the mouth of Red River, where the Hudson's Bay *voyageurs* under Colin Robertson were resting. Here I was surprised to learn that Eric Hamilton had not waited but had hastened up Red River to Fort Douglas. I could not but connect this southward move of his with the sudden flight of Le Grand Diable from Fort William.

After brief pause at the foot of Lake Winnipeg, our brigade turned southward and made speed up the Red through the rush-grown sedgy swamps which overflood the river bed. Farther south the banks towered high and smoke curled up from the huts of Lord Selkirk's settlers. Women with nets in their hands to scare off myriad blackbirds that clouded the air, and men from the cornfields ran to the river edge and cheered us as we passed. Here the Sutherlands landed. Some of the traders thought it a good omen, that Hudson's Bay settlers cheered Nor'-Wester brigades; but in one bend of the muddy Red, the bastions of Fort

Douglas, where Governor McDonell of the rival company ruled, loomed up and the guns pointing across the river wore anything but a welcome look.

We passed Fort Douglas unmolested, followed the Red a mile farther to its junction with the Assiniboine and here disembarked at Fort Gibraltar, the headquarters of the Nor'-Westers in Red River.

CHAPTER X

MORE STUDIES IN STATUARY

"So he laughs at our warrant?" exclaimed Duncan Cameron. "Hut-tut! We'll teach him to respect warrants issued under authority of 43^d King George III.," and the dictator of Fort Gibraltar fussed angrily among the papers of his desk and beat a threatening tattoo with knuckles and heels.

The Assiniboine enters the Red at something like a right angle and in this angle was the Nor'-Westers' fort, named after an old-world stronghold, because we imagined our position gave us the same command of the two waterways by which the *voyageurs* entered and left the north country as Gibraltar has of the Mediterranean. Governor McDonell had thought to outwit us by building the Hudson's Bay fort a mile further down the current of the Red. It was a sharp trick, for Fort Douglas could intercept Nor'-West brigades bound from Montreal to Fort Gibraltar, or from Fort Gibraltar to the Athabasca. Two days after our arrival, Cuthbert Grant, with a band of *Bois-Brulés*, had gone to Fort Douglas to arrest Captain Miles McDonell for plundering Nor'-West posts. The doughty governor took Grant's warrant as a joke and scornfully turned the whole North-West party out of Fort Douglas. On the stockades outside were proclamations commanding settlers to take up arms in defense of the Hudson's Bay traders and forbidding natives to sell furs to any but our rivals. These things added fuel to the hot anger of the chafing *Bois-Brulés*. A curious race were these mongrel plain-rangers, with all the savage instincts of the wild beast and few of the brutal impulses of the beastly man. The descendants of French fathers and Indian mothers, they inherited all the quick, fiery daring of the Frenchman, all the endurance, craft and courage of the Indian, and all the indolence of both white man and red. One might cut his enemy's throat and wash his hands in the life blood, or spend years in accomplishing revenge; but it is a question if there is a single instance on record of a *Bois-Brulé* molesting an enemy's family. When the Frenchman married a native woman, he cast off civilization like an ill-fitting coat and virtually became an Indian. When the Scotch settler married a native woman, he educated her up to his own level and if she did not become entirely civilized, her children did. One was the wild man, the Ishmaelite of the desert, the other, the tiller of the soil, the Israelite of the plain. Such were the tameless

men, of whom Cuthbert Grant was the leader, the leader solely from his fitness to lead.

It was late in the afternoon when the warden returned from Fort Douglas. I was busy over my desk. Father Holland was still with us awaiting the departure of traders to the south, and Duncan Cameron was stamping about the room like a caged lion. There came a quick, angry tramp from the hall.

"That's Grant back, and there's no one with him," muttered Cameron with suppressed anger; and in burst the warden himself, his heavy brows dark with fury and his eyes flashing like the fire at a pistol point. Involuntarily I stopped work and the priest glanced across at me with a look which bespoke expectation of an explosion. Grant did not storm. That was not his way. He took several turns about the room, mastered himself, and speaking through his teeth said quietly, "There be some fools that enjoy playing with gunpowder. I'm not one of them! There be some idiots that like teasing tigers. 'Tis not sport to my fancy! There be some pot-valiant braggarts that defy the law. Let them enjoy the breaking of the law!"

"What—what—what?" sputtered the Highland governor, springing first on one side of Grant and then on the other, all the while rumbling out maledictions on Lord Selkirk, and Governor McDonell and Fort Douglas. "What do ye say, mon? Do I understand ye clearly, there's no prisoners with ye?"

"Laughs at the *Bois-Brulés*. The fool laughs at the *Bois-Brulés*! I've seen gophers cock their eye at a wolf, before that same wolf made a breakfast of gophers! The fool laughs at your warrant, Sir! Scouted it, Sir! Bundled us out of Fort Douglas like cattle!" The warden went on in a bitter strain to tell of the effect of the posted proclamations on his followers.

"So the lordly Captain Miles McDonell of the Queen's Rangers, generalissimo of all creation, defies us, does he?" demanded Cameron in great dudgeon, scarcely crediting his ears.

"Aye!" answered Grant, "but he can ill afford to be so high and mighty. We went through the settlement and half the people are with us——"

"That's good! That's good!" responded Cameron with keen relish.

"They're heartily sick of the country," continued the warden, "and would leave to-morrow if we'd supply the boats. Last winter they nearly starved. The

company's generous supply was rancid grease and wormy flour."

"Fine way o' colonizing a country," stormed Cameron, "bring men out as settlers and arm them to fight! We'll spike his guns by shipping a score more away."

"We've spiked his guns in a better way," said Grant dryly. "Some of the friendlies are so afraid he'll take their guns away and leave them defenceless unless they fight us, they've sent their arms here for safekeeping. We'll keep them safe, I'll warrant." Grant smiled, showing his white teeth in a way that was not pleasant to see, and somehow reminded me of a dog's snarl.

"Good! Good! Excellent, Grant." Such strategy pleased Cameron. "See here, mon, Cuthbert, we've the law on our side—we've the warrants to back the law! We'd better give yon dour fool a lesson. He's broken the peace. We haven't. Come out, an' I'll talk it over with ye!"

The two went out, Grant saying as they passed the window—"Let him tamper with the fur trade among the Indians and I'll not answer for it! That last order not to sell——" The rest of the remark I lost.

'"Twould serve him well right if they did," returned Cameron, and both men walked beyond hearing.

Father Holland and I were left alone. The fort became ominously still. There was a distant clatter of receding hoofs; but we were on the south side of the warehouse and could not see which way the horses were galloping.

"I'm afraid—I'm afraid both sides will be rash," observed the priest.

The sun-dial indicated six o'clock. I closed and locked the office desks. We had supper in the deserted dining-hall. Afterwards we strolled to the northeast gate, and looking in the direction of Fort Douglas, wondered what scheme could be afoot. Here my testimony need not be taken for, or against, either side. All I saw was Duncan Cameron with the other white men of the fort standing on a knoll some distance from Fort Gibraltar, evidently gazing towards Fort Douglas. Against the sky, above the settlement, there were clouds of rising smoke.

"Burning hay-ricks?" I questioned.

"Aye, and houses! 'Tis shameless work leaving the people exposed to the blasts of next winter! Shameless, shameless work! Y'r company'll gain nothing by it, Rufus!"

Across the night came faint, short snappings like a fusillade of shots.

"Looting the neutrals," said the priest. "God grant there be no blood on the plains this night! These fool traders don't realize what it means to rouse blood in an Indian! They'll get a lesson yet! Give the red devils a taste of blood and there won't be a white unscalped to the Rockies! I've seen y'r fine, clever rascals play the Indian against rivals, and the game always ends the same way. The Indian is a weapon that's quick to cut the hand of the user."

Little did I realize my part in the terrible fulfilment of that prophecy.

"Look alive, lad! Where are y'r wits? What's that?" he cried, suddenly pointing to the river bank.

Up from the cliff sprang a form as if by magic. It came leaping straight to the fort gate.

"Some frightened half-breed wench," surmised the priest.

I saw it was a woman with a shawl over her head like a native.

"*Bon soir!*" said I after the manner of traders with Indian women; but she rushed blindly on to the gate.

The fort was deserted. Suspicion of treachery flashed on me. How many more half-breeds were beneath that cliff?

"Stop, huzzie!" I ordered, springing forward and catching her so tightly by the wrist that she swung half-way round before she could check herself. She wrenched vigorously to get free. "Stop! Be still, you huzzie!"

"Be still—you what?" asked a low, amazed voice that broke in ripples and froze my blood. A shawl fluttered to the ground, and there stood before us the apparition of a marble face.

"The Little Statue!" I gasped in sheer horror at what I had done.

"The little—what?" asked the rippling voice, that sounded like cold water flowing under ice, and a pair of eyes looked angrily down at the hand with which I was still unconsciously gripping her arm.

"I'd thank you, Sir," she began, with a mock courtesy to the priest, "I'd thank you, Sir, to call off your mastiff."

"Let her go, boy!" roared the priest with a hammering blow across my forearm that brought me to my senses and convinced me she was no wraith.

Mastiff! That epithet stung to the quick. I flung her wrist from me as if it had been hot coals. Now, a woman may tread upon a man—also stamp upon him if she has a mind to—but she must trip it daintily. Otherwise even a worm may turn against its tormentor. To have idolized that marble creature by day and night, to have laid our votive offerings on its shrine, to have hungered for the sound of a woman's lips for weeks, and to hear those lips cuttingly call me a dog—were more than I could stand.

"Ten thousand pardons, Mistress Sutherland!" I said with a pompous stiffness which I intended should be mighty crushing. "But when ladies deck themselves out as squaws and climb in and out of windows,"—that was brutal of me; she had done it for Miriam and me—"and announce themselves in unexpected ways, they need not hope to be recognized."

And did she flare back at me? Not at all.

"You waste time with your long speeches," she said, turning from me to Father Holland.

Thereupon I strode off angrily to the river bank.

"Oh, Father Holland," I heard her say as I walked away, "I must go to Pembina! I'm in such trouble! There's a Frenchman——"

Trouble, thought I; she is in trouble and I have been thinking only of my own dignity. And I stood above the river, torn between desire to rush back and wounded pride, that bade me stick it out. Over the plains came the shout of returning plunderers. I could hear the throb, throb of galloping hoofs beating nearer and nearer over the turf, and reflected that I might make the danger from returning *Bois-Brulés* the occasion of a reconciliation.

"Come here, lad!" called Father Holland. I needed no urging. "Ye must rig up in tam-o'-shanter and tartan, like a Highland settler, and take Mistress Sutherland back to Fort Douglas. She's going to Pembina to meet her father, lad, when I go south to the Missouri. And, lad," the priest hesitated, glancing doubtfully from Miss Sutherland to me, "I'm thinking there's a service ye might do her."

The Little Statue was looking straight at me now, and there were tear-marks about the heavy lashes. Now, I do not pretend to explain the power, or witchery,

a gentle slip of a girl can wield with a pair of gray eyes; but when I met the furtive glance and saw the white, veined forehead, the arched brows, the tremulous lips, the rounded chin, and the whole face glorified by that wonderful mass of hair, I only know, without weapon or design, she dealt me a wound which I bear to this day. What a ruffian I had been! I was ashamed, and my eyes fell before hers. If a libation of blushes could appease an offended goddess, I was livid evidence of repentance. I felt myself flooded in a sudden heat of shame. She must have read my confusion, for she turned away her head to hide mantling forgiveness.

"There's a crafty Frenchman in the fort has been troubling the lassie. I'm thinking, if ye worked off some o' your anger on him, it moight be for the young man's edification. Be quick! I hear the breeds returning!"

"But I have a message," she said in choking tones.

"From whom?" I asked aimlessly enough.

"Eric Hamilton!" she answered.

"Eric Hamilton!" both the priest and I shouted.

"Yes—why? What—what—is it? He's wounded, and he wants a Rufus Gillespie, who's with the Nor'-Westers. The *Bois-Brulés* fired on the fort. Where *is* Rufus Gillespie?"

"Bless you, lassie! Here—here—here he is!" The holy father thumped my back at every word. "Here he is, crazy as a March hare for news of Hamilton!"

"You—Rufus—Gillespie!" So she did not even know my name. Evidently, if she troubled my thoughts, I did not trouble hers.

"He's told me so much about you," she went on, with a little pant of astonishment. "How brave and good——"

"Pshaw!" I interrupted roughly. "What's the message?"

"Mr. Hamilton wishes to see you at once," she answered coldly.

"Then kill two birds with one stone! Take her home and see Hamilton—and hurry!" urged the priest.

The half-breeds were now very near.

"Put it over your head!" and Father Holland clapped the shawl about Frances Sutherland after the fashion of the half-breed women.

She stood demurely behind him while I ran up-stairs in the warehouse to disguise myself in tartan plaid. When I came out, Duncan Cameron was in the gateway welcoming Cuthbert Grant and the *Bois-Brulés*, as if pillaging defenceless settlers were heroic. Victors from war may be inspiring, but a half-breed rabble, red-handed from deeds of violence, is not a sight to edify any man.

"What's this ye have, Father?" bawled one impudent fellow, and he pointed sneeringly at the figure in the folds of the shawl.

"Let the wench be!" was the priest's reply, and the half-breed lounged past with a laugh.

I was about to offer Frances Sutherland my arm to escort her from the mob, when I felt Father Holland's hard knuckles dig viciously into my ribs.

"Ye fool ye! Ye blundering idiot!" he whispered, "she's a half-breed. Och! But's time y'r eastern greenness was tannin' a good western russet! Let her follow with bowed head, or you'll have the whole pack on y'r heels!"

With that admonition I strode boldly out, she behind, humble, with downcast eyes like a half-breed girl.

We ran down the river path through the willows and jumping into a canoe swiftly rounded the forks of the Assiniboine and Red. There we left the canoe and fled along a trail beneath the cliff till the shouting of the half-breeds could be no longer heard. At once I turned to offer her my arm. She must have bruised her feet through the thin moccasins, for the way was very rough. I saw that she was trembling from fatigue.

"Permit me," I said, offering my arm as formally as if she had been some grand lady in an eastern drawing-room.

"Thank you—I'm afraid I must," and she reluctantly placed a light hand on my sleeve.

I did not like that condescending compulsion, and now out of danger, I became strangely embarrassed and angry in her presence. The "mastiff" epithet stuck like a barb in my boyish chivalry. Was it the wind, or a low sigh, or a silent weeping, that I heard? I longed to know, but would not turn my head, and my companion

was lagging just a step behind. I slackened speed, so did she. Then a voice so low and soft and golden it might have melted a heart of stone—but what is a heart of stone compared to the wounded pride of a young man?—said, "Do you know, I think I rather like mastiffs?"

"Indeed," said I icily, in no mood for raillery.

"Like *them* for friends, not enemies, to be protected by *them*, not—not bitten," the voice continued with a provoking emphasis of the plural "*them*."

"Yes," said I, with equal emphasis of the obnoxious plural. "Ladies find *them* useful at times."

That fling silenced her and I felt a shiver run down the arm on my sleeve.

"Why, you're shivering," I blundered out. "You must let me put this round you," and I pulled off the plaid and would have placed it on her shoulders, but she resisted.

"I am not in the least cold," she answered frigidly—which is the only untruth I ever heard her tell—"and you shall not say '*must*' to me," and she took her hand from my arm. She spoke with a tremor that warned me not to insist. Then I knew why she had shivered.

"Please forgive, Miss Sutherland," I begged. "I'm such a maladroit animal."

"I quite agree with you, a maladroit mastiff with teeth!"

Mastiff! That insult again! I did not reproffer my arm. We strode forward once more, she with her face turned sideways remote from me, I with my face sideways remote from her, and the plaid trailing from my hand by way of showing her she could have it if she wished. We must have paced along in this amiable, post-matrimonial fashion for quite a quarter of the mile we had to go, and I was awkwardly conscious of suppressed laughing from her side. It was the rippling voice, that always seemed to me like fountain splash in the sunshine, which broke silence again.

"Really," said the low, thrilling, musical witchery by my side, "really, it's the most wonderful story I have ever heard!"

"Story?" I queried, stopping stock still and gaping at her.

"Perfectly wonderful! So intensely interesting and delightful."

"Interesting and delightful?" I interrogated in sheer amazement. This girl utterly dumfounded me, and in the conceit of youth I thought it strange that any girl could dumfound me.

"What an interesting life you have had, to be sure!"

"I have had?"

"Yes, don't you know you've been talking in torrents for the past ten minutes? No? Do you forget?" and she laughed tremulously either from embarrassment, or cold.

"Well!" said I, befooled into good-humor and laughing back. "If you give me a day's warning, I'll try to keep up with you."

"Ah! There! I've put you through the ice at last! It's been such hard work!"

"And I come up badly doused!"

"Stimulated too! You're doing well already!"

"My thanks to my instructor," and catching the spirit of her mockery, I swept her a courtly bow.

"There! There!" she cried, dropping raillery as soon as I took it up. "You were cross at the window. I was cross on the flats. You nearly wrenched my hand off ——"

"Can you blame me?" I asked. "And to pay me back you turned my head and stole my heart——"

"Hush!" she interrupted. "Let's clean the slate and begin again."

"With all my heart, if you'll wear this tartan and stop shivering." I was not ready to consent to an unconditional surrender.

"I hate your 'ifs' and 'buts' and so-much-given-for-so-much-got," she exclaimed with an impatient, little stamp, "but—but—" she added inconsistently, "if—if—you'll keep one end of the plaid for yourself, I'll take the other."

"Ho—ho! I like 'ifs' and 'buts.' Have you more of that kind?" I laughed, whisking the fold about us both. Drawing her hand into mine, I kept it there.

"It isn't so cold as—as that, is it?" asked the voice under the plaid.

"Quite," I returned valiantly, tightening my clasp. She laughed a low, mellow laugh that set my heart beating to the tune of a trip-hammer. I felt a great intoxication of strength that might have razed Fort Douglas to the ground and conquered the whole world, which, I dare say, other young men have felt when the same kind of weight hung upon their protection.

"Oh! Little Statue! Why have you been so hard on us?" I began.

"*Us?*" she asked.

"Me—then," and I gulped down my embarrassment.

"Because——"

"Because what?"

"No *what*. Just because!" She was astonished that her decisive reason did not satisfy.

"Because! A woman's reason!" I scoffed.

"Because! It's the best and wisest and most wholesome reason ever invented. Think what it avoids saying and what wisdom may be behind it!"

"Only wisdom?"

"You be careful! There'll be another cold plunge! Tell me about your friend's wife, Miriam," she answered, changing the subject.

And when I related my strange mission and she murmured, "How noble," I became a very Samson of strength, ready to vanquish an army of Philistine admirers with the jawbone of my inflated self-confidence—provided, always, one queen of the combat were looking on.

"Are you cold, now?" I asked, though the trembling had ceased.

No, she was not cold. She was quite comfortable, and the answer came in vibrant tones which were as wine to a young man's heart.

"Are you tired, Frances?" and the "No" was accompanied by a little laugh, which spurred more questioning for no other purpose than to hear the music of her voice. Now, what was there in those replies to cause happiness? Why have inane answers to inane, timorous questions transformed earth into paradise and mortals into angels?

"Do you find the way very far—Frances?" The flavor of some names tempts repeated tasting.

"Very far?" came the response in an amused voice, "find it very far? Yes I do, quite far—oh! No—I don't. Oh! I don't know!" She broke into a joyous laugh at her own confusion, gaining more self-possession as I lost mine; and out she slipped from the plaid.

"I wish it were a thousand times farther," and I gazed ruefully at the folds that trailed empty.

What other absurd things I might have said, I cannot tell; but we were at the fort and I had to wrap the tartan disguise about myself. Stooping, I picked a bunch of dog-roses growing by the path, then felt foolish, for I had not the courage to give them to her, and dropped them without her knowledge. She gave the password at the gate. I was taken for a Selkirk Highlander and we easily gained entrance.

A man brushed past us in the gloom of the courtyard. He looked impudently down into her face. It was Laplante, and my whole frame filled with a furious resentment which I had not guessed could be possible with me.

"That Frenchman," she whispered, but his figure vanished among the buildings. She showed me the council hall where Eric could be found.

"And where do you go?" I asked stupidly.

She indicated the quarters where the settlers had taken refuge. I led her to the door.

"Are you sure you'll be safe?"

"Oh! Yes, quite, as long as the settlers are here; and you, you will let me know when the priest sets out for Pembina?"

I vowed more emphatically than the case required that she should know.

"Are there no dark halls in there, unsafe for you?" I questioned.

"None," and she went up the first step of the doorway.

"Are you sure you're safe?" I also mounted a step.

"Yes, quite, thank you," and she retreated farther, "and you, have you forgotten

you came to see Mr. Hamilton?"

"Why—so I did," I stammered out absently.

She was on the top step, pulling the latch-string of the great door.

"Stop! Frances—dear!" I cried.

She stood motionless and I felt that this last rashness of an unruly tongue—too frank by far—had finished me.

"What? Can I do anything to repay you for your trouble in bringing me here?"

"I've been repaid," I answered, "but indeed, indeed, long live the Queen! May it please Her Majesty to grant a token to her leal and devoted knight——"

"What is thy request?" she asked laughingly. "What token doth the knight covet?"

"The token that goes with *good-nights*," and I ventured a pace up the stairs.

"There, Sir Knight," she returned, hastily putting out her hand, which was not what I wanted, but to which I gratefully paid my devoir. "Art satisfied?" she asked.

"Till the Queen deigns more," and I paused for a reply.

She lingered on the threshold as if she meant to come down to me, then with a quick turn vanished behind the gloomy doors, taking all the light of my world with her; but I heard a voice, as of some happy bird in springtime, trilling from the hall where she had gone, and a new song made music in my own heart.

CHAPTER XI

A SHUFFLING OF ALLEGIANCE

Time was when Fort Douglas rang as loudly with mirth of assembled traders as ever Fort William's council hall. Often have I heard veterans of the Hudson's Bay service relate how the master of revels used to fill an ample jar with corn and quaff a beaker of liquor for every grain in the drinker's hour-glass.

"How stands the hour-glass?" the governor of the feast, who was frequently also the governor of the company, would roar out in stentorian tones, that made themselves heard above the drunken brawl.

"High, Your Honor, high," some flunkey of the drinking bout would bawl back.

Thereupon, another grain was picked from the jar, another flagon tossed down and the revel went on. This was a usual occurrence before and after the conflict with the Nor'-Westers. But the night that I climbed the stairs of the main warehouse and, mustering up assurance, stepped into the hall as if I belonged to the fort, or the fort belonged to me, there was a different scene. A wounded man lay on a litter at the end of the long, low room; and the traders sitting on the benches against the walls, or standing aimlessly about, were talking in suppressed tones. Scotchmen, driven from their farms by the *Bois-Brulés*, hung around in anxious groups. The lanterns, suspended on iron hooks from mid-rafter, gave but a dusky light, and I vainly scanned many faces for Eric Hamilton. That he was wounded, I knew. I was stealing stealthily towards the stretcher at the far end of the place, when a deep voice burred rough salutation in my ear.

"Hoo are ye, gillie?" It was a shaggy-browed, bluff Scotchman, who evidently took me in my tartan disguise for a Highland lad. Whether he meant, "How are you," or "Who are you," I was not certain. Afraid my tongue might betray me, I muttered back an indistinct response. The Scot was either suspicious, or offended by my churlishness. I slipped off quickly to a dark corner, but I saw him eying me closely. A youth brushed past humming a ditty, which seemed strangely out of place in those surroundings. He stood an elbow's length from me and kicked moccasined heels against the floor in the way of light-headed lads.

Both the air and figure of the young fellow vaguely recalled somebody, but his back was towards me. I was measuring my comrade, wondering if I might inquire where Hamilton could be found, when the lad turned, and I was face to face with the whiskered babe of Fort William. He gave a long, low whistle.

"Gad!" he gasped. "Do my eyes tell lies? As I live, 'tis your very self! Hang it, now, I thought you were one of those solid bodies wouldn't do any turn-coating ——"

"Turn-coating!" I repeated in amazement.

"One of those dray-horse, old reliables, wouldn't kick over the traces, not if the boss pumped his arms off licking you! Hang it! I'm not that sort! By gad, I'm not! I've got too many oats! I can't stand being jawed and gee-hawed by Dunc. Cameron; so when the old Gov. threatened to dock me for being full, I just kicked up my heels and came. But say! I didn't think you would, Gillespie!"

"No?" said I, keeping my own counsel and waiting for the Nor'-West deserter to proceed.

"What 'd y' do it for, Gillespie? You're as sober as cold water! Was it old Cameron?"

"You're not talking straight, babe," said I. "You know Cameron doesn't nag his men. What did *you* do it for?"

"Eh?" and the lad gave a laugh over my challenge of his veracity. "See here, old pal, I'll tell you if you tell me."

"Go ahead with your end of the contract!"

"Well, then, look here. We're not in this wilderness for glory. I knock down to the highest bidder——"

"Hudson's Bay is *not* the highest bidder."

"Not unless you happen to have information they want."

"Oh! That's the way of it, is it?" So the boy was selling Nor'-Westers' secrets.

"You can bet your last beaver-skin it is! Do you think I was old Cam's private secretary for nothin'? Not I! I say—get your wares as you may and sell 'em to the highest bidder. So here I am, snugly berthed, with nothing to do but twiddle my

thumbs, all through judicious—distribution—of—information." And the boy gurgled with pleasure over his own cleverness. "And say, Gillespie, I'm in regular clover! The Little Statue's here, all alone! Dad's gone to Pembina to the buffalo hunt. I've got ahead of all you fellows. I'm going to introduce a French-chap, a friend of mine."

"You'd much better break his bones," was my advice. It needed no great speculation to guess who the Frenchman was; and in the hands of that crafty rake this prattling babe would be as putty.

"Pah! You're jealous, Gillespie! We're right on the inside track!"

"Lots of confidential talks with her, I suppose?"

"Talks! Pah! You gross fatty! Why, Gillespie, what do you know of such things? Laplante can win a girl by just looking at her—French way, you know—he can pose better than a poem!"

"Blockhead," I ground out between my teeth, a feeling taking possession of me, which is designated "indignation" in the first person but jealousy in the second and third. "You stupid simpleton, that Laplante is a villain who will turn your addled pate and work you as an old wife kneads dough."

"What do you know about Laplante?" he demanded hotly.

"I know he is an accomplished blackguard," I answered quietly, "and if you want to spoil your chances with the Little Statue, just prance round in his company."

The lad was too much surprised to speak.

"Where's Hamilton?" I asked.

"Find him for yourself," said he, going off in a huff.

I edged cautiously near enough the wounded man to see that he was not Hamilton. Near the litter was a group of clerks.

"They're fools," one clerk was informing the others. "Cameron sent word he'd have McDonell dead or alive. If he doesn't give himself up, this fort'll go and the whole settlement be massacred."

"Been altogether too high-handed anyway," answered another. "I'm loyal to my company; but Lord Selkirk can't set up a military despotism here. Been

altogether better if we'd left the Nor'-Westers alone."

"It's all the fault of that cocky little martinet," declared a third.

"I say," exclaimed a man joining the group, "d' y' hear the news? All the chiefs in there—" jerking his thumb towards a side door—"are advising Captain McDonell to give himself up and save the fort."

"Good thing. Who'll miss him? He'll only get a free trip to Montreal," remarked one of the aggressives in this group. "I tell you, men, both companies have gone a deal too far in this little slap-back game to be keen for legal investigation. Why, at Souris, everybody knows——"

He lowered his voice and I unconsciously moved from my dark corner to hear the rest.

"Hoo are ye, gillie?" said the burly Scot in my ear.

Turning, I found the canny swain had followed me on an investigating tour. Again I gave him an inarticulate reply and lost myself among other coteries. Was the man spying on me? I reflected that if "the chiefs"—as the Hudson's Bay man had called them—were in the side room, Eric Hamilton would be among these conferring with the governor. As I approached the door, I noticed my Scotch friend had taken some one into his confidence and two men were now on my tracks. Lifting the latch, I gave a gentle, cautious push and the hinges swung so quietly I had slipped into the room before those inside or out could prevent me. I found myself in the middle of a long apartment with low, sloping ceiling, and deep window recesses. It had evidently been partitioned off from the main hall; for the wall, ceiling and floor made an exact triangle. At one end of the place was a table. Round this was a group of men deeply engrossed in some sort of conference. Sitting on the window sills and lounging round the box stove behind the table were others of our rival's service. I saw at once it would be difficult to have access to Hamilton. He was lying on a stretcher within talking range of the table and had one arm in a sling. Now, I hold it is harder for the unpractised man to play the spy with everything in his favor, than for the adept to act that rôle against the impossible. One is without the art that foils detection. The other can defy detection. So I stood inside with my hand on the door lest the click of the closing latch should rouse attention, but had no thought of prying into Hudson's Bay secrets.

"Your Honor," began Hamilton in a lifeless manner, which told me his search

had been bootless, and he turned languidly towards a puffy, crusty, military gentleman, whom, from the respect shown him, I judged to be Governor McDonell. "Duncan Cameron's warrant for the arrest is perfectly legal. If Your Honor should surrender yourself, you will save Fort Douglas for the Hudson's Bay Company. Besides, the whole arrest will prove a farce. The law in Lower Canada provides no machinery for the trial of cases occurring——" Here Hamilton came to a blank and unexpected stop, for his eyes suddenly alighted on me with a look that forbade recognition, and fled furtively back to the group it the table. I understood and kept silent.

"For the trial of cases occurring?" asked the governor sharply.

"Occurring—here," added Hamilton, shooting out the last word as if his arm had given him a sudden twinge. "And so I say, Your Honor will lose nothing by giving yourself up to the Nor'-Westers, and will save Fort Douglas for the Hudson's Bay."

"The doctor tells me it's a compound fracture. You'll find it painful, Mr. Hamilton," said Governor McDonell sympathetically, and he turned to the papers over which the group were conferring. "I'm no great hand in winning victories by showing the white flag," began the gallant captain, "but if a free trip from here to Montreal satisfies those fools, I'll go."

"Well said! Bravo! Your Honor," exclaimed a shaggy member of the council, bringing his fist down on the table with a thud. "I call that diplomacy, outmanœuvring the enemy! Your Honor sets an example for abiding by the law; you obey the warrant. They must follow the example and leave Fort Douglas alone."

"Besides, I can let His Lordship know from Montreal just what reinforcements are needed here," continued Captain McDonell, with a curious disregard for the law which he professed to be obeying, and a faithful zeal for Lord Selkirk.

Hamilton was looking anxiously at me with an expression of warning which I could not fully read. Then I felt, what every one must have felt at some time, that a third person was watching us both. Following Eric's glance to a dark window recess directly opposite the door where I stood, I was horrified and riveted by the beady, glistening, insolent eyes of Louis Laplante, gazing out of the dusk with an expression of rakish amusement, the amusement of a spider when a fly walks into its web. Taken unawares I have ever been more or less of what Mr. Jack MacKenzie was wont to call "a stupid loon!" On discovering Laplante I

promptly sustained my reputation by letting the door fly to with a sharp click that startled the whole room-full. Whereat Louis Laplante gave a low, soft laugh.

"What do you want here, man?" demanded Governor McDonell's sharp voice.

Jerking off my cap, I saluted.

"My man, Your Honor," interjected Eric quietly. "Come here, Rufus," he commanded, motioning me to his side with the hauteur of a master towards a servant. And Louis Laplante rose and tip-toed after me with a tigerish malice that recalled the surly squaw.

"Oh, Eric!" I cried out eagerly. "Are you hurt, and at such a time?" Unconsciously I was playing into Louis' hands, for he stood by the stove, laughing nonchalantly.

Thereupon Eric ground out some imprecation at my stupidity.

"There's been a shuffling of allegiance, I hear," he said with a queer misleading look straight at Laplante. "We've recruits from Fort Gibraltar."

Eric's words, curiously enough, banished triumph from Laplante's face and the Frenchman's expression was one of puzzled suspicion. From Eric's impassive features, he could read nothing. What Hamilton was driving at, I should presently learn; but to find out I would no more take my eyes from Laplante's than from a tiger about to spring. At once, to get my attention, Hamilton brought a stick down on my toes with a sharpness that made me leap. By all the codes of nudges and kicks and such signaling, it is a principle that a blow at one end of human anatomy drives through the density of the other extremity. It dawned on me that Eric was trying to persuade Laplante I had deserted Nor'-Westers for the Hudson's Bay. The ethics of his attempt I do not defend. It was after the facile fashion of an intriguing era. A sharper weapon was presently given us against Louis Laplante; for when I grasped Eric's stick to stay the raps against my feet, I felt the handle rough with carving.

"What are these carvings, may I inquire, Sir?" I asked, assuming the strangeness, which Eric's signals had directed, but never moving my eyes from Laplante. The villain who had befooled me in the gorge and eluded me in the forest, and now tormented Frances Sutherland, winced under my watchfulness.

"The carvings!" answered Eric, annoyed that I did not return his plain signals and determined to get my eye. "Pray look for yourself! Where are your eyes?"

"I can't see in this poor light, Sir; but I also have a strangely carved thing—a spear-head. Now if this head has no handle and this handle has no head—they might fit," I went on watching Laplante, whose saucy assurance was deserting him.

"Spear-head!" exclaimed Hamilton, beginning to understand I too had my design. "Where did you find it?"

"Trying to bury itself in my head." I returned. At this, Laplante, the knave, smiled graciously in my very face.

"But it didn't succeed?" asked Hamilton.

"No—it mistook me for a tree, missed the mark and went into the tree; just as another friend of mine mistook me for a tree, hit the mark and ran into me," and I smiled back at Laplante. His face clouded. That reference to the scene on the beach, where his Hudson's Bay despatches were stolen, was too much for his hot blood. "Here it is," I continued, pulling the spear-head out of my plaid. I had brought it to Hamilton, hoping to identify our enemy, and we did. "Please see if they fit, Sir? We might identify our—friends!" and I searched the furtive, guilty eyes of the Frenchman.

"Dat frien'," muttered Louis with a threatening look at me, "dat frien' of Mister Hamilton he spike good English for Scot' youth."

Now Louis, as I remembered from Laval days, never mixed his English and French, except when he was in passion furious beyond all control.

"Fit!" cried Hamilton. "They're a perfect fit, and both carved the same, too."

"With what?"

"Eagles," answered Eric, puzzled at my drift, and Louis Laplante wore the last look of the tiger before it springs.

"And eagles," said I, defying the spring, "signify that both the spear-head and the spear-handle belong to the Sioux chief whose daughter"—and I lowered my voice to a whisper which only Laplante and Hamilton could hear—"is married—to Le—Grand—Diable!"

"What!" came Hamilton's low cry of agony. Forgetting the fractured arm, he sprang erect.

And Louis Laplante staggered back in the dark as if we had struck him.

"Laplante! Laplante! Where's that Frenchman? Bring him up here!" called Governor McDonell's fussy, angry tones.

Coming when it did, this demand was to Louis a bolt of judgment; and he joined the conference with a face as gray as ashes.

"Now about those stolen despatches! We want to know the truth! Were you drunk, or were you not? Who has them?" Captain McDonell arraigned the Frenchman with a fire of questions that would have confused any other culprit but Louis.

"Eric," I whispered, taking advantage of the respite offered by Louis' examination. "We found Laplante at *Pointe a la Croix*. He was drunk. He confessed Miriam is held by Diable's squaw. Then we discovered someone was listening to the confession and pursued the eavesdropper into the bush. When we came back, Laplante had been carried off. I found one of my canoemen had your lost fowling-piece, and it was he who had listened and carried off the drunk sot and tried to send that spear-head into me at the Sault. 'Twas Diable, Eric! Father Holland, a priest in our company, told me of the white woman on Lake Winnipeg. Did you find this—" indicating the spear handle—"there?"

Eric, cold, white and trembling, only whispered an affirmative.

"Was that all?"

"All," he answered, a strange, fierce look coming over his face, as the full import of my news forced home on him. "Was—was—Laplante—in that?" he asked, gripping my arm in his unwounded hand with foreboding force.

"Not that we know of. Only Diable. But Louis is friendly with the Sioux, and if we only keep him in sight we may track them."

"I'll—keep—him—in sight," muttered Hamilton in low, slow words.

"Hush, Eric!" I whispered. "If we harm him, he may mislead us. Let us watch him and track him!"

"He's asking leave to go trapping in the Sioux country. Can you go as trader for your people? To the buffalo hunt first, then, south? I'll watch here, if he stays; you, there, if he goes, and he shall tell us all he knows or—"

"Hush, man," I urged. "Listen!"

"Where," Governor McDonell was thundering at Laplante, "where are the parties that stole those despatches?"

The question brought both Hamilton and myself to the table. We went forward where we could see Laplante's face without being seen by his questioners.

"If I answer, Your Honor," began the Frenchman, taking the captain's bluster for what it was worth and holding out doggedly for his own rights, "I'll be given leave to trap with the Sioux?"

"Certainly, man. Speak out."

"The parties—that stole—those despatches," Laplante was answering slowly. At this stage he looked at his interlocutor as if to question the sincerity of the guarantee and he saw me standing screwing the spear-head on the tell-tale handle. I patted the spear-head, smiled blandly back, and with my eyes dared him to go on. He paused, bit his lip and flushed.

"No lies, no roguery, or I'll have you at the whipping-post," roared the governor. "Speak up. Where are the parties?"

"Near about here," stammered Louis, "and you may ask your new turn-coat."

I was betrayed! Betrayed and trapped; but he should not go free! I would have shouted out, but Hamilton's hand silenced me.

"Here!" exclaimed the astounded governor. "Go call that young Nor'-Wester! If *he* backs up y'r story, *he* was Cameron's secretary, you can go to the buffalo hunt."

That response upset Louis' bearings. He had expected the governor would refer to me; but the command let him out of an awkward place and he darted from the room, as Hamilton and I supposed,—simpletons that we were with that rogue!—to find the young Nor'-Wester. This turn of affairs gave me my chance. If the young Nor'-Wester and Laplante came together, my disguise as Highlander and turn-coat would be stripped from me and I should be trapped indeed.

"Good-by, old boy!" and I gripped Hamilton's hand. "If he stays, he's your game. When he goes, he's mine. Good luck to us both! You'll come south when you're better."

Then I bolted through the main hall thinking to elude the canny Scots, but saw both men in the stairway waiting to intercept me. When I ran down a flight of side stairs, they dashed to trap me at the gate. At the doorway a man lounged against me. The lantern light fell on a pointed beard. It was Laplante, leaning against the wall for support and shaking with laughter.

"You again, old tombstone! Whither away so fast?" and he made to hold me. "I'm in a hurry myself! My last night under a roof, ha! ha! Wait till I make my grand farewell! We both did well, did the grand, ho! ho! But I must leave a fair demoiselle!"

"Let go," and I threw him off.

"Take that, you ramping donkey, you Anglo-Saxon animal," and he aimed a kick in my direction. Though I could ill spare the time to do it, I turned. All the pent-up strength, from the walk with Frances Sutherland rushed into my clenched fist and Louis Laplante went down with a thud across the doorway. There was the sish-rip of a knife being thrust through my boot, but the blade broke and I rushed past the prostrate form.

Certain of waylaying me, the Scots were dodging about the gate; but by running in the shadow of the warehouse to the rear of the court, I gave both the slip. I had no chance to reconnoitre, but dug my hunting-knife into the stockade, hoisted myself up the wooden wall, got a grip of the top and threw myself over, escaping with no greater loss than boots pulled off before climbing the palisade, and the Highland cap which stuck fast to a picket as I alighted below. At dawn, bootless and hatless, I came in sight of Fort Gibraltar and Father Holland, who was scanning the prairie for my return, came running to greet me.

"The tip-top o' the mornin' to the renegade! I thought ye'd been scalped—and so ye have been—nearly—only they mistook y'r hat for the wool o' y'r crown. Boots gone too! Out wid your midnight pranks."

A succession of welcoming thuds accompanied the tirade. As breath returned, I gasped out a brief account of the night.

"And now," he exclaimed triumphantly, "I have news to translate ye to a sivinth hiven! Och! But it's clane cracked ye'll be when ye hear it. Now, who's appointed to trade with the buffalo hunters but y'r very self?"

It was with difficulty I refrained from embracing the bearer of such good tidings.

"Be easy," he commanded. "Ye'll need these demonstrations, I'm thinkin'—huntin' one lass and losin' y'r heart to another."

We arranged he should go to Fort Douglas for Frances Sutherland and I was to set out later. They were to ride along the river-path south of the forks where I could join them. I, myself, picked out and paid for two extra horses, one a quiet little cayuse with ambling action, the other, a muscular broncho. I had the satisfaction of seeing Father Holland mounted on the latter setting out for Fort Douglas, while the Indian pony wearing an empty side-saddle trotted along in tow.

The information I brought back from Fort Douglas delayed any more hostile demonstrations against the Hudson's Bay. That very morning, before I had finished breakfast, Governor McDonell rode over to Fort Gibraltar, and on condition that Fort Douglas be left unmolested gave himself up to the Nor'-Westers. At noon, when I was riding off to the buffalo hunt and the Missouri, I saw the captain, smiling and debonair, embarking—or rather being embarked—with North-West brigades, to be sent on a free trip two thousand five hundred miles to Montreal.

"A safe voyage to ye," said Duncan Cameron, commander of Nor'-Westers, as the ex-governor of Red River settled himself in a canoe. "A safe voyage to ye, mon!"

"And a prosperous return," was the ironical answer of the dauntless ruler over the Hudson's Bay.

"Sure now, Rufus," said Father Holland to me a year afterwards, "'twas a prosperous return he had!"

Fortunately, I had my choice of scouts, and, by dangling the prospects of a buffalo hunt before La Robe Noire and Little Fellow, tempted them to come with me.

CHAPTER XII

HOW A YOUTH BECAME A KING

When the prima-donna of some vauntful city trills her bird-song above the foot-lights, or the cremona moans out the sigh of night-winds through the forest, artificial townsfolk applaud. Yet a nesting-tree, a thousand leagues from city discords, gives forth better music with deeper meaning and higher message—albeit the songster sings only from love of song. The fretted folk of the great cities cannot understand the witching fascinations of a wild life in a wild, free, tameless land, where God's own hand ministers to eye and ear. To fare sumptuously, to dress with the faultless distinction that marks wealth, to see and above all to be seen—these are the empty ends for which city men engage in a mad, feverish pursuit of wealth, trample one another down in a strife more ruthless than war and gamble away gifts of mind and soul. These are the things for which they barter all freedom but the name. Where one succeeds a thousand fail. Those with higher aims count themselves happy, indeed, to possess a few square feet of canvas, that truly represents the beauty dear to them, before weeds had undermined and overgrown and choked the temple of the soul. That any one should exchange gilded chains for freedom to give manhood shoulder swing, to be and to do—without infringing on the liberty of others to be and to do—is to such folk a matter of no small wonderment. For my part, I know I was counted mad by old associates of Quebec when I chose the wild life of the north country.

But each to his taste, say I; and all this is only the opinion of an old trader, who loved the work of nature more than the work of man. Other voices may speak to other men and teach them what the waterways and forests, the plains and mountains, were teaching me. If "ologies" and "ics," the lore of school and market, comfort their souls—be it so. As for me, it was only when half a continent away from the jangle of learning and gain that I began to stir like a living thing and to know that I existed. The awakening began on the westward journey; but the new life hardly gained full possession before that cloudless summer day on the prairie, when I followed the winding river trail south of the forks. The Indian scouts were far to the fore. Rank grass, high as the saddle-bow, swished past the horse's sides and rippled away in an unbroken ocean of green to the encircling horizon. Of course allowance must be made for a man in love.

Other men have discovered a worldful of beauty, when in love; but I do not see what difference two figures on horseback against the southern sky-line could possibly make to the shimmer of purple above the plains, or the fragrance of prairie-roses lining the trail. It seems to me the lonely call of the meadow-lark high overhead—a mote in a sea of blue—or the drumming and chirruping of feathered creatures through the green, could not have sounded less musical, if I had not been a lover. But that, too, is only an opinion; for one glimpse of the forms before me brought peace into the whole world.

Father Holland evidently saw me, for he turned and waved. The other rider gave no sign of recognition. A touch of the spur to my horse and I was abreast of them, Frances Sutherland curveting her cayuse from the trail to give me middle place.

"Arrah, me hearty, here ye are at last! Och, but ye're a skulkin' wight," called the priest as I saluted both. "What d'y' say for y'rself, ye belated rascal, comin' so tardy when ye're headed for Gretna Green—Och! 'Twas a *lapsus linguæ*! 'Tis Pembina—not Gretna Green—that I mean."

Had it been half a century later, when a little place called Gretna sprang up on this very trail, Frances Sutherland and I need not have flinched at this reference to an old-world Mecca for run-away lovers. But there was no Gretna on the Pembina trail in those days and the Little Statue's cheeks were suddenly tinged deep red, while I completely lost my tongue.

"Not a word for y'rself?" continued the priest, giving me full benefit of the mischievous spirit working in him. "He, who bearded the foe in his den, now meeker than a lambkin, mild as a turtle-dove, timid as a pigeon, pensive as a whimpering-robin that's lost his mate——"

"There ought to be a law against the jokes of the clergy, Sir," I interrupted tartly. "The jokes aren't funny and one daren't hit back."

"There ought to be a law against lovers, me hearty," laughed he. "They're always funny, and they can't stand a crack."

"Against all men," ventured Frances Sutherland with that instinctive, womanly tact, which whips recalcitrant talkers into line like a deft driver reining up kicking colts. "All men should be warranted safe, not to go off."

"Unless there's a fair target," and the priest looked us over significantly and

laughed. If he felt a gentle pull on the rein, he yielded not a jot. Unluckily there are no curb-bits for hard-mouthed talkers.

"Rufus, I don't see that ye wear a ticket warranting ye'll not go off," he added merrily. Red became redder on two faces, and hot, hotter with at least one temper.

"And womankind?" I managed to blurt out, trying to second her efforts against our tormentor. "What guarantee against dangers from them? The pulpit silenced —though that's a big contract—mankind labeled, what for women?"

"Libeled," she retorted. "Men say we don't hit straight enough to be dangerous."

"The very reason ye are dangerous," the priest broke in. "Ye aim at a head and hit a heart! Then away ye go to Gretna Green—och! It's Pembina, I mean! Marry, my children——" and he paused.

"Marry!—What?" I shouted. Thereupon Frances Sutherland broke into peals of laughter, in which I could see no reason, and Father Holland winked.

"What's wrong with ye?" asked the priest solemnly. "Faith, 'tis no advice I'm giving; but as I was remarking, marry, my children, I'd sooner stand before a man not warranted safe than a woman, who might take to shying pretty charms at my head! Faith, me lambs, ye'll learn that I speak true."

As Mr. Jack MacKenzie used to put it in his peppery reproof, I always did have a knack of tumbling head first the instant an opportunity offered. This time I had gone in heels and all, and now came up in as fine a confusion as any bashful bumpkin ever displayed before his lady. Frances Sutherland had regained her composure and came to my rescue with another attempt to take the lead from the loquacious churchman.

"I'm so grateful to you for arranging this trip," and she turned directly to me.

"Hm-m," blurted Father Holland with unutterable merriment, before I could get a word in, "he's grateful to himself for that same thing. Faith! He's been thankin' the stars, especially Venus, ever since he got marching orders!"

"How did you reach Fort Gibraltar?" she persisted.

"Sans boots and cap," I promptly replied, determined to be ahead of the interloper.

"Sans heart, too," and the priest flicked my broncho with his whip and knocked the ready-made speech, with which I had hoped to silence him, clean out of my head. Frances Sutherland took to examining remote objects on the horizon. Hers was a nature not to be beaten.

"Let us ride faster," she suddenly proposed with a glance that boded roguery for the priest's portly form. She was off like a shaft from a bow-string, causing a stampede of our horses. That was effective. A hard gallop against a stiff prairie wind will stop a stout man's eloquence.

"Ho youngsters!" exclaimed the priest, coming abreast of us as we reined up behind the scouts. "If ye set me that gait—whew—I'll not be left for Gretna Green—Faith—it's Pembina, I mean," and he puffed like a cargo boat doing itself proud among the great liners.

He was breathless, therefore safe. Frances Sutherland was not disposed to break the accumulating silence, and I, for the life of me, could not think of a single remark appropriate for a party of three. The ordinary commonplaces, that stop-gap conversation, refused to come forth. I rehearsed a multitude of impossible speeches; but they stuck behind sealed lips.

"Silence is getting heavy, Rufus," he observed, enjoying our embarrassment.

Thus we jogged forward for a mile or more.

"Troth, me pet lambs," he remarked, as breath returned, "ye'll both bleat better without me!"

Forthwith, away he rode fifty yards ahead, keeping that distance beyond us for the rest of the day and only calling over his shoulder occasionally.

"Och! But y'r bronchos are slow! Don't be telling me y'r bronchos are not slow! Arrah, me hearties, be making good use o' the honeymoon,—I mean afternoon, not honeymoon. Marry, me children, but y'r bronchos are bog-spavined and spring-halted. Jiggle-joggle faster, with ye, ye rascals! Faith, I see ye out o' the tail o' my eye. Those bronchos are nosing a bit too close, I'm thinkin'! I'm going to turn! I warn ye fair—ready! One—shy-off there! Two—have a care! Three—I'm coming! Four—prepare!"

And he would glance back with shouts of droll laughter. "Get epp! We mustn't disturb them! Get epp!" This to his own horse and off he would go, humming some ditty to the lazy hobble of his nag.

"Old angel!" said I, under my breath, and I fell to wondering what earthly reason any man had for becoming a priest.

He was right. Talk no longer lagged, whatever our bronchos did; but, indeed, all we said was better heard by two than three. Why that was, I cannot tell, for like beads of a rosary our words were strung together on things commonplace enough; and fond hearts, as well as mystics, have a key to unlock a world of meaning from meaningless words. Tufts of poplars, wood islands on the prairie, skulking coyotes, that prowled to the top of some earth mound and uttered their weird cries, mud-colored badgers, hulking clumsily away to their treacherous holes, gophers, sly fellows, propped on midget tails pointing fore-paws at us—these and other common things stole the hours away. The sun, dipping close to the sky-line, shone distorted through the warm haze like a huge blood shield. Far ahead our scouts were pitching tents on ground well back from the river to avoid the mosquitoes swarming above the water. It was time to encamp for the night.

Those long June nights in the far north with fire glowing in the track of a vanished sun and stillness brooding over infinite space—have a glory, that is peculiarly their own. Only a sort of half-darkness lies between the lingering sunset and the early sun-dawn. At nine o'clock the sun-rim is still above the western prairie. At ten, one may read by daylight, and, if the sky is clear, forget for another hour that night has begun. After supper, Father Holland sat at a distance from the tents with his back carefully turned towards us, a precaution on his part for which I was not ungrateful. Frances Sutherland was throned on the boxes of our quondam table, and I was reclining against saddle-blankets at her feet.

"Oh! To be so forever," she exclaimed, gazing at the globe of solid gold against the opal-green sky. "To have the light always clear, just ahead, nothing between us and the light, peace all about, no care, no weariness, just quiet and beauty like this forever."

"Like this forever! I ask nothing better," said I with great heartiness; but neither her eyes nor her thoughts were for me. Would the eyes looking so intently at the sinking sun, I wondered, condescend to look at a spot against the sun. In desperation I meditated standing up. 'Tis all very well to talk of storming the citadel of a closed heart, but unless telepathic implements of war are perfected to the same extent as modern armaments, permitting attack at long range, one must first get within shooting distance. Apparently I was so far outside the defences, even my design was unknown.

"I think," she began in low, hesitating words, so clear and thrilling, they set my heart beating wildly with a vague expectation, "I think heaven must be very, very near on nights like this, don't—you—Rufus?"

I wasn't thinking of heaven at all, at least, not the heaven she had in mind; but if there is one thing to make a man swear white is black and black white and to bring him to instantaneous agreement with any statement whatsoever, it is to hear his Christian name so spoken for the first time. I sat up in an electrified way that brought the fringe of lashes down to hide those gray eyes.

"Very near? Well rather! I've been in heaven all day," I vowed. "I've been getting glimpses of paradise all the way from Fort William——"

"Don't," she interrupted with a flash of the imperious nature, which I knew. "Please don't, Mr. Gillespie."

"Please don't Mister Gillespie me," said I, piqued by a return to the formal. "If you picked up Rufus by mistake from the priest, he sets a good example. Don't drop a good habit!"

That was my first step inside the outworks.

"Rufus," she answered so gently I felt she might disarm and slay me if she would, "Rufus Gillespie"—that was a return of the old spirit, a compromise between her will and mine—"please don't begin saying that sort of thing—there's a whole day before us——"

"And you think I can't keep it up?"

"You haven't given any sign of failing. You know, Rufus," she added consolingly, "you really must not say those things, or something will be hurt! You'll make me hurt it."

"Something is hurt and needs mending, Miss Sutherland——"

"Don't Miss Sutherland me," she broke in with a laugh, "call me Frances; and if something is hurt and needs mending, I'm not a tinker, though my father and the priest—yes and you, too—sometimes think so. But sisters do mending, don't they?" and she laughed my earnestness off as one would puff out a candle.

"No—no—no—not sisters—not that," I protested. "I have no sisters, Little Statue. I wouldn't know how to act with a sister, unless she were somebody else's

sister, you know. I can't stand the sisterly business, Frances——"

"Have you suffered much from the sisterly?" she asked with a merry twinkle.

"No," I hastened to explain, "I don't know how to play the sisterly touch-and-go at all, but the men tell me it doesn't work—dead failure, always ends the same. Sister proposes, or is proposed to——"

"Oh!" cried the Little Statue with the faintest note of alarm, and she moved back from me on the boxes. "I think we'd better play at being very matter-of-fact friends for the rest of the trip."

"No, thank you, Miss Sutherland—Frances, I mean," said I. "I'm not the fool to pretend that——"

"Then pretend anything you like," and there was a sudden coldness in her voice, which showed me she regarded my refusal and the slip in her name as a rebuff. "Pretend anything you like, only don't say things."

That was a throwing down of armor which I had not expected.

"Then pretend that a pilgrim was lost in the dark, lost where men's souls slip down steep places to hell, and that one as radiant as an angel from heaven shone through the blackness and guided him back to safe ground," I cried, taking quick advantage of my fair antagonist's sudden abandon and casting aside all banter.

"Children! children!" cried the priest. "Children! Sun's down! Time to go to your trundles, my babes!"

"Yes, yes," I shouted. "Wait till I hear the rest of this story."

At my words she had started up with a little gasp of fright. A look of awe came into her gray eyes, which I have seen on the faces of those who find themselves for the first time beside the abyss of a precipice. And I have climbed many lofty peaks, but never one without passing these places with the fearful possibilities of destruction. Always the novice has looked with the same unspeakable fear into the yawning depths, with the same unspeakable yearning towards the jewel-crowned heights beyond. This, or something of this, was in the startled attitude of the trembling figure, whose eyes met mine without flinching or favor.

"Or pretend that a traveler had lost his compass, and though he was without merit, God gave him a star."

"Is it a pretty story, Rufus?" called the priest.

"Very," I cried out impatiently. "Don't interrupt."

"Or pretend that a poor fool with no merit but his love of purity and truth and honor lost his way to paradise, and God gave him an angel for a guide."

"Is it a long story, Rufus?" called the priest.

"It's to be continued," I shouted, leaping to my feet and approaching her.

"And pretend that the pilgrim and the traveler and the fool, asked no other privilege but to give each his heart's love, his life's devotion to her who had come between him and the darkness——"

"Rufus!" roared the priest. "I declare I'll take a stick to you. Come away! D' y' hear? She's tired."

"Good-night," she answered, in a broken whisper, so cold it stabbed me like steel; and she put out her hand in the mechanical way of the well-bred woman in every land.

"Is that all?" I asked, holding the hand as if it had been a galvanic battery, though the priest was coming straight towards us.

"All?" she returned, the lashes falling over the misty, gray eyes. "Ah, Rufus! Are we playing jest is earnest, or earnest is jest?" and she turned quickly and went to her tent.

How long I stood in reverie, I do not know. The priest's broad hand presently came down on my shoulder with a savage thud.

"Ye blunder-busticus, ye, what have ye been doing?" he asked. "The Little Statue was crying when she went to her tent."

"Crying?"

"Yes, ye idiot. I'll stay by her to-morrow."

And he did. Nor could he have contrived severer punishment for the unfortunate effect of my words. Fool, that I was! I should keep myself in hand henceforth. How many men have made that vow regarding the woman they love? Those that have kept it, I trow, could be counted easily enough. But I had no opportunity to break my vow; for the priest rode with Frances Sutherland the whole of the

second day, and not once did he let loose his scorpion wit. She had breakfast alone in her tent next morning, the priest carrying tea and toast to her; and when she came out, she leaped to her saddle so quickly I lost the expected favor of placing that imperious foot in the stirrup. We set out three abreast, and I had no courage to read my fate from the cold, marble face. The ground became rougher. We were forced to follow long detours round sloughs, and I gladly fell to the rear where I was unobserved. Clumps of willows alone broke the endless dip of the plain. Glassy creeks glittered silver through the green, and ever the trail, like a narrow ribbon of many loops, fled before us to the dim sky-line.

When we halted for our nooning, Frances Sutherland had slipped from her saddle and gone off picking prairie roses before either the priest or I noticed her absence.

"If you go off, you nuisance, you," said the priest rubbing his bald pate, and gazing after her in a puzzled way, when we had the meal ready, "I think she'll come back and eat."

I promptly took myself off and had the glum pleasure of hearing her chat in high spirits over the dinner table of packing boxes; but she was on her cayuse and off with the scouts long before Father Holland and I had mounted.

"Rufus," said the priest with a comical, quizzical look, as we set off together. "Rufus, I think y'r a fool."

"I've thought that several hundred thousand times myself, this morning."

"Have ye as much as got a glint of her eye to-day?"

"No. I can't compete against the Church with women. Any fool knows that, even as big a fool as I."

"Tush, youngster! Don't take to licking your raw tongue up and down the cynic's saw edge! Put a spur to your broncho there and ride ahead with her."

"Having offended a goddess, I don't wish to be struck dead by inviting her wrath."

"Pah! I've no patience with y'r ramrod independence! Bend a stiff neck, or you'll break a sore heart! Ride ahead, I tell you, you young mule!" and he brought a smart flick across my broncho.

"Father Holland," I made answer with the dignity of a bishop and my nose mighty high in the air, "will you permit me to suggest that people know their own affairs best——"

"Tush, no! I'll permit you to do nothing of the kind," said he, driving a fly from his horse's ear. "Don't you know, you young idiot, that between a man surrendering his love, and a woman surrendering hers, there's difference enough to account for tears? A man gives his and gets it back with compound interest in coin that's pure gold compared to his copper. A woman gives hers and gets back ——" the priest stopped.

"What?" I asked, interest getting the better of wounded pride.

"Not much that's worth having from idiots like you," said he; by which the priest proved he could deal honestly by a friend, without any mincing palliatives.

His answer set me thinking for the best part of the afternoon; and I warrant if any man sets out with the priest's premises and thinks hard for an afternoon he will come to the same conclusion that I did.

"Let's both poke along a little faster," said I, after long silence.

"Oho! With all my heart!" And we caught up with Frances Sutherland and for the first time that day I dared to look at her face. If there were tear marks about the wondrous eyes, they were the marks of the shower after a sun-burst, the laughing gladness of life in golden light, the joyous calm of washed air when a storm has cleared away turbulence. Why did she evade me and turn altogether to the priest at her right? Had I been of an analytical turn of mind, I might, perhaps, have made a very careful study of an emotion commonly called jealousy; but, when one's heart beats fast, one's thoughts throng too swiftly for introspection. Was I a part of the new happiness? I did not understand human nature then as I understand it now, else would I have known that fair eyes turn away to hide what they dare not reveal. I prided myself that I was now well in hand. I should take the first opportunity to undo my folly of the night before.

It was after supper. Father Holland had gone to his tent. Frances Sutherland was arranging a bunch of flowers in her lap; and I took my place directly behind her lest my face should tell truth while my tongue uttered lies.

"Speaking of stars, you know Miss Sutherland," I began, remembering that I had said something about stars that must be unsaid.

"Don't call me *Miss* Sutherland, Rufus," she said, and that gentle answer knocked my grand resolution clean to the four winds.

"I beg your pardon, Frances——" Chaos and I were one. Whatever was it I was to say about stars?

"Well?" There was a waiting in the voice.

"Yes—you know—Frances." I tried to call up something coherent; but somehow the thumping of my heart set up a rattling in my head.

"No—Rufus. As a matter of fact, I don't know. You were going to tell me something."

"Bother my stupidity, Miss—Miss—Frances, but the mastiff's forgotten what it was going to bow-wow about!"

"Not the moon this time," she laughed. "Speaking of stars," and she gave me back my own words.

"Oh! Yes! Speaking of stars! Do you know I think a lot of the men coming up from Fort William got to regarding the star above the leading canoe as their own particular star."

I thought that speech a masterpiece. It would convince her she was the star of all the men, not mine particularly. That was true enough to appease conscience, a half-truth like Louis Laplante's words. So I would rob my foolish avowal of its personal element. A flush suffused the snowy white below her hair.

"Oh! I didn't notice any particular star above the leading canoe. There were so very, very many splendid stars, I used to watch them half the night!"

That answer threw me as far down as her manner had elated me.

"Well! What of the stars?" asked the silvery voice.

I was dumb. She flung the flowers aside as though she would leave; but Father Holland suddenly emerged from the tent fanning himself with his hat.

"Babes!" said he. "You're a pair of fools! Oh! To be young and throw our opportunities helter-skelter like flowers of which we're tired," and he looked at

the upset lapful. "Children! children! *Carpe Diem! Carpe Diem!* Pluck the flowers; for the days are swifter than arrows," and he walked away from us engrossed in his own thoughts, muttering over and over the advice of the Latin poet, "*Carpe Diem! Carpe Diem!*"

"What is *Carpe Diem*?" asked Frances Sutherland, gazing after the priest in sheer wonder.

"I wasn't strong on classics at Laval and I haven't my crib."

"Go on!" she commanded. "You're only apologizing for my ignorance. You know very well."

"It means just what he says—as if each day were a flower, you know, had its joys to be plucked, that can never come again."

"Flowers! Oh! I know! The kind you all picked for me coming up from Fort William. And do you know, Rufus, I never could thank you all? Were those *Carpe Diem* flowers?"

"No—not exactly the kind Father Holland means we should pick."

"What then?" and she turned suddenly to find her face not a hand's length from mine.

"This kind," I whispered, bending in terrified joy over her shoulder; and I plucked a blossom straight from her lips and another and yet another, till there came into the deep, gray eyes what I cannot transcribe, but what sent me away the king of all men—for had I not found my Queen?

And that was the way I carried out my grand resolution and kept myself in hand.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BUFFALO HUNT

I question if Norse heroes of the sea could boast more thrilling adventure than the wild buffalo hunts of American plain-rangers. A cavalcade of six hundred men mounted on mettlesome horses eager for the furious dash through a forest of tossing buffalo-horns was quite as imposing as any clash between warring Vikings. Squaws, children and a horde of ragged camp-followers straggled in long lines far to the hunters' rear. Altogether, the host behind the flag numbered not less than two thousand souls. Like any martial column, our squad had captain, color-bearer and chaplain. Luckily, all three were known to me, as I discovered when I reached Pembina. The truce, patched up between Hudson's Bay and Nor'-Westers after Governor McDonell's surrender, left Cuthbert Grant free to join the buffalo hunt. Pursuing big game across the prairie was more to his taste than leading the half-breeds during peace. The warden of the plains came hot-foot after us, and was promptly elected captain of the chase. Father Holland was with us too. Our course lay directly on his way to the Missouri and a jolly chaplain he made. In Grant's company came Pierre, the rhymster, bubbling over with jingling minstrelsy, that was the delight of every half-breed camp on the plains. Bareheaded, with a red handkerchief banding back his lank hair, and clad in fringed buckskin from the bright neck-cloth to the beaded moccasins, he was as wild a figure as any one of the savage rabble. Yet this was the poet of the plain-rangers, who caught the song of bird, the burr of cataract through the rocks, the throb of stampeding buffalo, the moan of the wind across the prairie, and tuned his rude minstrelsy to wild nature's fugitive music. Viking heroes, I know, chanted their deeds in songs that have come down to us; but with the exception of the Eskimo, descendants of North American races have never been credited with a taste for harmony. Once I asked Pierre how he acquired his art of verse-making. With a laugh of scorn, he demanded if the wind and the waterfalls and the birds learned music from beardless boys and draggle-coated dominies with armfuls of books. However, it may have been with his Pegasus, his mount for the hunt was no laggard. He rode a knob-jointed, muscular brute, that carried him like poetic inspiration wherever it pleased. Though Pierre's right hand was busied upholding the hunters' flag, and he had but one arm to bow-string the broncho's arching neck, the half-breed poet kept his seat with the easy

grace of the plainsman born and bred in the saddle.

"Faith, man, 'tis the fate of genius to ride a fractious steed," said Father Holland, when the bronchos of priest and poet had come into violent collision with angry squeals for the third time in ten minutes.

"And what are the capers of this, my beast, compared to the antics of fate, Sir Priest?" asked Pierre with grave dignity.

The wind caught his long hair and blew it about his face till he became an equestrian personification of the frenzied muse. I had become acquainted with his trick of setting words to the music of quaint rhymes; but Father Holland was taken aback.

"By the saints," he exclaimed, "I've no mind to run amuck of Pegasus! I'll get out of your way. Faith, 'tis the first time I've seen poetry in buckskin of this particular binding," and he wheeled his broncho out, leaving me abreast of the rhymster.

Pierre's lips began to frame some answer to the churchman.

"Have a care, Father," I warned. "You've escaped the broncho; but look out for the poet."

"Save us! What's coming now?" gasped the priest.

"Ha! I have it!" and Pierre turned triumphantly to Father Holland.

"The Lord be praised that poetry's free,
Or you'd bottle it up like a saint's thumb-bone,
That beauty's beauty for eyes that see
Without regard to a priestly gown——"

"Hold on," interrupted Father Holland. "Hold on, Pierre!"

"'Your double-quick Peg
Has a limp of one leg!'

"'Bone' and 'gown' don't fit, Mr. Rhymster."

"Upon my honor! You turned poet, too, Father Holland!" said I. "We might be on a pilgrimage to Helicon."

"To where?" says Grant, whose knowledge of classics was less than my own, which was precious little indeed.

"Helicon."

At that Father Holland burst in such roars of laughter, the rhymster took personal offense, dug his moccasins against the horse's sides and rode ahead. His fringed leggings were braced straight out in the stirrups as if he anticipated his broncho transforming the concave into the convex,—known in the vernacular as "bucking."

"Mad as a hatter," said Grant, inferring the joke was on Pierre. "Let him be! Let him be! He'll get over it! He's working up his rhymes for the feast after the buffalo hunt."

And we afterwards got the benefit of those rhymes.

The tenth day west from Pembina our scouts found some herd's footprints on soggy ground. At once word was sent back to pitch camp on rolling land. A cordon of carts with shafts turned outward encircled the camping ground. At one end the animals were tethered, at the other the hunter's tents were huddled together. All night mongrel curs, tearing about the enclosure in packs, kept noisy watch. Twice Grant and I went out to reconnoitre. We saw only a whitish wolf scurrying through the long grass. Grant thought this had disturbed the dogs; but I was not so sure. Indeed, I felt prepared to trace features of Le Grand Diable under every elk-hide, or wolf-skin in which a cunning Indian could be disguised. I deemed it wise to have a stronger guard and engaged two runners, Ringing Thunder and Burnt Earth, giving them horses and ordering them to keep within call during the thick of the hunt.

At daybreak all tents were a beehive of activity. The horses, with almost human intelligence, were wild to be off. Riders could scarcely gain saddles, and before feet were well in the stirrups, the bronchos had reared and bolted away, only to be reined sharply in and brought back to the ranks. The dogs, too, were mad, tearing after make-believe enemies and worrying one another till there were several curs less for the hunt. Inside the cart circle, men were shouting last orders to women, squaws scolding half-naked urchins, that scampered in the way, and the whole encampment setting up a din that might have scared any buffalo herd into endless flight. Grant gave the word. Pierre hoisted the flag, and the camp turmoil was left behind. The *Bois-Brulés* kept well within the lines and observed good order; but the Indian rabble lashed their half-broken horses into a

fury of excitement, that threatened confusion to all discipline. The camp was strongly guarded. Father Holland remained with the campers, but in spite of his holy calling, I am sure he longed to be among the hunters.

Scouts ahead, we followed the course of a half-dried slough where buffalo tracks were visible. Some two miles from camp, the out-runners returned with word that the herds were browsing a short distance ahead, and that the marsh-bed widened to a banked ravine. The buffalo could not have been found in a better place; for there was a fine slope from the upper land to our game. We at once ascended the embankment and coursed cautiously along the cliff's summit. Suddenly we rounded an abrupt headland and gained full view of the buffalo. The flag was lowered, stopping the march, and up rose our captain in his stirrups to survey the herd. A light mist screened us and a deep growth of the leathery grass, common to marsh lands, half hid a multitude of broad, humped, furry backs, moving aimlessly in the valley. Coal-black noses poked through the green stalks sniffing the air suspiciously and the curved horns tossed broken stems off in savage contempt.

From the headland beneath us to the rolling prairie at the mouth of the valley, the earth swayed with giant forms. The great creatures were restless as caged tigers and already on the rove for the day's march. I suppose the vast flocks of wild geese, that used to darken the sky and fill the air with their shrill "hunk, hunk," when I first went to the north, numbered as many living beings in one mass as that herd; but men no more attempted to count the creatures in flock or herd, than to estimate the pebbles of a shore.

Protruding eyes glared savagely sideways. Great, thick necks hulked forward in impatient jerks; and those dagger-pointed horns, sharper than a pruning hook, promised no boy's sport for our company. The buffalo sees best laterally on the level, and as long as we were quiet we remained undiscovered. At the prospect, some of the hunters grew excitedly profane. Others were timorous, fearing a stampede in our direction. Being above, we could come down on the rear of the buffaloes and they would be driven to the open.

Grant scouted the counseled caution. The hunters loaded guns, filled their mouths with balls to reload on the gallop and awaited the captain's order. Wheeling his horse to the fore, the warden gave one quick signal. With a storm-burst of galloping hoofs, we charged down the slope. At sound of our whirlwind advance, the bulls tossed up their heads and began pawing the ground angrily. From the hunters there was no shouting till close on the herd, then a wild halloo

with unearthly screams from the Indians broke from our company. The buffaloes started up, turned panic-stricken, and with bellowings, that roared down the valley, tore for the open prairie. The ravine rocked with the plunging monsters, and reëchoed to the crash of six-hundred guns and a thunderous tread. Firing was at close range. In a moment there was a battle royal between dexterous savages, swift as tigers, and these leviathans of the prairie with their brute strength.

A quick fearless horse was now invaluable; for the swiftest riders darted towards the large buffaloes and rode within a few yards before taking aim. Instantly, the ravine was ablaze with shots. Showers of arrows from the Indian hunters sung through the air overhead. Men unhorsed, ponies thrown from their feet, buffaloes wounded—or dead—were scattered everywhere. One angry bull gored furiously at his assailant, ripping his horse from shoulder to flank, then, maddened by the creature's blood, and before a shot from a second hunter brought him down, caught the rider on its upturned horns and tossed him high. By keeping deftly to the fore, where the buffalo could not see, and swerving alternately from side to side as the enraged animals struck forward, trained horses avoided side thrusts. The saddle-girths of one hunter, heading a buffalo from the herd, gave way as he was leaning over to send a final ball into the brute's head. Down he went, shoulders foremost under its nose, while the horse, with a deft leap cleared the vicious drive of horns. Strange to say, the buffalo did not see where he fell and galloped onward. Carcasses were mowed down like felled trees; but still we plunged on and on, pursuing the racing herd; while the ground shook in an earthquake under stampeding hoofs.

I had forgotten time, place, danger—everything in the mad chase and was hard after a savage old warrior that outraced my horse. Gradually I rounded him closer to the embankment. My broncho was blowing, almost wind-spent, but still I dug the spurs into him, and was only a few lengths behind the buffalo, when the wily beast turned. With head down, eyes on fire and nostrils blood-red, he bore straight upon me. My broncho reared, then sprang aside. Leaning over to take sure aim, I fired, but a side jerk unbalanced me. I lost my stirrup and sprawled in the dust. When I got to my feet, the buffalo lay dead and my broncho was trotting back. Hunters were still tearing after the disappearing herd. Riderless horses, mad with the smell of blood and snorting at every flash of powder, kept up with the wild race. Little Fellow, La Robe Noire, Burnt Earth, and Ringing Thunder, had evidently been left in the rear; for look where I might I could not see one of my four Indians. Near me two half-breeds were righting their saddles. I also was tightening the girths, which was not an easy matter with

my excited broncho prancing round in a circle. Suddenly there was the whistle of something through the air overhead, like a catapult stone, or recoiling whip-lash. The same instant one of the half-breeds gave an upward toss of both arms and, with a piercing shriek, fell to the ground. The fellow caught at his throat and from his bared chest protruded an arrow shaft.

I heard his terrified comrade shout, "The Sioux! the Sioux!" Then he fled in a panic of fear, not knowing where he was going and staggering as he ran; and I saw him pitch forward face downwards. I had barely realized what had happened and what it all meant, before an exultant shout broke from the high grass above the embankment. At that my horse gave a plunge and, wrenching the rein from my grasp, galloped off leaving me to face the hostiles. Half a score of Indians scrambled down the cliff and ran to secure the scalps of the dead. Evidently I had not been seen; but if I ran I should certainly be discovered and a Sioux's arrow can overtake the swiftest runner. I was looking hopelessly about for some place of concealment, when like a demon from the earth a horseman, scarlet in war-paint appeared not a hundred yards away. Brandishing his battle-axe, he came towards me at furious speed. With weapons in hand I crouched as his horse approached; and the fool mistook my action for fear. White teeth glistened and he shrieked with derisive laughter. I knew that sound. Back came memory of Le Grand Diable standing among the shadows of a forest camp-fire, laughing as I struck him.

The Indian swung his club aloft. I dodged abreast of his horse to avoid the blow. With a jerk he pulled the animal back on its haunches. Quick, when it rose, I sent a bullet to its heart. It lurched sideways, reared straight up and fell backwards with Le Grand Diable under. The fall knocked battle-axe and club from his grasp; and when his horse rolled over in a final spasm, two men were instantly locked in a death clutch. The evil eyes of the Indian glared with a fixed look of uncowed hatred and the hands of the other tightened on the redman's throat. Diable was snatching at a knife in his belt, when the cries of my Indians rang out close at hand. Their coming seemed to renew his strength; for with the full weight of an antagonist hanging from his neck, the willowy form squirmed first on his knees, then to his feet. But my men dashed up, knocked his feet from under him and pinioned him to the ground. La Robe Noire, with the blood-lust of his race, had a knife unsheathed and would have finished Diable's career for good and all; but Little Fellow struck the blade from his hand. That murderous attempt cost poor La Robe Noire dearly enough in the end.

Hare-skin thongs of triple ply were wound about Diable's crossed arms from

wrists to elbows. Burnt Earth gagged the knave with his own moccasin, while Ringing Thunder and Little Fellow quickly roped him neck and ankles to the fore and hind shanks of the dead buffalo. This time my wily foe should remain in my power till I had rescued Miriam.

"*Monsieur! Monsieur!*" gasped Little Fellow as he rose from putting a last knot to our prisoner's cords. "The Sioux!" and he pointed in alarm to the cliff.

True, in my sudden conflict, I had forgotten about the marauding Sioux; but the fellows had disappeared from the field of the buffalo hunt and it was to the embankment that my Indians were anxiously looking. Three thin smoke lines were rising from the prairie. I knew enough of Indian lore to recognize this tribal signal as a warning to the Sioux band of some misfortune. Was Miriam within range of those smoke signals? Now was my opportunity. I could offer Diable in exchange for the Sioux captives. Meanwhile, we had him secure. He would not be found till the hunt was over and the carts came for the skins.

Mounting the broncho, which Little Fellow had caught and brought back, I ordered the Indians to get their horses and follow; and I rode up to the level prairie. Against the southern horizon shone the yellow birch of a wigwam. Vague movements were apparent through the long grass, from which we conjectured the raiders were hastening back with news of Diable's capture. We must reach the Sioux camp before these messengers caused another mysterious disappearing of this fugitive tribe.

We whipped our horses to a gallop. Again thin smoke lines arose from the prairie and simultaneously the wigwam began to vanish. I had almost concluded the tepee was one of those delusive mirages which lead prairie riders on fools' errands, when I descried figures mounting ponies where the peaked camp had stood. At this we lashed our horses to faster pace. The Sioux galloped off and more smoke lines were rising.

"What do those mean, Little Fellow?" I asked; for there was smoke in a dozen places ahead.

"The prairie's on fire, *Monsieur*! The Sioux have put burnt stick in dry grass! The wind—it blow—it come hard—fast—fast this way!" and all four Indians reined up their horses as if they would turn.

"Coward Indians," I cried. "Go on! Who's put off the trail by the fire of a fool Sioux? Get through the fire before it grows big, or it will catch you all and burn

you to a crisp."

The gathering smoke was obscuring the fugitives and my Indians still hung back. Where the Indian refuses to be coerced, he may be won by reward, or spurred by praise of bravery.

"Ten horses to the brave who catches a Sioux!" I shouted. "Come on, Indians! Who follows? Is the Indian less brave than the pale face?" and we all dashed forward, spurring our hard-ridden horses without mercy. Each Indian gave his horse the bit. Beating them over the head, they craned flat over the horses' necks to lessen resistance to the air. A boisterous wind was fanning the burning grass to a great tide of fire that rolled forward in forked tongues; but beyond the flames were figures of receding riders; and we pressed on. Cinders rained on us like liquid fire, scorching and maddening our horses; but we never paused. The billowy clouds of smoke that rolled to meet us were blinding, and the very atmosphere, livid and quivering with heat, seemed to become a fiery fluid that enveloped and tortured us. Involuntarily, as we drew nearer and nearer the angry fire-tide, my hand was across my mouth to shut out the hot burning air; but a man must breathe, and the next intake of breath blistered one's chest like live coals on raw flesh. Little wonder our poor beasts uttered that pitiful scream against pain, which is the horse's one protest of suffering. Presently, they became wildly unmanageable; and when we dismounted to blindfold them and muffle their heads in our jackets, they crowded and trembled against us in a frenzy of terror. Then we tied strips torn from our clothing across our own mouths and, remounting, beat the frantic creatures forward. I have often marveled at the courage of those four Indians. For me, there was incentive enough to dare everything to the death. For them, what motive but to vindicate their bravery? But even bravery in its perfection has the limitation of physical endurance; and we had now reached the limit of what we could endure and live. The fire wave was crackling and licking up everything within a few paces of us. Live brands fell thick as a rain of fire. The flames were not crawling in the insidious line of the prairie fire when there is no wind, but the very heat of the air seemed to generate a hurricane and the red wave came forward in leaps and bounds, reaching out cloven fangs that hissed at us like an army of serpents. I remember wondering in a half delirium whether parts of Dante's hell could be worse. With the instinctive cry to heaven for help, of human-kind world over, I looked above; but there was only a great pitchy dome with glowing clouds rolling and heaving and tossing and blackening the firmament. Then I knew we must choose one of three things, a long detour round the fire-wave, one dash through the flames—or

death. I shouted to the men to save themselves; but Burnt Earth and Ringing Thunder had already gone off to skirt the near end of the fire-line. Little Fellow and La Robe Noire stuck staunchly by me. We all three paused, facing death; and the Indians' horses trembled close to my broncho till I felt the burn of hot stirrups against both ankles. Our buckskin was smoking in a dozen places. There was a lull of the wind, and I said to myself, "The calm before the end; the next hurricane burst and those red demon claws will have us." But in the momentary lull, a place appeared through the trough of smoke billows, where the grass was green and the fire-barrier breached. With a shout and heads down, we dashed towards this and vaulted across the flaming wall, our horses snorting and screaming with pain as we landed on the smoking turf of the other side. I gulped a great breath of the fresh air into my suffocating lungs, tore the buckskin covering from my broncho's head and we raced on in a swirl of smoke, always following the dust which revealed the tracks of the retreating Sioux. There was a whiff of singed hair, as if one of the horses had been burnt, and Little Fellow gave a shout. Looking back I saw his horse sinking on the blackened patch; but La Robe Noire and I rode on. The fugitives were ascending rising ground to the south. They were beating their horses in a rage of cruelty; but we gained at every pace. I counted twenty riders. A woman seemed to be strapped to one horse. Was this Miriam? We were on moist grass and I urged La Robe Noire to ride faster and drove spurs in my own beast, though I felt him weakening under me. The Sioux had now reached the crest of the hill. Our horses were nigh done, and to jade the fagged creatures up rising ground was useless.

When we finally reached the height, the Sioux were far down in the valley. It was utterly hopeless to try to overtake them. Ah! It is easy to face death and to struggle and to fight and to triumph! But the hardest of all hard things is to surrender, to yield to the inevitable, to turn back just when the goal looms through obscurity!

I still had Diable in my power. We headed about and crawled slowly back by unburnt land towards the buffalo hunters.

Little Fellow, we overtook limping homeward afoot. Burnt Earth and Ringing Thunder awaited us near the ravine. The carts were already out gathering hides, tallow, flesh and tongues. We made what poor speed we could among the buffalo carcasses to the spot where we had left Le Grand Diable. It was Little Fellow, who was hobbling ahead, and the Indian suddenly turned with such a cry of baffled rage, I knew it boded misfortune. Running forward, I could hardly believe my eyes. Fools that we were to leave the captive unguarded! The great

buffalo lay unmolested; but there was no Le Grand Diable. A third time had he vanished as if in league with the powers of the air. Closer examination explained his disappearance. A wet, tattered moccasin, with the appearance of having been chewed, lay on the turf. He had evidently bitten through his gag, raised his arms to his mouth, eaten away the hare thongs, and so, without the help of the Sioux raiders, freed his hands, untied himself and escaped.

Dumfounded and baffled, I returned to the encampment and took counsel with Father Holland. We arranged to set out for the Mandanes on the Missouri. Diable's tribe had certainly gone south to Sioux territory. The Sioux and the Mandanes were friendly enough neighbors this year. Living with the Mandanes south of the Sioux country, we might keep track of the enemy without exposing ourselves to Sioux vengeance.

Forebodings of terrible suffering for Miriam haunted me. I could not close my eyes without seeing her subjected to Indian torture; and I had no heart to take part in the jubilation of the hunters over their great success. The savory smell of roasting meat whiffed into my tent and I heard the shrill laughter of the squaws preparing the hunters' feast. With hard-wood axles squeaking loudly under the unusual burden, the last cart rumbled into the camp enclosure with its load of meat and skins. The clamor of the people subsided; and I knew every one was busily gorging to repletion, too intent on the satisfaction of animal greed to indulge in the Saxon habit of talking over a meal. Well might they gorge; for this was the one great annual feast. There would follow a winter of stint and hardship and hunger; and every soul in the camp was laying up store against famine. Even the dogs were happy, for they were either roving over the field of the hunt, or lying disabled from gluttony at their masters' tents.

Father Holland remained in the tepee with me talking over our plans and plastering Indian ointment on my numerous burns. By and by, the voices of the feasters began again and we heard Pierre, the rhymester, chanting the song of the buffalo hunt:

Now list to the song of the buffalo hunt,
Which I, Pierre, the rhymester, chant of the brave!
We are *Bois-Brulés*, Freemen of the plains,
We choose our chief! We are no man's slave!

Up, riders, up, ere the early mist
Ascends to salute the rising sun!
Up, rangers, up, ere the buffalo herds
Sniff morning air for the hunter's gun!

They lie in their lairs of dank spear-grass,
Down in the gorge, where the prairie dips.
We've followed their tracks through the sucking ooze,
Where our bronchos sank to their steaming hips.

We've followed their tracks from the rolling plain
Through slime-green sloughs to a sedgy ravine,
Where the cat-tail spikes of the marsh-grown flags
Stand half as high as the billowy green.

The spear-grass touched our saddle-bows,
The blade-points pricked to the broncho's neck;
But we followed the tracks like hounds on scent
Till our horses reared with a sudden check.

The scouts dart back with a shout, "They are found!"
Great fur-maned heads are thrust through reeds,
A forest of horns, a crunching of stems,
Reined sheer on their haunches are terrified steeds!

Get you gone to the squaws at the tents, old men,
The cart-lines safely encircle the camp!
Now, braves of the plain, brace your saddle-girths!
Quick! Load guns, for our horses champ!

A tossing of horns, a pawing of hoofs,
But the hunters utter never a word,
As the stealthy panther creeps on his prey,
So move we in silence against the herd.

With arrows ready and triggers cocked,
We round them nearer the valley bank;
They pause in defiance, then start with alarm
At the ominous sound of a gun-barrel's clank.

A wave from our captain, out bursts a wild shout,
A crash of shots from our breaking ranks,
And the herd stampedes with a thunderous boom
While we drive our spurs into quivering flanks.

The arrows hiss like a shower of snakes,
The bullets puff in a smoky gust,
Out fly loose reins from the bronchos' bits
And hunters ride on in a whirl of dust.

The bellowing bulls rush blind with fear
Through river and marsh, while the trampled dead
Soon bridge safe ford for the plunging herd;
Earth rocks like a sea 'neath the mighty tread.

A rip of the sharp-curved sickle-horns,
A hunter falls to the blood-soaked ground!
He is gored and tossed and trampled down,
On dashes the furious beast with a bound,

When over sky-line hulks the last great form
And the rumbling thunder of their hoofs' beat, beat,
Dies like an echo in distant hills,
Back ride the hunters chanting their feat.

Now, old men and squaws, come you out with the carts!
There's meat against hunger and fur against cold!
Gather full store for the pemmican bags,
Garner the booty of warriors bold.

So list ye the song of the *Bois-Brulés*,
Of their glorious deeds in the days of old,
And this is the tale of the buffalo hunt
Which I, Pierre, the rhymester, have proudly told.

CHAPTER XIV

IN SLIPPERY PLACES

A more desolate existence than the life of a fur-trading winterer in the far north can scarcely be imagined. Penned in some miserable lodge a thousand miles from human companionship, only the wild orgies of the savages varied the monotony of dull days and long nights. The winter I spent with the Mandanes was my first in the north. I had not yet learned to take events as the rock takes wave-blows, and was still at that mawkish age when a man is easily filled with profound pity for himself. A month after our arrival, Father Holland left the Mandane village. Eric Hamilton had not yet come; so I felt much like the man whom a gloomy poet describes as earth's last habitant. I had accompanied the priest half-way to the river forks. Here, he was to get passage in an Indian canoe to the tribes of the upper Missouri. After an affectionate farewell, I stood on a knoll of treeless land and watched the broad-brimmed hat and black robe receding from me.

"Good-by, boy! God bless you!" he had said in broken voice. "Don't fall to brooding when you're alone, or you'll lose your wits. Now mind yourself! Don't mope!"

For my part, I could not answer a word, but keeping hold of his hand walked on with him a pace.

"Get away with you! Go home, youngster!" he ordered, roughly shaking me off and flourishing his staff.

Then he strode swiftly forward without once looking back, while I would have given all I possessed for one last wave. As he plunged into the sombre forest, where the early autumn frost of that north land had already tinged the maple woods with the hectic flush of coming death, so poignant was this last wresting from human fellowship, I could scarcely resist the impulse to desert my station and follow him. Poorer than the poorest of the tribes to whom he ministered, alone and armed only with his faith, this man was ready to conquer the world for his Master. "Would that I had half the courage for my quest," I mused, and walked slowly back to the solitary lodge.

Black Cat, Chief of the Mandane village, in a noisy harangue, adopted me as his son and his brother and his father and his mother and I know not what; but apart from trade with his people, I responded coldly to these warm overtures. From Father Holland's leave-taking to Hamilton's coming, was a desolately lonesome interval. Daily I went to the north hill and strained my eyes for figures against the horizon. Sometimes horsemen would gradually loom into view, head first, then arms and horse, like the peak of a ship preceding appearance of full canvas and hull over sea. Thereupon I would hurriedly saddle my own horse and ride furiously forward, feeling confident that Hamilton had at last come, only to find the horsemen some company of Indian riders. What could be keeping him? I conjectured a thousand possibilities; but in truth there was no need for any conjectures. 'Twas I, who felt the days drag like years. Hamilton was not behind his appointed time. He came at last, walking in on me one night when I least expected him and was sitting moodily before my untouched supper. He had nothing to tell except that he had wasted many weeks following false clues, till our buffalo hunters returned with news of the Sioux attack, Diable's escape and our bootless pursuit. At once he had left Fort Douglas for the Missouri, pausing often to send scouts scouring the country for news of Diable's band; but not a trace of the rascals had been found; and his search seemed on the whole more barren of results than mine. Laplante, he reported, had never been seen the night after he left the council hall to find the young Nor'-Wester. In my own mind, I had no doubt the villain had been in that company we pursued through the prairie fire. Altogether, I think Hamilton's coming made matters worse rather than better. That I had failed after so nearly effecting a rescue seemed to embitter him unspeakably.

Out of deference to the rival companies employing us, we occupied different lodges. Indeed, I fear poor Eric did but a sorry business for the Hudson's Bay that winter. I verily believe he would have forgotten to eat, let alone barter for furs, had I not been there to lug him forcibly across to my lodge, where meals were prepared for us both. Often when I saw the Indian trappers gathering before his door with piles of peltries, I would go across and help him to value the furs. At first the Indian rogues were inclined to take advantage of his abstraction and palm off one miserable beaver skin, where they should have given five for a new hatchet; and I began to understand why they crowded to his lodge, though he did nothing to attract them, while they avoided mine. Then I took a hand in Hudson's Bay trade and equalized values. First, I would pick over the whole pile, which the Indians had thrown on the floor, putting spoiled skins to one side, and peltries of the same kind in classified heaps.

"Lynx, buffalo, musk-ox, marten, beaver, silver fox, black bear, raccoon! Want them all, Eric?" I would ask, while the Indians eyed me with suspicious resentment.

"Certainly, certainly, take everything," Eric would answer, without knowing a word of what I had said, and at once throwing away his opportunity to drive a good bargain.

Picking over the goods of Hamilton's packet, the Mandanes would choose what they wanted. Then began a strange, silent haggling over prices. Unlike Oriental races, the Indian maintains stolid silence, compelling the white man to do the talking.

"Eric, Running Deer wants a gun," I would begin.

"For goodness' sake, give it to him, and don't bother me," Eric would urge, and the faintest gleam of amused triumph would shoot from the beady eyes of Running Deer. Running Deer's peltries would be spread out, and after a half hour of silent consideration on his part and trader's talk on mine, furs to the value of so many beaver skins would be passed across for the coveted gun. I remember it was a wretched old squaw with a toothless, leathery, much-bewrinkled face and a reputation for knowledge of Indian medicines, who first opened my eyes to the sort of trade the Indians had been driving with Hamilton. The old creature was bent almost double over her stout oak staff and came hobbling in with a bag of roots, which she flung on the floor. After thawing out her frozen moccasins before the lodge fire and taking off bandages of skins about her ankles, she turned to us for trade. We were ready to make concessions that might induce the old body to hurry away; but she demanded red flannel, tea and tobacco enough to supply a whole family of grandchildren, and sat down on the bag of roots prepared to out-siege us.

"What's this, Eric?" I asked, knowing no more of roots than the old woman did of values.

"Seneca for drugs. For goodness' sake, buy it quick and don't haggle."

"But she wants your whole kit, man," I objected.

"She'll have the whole kit and the shanty, too, if you don't get her out," said Hamilton, opening the lodge door; and the old squaw presently limped off with an armful of flannel, one tea packet and a parcel of tobacco, already torn open.

Such was the character of Hamilton's bartering up to the time I elected myself his first lieutenant; but as his abstractions became almost trance-like, I think the superstition of the Indians was touched. To them, a maniac is a messenger of the Great Spirit; and Hamilton's strange ways must have impressed them, for they no longer put exorbitant values on their peltries.

After the day's trading Eric would come to my hut. Pacing the cramped place for hours, wild-eyed and silent, he would abruptly dash into the darkness of the night like one on the verge of madness. Thereupon, the taciturn, grave-faced La Robe Noire, tapping his forehead significantly, would look with meaning towards Little Fellow; and I would slip out some distance behind to see that Hamilton did himself no harm while the paroxysm lasted. So absorbed was he in his own gloom, for days he would not utter a syllable. The storm that had gathered would then discharge its strength in an outburst of incoherent ravings, which usually ended in Hamilton's illness and my watching over him night and day, keeping firearms out of reach. I have never seen—and hope I never may—any other being age so swiftly and perceptibly. I had attributed his worn appearance in Fort Douglas to the cannon accident and trusted the natural robustness of his constitution would throw off the apparent languor; but as autumn wore into winter, there were more gray hairs on his temple, deeper lines furrowed his face and the erect shoulders began to bow.

When days slipped into weeks and weeks into months without the slightest inkling of Miriam's whereabouts to set at rest the fear that my rash pursuit had caused her death, I myself grew utterly despondent. Like all who embark on daring ventures, I had not counted on continuous frustration. The idea that I might waste a lifetime in the wilderness without accomplishing anything had never entered my mind. Week after week, the scouts dispatched in every direction came back without one word of the fugitives, and I began to imagine my association with Hamilton had been unfortunate for us both. This added to despair the bitterness of regret.

The winter was unusually mild, and less game came to the Missouri from the mountains and bad lands than in severe seasons. By February, we were on short rations. Two meals a day, with cat-fish for meat and dried skins in soup by way of variety, made up our regular fare for mid-winter. The frequent absence of my two Indians, scouring the region for the Sioux, left me to do my own fishing; and fishing with bare hands in frosty weather is not pleasant employment for a youth of soft up-bringing. Protracted bachelordom was also losing its charms; but that may have resulted from a new influence, which came into my life and seemed

ever present.

At Christmas, Hamilton was threatened with violent insanity. As the Mandanes' provisions dwindled, the Indians grew surlier toward us; and I was as deep in despondency as a man could sink. Frequently, I wondered whether Father Holland would find us alive in the spring, and I sometimes feared ours would be the fate of Athabasca traders whose bodies satisfied the hunger of famishing Crees.

How often in those darkest hours did a presence, which defied time and space, come silently to me, breathing inspiration that may not be spoken, healing the madness of despair and leaving to me in the midst of anxiety a peace which was wholly unaccountable! In the lambent flame of the rough stone fireplace, in the darkness between Hamilton's hut and mine, through which I often stole, dreading what I might find—everywhere, I felt and saw, or seemed to see, those gray eyes with the look of a startled soul opening its virgin beauty and revealing its inmost secrets.

A bleak, howling wind, with great piles of storm-scud overhead, raved all the day before Christmas. It was one of those afternoons when the sombre atmosphere seems weighted with gloom and weariness. On Christmas eve Hamilton's brooding brought on acute delirium. He had been more depressed than usual, and at night when we sat down to a cheerless supper of hare-skin soup and pemmican, he began to talk very fast and quite irrationally.

"See here, old boy," said I, "you'd better bunk here to-night. You're not well."

"Bunk!" said he icily, in the grand manner he sometimes assumed at the Quebec Club for the benefit of a too familiar member. "And pray, Sir, what might 'bunk' mean?"

"Go to bed, Eric," I coaxed, getting tight hold of his hands. "You're not well, old man; come to bed!"

"Bed!" he exclaimed with indignation. "Bed! You're a madman, Sir! I'm to meet Miriam on the St. Foye road." (It was here that Miriam lived in Quebec, before they were married.) "On the St. Foye road! See the lights glitter, dearest, in Lower Town," and he laughed aloud. Then followed such an outpouring of wild ravings I wept from very pity and helplessness.

"Rufus! Rufus, lad!" he cried, staring at me and clutching at his forehead as lucid

intervals broke the current of his madness. "Gillespie, man, what's wrong? I don't seem able to think. Who—are—you? Who—in the world—are you? Gillespie! O Gillespie! I'm going mad! Am I going mad? Help me, Rufus! Why can't you help me? It's coming after me! See it! The hideous thing!" Tears started from his burning eyes and his brow was knotted hard as whipcord.

"Look! It's there!" he screamed, pointing to the fire, and he darted to the door, where I caught him. He fought off my grasp with maniacal strength, and succeeded in flinging open the door. Then I forgot this man was more than brother to me, and threw myself upon him as against an enemy, determined to have the mastery. The bleak wind roared through the open blackness of the doorway, and on the ground outside were shadows of two struggling, furious men. I saw the terrified faces of Little Fellow and La Robe Noire peering through the dark, and felt wet beads start from every pore in my body. Both of us were panting like fagged racers. One of us was fighting blindly, raining down aimless blows, I know not which, but I think it must have been Hamilton, for he presently sank in my arms, limp and helpless as a sick child.

Somehow I got him between the robes of my floor mattress. Drawing a box to the bedside I again took his hands between mine and prepared for a night's watch.

He raved in a low, indistinct tone, muttering Miriam's name again and again, and tossing his head restlessly from side to side. Then he fell into a troubled sleep. The supper lay untouched. Torches had burned black out. One tallow candle, that I had extravagantly put among some evergreens—our poor decorations for Christmas Eve—sputtered low and threw ghostly, branching shadows across the lodge. I slipped from the sick man's side, heaped more logs on the fire and stretched out between robes before the hearth. In the play of the flame Hamilton's face seemed suddenly and strangely calm. Was it the dim light, I wonder. The furrowed lines of sorrow seemed to fade, leaving the peaceful, transparent purity of the dead. I could not but associate the branched shadows on the wall with legends of death keeping guard over the dying. The shadow by his pillow gradually assumed vague, awesome shape. I sat up and rubbed my eyes. Was this an illusion, or was I, too, going mad? The filmy thing distinctly wavered and receded a little into the dark.

An unspeakable fear chilled my veins. Then I could have laughed defiance and challenged death. Death! Curse death! What had we to fear from dying? Had we not more to fear from living? At that came thought of my love and the tumult

against life was quieted. I, too, like other mortals, had reason, the best of reason, to fear death. What matter if a lonely one like myself went out alone to the great dark? But when thought of my love came, a desolating sense of separation—separation not to be bridged by love or reason—overwhelmed me, and I, too, shrank back.

Again I peered forward. The shadow fluttered, moved, and came out of the gloom, a tender presence with massy, golden hair, white-veined brow, and gray eyes, speaking unutterable things.

"My beloved!" I cried. "Oh, my beloved!" and I sprang towards her; but she had glided back among the spectral branches.

The candle tumbled to the floor, extinguishing all light, and I was alone with the sick man breathing heavily in the darkness. A log broke over the fire. The flames burst up again; but I was still alone. Had I, too, lost grip of reality; or was she in distress calling for me? Neither suggestion satisfied; for the mean lodge was suddenly filled with a great calm, and my whole being was flooded and thrilled with the trancing ecstasy of an ethereal presence.

If I remember rightly—and to be perfectly frank, I do—though I was in as desperate straits as a man could be, I lay before the hearth that Christmas Eve filled with gratitude to heaven—God knows such a gift must have come from heaven!—for the love with which I had been dowered.

How it might have been with other men I know not. For myself, I could not have come through that dreary winter unscathed without the influence of her, who would have been the first to disclaim such power. Among the velvet cushions of the east one may criticise the lapse of white man to barbarity; but in the wilderness human voice is as grateful to the ear as rain patter in a drouth. There, men deal with facts, not arguments. Natives break the loneliness of an isolated life by not unwelcomed visits. Comes a time when they tarry over long in the white man's lodge. Other men, who have scouted the possibility of sinking to savagery, have forsaken the ways of their youth. Who can say that I might not have departed from the path called rectitude?

Religion may keep a holy man upright in slippery places; but for common mortals, devotion to a being, whom, in one period of their worship men rank with angels, does much to steady wavering feet. Hers was the influence that aroused loathing for the drunken debauches, the cheating, the depraved living of the Indian lodges: hers, the influence that kept the loathing from slipping into

indifference, the indifference from becoming participation. Indeed, I could wish a young man no better talisman against the world, the flesh and the devil, than love for a pure woman.

How we dragged through the hours of that night, of Christmas and the days that followed, I do not attempt to set down here. Hamilton's illness lasted a month. What with trading and keeping our scouts on the search for Miriam and waiting on the sick man, I had enough to busy me without brooding over my own woes. Hard as my life was, it was fortunate I had no time for thoughts of self and so escaped the melancholy apathy that so often benumbs the lonely man's activities. And when Eric became convalescent, I had enough to do finding diversion for his mind. Keeping record of our doings on birch-bark sheets, playing quoits with the Mandanes and polo with a few fearless riders, helped to pass the long weary days.

So the dismal winter wore away and spring was drizzling into summer. Within a few weeks we should be turning our faces northward for the forks of the Red and Assiniboine. The prospect of movement after long stagnation cheered Hamilton and fanned what neither of us would acknowledge—a faint hope that Miriam might yet be alive in the north. I verily believe Eric would have started northward with restored courage had not our plans been thwarted by the sinister handiwork of Le Grand Diable.

CHAPTER XV

THE GOOD WHITE FATHER

For a week Hamilton and I had been busy in our respective lodges getting peltries and personal belongings into shape for return to Red River. On Saturday night, at least I counted it Saturday from the notches on my doorpost, though Eric, grown morose and contradictory, maintained that it was Sunday—we sat talking before the fire of my lodge. A dreary raindrip pattered through the leaky roof and the soaked parchment tacked across the window opening flapped monotonously against the pine logs.

Unfastening the moon-shaped medallion, which my uncle had given me, I slowly spelled out the Nor'-Westers' motto—"Fortitude in Distress."

"For-ti-tude in Dis-tress," I repeated idly. "By Jove, Hamilton, we need it, don't we?"

Eric's lips curled in scorn. Without answering, he impatiently kicked a fallen brand back to the live coals. I know old saws are poor comfort to people in distress, being chiefly applicable when they are not needed.

"What in the world can be keeping Father Holland?" I asked, leading off on another tack. "Here we are almost into the summer, and never a sight of him."

"Did you really expect him back alive from the Bloods?" sneered Hamilton. He had unconsciously acquired a habit of expecting the worst.

"Certainly," I returned. "He's been among them before."

"Then all I have to say is, you're a fool!"

Poor Eric! He had informed me I was a fool so often in his ravings I had grown quite used to the insult. He glared savagely at the fire, and if I had not understood this bitterness towards the missionary, the next remark was of a nature to enlighten me.

"I don't see why any man in his senses wants to save the soul of an Indian," he broke out. "Let them go where they belong! Souls! They haven't any souls, or if

they have, it's the soul of a fiend——"

"By the bye, Eric," I interrupted, for this petulant ill-humor, that saw naught but evil in everything, was becoming too frequent and always ended in the same way —a night of semi-delirium, "by the bye, did you see those fellows turning up soil for corn with a buffalo shoulder-blade as a hoe?"

"I wish every damn Red a thousand feet under the soil, deeper than that, if the temperature increases."

It was impossible to talk to Hamilton without provoking a quarrel. Leaning back with hands clasped behind my head, I watched through half-closed eyes his sad face darkling under stormy moods.

At last the rain succeeded in soaking through the parchment across the window and the wind drove through a great split in chilling gusts that added to the cabin's discomfort. I got up and jammed an old hat into the hole. At the window I heard the shouting of Indians having a hilarious night among the lodges and was amazed at the sound of discharging firearms above the huzzas, for ammunition was scarce among the Mandanes. The hubbub seemed to be coming towards our hut. I could see nothing through the window slit, and lighting a pine fagot, shot back the latch-bolt and threw open the door. A multitude of tawny, joyous, upturned faces thronged to the steps. The crowd was surging about some newcomer, and Chief Black Cat was prancing around in an ecstasy of delight, firing away all his gunpowder in joyous demonstration. I lifted my torch. The Indians fell back and forth strode Father Holland, his face shining wet and abeam with pleasure. The Indians had been welcoming "their good white father." As he dismissed his Mandane children we drew him in and placed his soaked over-garments before the fire. Then we proffered him all the delicacies of bachelors' quarters, and filled and refilled his bowl with soup, and did not stop pouring out our lye-black tea till he had drained the dregs of it.

Having satisfied his inner-man, we gave him the best stump-tree seat in the cabin and sat back to listen. There was the awkward pause of reunion, when friends have not had time to gather up the loose threads of a parted past and weave them anew into stronger bands of comradeship. Hamilton and the priest were strangers; but if the latter were as overcome by the meeting after half a year's isolation as I was, the silence was not surprising. To me it seemed the genial face was unusually grave, and I noticed a long, horizontal scar across his forehead.

"What's that, Father?" I asked, indicating the mark on his brow.

"Tush, youngster! Nothing! Nothing at all! Sampled scalping-knife on me; thought better of it, kept me out of the martyr's crown."

"And left you your own!" cried Hamilton astonished at the priest's careless stoicism.

"Left me my own," responded Father Holland.

"Do you mean to say the murderous——" I began.

"Tush, youngster! Be quiet!" said he. "Haven't many brethren come from the same tribe more like warped branches than men? What am I, that I should escape? Never speak of it again," and he continued his silent study of the flames' play.

"Where are your Indians?" he asked abruptly.

"In the lodges. Shall I whistle for them?"

He did not answer, but leaned forward with elbows on his knees, rubbing his chin vigorously first with one hand, then the other, still studying the fire.

"How strong are the Mandanes?" he asked.

"Weak, weak," I answered. "Few hundred. It hasn't been worth while for traders to come here for years."

"Was it worth while this year?"

"Not for trade."

"For anything else?" and he looked at Eric's dejected face.

"Nothing else," I put in hastily, fearing one of Hamilton's outbreaks. "We've been completely off the track, might better have stayed in the north——"

"No, you mightn't, not by any means," was his sharp retort. "I've been in the Sioux lodges for three weeks."

With an inarticulate cry, Hamilton sprang to his feet. He was trembling from head to foot and caught Father Holland roughly by the shoulder.

"Speak out, Sir! What of Miriam?" he demanded in dry, hard, rasping tones.

"Well, well, safe and inviolate. So's the boy, a big boy now! May ye have them

both in y'r arms soon—soon—soon!" and again he fell to studying the fire with an unhurried deliberation, that was torture to Hamilton.

"Are they with you? Are they with you?" shouted Hamilton, hope bounding up elastically to the wildest heights after his long depression. "Don't keep me in suspense! I cannot bear it. Tell me where they are," he pleaded. "Are they with you?" and his eyes burned into the priest's like live coals. "Are—they—with—you?"

"No—Lord—no!" roared Father Holland, alarmed at Hamilton's violent condition. "But," he added, seeing Eric reel dizzily, "but they're all right! Now you keep quiet and don't scare the wits out of a body! They're all right, I tell you, and I've come straight from them for the ransom price."

"Get it, Rufus, get it!" shouted Hamilton to me, throwing his hands distractedly to his head, a habit too common with him of late. "Get it! Get it!" he kept calling, utterly beside himself.

"Sit down, will you?" thundered the priest, as if Eric's sitting down would calm all agitation. "Sit down! Behave! Keep quiet, both of you, or my tongue'll forget holy orders and give ye some good Irish eloquence! What d' y' mane, scarin' the breath out of a body and blowing his ideas to limbo? Keep quiet, now, and listen!"

"And did they," I cried, in spite of the injunction, "did they do that to you?" pointing to the scar on his brow.

"Yes, they did."

"Because they saw you with me?"

"No, that's a brand for the faith, you conceited whelp, you—they stopped their tortures because they saw you with me. Now, swell out, Rufus, and gloat over your importance! I tell you it was the devil, himself, snatched my martyr's crown."

"Le Grand Diable?"

"Le Grand Diable's own minion. I saw his devilish eyes leering from the back o' the crowd, when I was tied to a stake. 'Bring that Indian to me,' sez I, transfixing him with my gaze; for—you understand—I couldn't point, my hands being tied. Troth! But ye should 'a' seen their looks of amazement at me boldness! There

was I, roped to that tree, like a pig for the boiling pot, and sez I, 'Bring—that Indian—to me!' just as though I was managing the execution," and the priest paused to enjoy the recollection of the effects of his boldness.

"A squaw up with an old clout," he continued, "and slashed it across my face, saying, 'Take that, pale face! Take that, man with a woman's skirts on!' and 'Take that!' howled a young buck, fetching the flat of his dagger across me forehead, close-cropped hair giving no grip for scalping, not to mention a pate as bald as mine," and the priest roared at his own joke, patting his bare crown affectionately.

"Though the blood was boilin' in me enraged veins and dribblin' down my face like the rain to-night, by the help o' the Lord, I felt no pain. Never flinchin' nor takin' heed o' that bold baste of a squaw, I bawled like a bull of Bashan, 'Bring—that Indian—to me, coward-hearted Sioux—d' y' fear an Iroquois? Bring him to me and I'll make him enrich your tribe!'

"Faith! Their eyes grew big as a harvest moon and they brought Le Grand Diable to me. Knowing his covetous heart, I told him if he still had the woman and the child, I'd get him a big ransom. At that they all jangled a bit, the old squaw clouting me with her filthy rag as if she wanted to slap me to a peak. At length they let Le Grand Diable unfasten the bands. With my hands tied behind my back, I was taken to his lodge. Miriam and the boy were kept in a place behind the Sioux squaw's hut. Once when the skin tied between blew up, I caught a glimpse of her poor white face. The boy was playing round her feet. I was in a corner of the lodge but was so grimed with grease and dirt, if she saw me she thought I was some Indian captive and turned away her head. I told Le Grand Diable in *habitant* French—which the rascal understands—that I could obtain a good ransom for his prisoners. He left me alone in the lodge for some hours, I think to spy upon me and learn if I tried to speak to Miriam; but I lay still as a log and pretended to sleep. When he came back, he began bartering for the price; but I could make him no promises as to the amount or time of payment, for I was not sure you were here, and would not have him know where you are.

"He kept me hanging on for his answer during the whole week, and many a time Miriam brushed past so close her skirts touched me; but that she-male devil of his—may the Lord give them both a warm, front seat!—was always watching and I could not speak. Miriam's face was hidden under her shawl and she looked neither to the right, nor to the left. I don't think she ever saw me. On condition you stay in your camp and don't go to meet her, but send your two Indians alone

for her with your offer, he let me go. Here I am! Now, Rufus, where are your men? Off with them bearing more gifts than the Queen of Sheba carried to Solomon!"

From the hour that La Robe Noire and Little Fellow, laden with gaudy trinkets and hunting outfits, departed for the Sioux lodges, Hamilton was positively a madman. In the first place, he had been determined to disguise himself as an Indian and go instead of La Robe Noire, whose figure he resembled. To this, we would not listen. Le Grand Diable was not the man to be tricked and there was no sense in ransoming Miriam for a captive husband. Then, he persisted in riding part of the way with our messengers, which necessitated my doing likewise. I had to snatch his horse's bridle, wheel both our horses round and head homeward at a gallop, before he would listen to reason and come back.

Round the lodges he was a ramping tiger. Twenty times a day he went from our hut to the height of land commanding the north country, keeping me on the run at his heels; and all night he beat around the cramped shack as if it had been a cage. On the fourth day from the messengers' departure, chains could not bind him. If all went well, they should be with us at night. In defiance of Le Grand Diable's conditions, which an arrow from an unseen marksman might enforce, Eric saddled his mare and rode out to meet the men.

Of course Father Holland and I peltered after him; but it was only because gathering darkness prevented travel that we prevailed on him to dismount and await the Indians' coming at the edge of the village.

At last came the clank, clank of shod hoofs in the valley. The natives used only unshod animals, so we recognized our men. Hamilton darted away like a hare racing for cover.

"The Lord have mercy upon us!" groaned Father Holland. "Listen, lad! There's only one horse!"

I threw myself to the earth and laying my ear to the turf strained for every sound. The thud, thud of a single horse, fore and hind feet striking the beaten trail in quick gallop, came distinctly up from the valley.

"It may not be our men," said I, with sickening forebodings tugging at throat and

heart.

"I mistrusted them! I mistrusted the villains!" repeated the priest. "If only you had enough Mandanes to ride down on them, but you're too weak. There are at least two thousand Sioux."

Hamilton and Little Fellow, talking loudly and gesticulating, rode crashing through the furze.

"I knew it! I knew it!" shouted Hamilton fiercely, "One of us should have gone."

"What's wrong?" came from Father Holland in a voice so low and unnaturally calm, I knew he feared the worst.

"Wrong!" yelled Hamilton, "They hold La Robe Noire as hostage and demand five hundred pounds of ammunition, twenty guns and ten horses. Of course, I should have gone——"

"And would it have mended matters if you'd been held hostage too?" I demanded, utterly out of patience and at that stage when a little strain makes a man strike his best friends. "You know very well, the men were only sent to make an offer. You'd no right to expect everything on one trip without any bargaining——"

"Shut up, boy!" exclaimed Father Holland. "Just when ye both need all y'r wits, y'r scattering them to the four winds. Now, mind yourselves! I don't like these terms! 'Tis the devil's own doing! Let's talk this over!"

With a vast deal of the wordy eloquence that characterizes Indian diplomacy, the tenor of Le Grand Diable's message was "His shot pouch was light and his pipe cold; he hung down his head and the pipe of peace had not been in the council; the Sioux were strangers and the whites were their enemies; the pale-faces had been in their power and they had always conveyed them on their journey with glad hearts and something to eat." Finally, the Master of Life, likewise Earth, Air, Water, and Fire were called on to witness that if the white men delivered five hundred rounds of ammunition, twenty guns and ten horses, the white woman and her child, likewise the two messengers, would be sent safely back to the Mandane lodge; none but these two messengers would be permitted in the Sioux camp; also, the Sioux would not answer for the lives of the white men if they left the Mandane lodges. Let the white men, therefore, send back the full ransom by the hands of the same messenger.

CHAPTER XVI

LE GRAND DIABLE SENDS BACK OUR MESSENGER

Father Holland advised caution and consideration before acting. A policy of bargaining was his counsel.

"I don't like those terms, at all," he said, "too much like giving your weapons to the enemy. I don't like all this."

He would temporize and rely on Le Grand Diable's covetous disposition bringing him to our terms; but Hamilton would hear of neither caution nor delay.

The ransom price was at once collected. Next morning, Little Fellow, on a fresh mount with a string of laden horses on each side, went post haste back to the Sioux.

In all conscience, Hamilton had been wild enough during the first parley. His excitement now exceeded all bounds. The first two days, when there was no possibility of Miriam's coming and Little Fellow could not yet have reached the Sioux, I tore after Eric so often I lost count of the races between our lodge and the north hill. The performance began again on the third day, and I broke out with a piece of my mind, which surprised him mightily.

"Look you here, Hamilton!" I exclaimed, rounding him back from the hill, "Can't you stop this nonsense and sit still for only two days more, or must I tie you up? You've tried to put me crazy all winter and, by Jove, if you don't stop this, you'll finish the job——"

He gazed at me with the dumb look of a wounded animal and was too amazed for words. Leaving me in mid-road, feeling myself a brute, he went straight to his own hut. After that incident, he gave us no further anxiety and kept an iron grip on his impatience. With me, anger had given place to contrition. He remained much by himself until the night, when our messengers were expected. Then he came across to my quarters, where Father Holland and I were keyed up to the highest pitch. Putting out his hand he said—

"Is it all right with us again, Rufus, old man?"

That speech nigh snapped the strained cords.

"Of course," said I, gripping the extended hand, and I immediately coughed hard, to explain away the undue moisture welling into my eyes.

We all three sat as still and silent as a death-watch, Father Holland fumbling and pretending to pore over some holy volume, Eric with fingers tightly interlaced and upper teeth biting through lower lip, and I with clenched fists dug into jacket pockets and a thousand imaginary sounds singing wild tunes in my ears.

How the seconds crawled, and the minutes barely moved, and the hours seemed to heap up in a blockade and crush us with their leaden weight! Twice I sought relief for pent emotion by piling wood on the fire, though the night was mild, and by breaking the glowing embers into a shower of sparks. The soft, moccasined tread of Mandanes past our door startled Father Holland so that his book fell to the floor, while I shook like a leaf. Strange to say, Hamilton would not allow himself the luxury of a single movement, though the lowered brows tightened and teeth cut deeper into the under lip.

Dogs set up a barking at the other end of the village—a common enough occurrence where half-starved curs roved in packs—but I could not refrain from lounging with a show of indifference to the doorway, where I peered through the moon-silvered dusk. As usual, the Indians with shrill cry flew at the dogs to silence them. The noise seemed to be annoying my companions and was certainly unnerving me, so I shut the door and walked back to the fire.

The howl of dogs and squaws increased. I heard the angry undertone of men's voices. A hoarse roar broke from the Mandane lodges and rolled through the village like the sweep of coming hurricane. There was a fleet rush, a swift pattering of something pursued running round the rear of our lodge, with a shrieking mob of men and squaws after it. The dogs were barking furiously and snapping at the heels of the thing, whatever it was.

"A hostile!" exclaimed Hamilton, leaping up.

Hardly knowing what I did, I bounded towards the door and shot forward the bolt, with a vague fear that blood might be spilled on our threshold.

"For shame, man!" cried Father Holland, making to undo the latch.

But the words had not passed his lips when the parchment flap of the window lifted. A voice screamed through the opening and in hurtled a round, nameless,

blood-soaked horror, rolling over and over in a red trail, till it stopped with upturned, dead, glaring eyes and hideous, gaping mouth, at the very feet of Hamilton.

It was the scalpless head of La Robe Noire. Our Indian had paid the price of his own blood-lust and Diable's enmity.

Before the full enormity of the treachery—messengers murdered and mutilated, ransom stolen and captives kept—had dawned on me, Father Holland had broken open the door. He was rushing through the night screaming for the Mandanes to catch the miscreant Sioux. When I turned back, not daring to look at that awful object, Hamilton had fallen to the hut floor in a dead faint.

And now may I be spared recalling what occurred on that terrible night!

Women luxuriate and men traffic in the wealth of the great west, but how many give one languid thought to the years of bloody deeds by which the west was won?

Before restoring Hamilton, it was necessary to remove that which was unseemly; also to wash out certain stains on the hearth-stones; and those things would have tried the courage of more iron-nerved men than myself.

I should not have been surprised if Eric had come out of that faint, a gibbering maniac; but I toiled over him with the courage of blank hopelessness, pumping his arms up and down, forcing liquor between the clenched teeth, splashing the cold, clammy face with water, and laving his forehead. At last he opened his eyes wearily. Like a man ill at ease with life, moaning, he turned his face to the wall.

Outside, it was as if the unleashed furies of hell fought to quench their thirst in human blood. The clamor of those red demons was in my ears and I was still working over Hamilton, loosening his jacket collar, under-pillowing his chest, fanning him, and doing everything else I could think of, to ease his labored breathing, when Father Holland burst into the lodge, utterly unmanned and

sobbing like a child.

"For the Lord's sake, Rufus," he cried, "for the Lord's sake, come and help! They're murdering him! They're murdering him! 'Twas I who set them on him, and I can't stop them! I can't stop them!"

"Let them murder him!" I returned, unconsciously demonstrating that the civilized heart differs only in degree from the barbarian.

"Come, Rufus," he pleaded, "come, for the love of Frances, or your hands will not be clean. There'll be blood on your hands when you go back to her. Come, come!"

Out we rushed through the thronging Mandanes, now riotous with the lust of blood. A ring of young bucks had been formed round the Sioux to keep the crowd off. Naked, with arms pinioned, the victim stood motionless and without fear.

"Good white father, he no understand," said the Mandanes, jostling the weeping priest back from the circle of the young men. "Good white father, he go home!" In spite of protest by word and act they roughly shoved us to our lodge, the doomed man's death chant ringing in our ears as they pushed us inside and clashed our door. In vain we had argued they would incur the vengeance of the Sioux nation. Our voices were drowned in the shout for blood—for blood!

The sigh of the wind brought mournful strains of the victim's dirge to our lodge. I fastened the door, with robes against it to keep the sound out. Then a smell of burning drifted through the window, and I stop-gapped that, too, with more robes.

That the Sioux would wreak swift vengeance could not be doubted. As soon as the murderous work was over, guides were with difficulty engaged. Having fitted up a sort of prop in which I could tie Hamilton to the saddle, I saw both Father Holland and Eric set out for Red River before daybreak.

It was best they should go and I remain. If Miriam were still in the country, stay I would, till she were safe; but I had no mind to see Eric go mad or die before the rescue could be accomplished.

As they were leaving I took a piece of birch bark. On it I wrote with a charred stick:—

"Greetings to my own dear love from her ever loyal and devoted knight."

This, Father Holland bore to Frances Sutherland from me.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PRICE OF BLOOD

How many shapeless terrors can spring from the mind of man I never knew till Eric and the priest left me alone in the Mandane village. Ever, on closing my eyes, there rolled and rolled past, endlessly, without going one pace beyond my sight, something too horrible to be contemplated. When I looked about to assure myself the thing was not there—could not possibly be there—memory flashed back the whole dreadful scene. Up started glazed eyes from the hearth, the floor, and every dim nook in the lodge. Thereupon I would rush into the village road, where the shamefaced greetings of guilty Indians recalled another horror.

If I ventured into Le Grand Diable's power a fate worse than La Robe Noire's awaited me. That there would be a hostile demonstration over the Sioux messenger's death I was certain. Nothing that I offered could induce any of the Indians to act as scouts or to reconnoiter the enemy's encampment. I had, of my own will, chosen to remain, and now I found myself with tied hands, fuming and gnashing against fate, conjuring up all sorts of projects for the rescue of Miriam, and butting my head against the impossible at every turn. Thus three weary days dragged past.

Having reflected on the consequences of their outrage, the Mandanes exhibited repentance of a characteristically human form—resentment against the cause of their trouble. Unfortunately, I was the cause. From the black looks of the young men I half suspected, if the Sioux chief would accept me in lieu of material gifts, I might be presented as a peace-offering. This would certainly not forward my quest, and prudence, or cowardice—two things easily confused when one is in peril—counseled discretion, and discretion seemed to counsel flight.

"Discretion! Discretion to perdition!" I cried, springing up from a midnight reverie in my hut. Every selfish argument for my own safety had passed in review before my mind, and something so akin to judicious caution, which we trappers in plain language called "cowardice," was insidiously assailing my better self, I cast logic's sophistries to the winds, and dared death or torture to drive me from my post. Whence comes this sublime, reasonless *abandon* of imperiled human beings, which casts off fear and caution and prudence and

forethought and all that goes to make success in the common walks of life, and at one blind leap mounts the Sinai of duty? To me, the impulse upwards is as mysterious as the impulse downwards, and I do not wonder that pagans ascribe one to Ormuzd, the other to Ahriman. 'Tis ours to yield or resist, and I yielded with the vehemence of a passionate nature, vowing in the darkness of the hut —"Here, before God, I stay!"

Swift came test of my oath. While the words were yet on my lips, stealthy steps suddenly glided round the lodge. A shuffling stopped at the door, while a chilling fear took possession of me lest the mutilated form of my other Indian should next be hurled through the window. I had not time to shoot the door-bolt to its catch before a sharp click told of lifted latch. The hinge creaked, and there, distinct in the starlight, that smote through the open, stood Little Fellow, himself, haggard and almost naked.

"Little Fellow! Good boy!" I shouted, pulling him in. "Where did you come from? How did you get away? Is it you or your ghost?"

Down he squatted with a grunt on one of the robes, answering never a word. The gaunt look of the man declared his needs, so I prepared to feed him back to speech. This task kept me busy till daybreak, for the filling capacity of a famishing Indian may not be likened to any other hungry thing on earth without doing the red man grave injustice.

"Hoohoo! Hoohoo! But I be sick man to-morrow!" and he rubbed himself down with a satisfied air of distension, declining to have his plate reloaded for the tenth time. I noticed the poor wretch's skin was cut to the bone round wrists and ankles. Chafed bandage marks encircled the flesh of his neck.

"What did this, Little Fellow?" and I pointed to the scars.

A grim look of Indian gratitude for my interest came into the stolid face.

"Bad Indians," was the terse response.

"Did they torture you?"

He grunted a ferocious negative.

"You got away too quick for them?"

An affirmative grunt.

"Le Grand Diable—did you see him?"

At that name, his white teeth snapped shut, and from the depths of the Indian's throat came the vicious snarl of an enraged wolf.

"Come," I coaxed, "tell me. How long since you left the Sioux?"

"Walkee—walkee—walkee—one sleep," and rising, he enacted a hobbling gait across the cabin in unison with the rhythmic utterance of his words.

"Walkee—walkee—walkee—one."

"Traveled at night!" I interrupted. "Two nights! You couldn't do it in two nights!"

"Walkee—walkee—walkee—one sleep," he repeated.

"Three nights!"

Four times he hobbled across the floor, which meant he had come afoot the whole distance, traveling only at night.

Sitting down, he began in a low monotone relating how he had returned to La Robe Noire with the additional ransom demanded by Le Grand Diable. The "pig Sioux, more gluttonous than the wolverine, more treacherous than the mountain cat," had come out to receive them with hootings. The plunder was taken, "as a dead enemy is picked by carrion buzzards." He, himself, was dragged from his horse and bound like a slave squaw. La Robe Noire had been stripped naked, and young men began piercing his chest with lances, shouting, "Take that, man who would scalp the Iroquois! Take that, enemy to the Sioux! Take that, dog that's friend to the white man!" Then had La Robe Noire, whose hands were bound, sprung upon his torturers and as the trapped badger snaps the hand of the hunter so had he buried his teeth in the face of a boasting Sioux.

Here, Little Fellow's teeth clenched shut in savage imitation. Then was Le Grand Diable's knife unsheathed. More, my messenger could not see; for a Sioux bandaged his eyes. Another tied a rope round his neck. Thus, like a dead stag, was he pulled over the ground to a wigwam. Here he lay for many "sleeps," knowing not when the great sun rose and when he sank. Once, the lodges became very still, like many waters, when the wind slumbers and only the little waves lap. Then came one with the soft, small fingers of a white woman and gently, scarcely touching him, as the spirits rustle through the forest of a dark night, had these hands cut the rope around his neck, and unbound him. A

whisper in the English tongue, "Go—run—for your life! Hide by day! Run at night!"

The skin of the tent wall was lifted by the same hands. He rolled out. He tore the blind from his eyes. It was dark. The spirits had quenched their star torches. No souls of dead warriors danced on the fire plain of the northern sky! The father of winds let loose a blast to drown all sound and help good Indian against the pig Sioux! He ran like a hare. He leaped like a deer. He came as the arrows from the bow of the great hunter. Thus had he escaped from the Sioux!

Little Fellow ceased speaking, wrapped himself in robes and fell asleep.

I could not doubt whose were the liberator's hands, and I marveled that she had not come with him. Had she known of our efforts at all? It seemed unlikely. Else, with the liberty she had, to come to Little Fellow, surely she would have tried to escape. On the other hand, her immunity from torture might depend on never attempting to regain freedom.

Now I knew what to expect if I were captured by the Sioux. Yet, given another stormy night, if Little Fellow and I were near the Sioux with fleet horses, could not Miriam be rescued in the same way he had escaped? Until Little Fellow had eaten and slept back to his normal condition of courage, it would be useless to propose such a hazardous plan. Indeed, I decided to send him to some point on the northern trail, where I could join him and go alone to the Sioux camp. This would be better than sitting still to be given as a hostage to the Sioux. If the worst happened and I were captured, had I the courage to endure Indian tortures? A man endures what he must endure, whether he will, or not; and I certainly had not courage to leave the country without one blow for Miriam's freedom.

With these thoughts, I gathered my belongings in preparation for secret departure from the Mandanes that night. Then I prepared breakfast, saw Little Fellow lie back in a dead sleep, and strolled out among the lodges.

Four days had passed without the coming of the avengers. The villagers were disposed to forget their guilt and treat me less sulkily. As I sauntered towards the north hill, pleasant words greeted me from the lodges.

"Be not afraid, my son," exhorted Chief Black Cat. "Lend a deaf ear to bad talk! No harm shall befall the white man! Be not afraid!"

"Afraid!" I flouted back. "Who's afraid, Black Cat? Only white-livered cowards

fear the Sioux! Surely no Mandane brave fears the Sioux—ugh! The cowardly Sioux!"

My vaunting pleased the old chief mightily; for the Indian is nothing if not a boaster. At once Black Cat would have broken out in loud tirade on his friendship for me and contempt for the Sioux, but I cut him short and moved towards the hill, that overlooked the enemy's territory. A great cloud of dust whirled up from the northern horizon.

"A tornado the next thing!" I exclaimed with disgust. "The fates are against me! A fig for my plans!"

I stooped. With ear to the ground I could hear a rumbling clatter as of a buffalo stampede.

"What is it, my son?" asked the voice of the chief, and I saw that Black Cat had followed me to the hill.

"Are those buffalo, Black Cat?" and I pointed to the north.

As he peered forward, distinguishing clearly what my civilized eyes could not see, his face darkened.

"The Sioux!" he muttered with a black look at me. Turning, he would have hurried away without further protests of friendship, but I kept pace with him.

"Pooh!" said I, with a lofty contempt, which I was far from feeling. "Pooh! Black Cat! Who's afraid of the Sioux? Let the women run from the Sioux!"

He gave me a sidelong glance to penetrate my sincerity and slackened his flight to the proud gait of a fearless Indian. All the same, alarm was spread among the lodges, and every woman and child of the Mandanes were hidden behind barricaded doors. The men mounted quickly and rode out to gain the vantage ground of the north hill before the enemy's arrival.

Another cross current to my purposes! Fool that I was, to have dilly-dallied three whole days away like a helpless old squaw wringing her hands, when I should have dared everything and ridden to Miriam's rescue! Now, if I had been near the Sioux encampment, when all the warriors were away, how easily could I have liberated Miriam and her child!

Always, it is the course we have not followed, which would have led on to the success we have failed to grasp in our chosen path. So we salve wounded mistrust of self and still, in spite of manifest proof to the contrary, retain a magnificent conceit.

I cursed my blunders with a vehemence usually reserved for other men's errors, and at once decided to make the best of the present, letting past and future each take care of itself, a course which will save a man gray hairs over to-morrow and give him a well-provisioned to-day.

Arming myself, I resolved to be among the bargain-makers of the Mandanes rather than be bargained by the Sioux. Wakening Little Fellow, I told him my plan and ordered him to slip away north while the two tribes were parleying and to await me a day's march from the Sioux camp. He told me of a wooded valley, where he could rest with his horses concealed, and after seeing him off, I rode straight for the band of assembled Mandanes and surprised them beyond all measure by taking a place in the forefront of Black Cat's special guard. The Sioux warriors swept towards us in a tornado. Ascending the slope at a gallop, whooping and beating their drums, they charged past us, and down at full speed through the village, displaying a thousand dexterities of horsemanship and prowess to strike terror to the Mandanes. Then they dashed back and reined up on the hillside beneath our forces. The men were naked to the waist and their faces were blackened. Porcupine quills, beavers' claws, hooked bones, and bears' claws stained red hung round their necks in ringlets, or adorned gorgeous belts. Feathered crests and broad-shielded mats of willow switches, on the left arm, completed their war dress. The leaders had their buckskin leggings strung from hip to ankle with small bells, and carried firearms, as well as arrows and stone lances; but the majority had only Indian weapons. In that respect—though we were not one third their number—we had the advantage. All the Mandanes carried firearms; but I do not believe there was enough ammunition to average five rounds a man. Luckily, this was unknown to the Sioux. I scanned every face. Diable was not there.

Scarcely were the ranks in position, when both Sioux and Mandane chiefs rode forward, and there opened such a harangue as I have never heard since, and hope I never may.

"Our young man has been killed," lamented the Sioux. "He was a good warrior. His friends sorrow. Our hearts are no longer glad. Till now our hands have been white, and our hearts clean. But the young man has been slain and we are

grieved. Of the scalps of the enemy, he brought many. We hang our heads. The pipe of peace has not been in our council. The whites are our enemies. Now, the young man is dead. Tell us if we are to be friends or enemies. We have no fear. We are many and strong. Our bows are good. Our arrows are pointed with flint and our lances with stone. Our shot-pouches are not light. But we love peace. Tell us, what doth the Mandane offer for the blood of the young man? Is it to be peace or war? Shall we be friends or enemies? Do you raise the tomahawk, or pipe of peace? Say, great chief of the Mandanes, what is thy answer?"

This and more did the Sioux chief vauntingly declaim, brandishing his war club and addressing the four points of the compass, also the sun, as he shouted out his defiance. To which Black Cat, in louder voice, made reply.

"Say, great chief of the Sioux, our dead was brought into the camp. The body was yet warm. It was thrown at our feet. Never before did it enter the heart of a Missouri to seek the blood of a Sioux! Our messengers went to your camp smoking the sacred calumet of peace. They were sons of the Mandanes. They were friends of the white men. The white man is like magic. He comes from afar. He knows much. He has given guns to our warriors. His shot bags are full and his guns many. But his men, ye slew. We are for peace, but if ye are for war, we warn you to leave our camp before the warriors hidden where ye see them not, break forth. We cannot answer for the white man's magic," and I heard my power over darkness and light, life and death, magnified in a way to terrify my own dreams; but Black Cat cunningly wound up his bold declamation by asking what the Sioux chief would have of the white man for the death of the messenger.

A clamor of voices arose from the warriors, each claiming some relationship and attributing extravagant virtues to the dead Sioux.

"I am the afflicted father of the youth ye killed," called an old warrior, putting in prior claim for any forthcoming compensation and enhancing its value by adding, "and he had many feathers in his cap."

"He, who was killed, I desired for a nephew," shouted another, "and an ivory wand he carried in his hand."

"He who was killed was my brother," cried a third, "and he had a new gun and much powder."

"He was braver than the buffalo," declared another.

"He had three wounds!" "He had scars!" "He wore many scalps!" came the voices of others.

"Many bells and beads were on his leggings!"

"He had garnished moccasins!"

"He slew a bear with his own hands!"

"His knife had a handle of ivory!"

"His arrows had barbs of beavers' claws!"

If the noisy claimants kept on, they would presently make the dead man a god. I begged Black Cat to cut the parley short and demand exactly what gift would compensate the Sioux for the loss of so great a warrior. After another half-hour's jangling, in which I took an animated part, beating down their exorbitant request for two hundred guns with beads and bells enough to outfit the whole Sioux tribe, we came to terms. Indeed, the grasping rascals well-nigh cleared out all that was left of my trading stock; but when I saw they had no intention of fighting, I held back at the last and demanded the surrender of Le Grand Diable, Miriam and the child in compensation for La Robe Noire.

Then, they swore by everything, from the sun and the moon to the cow in the meadow, that they were not responsible for the doings of Le Grand Diable, who was an Iroquois. Moreover, they vowed he had hurriedly taken his departure for the north four days before, carrying with him the Sioux wife, the strange woman and the white child. As I had no object in arousing their resentment, I heard their words without voicing my own suspicions and giving over the booty, whiffed pipes with them. But I had no intention of being tricked by the rascally Sioux, and while they and the Mandanes celebrated the peace treaty, I saddled my horse and spurred off for their encampment, glad to see the last of a region where I had suffered much and gained nothing.

CHAPTER XVIII

LAPLANTE AND I RENEW ACQUAINTANCE

The warriors had spoken truth to the Mandanes. Le Grand Diable was not in the Sioux lodges. I had been at the encampment for almost a week, daily expecting the warriors' return, before I could persuade the people to grant me the right of search through the wigwams. In the end, I succeeded only through artifice. Indeed, I was becoming too proficient in craft for the maintenance of self-respect. A child—I explained to the surly old men who barred my way—had been confused with the Sioux slaves. If it were among their lodges, I was willing to pay well for its redemption. The old squaws, eying me distrustfully, averred I had come to steal one of their naked brats, who swarmed on my tracks with as tantalizing persistence as the vicious dogs. The jealous mothers would not hear of my searching the tents. Then I was compelled to make friends with the bevies of young squaws, who ogle newcomers to the Indian camps. Presently, I gained the run of all the lodges. Indeed, I needed not a little diplomacy to keep from being adopted as son-in-law by one pertinacious old fellow—a kind of embarrassment not wholly confined to trappers in the wilds. But not a trace of Diable and his captives did I find.

I had hobbled my horses—a string of six—in a valley some distance from the camp and directly on the trail, where Little Fellow was awaiting me. Returning from a look at their condition one evening, I heard a band of hunters had come from the Upper Missouri. I was sitting with a group of men squatted before my fatherly Indian's lodge, when somebody walked up behind us and gave a long, low whistle.

"Mon Dieu! Mine frien', the enemy! Sacredie! 'Tis he! Thou cock-brained idiot! Ho—ho! Alone among the Sioux!" came the astonished, half-breathless exclamation of Louis Laplante, mixing his English and French as he was wont, when off guard.

Need I say the voice brought me to my feet at one leap? Well I remembered how I had left him lying with a snarl between his teeth in the doorway of Fort Douglas! Now was his chance to score off that grudge! I should not have been surprised if he had paid me with a stab in the back.

"What for—come you—here?" he slowly demanded, facing me with a revengeful gleam in his eyes. His English was still mixed. There was none of the usual light and airy impudence of his manner.

"You know very well, Louis," I returned without quailing. "Who should know better than you? For the sake of the old days, Louis, help to undo the wrong you allowed? Help me and before Heaven you shall command your own price. Set her free! Afterwards torture me to the death and take your full pleasure!"

"I'll have it, anyway," retorted Louis with a hard, dry, mirthless laugh. "Know they—what for—you come?" He pointed to the Indians, who understood not a word of our talk; and we walked a pace off from the lodges.

"No! I'm not always a fool, Louis," said I, "though you cheated me in the gorge!"

"See those stones?" There was a pile of rock on the edge of the ravine.

"I do. What of them?"

"All of your Indian—left after the dogs—it lie there!" His eye questioned mine; but there was not a vestige of fear in me towards that boaster. This, I set down not vauntingly, but fully realizing what I owe to Heaven.

"Poor fellow," said I. "That was cruel work."

"Your other man—he fool them——"

"All the better," I interrupted.

"They not be cheated once more again! No—no—mine frien'! To come here, alone! Ha—ha! Stupid Anglo-Saxon ox!"

"Don't waste your breath, Louis," I quietly remarked. "Your names have no more terror for me now than at Laval! However big a knave you are, Louis, you're not a fool. Why don't you make something out of this? I can reward you. Hold *me*, if you like! Scalp me and skin me and put me under a stone-pile for revenge! Will it make your revenge any sweeter to torture a helpless, white woman?"

Louis winced. 'Twas the first sign of goodness I had seen in the knave, and I credited it wholly to his French ancestors.

"I never torture white woman," he vehemently declared, with a sudden flare-up of his proud temper. "The son of a seigneur——"

"The son of a seigneur," I broke in, "let an innocent woman go into captivity by lying to me!"

"Don't harp on that!" said Louis with a scornful laugh—a laugh that is ever the refuge of the cornered liar. "You pay me back by stealing despatches."

"Don't harp on that, Louis!" and I returned his insolence in full measure. "I didn't steal your despatches, though I know the thief. And you paid me back by almost trapping me at Fort Douglas."

"But I didn't succeed," exclaimed Laplante. "Mon Dieu! If I had only known you were a spy!"

"I wasn't. I came to see Hamilton."

"And you pay me back as if I had succeed," continued Louis, "by kicking me—me—the son of a seigneur—kicking me in the stomach like a pig, which is no fit treatment for a gentleman!"

"And you paid me back by sticking your knife in my boot——"

"And didn't succeed," broke in Louis regretfully.

At that, we both laughed in spite of ourselves, laughed as comrades. And the laugh brought back memories of old Laval days, when we used to thrash each other in the schoolyard, but always united in defensive league, when we were disciplined inside the class-room.

"See here, old crony," I cried, taking quick advantage of his sudden softening and again playing suppliant to my adversary. "I own up! You owe me two scores, one for the despatches I saw taken from you, one for knocking you down in Fort Douglas; for your knife broke and did not cut me a whit. Pay those scores with compound interest, if you like, the way you used to pummel me black and blue at Laval; but help me now as we used to help each other out of scrapes at school! Afterwards, do as you wish! I give you full leave. As the son of a seigneur, as a gentleman, Louis, help me to free the woman!"

"Pah!" cried Louis with mingled contempt and surrender. "I not punish you here with two thousand against one! Louis Laplante is a gentleman—even to his enemy!"

"Bravo, comrade!" I shouted out, full of gratitude, and I thrust forward my hand.

"No—no—thanks much," and Laplante drew himself up proudly, "not till I pay you well, richly,—generous always to mine enemy!"

"Very good! Pay when and where you will."

"Pay how I like," snapped Louis.

With that strange contract, his embarrassment seemed to vanish and his English came back fluently.

"You'd better leave before the warriors return," he said. "They come home to-morrow!"

"Is Diable among them?"

"No."

"Is Diable here?"

"No." His face clouded as I questioned.

"Do you know where he is?"

"No."

"Will he be back?"

"Dammie! How do I know? He will if he wants to! I don't tell tales on a man who saved my life."

His answer set me to wondering if Diable had seen me hold back the trader's murderous hand, when Louis lay drunk, and if the Frenchman's knowledge of that incident explained his strange generosity now.

"I'll stay here in spite of all the Sioux warriors on earth, till I find out about that knave of an Indian and his captives," I vowed.

Louis looked at me queerly and gave another whistle.

"You always were a pig-head," said he. "I can keep them from harming you; but remember, I pay you back in your own coin. And look out for the daughter of L'Aigle, curse her! She is the only thing I ever fear! Keep you in my tent! If Le Grand Diable see you——" and Louis touched his knife-handle significantly.

"Then Diable *is* here!"

"I not say so," but he flushed at the slip of his tongue and moved quickly towards what appeared to be his quarters.

"He is coming?" I questioned, suspicious of Louis' veracity.

"Dolt!" said Louis. "Why else do I hide you in my tent? But remember I pay you back in your own coin afterwards! Ha! There they come!"

A shout of returning hunters arose from the ravine, at which Louis bounded for the tent on a run, dashing inside breathlessly, I following close behind.

"Stay you here, inside, mind! Mon Dieu! If you but show your face; 'tis two white men under one stone-pile! Louis Laplante is a fool—dammie—a fool—to help you, his enemy, or any other man at his own risk."

With these enigmatical words, the Frenchman hurried out, fastening the tent flap after him and leaving me to reflect on the wild impulses of his wayward nature. Was his strange, unwilling generosity the result of animosity to the big squaw, who seemed to exercise some subtle and commanding influence over him; or of gratitude to me? Was the noble blood that coursed in his veins, directing him in spite of his degenerate tendencies; or had the man's heart been touched by the sight of a white woman's suffering? If his alarm at the sound of returning hunters had not been so palpably genuine—for he turned pale to the lips—I might have suspected treachery. But there was no mistaking the motive of fear that hurried him to the tent; and with Le Grand Diable among the hunters, Louis might well fear to be seen in my company. There was a hubbub of trappers returning to the lodges. I heard horses turned free and tent-poles clattering to the ground; but Laplante did not come back till it was late and the Indians had separated for the night.

"I can take you to her!" he whispered, his voice thrilling with suppressed emotion. "Le Grand Diable and the squaw have gone to the valley to set snares! And when I whistle, come out quickly! Mon Dieu! If you're caught, both our scalps go! Dammie! Louis is a fool. I take you to her; but I pay you back all the same!"

"To whom?" The question throbbed with a rush to my lips.

"Stupid dolt!" snarled Louis. "Follow me! Keep your ears open for my whistle—one—they return—two—come you out of the tent—three, we are caught, save yourself!"

I followed the Frenchman in silence. It was a hazy summer night with just enough light from the sickle moon for us to pick our way past the lodges to a large newly-erected wigwam with a small white tent behind.

"This way," whispered Louis, leading through the first to an opening hidden by a hanging robe. Raising the skin, he shoved me forward and hastened out to keep guard.

The figure of a woman with a child in her arms was silhouetted against the white tent wall. She was sitting on some robes, crooning in a low voice to the child, and was unaware of my presence.

"And was my little Eric at the hunt, and did he shoot an arrow all by himself?" she asked, fondling the face that snuggled against her shoulder.

The boy gurgled back a low, happy laugh and lisped some childish reply, which only a mother could translate.

"And he will grow big, big and be a great warrior and fight—fight for his poor mother," she whispered, lowering her voice and caressing the child's curls.

The little fellow sat up of a sudden facing his mother and struck out squarely with both fists, not uttering a word.

"My brave, brave little Eric! My only one, all that God has left to me!" she sobbed hiding her weeping face on the child's neck. "O my God, let me but keep my little one! Thou hast given him to me and I have treasured him as a jewel from Thine own crown! O my God, let me but keep my darling, keep him as Thy gift—and—and—O my God!—Thy—Thy—Thy will be done!"

The words broke in a moan and the child began to cry.

"Hush, dearie! The birds never cry, nor the beavers, nor the great, bold eagle! My own little warrior must never cry! All the birds and the beasts and the warriors are asleep! What does Eric say before he goes to sleep?"

A pair of chubby arms were flung about her neck and passionate, childish kisses pressed her forehead and her cheeks and her lips. Then he slipped to his knees and put his face in her lap.

"God bless my papa—and keep my mamma—and make little Eric brave and good—for Jesus' sake——" the child hesitated.

"Amen," prompted the gentle voice of the mother.

"And keep little Eric for my mamma so she won't cry," added the child, "for Jesus' sake—Amen," and he scrambled to his feet.

A low, piercing whistle cut the night air like the flight of an arrow-shaft. It was Louis Laplante's signal that Diable and the squaw were coming back. At the sound, mother and child started up in alarm. Then they saw me standing in the open way. A gasp of fright came from the white woman's lips. I could tell from her voice that she was all a-tremble, and the little one began to whimper in a smothered, suppressed way.

I whispered one word—"Miriam!"

With a faint cry of anguish, she leaped forward. "Is it you, Eric? O Eric! is it you?" she asked.

"No—no, Miriam, not Eric, but Eric's friend, Rufus Gillespie."

She tottered as if I had struck her. I caught her in my arms and helped her to the couch of robes.

Then I took up my station facing the tent entrance; for I realized the significance of Laplante's warning.

"We have hunted for more than a year for you," I whispered, bending over her, "but the Sioux murdered our messenger and the other you yourself let out of the tent!"

"That—your messenger for me?" she asked in sheer amazement, proving what I had suspected, that she was kept in ignorance of our efforts.

"I have been here for a week, searching the lodges. My horses are in the valley, and we must dare all in one attempt."

"I have given my word I will not try," she hastily interrupted, beginning to pluck at her red shawl in the frenzied way of delirious fever patients. "If we are caught, they will torture us, torture the child before my eyes. They treat him well now and leave me alone as long as I do not try to break away. What can you, one man, do against two thousand Sioux?" and she began to weep, choking back the anguished sobs, that shook her slender frame, and picking feverishly at the red shawl fringe.

To look at that agonized face would have been sacrilege, and in a helpless, nonplussed way, I kept gazing at the painful workings of the thin, frail fingers. That plucking of the wasted, trembling hands haunts me to this day; and never do I see the fingers of a nervous, sensitive woman working in that delirious, aimless fashion but it sets me wondering to what painful treatment from a brutalized nature she has been subjected, that her hands take on the tricks of one in the last stages of disease. It may be only the fancy of an old trader; but I dare avow, if any sympathetic observer takes note of this simple trick of nervous fingers, it will raise the veil on more domestic tragedies and heart-burnings than any father-confessor hears in a year.

"Miriam," said I, in answer to her timid protest, "Eric has risked his life seeking you. Won't you try all for Eric's sake? There'll be little risk! We'll wait for a dark, boisterous, stormy night, and you will roll out of your tent the way you thrust my Indian out. I'll have my horses ready. I'll creep up behind and whisper through the tent."

"Where *is* Eric?" she asked, beginning to waver.

Two shrill, sharp whistles came from Louis Laplante, commanding me to come out of the tent.

"That's my signal! I must go. Quick, Miriam, will you try?"

"I will do what you wish," she answered, so low, I had to kneel to catch the words.

"A stormy night our signal, then," I cried.

Three, sharp, terrified whistles, signifying, "We are caught, save yourself," came from Laplante, and I flung myself on the ground behind Miriam.

"Spread out your arms, Miriam! Quick!" I urged. "Talk to the boy, or we're trapped."

With her shawl spread out full and her elbows sticking akimbo, she caught the lad in her arms and began dandling him to right, and left, humming some nursery ditty. At the same moment there loomed in the tent entrance the great, statuesque figure of the Sioux squaw, whom I had seen in the gorge. I kicked my feet under the canvas wall, while Miriam's swaying shawl completely concealed me from the Sioux woman and thus I crawled out backwards. Then I lay outside the tent and listened, listened with my hand on my pistol, for what might not that

monster of fury attempt with the tender, white woman?

"There were words in the tepee," declared the angry tones of the Indian woman. "The pale face was talking! Where is the messenger from the Mandanes?"

At that, the little child set up a bitter crying.

"Cry not, my little warrior! Hush, dearie! 'Twas only a hunter whistling, or the night hawk, or the raccoon! Hush, little Eric! Warriors never cry! Hush! Hush! Or the great bear will laugh at you and tell his cubs he's found a coward!" crooned Miriam, making as though she neither heard, nor saw the squaw; but Eric opened his mouth and roared lustily. And the little lad unconsciously foiled the squaw; for she presently took herself off, evidently thinking the voices had been those of mother and son.

I skirted cautiously around the rear of the lodges to avoid encountering Diable, or his squaw. The form of a man hulked against me in the dark. 'Twas Louis.

"Mon Dieu, Gillespie, I thought one scalp was gone," he gasped.

"What are you here for? You don't want to be seen with me," I protested, grateful and alarmed for his foolhardiness in coming to meet me.

"Sacredie! The dogs! They make pretty music at your shins without me," and Louis struck boldly across the open for his tent. "Fool to stay so long!" he muttered. "I no more ever help you once again! Mon Dieu! No! I no promise my scalp too! They found your horses in the valley! They—how you say it?—think for some Mandane is here and fear. They rode back fast on your horses. 'Twas why I whistle for, twice so quick! They ride north in the morning. I go too, with the devil and his wife! I be gone to the devil this many a while! But I must go, or they suspect and knife me. That vampire! Ha! she would drink my gore! I no more have nothing to do with you. Before morning, you must do your own do alone! Sacredie! Do not forget, I pay you back yet!"

So he rattled on, ever keeping between me and the lodges. By his confused words, I knew he was in great trepidation.

"Why, there are my horses!" I exclaimed, seeing all six standing before Diable's lodge.

"You do your do before morning! Take one of my saddles!" said Louis.

Sure enough, all my saddles were piled before the Iroquois' wigwam; and there stood my enemy and the Sioux squaw, talking loudly, pointing to the horses and gesticulating with violence.

"Mon Dieu! Prenez garde! Get you in!" muttered Louis. We were at his tent door, and I was looking back at my horses. "If they see you, all is lost," he warned.

And the warning came just in time. With that animal instinct of nearness, which is neither sight, nor smell, my favorite broncho put forward his ears and whinnied sharply. Both Diable and the squaw noted the act and turned; but Louis had knocked me forward face down into the tent.

With an oath, he threw himself on his couch. "Take my saddle," he said. "I steal another. Do your do before morning. I no more have nothing to do with you, till I pay you back all the same!"

And he was presently fast asleep, or pretending to be.

CHAPTER XIX

WHEREIN LOUIS INTRIGUES

Next morning Le Grand Diable would set out for the north. This night, then, was my last chance to rescue Miriam. "Do your do before morning!" How Laplante's words echoed in my ears! I had told Miriam a stormy night was to be the signal for our attempt; and now the rising moon was dispelling any vague haziness that might have helped to conceal us. In an hour, the whole camp would be bright as day in clear, silver light. Presently, the clatter of the lodges ceased. Only an occasional snarl from the dogs, or the angry squeals of my bronchos kicking the Indian ponies, broke the utter stillness. There was not even a wind to drown foot-treads, and every lodge of the camp was reflected across the ground in elongated shadows as distinct as a crayon figure on white paper. What if some watchful Indian should discover our moving shadows? La Robe Noire's fate flashed back and I shuddered.

Flinging up impatiently from the robes, I looked from the tent way. Some dog of the pack gave the short, sharp bark of a fox. Then, but for the crunching of my horses over the turf some yards away, there was silence. I could hear the heavy breathing of people in near-by lodges. Up from the wooded valley came the far-off purr of a stream over stony bottom and the low washing sound only accentuated the stillness. The shrill cry of some lonely night-bird stabbed the atmosphere with a throb of pain. Again the dog snapped out a bark and again there was utter quiet.

"One chance in a thousand," said I to myself, "only one in a thousand; but I'll take it!" And I stepped from the tent. This time the wakeful dog let out a mouthful of quick barkings. Jerking off my boots—I had not yet taken to the native custom of moccasins—I dodged across the roadway into the exaggerated shadow of some Indian camp truckery. Here I fell flat to the ground so that no reflection should betray my movements. Then I remembered I had forgotten Louis Laplante's saddle. Rising, I dived back to the tepee for it and waited for the dogs to quiet before coming out again. That alert canine had set up a duet with a neighboring brute of like restless instincts and the two seemed to promise an endless chorus. As I live, I could have sworn that Louis Laplante laughed in

his sleep at my dilemma; but Louis was of the sort to laugh in the face of death itself. A man flew from a lodge and dealing out stout blows quickly silenced the vicious curs; but I had to let time lapse for the man to go to sleep before I could venture out.

Once more, chirp of cricket, croak of frog and the rush of waters through the valley were the only sounds, and I darted across to the camp shadow. Lying flat, I began to crawl cautiously and laboriously towards my horses. One gave a startled snort as I approached and this set the dogs going again. I lay motionless in the grass till all was quiet and then crept gently round to the far side of my favorite horse and caught his halter strap lest he should whinny, or start away. I drew erect directly opposite his shoulders, so that I could not be seen from the lodges and unhobbling his feet, led him into the concealment of a group of ponies and had the saddle on in a trice. To get the horse to the rear of Miriam's tent was no easy matter. I paced my steps so deftly with the broncho's and let him munch grass so often, the most watchful Indian could not have detected a man on the far side of the horse, directing every move. Behind the Sioux lodge, the earth sloped abruptly away, bare and precipitous; and I left the horse below and clambered up the steep to the white wall of Miriam's tent. Once the dogs threatened to create a disturbance, but a man quieted them, and with gratitude I recognized the voice of Laplante.

Three times I tapped on the canvas but there was no response. I put my arm under the tent and rapped on the ground. Why did she not signal? Was the Sioux squaw from the other lodge listening? I could hear nothing but the tossings of the child.

"Miriam," I called, shoving my arm forward and feeling out blindly.

Thereupon, a woman's hand grasped mine and thrust it out, while a voice so low it might have been the night breeze, came to my ear—"We are watched."

Watched? What did it matter if we were? Had I not dared all? Must not she do the same? This was the last chance. We must not be foiled. My horse, I knew, could outrace any cayuse of the Sioux band.

"Miriam," I whispered back, lifting the canvas, "they will take you away to-morrow—my horse is here! Come! We must risk all!"

And I shoved myself bodily in under the tent wall. She was not a hand's length away, sitting with her face to the entrance of Diable's lodge, her figure rigid and

tense with fear. In the half light I could discern the great, powerful, angular form of a giantess in the opening. 'Twas the Sioux squaw. Miriam leaned forward to cover the child with a motion intended to conceal me, and I drew quickly out.

I thought I had not been detected; but the situation was perilous enough, in all conscience, to inspire caution, and I was backing away, when suddenly the shadows of two men coming from opposite sides appeared on the white tent, and something sprang upon me with tigerish fury. There was the swish of an unsheathing blade, and I felt rather than saw Le Grand Diable and Louis Laplante contesting over me.

"Never! He's mine, my captive! He stole my saddle! He's mine, I tell you," ground out the Frenchman, throwing off my assailant. "Keep him for the warriors and let him be tortured," urged Louis, snatching at the Indian's arm.

I sprang up. It was Louis, who tripped my feet from under me, and we two tumbled to the bottom of the cliff, while the Indian stood above snarling out something in the Sioux tongue.

"Idiot! Anglo-Saxon ox!" muttered Louis, grappling with me as we fell. "Do but act it out, or two scalps go! I no promise mine when I say I help you, bah——"

That was the last I recall; for I went down head backwards, and the blow knocked me senseless.

When I came to, with an aching neck and a humming in my ears, there was the gray light of a waning moon, and I found myself lying bound in Miriam's tent. Her child was whimpering timidly and she was hurriedly gathering her belongings into a small bundle.

"Miriam, what has happened?" I asked. Then the whole struggle and failure came back to me with an overwhelming realization that torture and death would be our portion.

"Try no more," she whispered, brushing past me and making as though she were gathering things where I lay. "Never try, for my sake, never try! They will torture you. I shall die soon. Only save the child! For myself, I am past caring. Good-by forever!" and she dashed to the other side of the tent.

At that, with a deal of noisy mirth, in burst Laplante and the Sioux squaw.

"Ho-ho! My knight-errant has opened his eyes! Great sport for the braves, say I!

Fine mouse-play for the cat, ho-ho!" and Louis looked down at me with laughing insolence, that sent a chill through my veins. 'Twas to save his own scalp the rascal was acting and would have me act too; but I had no wish to betray him. Striking at her captives and rudely ordering them out, the Sioux led the way and left Louis to bring up the rear.

"Leave this, lady," said Louis with an air that might have been impudence or gallantry; and he grabbed the bundle from Miriam's hand and threw it over his shoulder at me. This was greeted with a roar of laughter from the Sioux woman and one look of unspeakable reproach from Miriam. Whistling gaily and turning back to wink at me, the Frenchman disappeared in Diable's lodge. For my part, I was puzzled. Did Louis act from the love of acting and trickery and intrigue? Was he befooling the daughter of L'Aigle, or me?

They tore down Diable's tepee, stringing the poles on the bronchos stolen from me and leaving Miriam's white tent with the Sioux. I saw them mount with my horses to the fore, and they set out at a sharp trot. From the hoof-beats, I should judge they had not gone many paces, when one rider seemed to turn back, and Louis ran into the tent where I lay. I did not utter one word of pleading; but as he stooped for Miriam's bundle, he whisked out a jack-knife and my heart bounded with a great hope. I suppose, involuntarily, I must have lifted my arms to have the bonds severed; for Laplante shook his head.

"No—mine frien'—not now—I not scalp Louis Laplante for your sake,—no, never. Use your teeth—so!" said he, laying the blade of the knife in his own teeth to show me how; and he slipped the thing into hiding under my armpits. "The warriors—they come back to-day," he warned. "You wait till we are far, then cut quick, or they do worse to you than to La Robe Noire! I leave one horse for you in the valley beyond the beaver-dam. Tra-la, comrade, but not forget you. I pay you back yet all the same," and with a whistle, he had vanished.

I hung upon the Frenchman's words as a drowning sailor to a life-line, and heard the hoof-beats grow fainter and fainter in the distance, hardly daring to realize the fearful peril in which I lay. By the light at the tent opening, I knew it was daybreak. Already the Sioux were stirring in their lodges and naked urchins came to the entrance to hoot and pelt mud. Somehow, I got into sitting posture, with my head bowed forward on my arms, so I could use the knife without being seen. At that, the impertinent brats became bolder and swarming into the tent began poking sticks. I held my arm closer to my side, and felt the hard steel's pressure with a pleasure not to be marred by that tantalizing horde. There

seemed to be a gathering hubbub outside. Indians, squaws and children were rushing in the direction of the trail to the Mandanes. The children in my tent forgot me and dashed out with the rest. I could not doubt the cause of the clamor. This was the morning of the warriors' return; and getting the knife in my teeth, I began filing furiously at the ropes about my wrists. Man is not a rodent; but under stress of necessity and with instruments of his own designing, he can do something to remedy his human helplessness. To the din of clamoring voices outside were added the shouts of approaching warriors, the galloping of a multitude of horses and the whining yells of countless dogs.

While all the Sioux were on the outskirts of the encampment, I might yet escape unobserved, but the returning braves were very near. Putting all my strength in my wrists, I burst the half-cut bonds; and the rest was easy. A slash of the knife and my feet were free and I had rolled down the cliff and was running with breathless haste over fallen logs, under leafy coverts, across noisy creeks, through the wooded valley to the beaver dam. How long, or how far, I ran in this desperate, heedless fashion, I do not know. The branches, that reached out like the bands of pursuers, caught and ripped my clothing to shreds. I had been bootless, when I started; but my feet were now bare and bleeding. A gleam of water flashed through the green foliage. This must be the river, with the beaver-dam, and to my eager eyes, the stream already appeared muddy and sluggish as if obstructed. My heart was beating with a sensation of painful, bursting blows. There was a roaring in my ears, and at every step I took, the landscape swam black before me and the trees racing into the back ground staggered on each side like drunken men. Then I knew that I had reached the limit of my strength and with the domed mud-tops of the beaver-dam in sight half a mile to the fore, I sank down to rest. The river was marshy, weed-grown and brown; but I gulped down a drink and felt breath returning and the labored pulse easing. Not daring to pause long, I went forward at a slackened rate, knowing I must husband my strength to swim or wade across the river. Was it the apprehension of fear, or the buzzing in my ears, that suggested the faint, far-away echo of a clamoring multitude? I stopped and listened. There was no sound but the lapping of water, or rush of wind through the leaves. I went on again at hastened pace, and distinctly down the valley came echo of the Sioux war-whoop.

I was pursued. There was no mistaking that fact, and with a thrill, which I have no hesitancy in confessing was the most intense fear I have ever experienced in my life, I broke into a terrified, panic-stricken run. The river grew dark, sluggish and treacherous-looking. By the blood flowing from my feet, Indian scouts could

track me for leagues. I looked to the river with the vague hope of running along the water bed to throw my pursuers off the trail; but the water was deep and I had not strength to swim. The beaver-dam was huddled close to the clay bank of the far side and on the side, where I ran, the current spread out in a flaggy marsh. Hoping to elude the Sioux, I plunged in and floundered blindly forward. But blood trails marked the pond behind and the soft ooze snared my feet.

I was now opposite the beaver-dam and saw with horror there were branches enough floating in mid-stream to entangle the strongest swimmer. The shouts of my pursuers sounded nearer. They could not have known how close they were upon me, else had they ambushed me in silence after Indian custom, shouting only when they sighted their quarry. The river was not tempting for a fagged, breathless swimmer, whose dive must be short and sorry. I had nigh counted my earthly course run, when I caught sight of a hollow, punky tree-trunk standing high above the bank. I could hear the swiftest runners behind splashing through the marsh bed. Now the thick willow-bush screened me, but in a few moments they would be on my very heels. With the supernatural strength of a last desperate effort, I bounded to the empty trunk and like some hounded, treed creature, clambered up inside, digging my wounded feet into the soft, wet wood-rot and burrowing naked fingers through the punk of the rounded sides till I was twice the height of a man above the blackened opening at the base. Then a piece of wood crumbled in my right hand. Daylight broke through the trunk and I found that I had grasped the edge of a rotted knot-hole.

Bracing my feet across beneath me like tie beams of raftered scaffolding, I craned up till my eye was on a level with the knot-hole and peered down through my lofty lookout. Either the shouting of the Sioux warriors had ceased, which indicated they had found my tracks and knew they were close upon me, or my shelter shut out the sound of approaching foes. I broke more bark from the hole and gained full view of the scene below.

A crested savage ran out from the tangled foliage of the river bank, saw the turgid settlings of the rippling marsh, where I had been floundering, and darted past my hiding-place with a shrill yell of triumph. Instantaneously the woods were ringing, echoing and re-echoing with the hoarse, wild war-cries of the Sioux. Band after band burst from the leafy covert of forest and marsh willows, and dashed in full pursuit after the leading Indian. Some of the braves still wore the buckskin toggery of their visit to the Mandanes; but the swiftest runners had cast off all clothing and tore forward unimpeded. The last coppery form disappeared among the trees of the river bank and the shoutings were growing

fainter, when, suddenly, there was such an ominous calm, I knew they were foiled.

Would they return to the last marks of my trail? That thought sent the blood from my head with a rush that left me dizzy, weak and shivering. I looked to the river. The floating branches turned lazily over and over to the lapping of the sluggish current, and the green slime oozing from the clustered beaver lodges of the far side might hide either a miry bottom, or a treacherous hole.

A naked Indian came pattering back through the brush, looking into every hollow log, under fallen trees, through clumps of shrub growth, where a man might hide, and into the swampy river bed. It was only a matter of time when he would reach my hiding-place. Should I wait to be smoked out of my hole, like a badger, or a raccoon? Again I looked hopelessly to the river. A choice of deaths seemed my only fate. Torture, burning, or the cool wash of a black wave gurgling over one's head?

A broad-girthed log lay in the swamp and stretched out over mid-stream in a way that would give a quick diver at least a good, clean, clear leap. A score more savages had emerged from the woods and were eagerly searching, from the limbs of trees above, where I might be perched, to the black river-bed below. However much I may vacillate between two courses, once my decision is taken, I have ever been swift to act; and I slipped down the tree-trunk with the bound of a bullet through a gun-barrel, took one last look from the opening, which revealed pursuers not fifty yards away, plunged through the marsh, dashed to the fallen log and made a rush to the end.

A score of brazen throats screeched out their baffled rage. There was a twanging of bow-strings. The humming of arrow flight sung about my head. I heard the crash of some savage blazing away with his old flintlock. A deep-drawn breath, and I was cleaving the air. Then the murky, greenish waters splashed in my face, opened wide and closed over me.

A tangle of green was at the soft, muddy bottom. Something living, slippery, silky and furry, that was neither fish, nor water snake, got between my feet; but countless arrows, I knew, were aimed and ready for me, when I came to the surface. So I held down for what seemed an interminable time, though it was only a few seconds, struck for the far shore, and presently felt the green slime of the upper water matting in my hair.

Every swimmer knows that rich, sweet, full intake of life-giving air after a long

dive. I drew in deep, fresh breaths and tried to blink the slime from my eyes and get my bearings. There were the howlings of baffled wolves from what was now the far side of the river bank; but domed clay mounds, mossy, floating branches and a world of willows shrubs were about my head. Then I knew what the furry thing among the tangle at the river bottom was, and realized that I had come up among the beaver lodges. The dam must have been an old one; for the clay houses were all overgrown with moss and water-weeds. A perfect network of willow growth interlaced the different lodges.

I heard the splash as of a diver from the opposite side. Was it a beaver, or my Indian pursuers? Then I could distinctly make out the strokes of some one swimming and splashing about. My foes were determined to have me, dead, or alive. I ducked under, found shallow, soft bottom, half paddled, half waded, a pace more shoreward, and came up with my head in utter darkness.

Where was I? I drew breath. Yes, assuredly, I was above water; but the air was fetid with heavy, animal breath and teeth snarled shut in my very face. Somehow, I had come up through the broken bottom of an old beaver lodge and was now in the lair of the living creatures. What was inside, I cannot record; for to my eyes the blackness was positively thick. I felt blindly out through the palpable darkness and caught tight hold of a pole, that seemed to reach from side to side. This gave me leverage and I hoisted myself upon it, bringing my crown a mighty sharp crack as I mounted the perch; for the beaver lodge sloped down like an egg shell.

I must have seemed some water monster to the poor beaver; for there was a scurrying, scampering and gurgling off into the river. Then my own breathing and the drip of my clothes were all that disturbed the lodge.

Time, say certain philosophers, is the measure of a man's ideas marching along in uniform procession. But I hold they are wrong. Time is nothing of the sort; else had time stopped as I hung panting over the pole in the beaver lodge; for one idea and one only, beat and beat and beat to the pulsing of the blood that throbbed through my brain—"I am safe—I am safe—I am safe!"

How can I tell how long I hung there? To me it seemed a century. I do not even know whether I lost consciousness. I am sure I repeatedly awakened with a jerk back from some hazy, far-off, oblivious realm, shut off even in memory from the things of this life. I am sure I tried to burrow my hand through the clammy moss-wall of the beaver lodge to let in fresh air; but my spirit would be suddenly

rapt away to that other region. I am sure I felt the waters washing over my head and sweeping me away from this world to another life. Then I would lose grip of the pole and come to myself clutching at it with wild terror; and again the drowse of life's borderland would overpower me. And all the time I was saying over and over, "I am safe! I am safe!"

How many of the things called hours slipped past, I do not know. As I said before, it seemed to me a century. Whether it was mid-day, or twilight, when I let myself down from the pole and crawled like a bedraggled water-rat to the shore, I do not know. Whether it was morning, or night, when I dragged myself under the fern-brake and fell into a death-like sleep, I do not know. When I awakened, the forest was a labyrinth of shafted moonlight and sombre shadows. All that had happened in the past twenty-four hours came back to me with vivid reality. I remembered Laplante's promise to leave a horse for me in the valley beyond the beaver dam. With this hope in my heart I crawled cautiously down through the silent shadows of the night.

At daybreak I found Louis had made good his promise, and I was speeding on horseback towards the trail, where Little Fellow awaited me.

CHAPTER XX

PLOTS AND COUNTER-PLOTS

He who would hear that paradox of impossibilities—silence become vocal—must traverse the vast wastes of the prairie by night. As a mother quiets a fretful child, so the illimitable calm lulls tumultuous thoughts. The wind moving through empty solitudes comes with a sigh of unutterable loneliness. Unconsciously, men listen for some faint rustling from the gauzy, wavering streamers that fire northern skies. The dullest ear can almost fancy sounds from the noiseless wheeling of planets through the overspanning vaulted blue; and human speech seems sacrilege.

Though the language of the prairie be not in words, some message is surely uttered; for the people of the plains wear the far-away look of communion with the unseen and the unheard. The fine sensibility of the white woman, perhaps, shows the impress of the vast solitudes most readily, and the gravely repressed nature of the Indian least; but all plain-dwellers have learned to catch the voice of the prairie. I, myself, know the message well, though I may no more put it into words than the song love sings in one's heart. Love, says the poet, is infinite. So is the space of the prairie. That, I suppose, is why both are too boundless for the limitation of speech.

Night after night, with only a grassy swish and deadened tread over the turf breaking stillness, we journeyed northward. Occasionally, like the chirp of cricket in a dry well, life sounded through emptiness. Skulking coyotes, seeking prey among earth mounds, or night hawks, lilting solitarily in vaulted mid-heaven, uttered cries that pierced the vast blue. Owls flapped stupidly up from our horses' feet. Hungry kites wheeled above lonely Indian graves, or perched on the scaffolding, where the dead lay swathed in skins.

Reflecting on my experiences with the Mandanes and the Sioux, I was disposed to upbraid fate as a senseless thing with no thread of purpose through life's hopeless jumble. Now, something in the calm of the plains, or the certainty of our unerring star-guides, quieted my unrest. Besides, was I not returning to one who was peerless? That hope speedily eclipsed all interests. That was purpose enough for my life. Forthwith, I began comparing lustrous gray eyes to the stars,

and tracing a woman's figure in the diaphanous northern lights. One face ever gleamed through the dusk at my horse's head and beckoned northward. I do not think her presence left me for an instant on that homeward journey. But, indeed, I should not set down these extravagances, which each may recall in his own case, only I would have others judge whether she influenced me, or I, her.

Thus we traveled northward, journeying by night as long as we were in the Sioux territory. Once in the land of the Assiniboines, we rode day and night to the limit of our horses' endurance. Remembering the Hudson's Bay outrage at the Souris, and having also heard from Mandane runners of a raid planned by our rivals against the North-West fort at Pembina, I steered wide of both places, following the old Missouri trail midway between the Red and Souris rivers. It may have been because we traveled at night, but I did not encounter a single person, native or white, till we came close to the Red and were less than a day's journey from Fort Gibraltar. On the river trail, we overtook some Hudson's Bay trappers. The fellows would not answer a single question about events during the year and scampered away from us as if we carried smallpox, which had thinned the population a few years before.

"That's bad!" said I aloud, as the men fled down the river bank, where we could not follow. Little Fellow looked as solemn as a grave-stone. He shook his head with ominous wisdom that foresees all evil but refuses to prophesy.

"Bother to you, Little Fellow!" I exclaimed. "What do you mean? What's up?"

Again the Indian shook his head with dark mutterings, looking mighty solemn, but he would not share his foreknowledge. We met more Hudson's Bay men, and their conduct was unmistakably suspicious. On a sudden seeing us, they reined up their horses, wheeled and galloped off without a word.

"I don't like that! I emphatically don't!" I piloted my broncho to a slight roll of the prairie, where we could reconnoitre. Distinctly there was the spot where the two rivers met. Intervening shrubbery confused my bearings. I rose in my stirrups, while Little Fellow stood erect on his horse's back.

"Little Fellow!" I cried, exasperated with myself, "Where's Fort Gibraltar? I see where it ought to be, where the towers ought to be higher than that brush, but where's the fort?"

The Indian screened his eyes and gazed forward. Then he came down with a thud, abruptly re-straddling his horse, and uttered one explosive word

—"Smoke."

"Smoke? I don't see smoke! Where's the fort?"

"No fort," said he.

"You're daft!" I informed him, with the engaging frankness of a master for a servant. "There—is—a fort, and you know it—we're both lost—that's more! A fine Indian you are, to get lost!"

Little Fellow scrambled with alacrity to the ground. Picking up two small switches, he propped them against each other.

"Fort!" he said, laconically, pointing to the switches.

"L'anglais!" he cried, thrusting out his foot, which signified Hudson's Bay.

"No fort!" he shouted, kicking the switches into the air. "No fort!" and he looked with speechless disgust at the vacancy.

Now I knew what he meant. Fort Gibraltar had been destroyed by Hudson's Bay men. We had no alternative but to strike west along the Assiniboine, on the chance of meeting some Nor'-Westers before reaching the company's quarters at the Portage. That post, too, might be destroyed; but where were Hamilton and Father Holland? Danger, or no danger, I must learn more of the doings in Red River. Also, there were reasons why I wished to visit the settlers of Fort Douglas. We camped on the south side of the Assiniboine a few miles from the Red, and Little Fellow went to some neighboring half-breeds for a canoe.

And a strange story he brought back! A great man, second only to the king—so the half-breeds said—had come from England to rule over Assiniboia. He boasted the shock of his power would be felt from Montreal to Athabasca. He would drive out all Nor'-Westers. This personage, I afterwards learned, was the amiable Governor Semple, who succeeded Captain Miles McDonell. Already, as a hunter chases a deer, had the great governor chased Nor'-Westers from Red River. Did Little Fellow doubt their word? Where was Fort Gibraltar? Let Little Fellow look and see for himself if aught but masonry and charred walls stood where Fort Gibraltar had been! Let him seek the rafters of the Nor-Westers' fort in the new walls of Fort Douglas! Pembina, too, had fallen before the Hudson's Bay men. Since the coming of the great governor, nothing could stand before the English.

But wait! It was not all over! The war drum was beating in the tents of all the *Bois-Brulés*! The great governor should be taught that even the king's arms could not prevail against the *Bois-Brulés*! Was there smoke of battle? The *Bois-Brulés* would be there! The *Bois-Brulés* had wrongs to avenge. They would not be turned out of their forts for nothing! Knives would be unsheathed. There were full powder-bags! There was a grand gathering of *Bois-Brulés* at the Portage. They, themselves, were on the way there. Let Little Fellow and the white trader join them! Let them be wary; for the English were watchful! Great things were to be done by the *Bois-Brulés* before another moon—and Little Fellow's eyes snapped fire as he related their vauntings.

I was inclined to regard the report as a fairy tale. If the half-breeds were arming and the English watchful, the distrust of the Hudson's Bay men was explained. A nomad, himself, the Indian may be willing enough to share running rights over the land of his fathers; but when the newcomer not only usurps possession, but imposes the yoke of laws on the native, the resentment of the dusky race is easily fanned to that point which civilized men call rebellion. I could readily understand how the Hudson's Bay proclamations forbidding the sale of furs to rivals, when these rivals were friends by marriage and treaty with the natives, roused all the bloodthirsty fury of the Indian nature. Nor'-Westers' forts were being plundered. Why should the *Bois-Brulés* not pillage Hudson's Bay posts? Each company was stealing the cargo of its rival, as boats passed and repassed the different forts. Why should the half-breed not have his share of the booty? The most peace-loving dog can be set a-fighting; and the fight-loving Indian finds it very difficult indeed, to keep the peace. This, the great fur companies had not yet realized; and the lesson was to be driven home to them with irresistible force.

The half-breeds also had news of a priest bringing a delirious man to Fort Douglas. The description seemed to fit Hamilton and Father Holland. Whatever truth might be in the rumors of an uprising, I must ascertain whether or not Frances Sutherland would be safe. Leaving Little Fellow to guard our horses, at sundown I pushed my canoe into the Assiniboine just east of the rapids. Paddling swiftly with the current, I kept close to the south bank, where overhanging willows concealed one side of the river.

As I swung out into the Red, true to the *Bois-Brulés'* report, I saw only blackened chimneys and ruined walls on the site of Fort Gibraltar. Heading towards the right bank, I hugged the naked cliff on the side opposite Fort Douglas, and trusted the rising mist to conceal me. Thus, I slipped past cannon,

pointing threateningly from the Hudson's Bay post, recrossed to the wooded west bank again, and paddled on till I caught a glimpse of a little, square, whitewashed house in a grove of fine old trees. This I knew, from Frances Sutherland's description, was her father's place.

Mooring among the shrubbery I had no patience to hunt for beaten path; but digging my feet into soft clay and catching branches with both hands, I clambered up the cliff and found myself in a thicket not a stone's throw from the door. The house was in darkness. My heart sank at a possibility which hardly framed itself to a thought. Was the apparition in the Mandane lodge some portent? Had I not read, or heard, of departed spirits hovering near loved ones? I had no courage to think more.

Suddenly the door flung open. Involuntarily, I slipped behind the bushes, but dusk hid the approaching figure. Whoever it was made no noise. I felt, rather than heard, her coming, and knew no man could walk so silently. It must be a woman. Then my chest stifled and I heard my own heart-beats. Garments fluttered past the branches of my hiding-place. She of whom I had dreamed by night and thought by day and hoped whether sleeping, or waking, paused, not an arm's length away.

Toying with the tip of the branch, which I was gripping for dear life, she looked languorously through the foliage towards the river. At first I thought myself the victim of another hallucination, but would not stir lest the vision should vanish. She sighed audibly, and I knew this was no spectre. Then I trembled all the more, for my sudden appearance might alarm her.

I should wait until she went back to the house—another of my brave vows to keep myself in hand!—then walk up noisily, giving due warning, and knock at the door. The keeping of that resolution demanded all my strength of will; for she was so near I could have clasped her in my arms without an effort. Indeed, it took a very great effort to refrain from doing so.

"Heigh-ho," said a low voice with the ripple of a sunny brook tinkling over pebbles, "but it's a long day—and a long, long week—and a long, long, long month—and oh!—a century of years since——" and the voice broke in a sigh.

I think—though I would not set this down as a fact—that a certain small foot, which once stamped two strong men into obedience, now vented its impatience at a twig on the grass. By the code of eastern proprieties, I may not say that the dainty toe-tip first kicked the offensive little branch and then crunched it deep in

the turf.

"I hate this lonely country," said the voice, with the vim of water-fret against an obstinate stone. "Wonder what it's like in the Mandane land! I'm sure it's nicer there."

Now I affirm there is not a youth living who would not at some time give his right hand to know a woman's exact interpretation of that word "nicer." For my part, it set me clutching the branch with such ferocity, off snapped the thing with the sharp splintering of a breaking stick. The voice gave a gasp and she jumped aside with nervous trepidation.

"Whatever—was that? I am—not frightened." No one was accusing her. "I won't go in! I won't let myself be frightened! There! The very idea!" And three or four sharp stamps followed in quick succession; but she was shivering.

"I declare the house is so lonely, a ghost would be live company." And she looked doubtfully from the dark house to the quivering poplars. "I'd rather be out here with the tree-toads and owls and bats than in there alone, even if they do frighten me! Anyway, I'm not frightened! It's just some stupid hop-and-go-spring thing at the base of our brains that makes us jump at mice and rats." But the hands interlocking at her back twitched and clasped and unclasped in a way that showed the automatic brain-spring was still active.

"It's getting worse every day. I can't stand it much longer, looking and looking till I'm half blind and no one but Indian riders all day long. Why doesn't he come? Oh! I know something is wrong."

"Afraid of the Metis," thought I, "and expecting her father. A fine father to leave his daughter alone in the house with the half-breeds threatening a raid. She needs some one else to take care of her." This, on after thought, I know was unjust to her father; for pioneers obey necessity first and chivalry second.

"If he would only come!" she repeated in a half whisper.

"Hope he doesn't," thought I.

"For a week I've been dreaming such fearful things! I see him sinking in green water, stretching his hands to me and I can't reach out to save him. On Sunday he seemed to be running along a black, awful precipice. I caught him in my arms to hold him back, but he dragged me over and I screamed myself awake. Sometimes, he is in a black cave and I can't find any door to let him out. Or he

lies bound in some dungeon, and when I stoop to cut the cords, he begins to sink down, down, down through the dark, where I can't follow. I leap after him and always waken with such a dizzy start. Oh! I know he has been in trouble. Something is wrong! His thoughts are reaching out to me and I am so gross and stupid I can't hear what his spirit says. If I could only get away from things, the clatter of everyday things that dull one's inner hearing, perhaps I might know! I feel as if he spoke in a foreign language, but the words he uses I can't make out. All to-day, he has seemed so near! Why does he not come home to me?"

"Mighty fond daughter," thought I, with a jealous pang. She was fumbling among the intricate draperies, where women conceal pockets, and presently brought out something in the palm of her hand.

"I wouldn't have him know how foolish I am," and she laid the thing gently against her cheek.

Now I had never given Frances Sutherland a gift of any sort whatever; and my heart was pierced with anguish that cannot be described. I was, indeed, falling over a precipice and her arms were not holding me back but dragging me over. Would that I, like the dreamer, could awaken with a start. In all conscience, I was dizzy enough; and every pressure of that hateful object to her face bound me faster in a dungeon of utter hopelessness. My sweet day-dreams and midnight rhapsodies trooped back to mock at me. I felt that I must bow broken under anguish or else steel myself and shout back cynical derision to the whole wan troop of torturing regrets. And all the time, she was caressing that thing in her hand and looking down at it with a fondness, which I—poor fool—thought that I alone could inspire. I suppose if I could have crept away unobserved, I would have gone from her presence hardened and embittered; but I must play out the hateful part of eavesdropper to the end.

She opened the hand to feast her eyes on the treasure, and I craned forward, playing the sneak without a pang of shame, but the dusk foiled me.

Then the low, mellow, vibrant tones, whose very music would have intoxicated duller fools than I—'tis ever a comfort to know there are greater fools—broke in melody: "To my own dear love from her ever loyal and devoted knight," and she held her opened hand high. 'Twas my birch-bark message which Father Holland had carried north. I suddenly went insane with a great overcharge of joy, that paralyzed all motion.

"Dear love—wherever are you?" asked a voice that throbbed with longing.

Can any man blame me for breaking through the thicket and my resolution and discretion and all?

"Here—beloved!" I sprang from the bush.

She gave a cry of affright and would have fallen, but my arms were about her and my lips giving silent proof that I was no wraith.

What next we said I do not remember. With her head on my shoulder and I doing the only thing a man could do to stem her tears, I completely lost track of the order of things. I do not believe either of us was calm enough for words for some time after the meeting. It was she who regained mental poise first.

"Rufus!" she exclaimed, breaking away from me, "You're not a sensible man at all."

"Never said I was," I returned.

"If you do *that*," she answered, ignoring my remark and receding farther, "I'll never stop crying."

"Then cry on forever!"

With womanly ingratitude, she promptly called me "a goose" and other irrelevant names.

The rest of our talk that evening I do not intend to set down. In the first place, it was best understood by only two. In the second, it could not be transcribed; and in the third, it was all a deal too sacred.

We did, however, become impersonal for short intervals.

"I feel as if there were some storm in the air," said Frances Sutherland. "The half-breeds are excited. They are riding past the settlement in scores every day. O, Rufus, I know something is wrong."

"So do I," was my rejoinder. I was thinking of the strange gossip of the Assiniboine encampment.

"Do you think the *Bois-Brulés* would plunder your boats?" she asked innocently, ignorant that the malcontents were Nor'-Westers.

"No," said I. "What boats?"

"Why, Nor'-West boats, of course, coming up Red River from Fort William to go up the Assiniboine for the winter's supplies. They're coming in a few days. My father told me so."

"Is Mr. Sutherland an H. B. C. or Nor'-Wester?" I asked in the slang of the company talk.

"I don't know," she answered. "I don't think he knows himself. He says there are numbers of men like that, and they all know there is to be a raid. Why, Rufus, there are men down the river every day watching for the Nor'-Westers' Fort William express." "Where do the men come from?" I questioned, vainly trying to patch some connection between plots for a raid on North-West boats and plots for a fight by Nor'-West followers.

"From Fort Douglas, of course."

"H. B. C.'s, my dear. You must go to Fort Douglas at once. There will be a fight. You must go to-morrow with your father, or with me to-night," I urged, thinking I should take myself off and notify my company of the intended pillaging.

"With you?" she laughed. "Father will be home in an hour. Are you sure about a fight!"

"Quite," said I, trembling for her safety. This certainty of mine has been quoted to prove premeditation on the Nor'-Westers' part; but I meant nothing of the sort. I only felt there was unrest on both sides, and that she must be out of harm's way.

Truly, I have seldom had a harder duty to perform than to leave Frances alone in that dark house to go and inform my company of the plot.

Many times I said good-by before going to the canoe and times unnumbered ran back from the river to repeat some warning and necessitate another farewell.

"Rufus, dear," she said, "this is about the twentieth time. You mustn't come back again."

"Then good-by for the twenty-first," said I, and came away feeling like a young priest anointed for some holy purpose.

I declare now, as I declared before the courts of the land, that in hastening to the Portage with news of the Hudson's Bay's intention to intercept the Nor'-Westers' express from Fort William, I had no other thought but the faithful serving of my company. I knew what suffering the destruction of Souris had entailed in Athabasca, and was determined our brave fellows should not starve in the coming winter through my negligence.

Could I foresee that simple act of mine was to let loose all the punishment the Hudson's Bay had been heaping up against the day of judgment?

CHAPTER XXI

LOUIS PAYS ME BACK

What tempted me to moor opposite the ruins of Fort Gibraltar? What tempts the fly into the spider's web and the fish with a wide ocean for play-ground into one small net? I know there is a consoling fashion of ascribing our blunders to the inscrutable wisdom of a long-suffering Providence; but common-sense forbids I should call evil good, deify my errors, and give thanks for what befalls me solely through my own fault.

Bare posts hacked to the ground were all that remained of Fort Gibraltar's old wall. I had not gone many paces across the former courtyard, when voices sounded from the gravel-pit that had once done duty as a cellar. The next thing I noticed was the shaggy face of Louis Laplante bobbing above the ground. With other vagabond wanderers, the Frenchman had evidently been rummaging old Nor'-West vaults.

"Tra-la, comrade," he shouted, leaping out of the cellar as soon as he saw me. "I, Louis Laplante, son of a seigneur, am resurrecting. I was a Plante! Now I'm a *Louis d'or*, fresh coined from the golden vein of dazzling wit. Once we were men, but they drowned us in a wine-barrel like your lucky dog of an English prince. Now we're earth-goblins re-incarnate! Behold gnomes of the mine! Knaves of the nethermost depths, tra-la! Vampires that suck the blood of whisky-cellars and float to the skies with dusky wings and dizzy heads! Laugh with us, old solemncholy! See the ground spin! Laugh, I say, or be a hitching-post, and we'll dance the May-pole round you! We're vampires, comrade, and you're our cousin, for you're a bat," and Louis applauded his joke with loud, tipsy laughter and staggered up to me drunk as a lord. His heavy breath and bloodshot eyes testified what he had found under the rubbish heaps of Fort Gibraltar's cellar. Embracing me with the affection of a long-lost brother, he rattled on with a befuddled, meaningless jargon.

"So the knife cut well, did it? And the Sioux did not eat you by inches, beginning with your thumbs? Ha! Très bien! Very good taste! You were not meant for feasts, my solemncholy? Some men are monuments. That's you, mine frien'! Some are champagne bottles that uncork, zip, fizz, froth, stars dancing

round your head! That's me! 'Tis I, Louis Laplante, son of a seigneur, am that champagne bottle!"

Pausing for breath, he drew himself erect with ridiculous pomposity. Now there are times when the bravest and wisest thing a brave and wise man can do is take to his heels. I have heard my Uncle Jack MacKenzie say that vice and liquor and folly are best frustrated by flight; and all three seemed to be embodied in Louis Laplante that night. A stupid sort of curiosity made me dally with the mischief brewing in him, just as the fly plays with the spider-web, or the fish with a baited hook.

"There's a fountain-spout in Nor'-West vaults for those who know where to tap the spigot, eh, Louis?" I asked.

"I'm a Hudson's Bay man and to the conqueror comes the tribute," returned Louis, sweeping me a courtly bow.

"I hope such a generous conqueror draws all the tribute he deserves. Do you remember how you saved my life twice from the Sioux, Louis?"

"Generous," shouted the Frenchman, drawing himself up proudly, "generous to mine enemy, always magnificent, grand, superb, as becomes the son of a seigneur! Now I pay you back, rich, well, generous."

"Nonsense, Louis," I expostulated. "'Tis I who am in your debt. I owe you my life twice over. How shall I pay you?" and I made to go down to my canoe.

"Pay me?" demanded Louis, thrusting himself across my path in a menacing attitude. "Stand and pay me like a man!"

"I am standing," I laughed. "Now, how shall I pay you?"

"Strike!" ordered Louis, launching out a blow which I barely missed. "Strike, I say, for kicking me, the son of a seigneur, like a pig!"

At that, half a dozen more drunken vagabonds of the Hudson's Bay service reeled up from the cellar pit; and I began to understand I was in for as much mischief as a young man could desire. The fellows were about us in a circle, and now, that it was too late, I was quite prepared like the fly and the fish to seek safety in flight.

"Sink his canoe," suggested one; and I saw that borrowed craft swamped.

"Strike! *Sacredie!* I pay you back generous," roared Louis. "How can I, Louis Laplante, son of a seigneur, strike a man who won't hit back?"

"And how can I strike a man who saved my life?" I urged, trying to mollify him. "See here, Louis, I'm on a message for my company to-night. I can't wait. Some other day you can pay me all you like—not to-night, some-other-time——"

"Some-oder-time! No—never! Some-oder-time—'tis the way I pay my own debts, always some-oder-time, and I never not pay at all. You no some-oder-time me, comrade! Louis knows some-oder-time too well! He quit his cups some-oder-time and he never quit, not at all! He quit wild Indian some-oder-time, and he never quit, not at all! And he go home and say his confess to the curé some-oder-time, and he never go, not at all! And he settle down with a wife and become a grand seigneur some-oder-time, and he never settle down at all!"

"Good night, Laplante! I have business for the company. I must go," I interrupted, trying to brush through the group that surrounded us.

"So have we business for the company, the Hudson's Bay Company, and you can't go," chimed in one of the least intoxicated of the rival trappers; and they closed about me so that I had not striking room.

"Are you men looking for trouble?" I asked, involuntarily fingering my pistol belt.

"No—we're looking for the Nor'-West brigade billed to pass from Fort William to Athabasca," jeered the boldest of the crowd, a red-faced, middle-aged man with blear eyes. "We're looking for the Nor'-Westers' express," and he laughed insolently.

"You don't expect to find our brigades in Fort Gibraltar's cellar," said I, backing away from them and piecing this latest information to what I had already heard of plots and conspiracies.

Forthwith I felt strong hands gripping both my arms like a vise and the coils of a rope were about me with the swiftness of a lasso. My first impulse was to struggle against the outrage; but I was beginning to learn the service of open ears and a closed mouth was often more valuable than a fighter's blows. Already I had ascertained from their own lips that the Hudson's Bay intended to molest our north-bound brigade.

"Well," said I, with a laugh, which surprised the rascals mightily, "now you've

captured your elephant, what do you propose to do with him?"

Without answering, the men shambled down to the landing place of the fort, jostling me along between the red-faced man and Louis Laplante.

"I consider this a scurvy trick, Louis," said I. "You've let me into a pretty scrape with your idiotic heroics about paying back a fancied grudge. To save a mouse from the tigers, Louis, and then feed him to your cats! Fie, man! I like your son-of-a-seigneur ideas of honor!"

"Ingrate! Low-born ingrate," snapped the Frenchman, preparing to strike one of his dramatic attitudes, "if I were not the son of a seigneur, and you a man with bound arms, you should swallow those words," and he squared up to me for a second time. "If you won't fight, you shan't run away——"

"Off with your French brag," ordered the soberest of the Hudson's Bay men, catching Louis by the scruff of his coat and spinning him out of the way. "There'll be neither fighting nor running away. It is to Fort Douglas we'll take our fine spy."

The words stung, but I muffled my indignation.

"I'll go with pleasure," I returned, thinking that Frances Sutherland and Hamilton and Father Holland were good enough company to compensate for any captivity. "With pleasure, and 'tis not the first time I'll have found friends in the Hudson's Bay fort."

At that speech, the red-faced man, who seemed to be the ringleader, eyed me narrowly. We all embarked on a rickety raft, that would, I declare, have drowned any six sober men who risked their lives on it; but drunk men and children seem to do what sober, grown folk may not are.

How Louis Laplante was for fighting a duel *en route* with the man, who spoke of "French brag" and was only dissuaded from his purpose by the raft suddenly teetering at an angle of forty-five degrees with the water, which threatened to toboggan us all into mid-river; how I was then stationed in the centre and the other men distributed equally on each side of the raft to maintain balance; how we swung out into the Red, rocking with each shifting of the crew and were treated to a volley of objurgations from the red-faced man—I do not intend to relate. This sort of melodrama may be seen wherever there are drunken men, a raft and a river. The men poled only fitfully, and we were driven solely by the

current. It was dark long before we had neared Fort Douglas and the waters swished past with an inky, glassy sheen that vividly recalled the murky pool about the beaver-dam. And yet I had no fear, but drifted along utterly indifferent to the termination of the freakish escapade in which I had become involved. Nature mercifully sets a limit to human capacity for suffering; and I felt I had reached that limit. Nothing worse could happen than had happened, at least, so I told myself, and I awaited with cynical curiosity what might take place inside the Hudson's Bay fort. Then a shaft of lantern light pierced the dark, striking aslant the river, and the men began poling hard for Fort Douglas wharf. We struck the landing with a bump, disembarked, passed the sentinel at the gate and were at the entrance to the main building.

"You kick me here," said Louis. "I pay you back here!"

"What are you going to do with him?" asked the soberest man of the red-faced leader.

"Hand him over to Governor Semple for a spy."

"The governor's abed. Besides, they don't want him about to hear H. B. secrets when the Nor'-West brigade's a-coming! You'd better get sobered up, yez hed! That's my advice to yez, before going to Governor Semple," and the prudent trapper led the way inside. To the fore was the main stairway, on the right the closed store, and on the left a small apartment which the governor had fitted up as a private office. For some unaccountable reason—the same reason, I suppose, that mischief is always awaiting the mischief-maker—the door to this office had been left ajar and a light burned inside. 'Twas Louis, ever alert, when mischief was abroad, who tip-toed over to the open door, poked his head in and motioned his drunken companions across the sacred precincts of Governor Semple's private room. I was loath to be a party to this mad nonsense, but the fly and the fish should have thought of results before venturing too near strange coils. The red-faced fellow gave me a push. The sober man muttered, "Better come, or they'll raise a row," and we were all within the forbidden place, the door shut and bolted.

To city folk, used to the luxuries of the east, I dare say that office would have seemed mean enough. But the men had been so long away from leather chairs, hair-cloth sofa, wall mirror, wine decanter and other odds and ends which furnish a gentleman's living apartments that the very memory of such things had faded, and that small room, with its old-country air, seemed the vestibule to

another world.

"Sump—too—uss—ain't it?" asked the sober man with bated breath and obvious distrust of his tongue.

"Mag—nee—feque! M. Louis Laplante, look you there," cried the Frenchman, catching sight of his full figure in the mirror and instantly striking a pose of admiration. Then he twirled fiercely at both ends of his mustache till it stood out with the wire finish of a Parisian dandy.

The red-faced fellow had permitted me, with arms still tied, to walk across the room and sit on the hair-cloth sofa. He was lolling back in the governor's armchair, playing the lord and puffing one of Mr. Semple's fine pipes.

"We are gentlemen adventurers of the ancient and honorable Hudson's Bay Company, gentlemen adventurers," he roared, bringing his fist down with a thud on the desk. "We hereby decree that the Fort William brigade be captured, that the whisky be freely given to every dry-throated lad in the Hudson's Bay Company, that the Nor'-Westers be sent down the Red on a raft, that this meeting raftify this dissolution, afterwards moving—seconding—and unanimously amending——"

"Adjourning—you mean," interrupted one of the orator's audience.

"I say," called one, who had been dazed by the splendor, "how do you tell which is the lookin' glass and which is the window?" And he looked from the window on one side to its exact reflection, length and width, directly opposite.

The puzzle was left unsolved; for just then Louis Laplante found a flask of liquor and speedily divided its contents among the crowd—which was not calculated to clear up mysteries of windows and mirrors among those addle-pates. Dull wit may be sport for drunken men, but it is mighty flat to an onlooker, and I was out of patience with their carousal.

"The governor will be back here presently, Louis," said I.

"Tired of being a tombstone, ha—ha! Better be a champagne bottle!" he laughed with slightly thickened articulation and increased unsteadiness in his gait.

"If you don't hide that bottle in your hand, there'll be a big head and a sore head for you men to-morrow morning." I rose to try and get them out of the office; but a sober man with tied arms among a drunken crew is at a disadvantage.

"Ha—old—wise—sh—head! To—be—sh—shure! Whur—d'—y'—hide—it?"

"Throw it out of the window," said I, without the slightest idea of leading him into mischief.

"Whish—whish—ish—the window, Rufush?" asked Louis imploringly.

The last potion had done its work and Louis was passing from the jovial to the pensive stage. He would presently reach a mood which might be ugly enough for a companion in bonds. Was it this prospect, I wonder, or the mischievous spirit pervading the very air from the time I reached the ruins that suggested a way out of my dilemma?

"Throw it out of the window," said I, ignoring his question and shoving him off.

"Whish—ish—the window—dammie?" he asked, holding the bottle irresolutely and looking in befuddled distraction from side to side of the room.

"Thur—both—windows—fur as I see," said the man, who had been sober, but was no longer so.

"Throw it through the back window! Folks comin' in at the door won't see it."

The red-faced man got up to investigate, and all faith in my plan died within me; but the lantern light was dusky and the red-faced man could no longer navigate a course from window to mirror.

"There's a winder there," said he, scratching his head and looking at the window reflected in perfect proportion on the mirrored surface.

"And there's a winder there," he declared, pointing at the real window. "They're both winders and they're both lookin'-glasses, for I see us all in both of them. This place is haunted. Lem-me out!"

"Take thish, then," cried Louis, shoving the bottle towards him and floundering across to the door to bar the way. "Take thish, or tell me whish—ish—the window."

"Both winders, I tell you, and both lookin'-glasses," vowed the man. The other four fellows declined to express an opinion for the very good reason that two were asleep and two befuddled beyond questioning.

"See here, Louis," I exclaimed, "there's only one way to tell where to throw that

bottle."

"Yesh, Rufush," and he came to me as if I were his only friend on earth.

"The bottle will go through the window and it won't go through the mirror," I began.

"Dammie—I knew that," he snapped out, ready to weep.

"Well—you undo these things," nodding to the ropes about my arms, "and I'll find out which opens, and the one that opens is the window, and you can throw out the bottle."

"The very thing, Rufush, wise—sh—head—old—old—ol' solemncholy," and he ripped the ropes off me.

Now I offer no excuse for what I did. I could have opened that window and let myself out some distance ahead of the bottle, without involving Louis and his gang in greater mischief. What I did was not out of spite to the governor of a rival company; but mischief, as I said, was in the very air. Besides, the knaves had delayed me far into midnight, and I had no scruples about giving each twenty-four hours in the fort guardroom. I took a precautionary inspection of the window-sash. Yes, I was sure I could leap through, carrying out sash and all.

"Hurry—ol' tombshtone—governor—sh-comin'," urged Louis.

I made towards the window and fumbled at the sash.

"This doesn't open," said I, which was quite true, for I did not try to budge it. Then I went across to the mirror. "Neither does this," said I.

"Wha'—wha'—'ll—we do—Rufush?"

"I'll tell you. You can jump through a window but not through a glass. Now you count—one two—three,"—this to the red-faced man—"and when you say 'three' I'll give a run and jump. If I fall back, you'll know it's the mirror, and fling the bottle quick through the other. Ready, count!"

"One," said the red-faced man.

Louis raised his arm and I prepared for a dash.

"Two!"

Louis brought back his arm to gain stronger sweep.

"Three!"

I gave a leap and made as though I had fallen back. There was the pistol-shot splintering of bottle and mirror crashing down to the floor. The window frame gave with a burst, and I was outside rushing past the sleepy sentinel, who poured out a volley of curses after me.

CHAPTER XXII

A DAY OF RECKONING

As well play pussy-wants-a-corner with a tiger as make-believe war with an Indian. In both cases the fun may become ghastly earnest with no time for cry-quits. So it was with the great fur-trading companies at the beginning of this century. Each held the Indian in subjection and thought to use him with daring impunity against its rival. And each was caught in the meshes of its own merry game.

I, as a Nor'-Wester, of course, consider that the lawless acts of the Hudson's Bay had been for three years educating the natives up to the tragedy of June 19, 1816. But this is wholly a partisan, opinion. Certainly both companies have lied outrageously about the results of their quarrels. The truth is Hudson's Bay and Nor'-Westers were playing war with the Indian. Consequences having exceeded all calculation, both companies would fain free themselves of blame.

For instance, it has been said the Hudson's Bay people had no intention of intercepting the North-West brigade bound up the Red and Assiniboine for the interior—this assertion despite the fact our rivals had pillaged every North-West fort that could be attacked. Now I acknowledge the Nor'-Westers disclaim hostile purpose in the rally of three hundred *Bois-Brulés* to the Portage; but this sits not well with the warlike appearance of these armed plain rangers, who sallied forth to protect the Fort William express. Nor does it agree with the expectations of the Indian rabble, who flocked on our rear like carrion birds keen for the spoils of battle. Both companies had—as it were—leveled and cocked their weapon. To send it off needed but a spark, and a slight misunderstanding ignited that spark.

My arrival at the Portage had the instantaneous effect of sending two strong battalions of *Bois-Brulés* hot-foot across country to meet the Fort William express before it could reach Fort Douglas. They were to convoy it overland to a point on the Assiniboine where it could be reshipped. To the second of these parties, I attached myself. I was anxious to attempt a visit to Hamilton. There was some one else whom I hoped to find at Fort Douglas; so I refused to rest at the Portage, though I had been in my saddle almost constantly for twenty days.

When we set out, I confess I did not like the look of things. Those Indians smeared with paint and decked out with the feathered war-cap kept increasing to our rear. There were the eagles! Where was the carcass? The presence of these sinister fellows, hot with the lust of blood, had ominous significance. Among the half-breeds there was unconcealed excitement.

Shortly before we struck off the Assiniboine trail northward for the Red, in order to meet the expected brigade beyond Fort Douglas, some of our people slipped back to the Indian rabble. When they reappeared, they were togged out in native war-gear with too many tomahawks and pistols for the good of those who might interfere with our mission. There was no misunderstanding the ugly temper of the men. Here, I wish to testify that explicit orders were given for the forces to avoid passing near Fort Douglas, or in any way provoking conflict. There was placed in charge of our division the most powerful plain-ranger in the service of the company, the one person of all others, who might control the natives in case of an outbreak—and that man was Cuthbert Grant. Pierre, the minstrel, and six clerks were also in the party; but what could a handful of moderate men do with a horde of Indians and Metis wrought up to a fury of revenge?

"Now, deuce take those rascals! What are they doing?" exclaimed Grant angrily, as we left the river trail and skirted round a slough of Frog Plains on the side remote from Fort Douglas. Our forces were following in straggling disorder. The first battalions of the *Bois-Brulés*, which had already rounded the marsh, were now in the settlement on Red River bank. It was to them that Grant referred. Commanding a halt and raising his spy-glass, he took an anxious survey of the foreground.

"There's something seriously wrong," he said. "Strikes me we're near a powder mine! Here, Gillespie, you look!" He handed the field-glass to me.

A great commotion was visible among the settlers. Ox-carts packed with people were jolting in hurried confusion towards Fort Douglas. Behind, tore a motley throng of men, women and children, running like a frightened flock of sheep. Whatever the cause of alarm, our men were not molesting them; for I watched the horsemen proceeding leisurely to the appointed rendezvous, till the last rider disappeared among the woods of the river path.

"Scared! Badly scared! That's all, Grant," said I. "You've no idea what wild stories are going the rounds of the settlement about the *Bois-Brulés*!"

"And you've no idea, young man, what wild stories are going the rounds of the

Bois-Brulés about the settlement," was Grant's moody reply.

My chance acquaintance with the Assiniboine encampment had given me some idea, but I did not tell Grant so.

"Perhaps they've taken a few old fellows prisoners to ensure the fort's good behavior, while we save our bacon," I suggested.

"If they have, those Highlanders will go to Fort Douglas shining bald as a red ball," answered the plain-ranger.

In this, Grant did his people injustice; for of those prisoners taken by the advance guard, not a hair of their heads was injured. The warden was nervously apprehensive. This was unusual with him; and I have since wondered if his dark forebodings arose from better knowledge of the *Bois-Brulés* than I possessed, or from some premonition.

"There'd be some reason for uneasiness, if you weren't here to control them, Grant," said I, nodding towards the Indians and Metis.

"One man against a host! What can I do?" he asked gloomily.

"Good gracious, man! Do! Why, do what you came to do! Whatever's the matter with you?"

The swarthy face had turned a ghastly, yellowish tint and he did not answer.

"'Pon my honor," I exclaimed. "Are you ill, man?"

"'Tisn't that! When I went to sleep, last night, there were—corpses all round me. I thought I was in a charnel house and——"

"Good gracious, Grant!" I shuddered out. "Don't you go off your head next! Leave that for us green chaps! Besides, the Indians were raising stench enough with a dog-stew to fill any brain with fumes. For goodness' sake, let's go on, meet those fellows with the brigade, secure that express and get off this 'powder mine'—as you call it."

"By all means!" Grant responded, giving the order, and we moved forward but only at snail pace; for I think he wanted to give the settlers plenty of time to reach the fort.

By five o'clock in the afternoon we had almost rounded the slough and were

gradually closing towards the wooded ground of the river bank. We were within ear-shot of the settlers. They were flying past with terrified cries of "The half-breeds! The half-breeds!" when I heard Grant groan from sheer alarm and mutter —

"Look! Look! The lambs coming to meet the wolves!"

To this day I cannot account for the madness of the thing. There, some twenty, or thirty Hudson's Bay men—mere youths most of them—were coming with all speed to head us off from the river path, at a wooded point called Seven Oaks. What this pigmy band thought it could do against our armed men, I do not know. The blunder on their part was so unexpected and inexcusable, it never dawned on us the panic-stricken settlers had spread a report of raid, and these poor valiant defenders had come out to protect the colony. If that be the true explanation of their rash conduct in tempting conflict, what were they thinking about to leave the walls of their fort during danger? My own opinion is that with Lord Selkirk's presumptuous claims to exclusive possession in Red River and the recent high-handed success of the Hudson's Bay, the men of Fort Douglas were so flushed with pride they did not realize the risk of a brush with the *Bois-Brulés*. Much, too, may be attributed to Governor Semple's inexperience; but it was very evident the purpose of the force deliberately blocking our path was not peaceable. If the Hudson's Bay blundered in coming out to challenge us, so did we, I frankly admit; for we regarded the advance as an audacious trick to hold us back till the Fort William express could be captured.

Now that the thing he feared had come, all hesitancy vanished from Grant's manner. Steeled and cool like the leader he was, he sternly commanded the surging Metis to keep back. Straggling Indians and half-breeds dashed to our fore-ranks with the rush of a tempest and chafed hotly against the warden. At a word from Grant, the men swung across the enemy's course sickle-shape; but they were furious at this disciplined restraint. From horn to horn of the crescent, rode the plain-ranger, lashing horses back to the circle and shaking his fist in the quailing face of many a bold rebel.

Both sides advanced within a short distance of each other. We could see that Governor Semple, himself, was leading the Hudson's Bay men. Immediately, Boucher, a North-West clerk, was sent forward to parley. Now, I hold the Nor'-Westers would not have done that if their purpose had been hostile; but Boucher rode out waving his hand and calling—

"What do you want? What do you want?"

"What do you want, yourself?" came Governor Semple's reply with some heat and not a little insolence.

"We want our fort," demanded Boucher, slightly taken aback, but thoroughly angered. His horse was prancing restively within pistol range of the governor.

"Go to your fort, then! Go to your fort!" returned Semple with stinging contempt in manner and voice.

He might as well have told us to go to Gehenna; for the fort was scattered to the four winds.

"The fool!" muttered Grant. "The fool! Let him answer for the consequences. Their blood be on their own heads."

Whether the *Bois-Brulés*, who had lashed their horses into a lather of foam and were cursing out threats in the ominous undertone that precedes a storm-burst, now encroached upon the neutral ground in spite of Grant, or were led gradually forward by the warden as the Hudson's Bay governor's hostility increased, I did not in the excitement of the moment observe. One thing is certain, while the quarrel between the Hudson's Bay governor and the North-West clerk was becoming more furious, our surging cohorts were closing in on the little band like an irresistible tidal wave. I could make out several Hudson's Bay faces, that seemed to remind me of my Fort Douglas visit; but of the rabble of Nor'-Westers and *Bois-Brulés* disguised in hideous war-gear, I dare avow not twenty of us were recognizable.

"Miserable rogue!" Boucher was shouting, utterly beside himself with rage and flourishing his gun directly over the governor's head, "Miserable rogue! Why have you destroyed our fort?"

"Call him off, Grant! Call him off, or it's all up!" I begged, seeing the parley go from bad to worse; but Grant was busy with the *Bois-Brulés* and did not hear.

"Wretch!" Governor Semple exclaimed in a loud voice. "Dare you to speak so to me!" and he caught Boucher's bridle, throwing the horse back on its haunches.

Boucher, agile as a cat, slipped to the ground.

"Arrest him, men!" commanded the governor. "Arrest him at once!"

But the clerk was around the other side of the horse, with his gun leveled across its back.

Whether, when Boucher jumped down, our bloodthirsty knaves thought him shot and broke from Grant's control to be avenged, or whether Lieutenant Holt of the Hudson's Bay at that unfortunate juncture discharged his weapon by accident, will never be known.

Instantaneously, as if by signal, our men with a yell burst from the ranks, leaped from their saddles and using horses as breast-work, fired volley after volley into the governor's party. The neighing and plunging of the frenzied horses added to the tumult. The Hudson's Bay men were shouting out incoherent protest; but what they said was drowned in the shrill war-cry of the Indians. Just for an instant, I thought I recognized one particular voice in that shrieking babel, which flashed back memory of loud, derisive laughter over a camp fire and at the buffalo hunt; but all else was forgotten in the terrible consciousness that our men's murderous onslaught was deluging the prairie with innocent blood.

Throwing himself between the *Bois-Brulés* and the retreating band, the warden implored his followers to grant truce. As well plead with wild beasts. The half-breeds were deaf to commands, and in vain their leader argued with blows. The shooting had been of a blind sort, and few shots did more than wound; but the natives were venting the pent-up hate of three years and would give no quarter. From musketry volleys the fight had become hand-to-hand butchery.

I had dismounted and was beating the scoundrels back with the butt end of my gun, begging, commanding, abjuring them to desist, when a Hudson's Bay youth swayed forward and fell wounded at my feet. There was the baffled, anguished scream of some poor wounded fellow driven to bay, and I saw Laplante across the field, covered with blood, reeling and staggering back from a dozen red-skin furies, who pressed upon their fagged victim, snatching at his throat like hounds at the neck of a beaten stag. With a bound across the prostrate form of the youth, I ran to the Frenchman's aid. Louis saw me coming and struck out so valiantly, the wretched cowards darted back just as I have seen a miserable pack of open-mouthed curs dodge the last desperate sweep of antlered head. That gave me my chance, and I fell on their rear with all the might I could put in my muscle, bringing the flat of my gun down with a crash on crested head-toggery, and striking right and left at Louis' assailants.

"Ah—*mon Dieu*—comrade," sobbed Louis, falling in my arms from sheer

exhaustion, while the tears trickled down in a white furrow over his blood-splashed cheeks, "*mon Dieu*—comrade, but you pay me back generous!"

"Tutts, man, this is no time for settling old scores and playing the grand! Run for your life. Run to the woods and swim the river!" With that, I flung him from me; for I heard the main body of our force approaching. "Run," I urged, giving the Frenchman a push.

"The run—ha—ha—my old spark," laughed Louis with a tearful, lack-life sort of mirth, "the run—it has all run out," and with a pitiful reel down he fell in a heap.

I caught him under the armpits, hoisted him to my shoulders, and made with all speed for the wooded river bank. My pace was a tumble more than a run down the river cliff, but I left the man at the very water's edge, where he could presently strike out for the far side and regain Fort Douglas by swimming across again. Then I hurried to the battle-field in search of the wounded youth whom I had left. As I bent above him, the poor lad rolled over, gazing up piteously with the death-look on his face; and I recognized the young Nor'-Wester who had picked flowers with me for Frances Sutherland and afterwards deserted to the Hudson's Bay. The boy moaned and moved his lips as if speaking, but I heard no sound. Stooping on one knee, I took his head on the other and bent to listen; but he swooned away. Afraid to leave him—for the savages were wreaking indescribable barbarities on the fallen—I picked him up. His arms and head fell back limply as if he were dead, and holding him thus, I again dashed for the fringe of woods. Rogers of the Hudson's Bay staggered against me wounded, with both hands thrown up ready to surrender. He was pleading in broken French for mercy; but two half-breeds, one with cocked pistol, the other with knife, rushed upon him. I turned away that I might not see; but the man's unavailing entreaties yet ring in my ears. Farther on, Governor Semple lay, with lacerated arm and broken thigh. He was calling to Grant, "I'm not mortally wounded! If you could get me conveyed to the fort I think I would live!"

Then I got away from the field and laid my charge in the woods. Poor lad! The pallor of death was on every feature. Tearing open his coat and taking letters from an inner pocket to send to relatives, I saw a knife-stab in his chest, which no mortal could survive. Battle is pitiless. I hurriedly left the dying boy and went back to the living, ordering a French half-breed to guard him.

"See that no one mutilates this body," said I, "and I'll reward you."

My shout seemed to recall the lad's consciousness. Whether he fully understood

the terrible significance of my words, I could not tell; but he opened his eyes with a reproachful glazed stare; and that was the last I saw of him.

Knowing Grant would have difficulty in obtaining carriers for Governor Semple, and only too anxious to gain access to Fort Douglas, I ran with haste towards the recumbent form of the fallen leader. Grant was at some distance scouring the field for reliable men, and while I was yet twenty or thirty yards away an Indian glided up.

"Dog!" he hissed in the prostrate man's face. "You have caused all this! You shall not live! Dog that you are!"

Then something caught my feet. I stumbled and fell. There was the flare of a pistol shot in Governor Semple's face and a slight cry. The next moment I was by his side. The shot had taken effect in the breast. The body was yet hot with life; but there was neither breath, nor heart beat.

A few of the Hudson's Bay band gained hiding in the shrubbery and escaped by swimming across to the east bank of the Red, but the remnant tried to reach the fort across the plain. Calling me, Grant, now utterly distracted, directed his efforts to this quarter. I with difficulty captured my horse and galloped off to join the warden. Our riders were circling round something not far from the fort walls and Grant was tearing over the prairie, commanding them to retire. It seems, when Governor Semple discovered the strength of our forces, he sent some of his men back to Fort Douglas for a field-piece. Poor Semple with his European ideas of Indian warfare! The *Bois-Brulés* did not wait for that field-piece. The messengers had trundled it out only a short distance from the gateway, when they met the fugitives flying back with news of the massacre. Under protection of the cannon, the men made a plucky retreat to the fort, though the *Bois-Brulés* harassed them to the very walls. This disappearance—or rather extermination—of the enemy, as well as the presence of the field-gun, which was a new terror to the Indians, gave Grant his opportunity. He at once rounded the men up and led them off to Frog Plains, on the other side of the swamp. Here we encamped for the night, and were subsequently joined by the first division of *Bois-Brulés*.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE IROQUOIS PLAYS HIS LAST CARD

The *Bois-Brulés* and Indian marauders, who gathered to our camp, were drunk with the most intoxicating of all stimulants—human blood. This flush of victory excited the redskins' vanity to a boastful frenzy. There was wild talk of wiping the pale-face out of existence; and if a weaker man than Grant had been at the head of the forces, not a white in the settlement would have escaped massacre. In spite of the bitterness to which the slaughter at Seven Oaks gave rise, I think all fair-minded people have acknowledged that the settlers owed their lives to the warden's efforts.

That night pandemonium itself could not have presented a more hideous scene than our encampment. The lust of blood is abhorrent enough in civilized races, but in Indian tribes, whose unrestrained, hard life abnormally develops the instincts of the tiger, it is a thing that may not be portrayed. Let us not, with the depreciatory hypocrisy, characteristic of our age, befool ourselves into any belief that barbaric practices were more humane than customs which are the flower of civilized centuries. Let us be truthful. Scientific cruelty may do its worst with intricate armaments; but the blood-thirst of the Indian assumed the ghastly earnest of victors drinking the warm life-blood of dying enemies and of torturers laving hands in a stream yet hot from pulsing hearts.

Decked out in red-stained trophies with scalps dangling from their waists, the natives darted about like blood-whetted beasts; and the half-breeds were little better, except that they thirsted more for booty than life. There was loud vaunting over the triumph, the ignorant rabble imagining their warriors heroes of a great battle, instead of the murderous plunderers they were. Pierre, the rhymester, according to his wont, broke out in jubilant celebration of the half-breeds' feat:[A]

Ho-ho! List you now to a tale of truth
Which I, Pierre, the rhymester, proudly sing,
Of the *Bois-Brulés*, whose deeds dismay
The hearts of the soldiers serving the king!

Swift o'er the plain rode our warriors brave
To meet the gay voyageurs come from the sea.
Out came the bold band that had pillaged our land,
And we taught them the plain is the home of the free.

We were passing along to the landing-place,
Three hostile whites we bound on the trail.
The enemy came with a shout of acclaim,
We flung back their taunts with the shriek of a gale.

"They have come to attack us," our people cry.
Our cohorts spread out in a crescent horn,
Their path we bar in a steel scimitar,
And their empty threats we flout with scorn.

They halt in the face of a dauntless foe,
They spit out their venom of baffled rage!
Honor, our breath to the very death!
So we proffer them peace, or a battle-gage.

The governor shouts to his soldiers, "Draw!"
'Tis the enemy strikes the first, fateful blow!
Our men break from line, for the battle-wine
Of a fighting race has a fiery glow.

The governor thought himself mighty in power.
The shock of his strength—Ha-ha!—should be known
From the land of the sea to the prairie free
And all free men should be overthrown![B]

But naked and dead on the plain lies he,
Where the carrion hawk, and the sly coyote
Greedily feast on the great and the least,
Without respect for a lord of note.

The governor thought himself mighty in power.
He thought to enslave the *Bois-Brulés*,
"Ha-ha," laughed the hawk. Ho-ho! Let him mock.
"Plain rangers ride forth to slay, to slay."

Whose cry outpierces the night-bird's note?
Whose voice mourns sadly through sighing trees?
What spirits wail to the prairie gale?
Who tells his woes to the evening breeze?

Ha-ha! We know, though we tell it not.
We fought with them till none remained.
The coyote knew, and his hungry crew
Licked clean the grass where the turf was stained.

Ho-ho! List you all to my tale of truth.
'Tis I, Pierre, the rhymester, this glory tell
Of freedom saved and brave hands laved
In the blood of tyrants who fought and fell!

The whole scene was repugnant beyond endurance. My ears were so filled with the death cries heard in the afternoon, I had no relish for Pierre's crude recital of what seemed to him a glorious conquest. I could not rid my mind of that dying boy's sad face. Many half-breeds were preparing to pillage the settlement. Intending to protect the Sutherland home and seek the dead lad's body, I borrowed a fresh horse and left the tumult of the camp.

I made a detour of the battle-field in order to reach the Sutherland homestead before night. I might have saved myself the trouble; for every movable object—to the doors and window sashes—had been taken from the little house, whether by father and daughter before going to the fort, or by the marauders, I did not know.

It was unsafe to return by the wooded river trail after dark and I struck directly to the clearing and followed the path parallel to the bush. When I reached Seven Oaks, I was first apprised of my whereabouts by my horse pricking forward his ears and sniffing the air uncannily. I tightened rein and touched him with the spur, but he snorted and jumped sideways with a suddenness that almost unseated me, then came to a stand, shaking as if with chill. Something skulked across the trail and gained cover in the woods. With a reassuring pat, I urged my

horse back towards the road, for the prairie was pitted with badger and gopher holes; but the beast reared, baulked and absolutely refused to be either driven, or coaxed.

"Wise when men are fools!" said I, dismounting. Bringing the reins over his head, I tried to pull him forward; but he planted all fours and jerked back, almost dragging me off my feet.

"Are you possessed?" I exclaimed, for if ever horror were plainly expressed by an animal, it was by that horse. Legs rigid, head bent down, eyes starting forward and nostrils blowing in and out, he was a picture of terror.

Something wriggled in the thicket. The horse rose on his hind legs, wrenched the rein from my hand and scampered across the plain. I sent a shot into the bush. There was a snarl and a scurrying through the underbrush.

"Pretty bold wolf! Never saw a broncho act that way over a coyote before!"

I might as well find the body of the English lad before trying to catch my horse, so I walked on. Suddenly, in the silver-white of a starry sky, I saw what had terrified the animal. Close to the shrubbery lay the stark form of a white man, knees drawn upwards and arms spread out like the bars of a cross. Was that the lad I had known? I rushed towards the corpse—but as quickly turned away. From downright lack of courage, I could not look at it; for the body was mutilated beyond semblance to humanity. Would that I had strength and skill to paint that dead figure as it was! Then would those, who glory in the shedding of blood, glory to their shame; and the pageant of war be stripped of all its false toggery revealing carnage and slaughter in their revolting nakedness.

I could not look back to know if that were the lad, but ran aimlessly towards the scene of the Seven Oaks fray. As I approached, there was a great flapping of wings. Up rose buzzards, scolding in angry discord at my interruption. A pack of wolves skulked a few feet off and eyed me impatiently, boldly waiting to return when I left. The impudence of the brutes enraged me and I let go half a dozen charges, which sent them to a more respectful distance. Here were more bodies like the first. I counted eight within a stone's throw, and there were twice as many between Seven Oaks and the fort. Where they lay, I could tell very well; for hawks wheeled with harsh cries overhead and there was a vague movement of wolfish shapes along the ground.

What possessed me to hover about that dreadful scene, I cannot imagine, unless

the fear of those creatures returning; but I did not carry a thing with which I could bury the dead. Involuntarily, I sought out Rogers and Governor Semple; for I had seen the death of each. It was when seeking these, that I thought I distinguished the faintest motion of one figure still clothed and lying apart from the others.

The sight riveted me to the spot.

Surely it was a mistake! The form could not have moved! It must have been some error of vision, or trick of the shadowy starlight; but I could not take my eyes from the prostrate form. Again the body moved—distinctly moved—beyond possibility of fancy, the chest heaving up and sinking like a man struggling but unable to rise. With the ghastly dead and the ravening wolves all about, the movement of that wounded man was strangely terrifying and my knees knocked with fear, as I ran to his aid.

The man was an Indian, but his face I could not see; for one hand staunched a wound in his head and the other gripped a knife with which he had been defending himself. My first thought was that he must be a Nor'-Wester, or his body would not have escaped the common fate; but if a Nor'-Wester, why had he been left on the field? So I concluded he was one of the camp-followers, who had joined our forces for plunder and come to a merited end. Still he was a man; and I stooped to examine him with a view to getting him on my horse and taking him back to the camp.

At first he was unconscious of my presence. Gently I tried to remove the left hand from his forehead, but at the touch, out struck the right hand in vicious thrusts of the hunting-knife, one blind cut barely missing my arm.

"Hold, man!" I cried, "I'm no foe, but a friend!" and I caught the right arm tightly.

At the sound of my voice, the left hand swung out revealing a frightful gash; and the next thing I knew, his left arm had encircled my neck like the coil of a strangler, five fingers were digging into the flesh of my throat and Le Grand Diable was making frantic efforts to free his right hand and plunge that dagger into me. The shock of the discovery threw me off guard, and for a moment there was a struggle, but only for a moment. Then the wounded man fell back, writhing in pain, his face contorted with agony and hate. I do not think he could see me. He must have been blind from that wound. I stood back, but his knife still cut the air.

"Le Grand Diable! Fool!" I said, "I will not harm you! I give you the white man's word, I will not hurt you!"

The right arm fell limp and still. Had I, by some strange irony, been led to this spot that I might witness the death of my foe? Was this the end of that long career of evil?

"Le Grand Diable!" I cried, going a pace nearer, which seemed to bring back the ebbing life. "Le Grand Diable! You cannot stay here among the wolves. Tell me whereto find Miriam and I'll take you back to the camp! Tell me and no one shall harm you! I will save you!"

The thin lips moved. He was saying, or trying to say, something.

"Speak louder!" and I bent over him. "Speak the truth and I take you to the camp!"

The lips were still moving, but I could not hear a sound.

"Speak louder!" I shouted. "Where is Miriam? Where is the white woman?" I put my ear to his lips, fearful that life might slip away before I could hear.

There was a snarl through the glistening set teeth. The prostrate body gave an upward lurch. With one swift, treacherous thrust, he drove his knife into my coat-sleeve, grazing my forearm. The effort cost him his life. He sank down with a groan. The sightless, bloodshot eyes opened. Le Grand Diable would never more feign death.

I jerked the knife from my coat, hurled it from me, sprang up and fled from the field as if it had been infected with a pest, or I pursued by gends. Never looking back and with superstitious dread of the dead Indian's evil spirit, I tore on and on till, breath-spent and exhausted, I threw myself down with the North-West camp-fires in sight.

FOOTNOTES:

[A] It should scarcely be necessary for the author to state that these are the sentiments of the Indian poet expressing the views of the savage towards the white man, and not the white man towards the savage. The poem is as close a translation of the original ballad sung by Pierre in Metis dialect the night of the massacre, as could be given. The Indian nature is more in harmony with the hawk and the coyote than with the white man; hence the references. Other thoughts embodied in this crude lay are taken

directly from the refrains of the trappers chanted at that time.

[B] Governor Semple unadvisedly boasted that the shock of his power would be felt from Montreal to Athabasca.

CHAPTER XXIV

FORT DOUGLAS CHANGES MASTERS

I suppose there are times in the life of every one, even the strongest—and I am not that—when a feather's weight added to a burden may snap power of endurance. I had reached that stage before encountering Le Grand Diable on the field of massacre at Seven Oaks. With the events in the Mandane country, the long, hard ride northward and this latest terrible culmination of strife between Nor'-Westers and Hudson's Bay, the past month had been altogether too hard packed for my well-being. The madness of northern traders no longer amazed me.

An old nurse of my young days, whom I remember chiefly by her ramrod back and sharp tongue, used to say, "Nerves! nerves! nothing but nerves!" She thanked God she was born before the doctors had discovered nerves. Though neurotic theories had not been sufficiently elaborated for me to ascribe my state to the most refined of modern ills—nervous prostration—I was aware, as I dragged over the prairie with the horse at the end of a trailing bridle rein, that something was seriously out of tune. It was daylight before I caught the frightened broncho and no knock-kneed coward ever shook more, as I vainly tried to vault into the saddle, and after a dozen false plunges at the stirrup, gave up the attempt and footed it back to camp. There was a daze between my eyes, which the over-weary know well, and in the brain-whirl, I could distinguish only two thoughts, Where was Miriam—and Father Holland's prediction —"Benedicite! The Lord shall be your avenger! He shall deliver that evil one into the power of the punisher."

Thus, I reached the camp, picketed the horse, threw myself down in the tent and slept without a break from the morning of the 20th till mid-day of the 21st. I was awakened by the *Bois-Brulés* returning from a demonstration before the gateway of Fort Douglas. Going to the tent door, I saw that Pritchard, one of the captive Hudson's Bay men, had been brought back from a conference with the enemy. From his account, the Hudson's Bay people seemed to be holding out against us; but the settlers, realizing the danger of Indian warfare, to a man favored surrender. Had it not been for Grant, there would have been no farther parley;

but on news that settlers were pressing for capitulation, the warden again despatched Pritchard to the Hudson's Bay post. In the hope of gaining access to Frances Sutherland and Eric Hamilton I accompanied him. Such was the terror prevailing within the walls, in spite of Pritchard's assurance regarding my friendly purpose, admission was flatly denied me. I contented myself with verbal messages that Hamilton and Father Holland must remain. I could guarantee their safety. The same offer I made to Frances, but told her to do what was best for herself and her father. When Pritchard came out, I knew from his face that Fort Douglas was ours. Hamilton and Father Holland would stay, he reported; but Mistress Sutherland bade him say that after Seven Oaks her father had no friendly feeling for Nor'-Westers, and she could not let him go forth alone. Terms were stipulated between the two companies with due advantage to our side from the recent victory and the formal surrender of Fort Douglas took place the following day.

"What are you going to do with the settlers, Cuthbert?" I asked of the warden before the capitulation.

"Aye! That's a question," was the grim response.

"Why not leave them in the fort till things quiet down?"

"With all the Indians of Red River in possession of that fort?" asked Grant, sarcastically. "Were a few Nor'-Westers so successful in holding back the Metis at Seven Oaks, you'd like to see that experiment repeated?"

"'Twill be worse, Grant, if you let them go back to their farms."

"They'll not do that, if I'm warden of the plains," he declared with great determination. "We'll have to send them down the Red to the lake till that fool of a Scotch nobleman decides what to do with his fine colonists."

"But, Grant, you don't mean to send them up north in this cold country. They may not reach Hudson's Bay in time to catch the company ship to Scotland! Why, man, it's sheer murder to expose those people to a winter up there without a thing to shelter them!"

"To my mind, freezing is not quite so bad as a massacre. If they won't take our boats to the States, or Canada, what else can Nor'-Westers do?"

And what else, indeed? I could not answer Grant's question, though I know every effort we made to induce those people to go south instead of north has

been misrepresented as an infamous attempt to expel Selkirk settlers from Red River. Truly, I hope I may never see a sadder sight than the going forth of those colonists to the shelterless plain. It was disastrous enough for them to be driven from their native heath; but to be lured away to this far country for the purpose of becoming buffers between rival fur-traders, who would stop at nothing, and to be sacrificed as victims for their company's criminal policy—I speak as a Nor'-Wester—was immeasurably cruel.

Grant was, of course, on hand for the surrender, and he wisely kept the plain-rangers at a safe distance. Clerks lined each side of the path to the gate, and I pressed forward for a glimpse of Frances Sutherland. There was the jar of a heavy bolt shot back. Confused noises sounded from the courtyard. The gates swung open, and out marched the sheriff of Assiniboia, bearing in one hand a pole with a white sheet tacked to the end for a flag of truce, and in the other the fort keys. Behind, sullen and dejected, followed a band of Hudson's Bay men. Grant stepped up to meet the sheriff. The terms of capitulation were again stated, and there was some signing of paper. Of those things my recollection is indistinct; for I was straining my eyes towards the groups of settlers inside the walls. When I looked back to the conferring leaders the silence was so intense a pinfall could have been heard. The keys of the fort were being handed to the Nor'-Westers and the Hudson's Bay men had turned away their faces that they might not see. The vanquished then passed quickly to the barges at the river. Each of the six drunken fellows, whom I had last seen in the late Governor Semple's office, the Highlanders who had spied upon me when I visited Fort Douglas but a year before, the clerks whom I had heard talking that night in the great hall, and many others with whom I had but a chance acquaintance, filed down to the river. Seeing all ready, with a North-West clerk at the prow of each boat to warn away marauders, the men came back for settlers and wounded comrades. I would have proffered my assistance to some of the burdened people on the chance of a word with Frances Sutherland, but the colonists proudly resented any kind offices from a Nor'-Wester. I saw Louis Laplante come limping out, leaning on the arm of the red-faced man, whose eye quailed when it met mine. Poor Louis looked sadly battered, with his head in a white bandage, one arm in a sling, and a dejected stoop to his shoulders that was unusual with him.

"This is too bad, Louis," said I, hurrying forward. "I forgot to send word about you. You might as well have stayed in the fort till your wounds healed. Won't you come back?"

Louis stole a furtive, sheepish glance at me, hung his head and looked away with a suspicion of moisture about his eyes.

"You always were a brute to fight at Laval! I might trick you at first, but you always ended by giving me the throw," he answered disconsolately.

"Nonsense, Louis." I was astounded at the note of reproach in his voice. "We're even now—let by-gones be by-gones! You helped me, I helped you. You trapped me into the fort, I tricked you into breaking a mirror and laying up a peck of trouble for yourself. Surely you don't treasure any grudge yet?"

He shook his head without looking at me.

"I don't understand. Let us begin over again. Come, forget old scores, come back to the fort till you're well."

"Pah!" said Louis with a sudden, strange impatience which I could not fathom. "You understand some day and turn upon me and strike and give me more throw."

"All right, comrade, treasure your wrath! Only I thought two men, who had saved each other's lives, might be friends and bury old quarrels."

"You not know," he blurted out in a broken voice.

"Not know what?" I asked impatiently. "I tell you I forgive all and I had thought you might do as much——"

"Do as much!" he interrupted fiercely. "*O mon Dieu!*" he cried, with a sob that shook his frame. "Take me away! Take me away!" he begged the man on whose arm he was leaning; and with those enigmatical words he passed to the nearest boat.

While I was yet gazing in mute amazement after Louis Laplante, wondering whether his strange emotion were revenge, or remorse, the women and children marched forth with the men protecting each side. The empty threats of half-breeds to butcher every settler in Red River had evidently reached the ears of the women. Some trembled so they could scarcely walk and others stared at us with the reproach of murder in their eyes, gazing in horror at our guilty hands. At last I caught sight of Frances Sutherland. She was well to the rear of the sad procession, leaning on the arm of a tall, sturdy, erect man whom I recognized as her father. I would have forced my way to her side at once, but a swift glance

forbade me. A gleam of love flashed to the gray eyes for an instant, then father and daughter had passed.

"Little did I think," the harsh, rasping voice of the father was saying, "that daughter of mine would give her heart to a murderer. Which of these cut-throats may I claim for a son?"

"Hush, father," she whispered. "Remember he warned us to the fort and took me to Pembina." She was as pale as death.

"Aye! Aye! We're under obligations to strange benefactors when times go awry!" he returned bitterly.

"O father! Don't! You'll think differently when you know——" but a hulking lout stumbled between us, and I missed the rest.

They were at the boats and an old Highlander was causing a blockade by his inability to lift a great bale into the barge.

"Let me give you a lift," said I, stepping forward and taking hold of the thing.

"Friend, or foe?" asked the Scot, before he would accept my aid.

"Friend, of course," and I braced myself to give the package a hoist.

"Hudson's Bay, or Nor'-Wester?" pursued the settler, determined to take no help from the hated enemy.

"Nor'-Wester, but what does that matter? A friend all the same! Yo heave! Up with it!"

"Neffer!" roared the man in a towering passion, and he gave me a push that sent me knocking into the crowd on the landing. Involuntarily, I threw out my arm to save a fall and caught a woman's outstretched hand. It was Frances Sutherland's and I thrilled with the message she could not speak.

"I beg your pardon, Mistress Sutherland," said I, as soon as I could find speech, and I stepped back tingling with embarrassment and delight.

"A civil-tongued young man, indeed," remarked the father, sarcastically, with a severe scrutiny of my retreating person. "A civil-tongued young man to know your name so readily, Frances! Pray, who is he?"

"Oh! Some Nor'-Wester," answered Frances, the white cheeks blushing red, and

she stepped quickly forward to the gang-plank. "Some Nor'-Wester, I suppose!" she repeated unconcernedly, but the flush had suffused her neck and was not unnoticed by the father's keen eyes.

Then they seated themselves at the prow beside the Nor'-Wester appointed to accompany the boat; and I saw that Louis Laplante was sitting directly opposite Frances Sutherland, with his eyes fixed on her face in a bold gaze, that instantly quenched any kindness I may have felt towards him. How I regretted my thoughtlessness in not having forestalled myself in the Sutherlands' barge. The next best thing was to go along with Grant, who was preparing to ride on the river bank and escort the company beyond all danger.

"You coming too?" asked Grant sharply, as I joined him.

"If you don't mind."

"Think two are necessary?"

"Not when one of the two is Grant," I answered, which pleased him, "but as my heart goes down the lake with those barges——"

"Hut-tutt—man," interrupted Grant. "War's bad enough without love; but come if you like."

As the boats sheered off from the wharf, Grant and I rode along the river trail. I saw Frances looking after me with surprise, and I think she must have known my purpose, though she did not respond when I signalled to her.

"Stop that!" commanded Grant peremptorily. "You did that very slyly, Rufus, but if they see you, there'll be all sorts of suspicion about collusion."

The river path ran into the bush, winding in and out of woods, so we caught only occasional glimpses of the boats; but I fancied her eyes were ever towards the bank where we rode, and I could distinctly see that the Frenchman's face was buried in his arms above one of the squarish packets opposite the Sutherlands.

"Is it the same lass," asked Grant, after we had been riding for more than an hour, "is it the same lass that was disguised as an Indian girl at Fort Gibraltar?"

His question astonished me. I thought her disguise too complete even for his sharp penetration; but I was learning that nothing escaped the warden's notice. Indeed, I have found it not unusual for young people at a certain stage of their

careers to imagine all the rest of the world blind.

"The same," I answered, wondering much.

"You took her back to Fort Douglas. Did you hear anything special in the fort that night?"

"Nothing but that McDonell was likely to surrender. How did you know I was there?"

"Spies," he answered laconically. "The old *voyageurs* don't change masters often for nothing. If you hadn't been stuck off in the Mandane country, you'd have learned a bit of our methods. Her father used to favor the Nor'-Westers. What has changed him?"

"Seven Oaks changed him," I returned tersely.

"Aye! Aye! That was terrible," and his face darkened. "Terrible! Terrible! It will change many," and the rest of his talk was full of gloomy portents and forebodings of blame likely to fall upon him for the massacre; but I think history has cleared and justified Grant's part in that awful work. Suddenly he turned to me.

"There's pleasure in this ride for you. There's none for me. Will ye follow the boats alone and see that no harm comes to them?"

"Certainly," said I, and the warden wheeled his horse and galloped back towards Fort Douglas.

For an hour after he left, the trail was among the woods, and when I finally reached a clearing and could see the boats, there was cause enough for regret that the warden had gone. A great outcry came from the Sutherlands' boat and Louis Laplante was on his feet gesticulating excitedly and talking in loud tones to the rowers.

"Hullo, there!" I shouted, riding to the very water's edge and flourishing my pistol. "Stop your nonsense, there! What's wrong?"

"There's a French papist demands to have speech wi' ye," called Mr. Sutherland.

"Bring him ashore," I returned.

The boat headed about and approached the bank. Then the rowers ceased

pulling; for the water was shallow, and we were within speaking distance.

"Now, Louis, what do you mean by this nonsense?" I began.

In answer, the Frenchman leaped out of the boat and waded ashore.

"Let them go on," he said, scrambling up the cliff in a staggering, faint fashion.

"If you meant to stay at the fort, why didn't you decide sooner?" I demanded roughly.

"I didn't." This doggedly and with downcast eyes.

"Then you go down the lake with the rest and no skulking!"

"Gillespie," answered Louis in a low tone, "there's strength of an ox in you, but not the wit. Let them go on! Simpleton, I tell you of Miriam."

His words recalled the real reason of my presence in the north country; for my quest had indeed been eclipsed by the fearful events of the past week. I signalled the rowers to go without him, waved a last farewell to Frances Sutherland, and turned to see Louis Laplante throw himself on the grass and cry like a schoolboy. Dismounting I knelt beside him.

"Cheer up, old boy," said I, with the usual vacuity of thought and stupidity of expression at such times. "Cheer up! Seven Oaks has knocked you out. I knew you shouldn't make this trip till you were strong again. Why, man, you have enough cuts to undo the pluck of a giant-killer!"

Louis was not paying the slightest attention to me. He was mumbling to himself and I wondered if he were in a fever.

"The priest, the Irish priest in the fort, he say to me: 'Wicked fellow, you be tortured forever and ever in the furnace, if you not undo what you did in the gorge!' What care Louis Laplante for the fire? Pah! What care Louis for wounds and cuts and threats? Pah! The fire not half so hot as the hell inside! The cuts not half so sharp as the thinks that prick and sting and lash from morn'g to night, night to morn'g! Pah! Something inside say: 'Louis Laplante, son of a seigneur, a dog! A cur! Toad! Reptile!' Then I try stand up straight and give the lie, but it say: 'Pah! Louis Laplante!' The Irish priest, he say, 'You repent!' What care Louis for repents? Pah! But her eyes, they look and look and look like two steel-gray stars! Sometime they caress and he want to pray! Sometime they stab and he

shiver; but they always shine like stars of heaven and the priest, he say, 'You be shut out of heaven!' If the angel all have stars, steel glittering stars, for eyes, heaven worth for trying! The priest, he say, 'You go to abode of torture!' Torture! Pah! More torture than 'nough here. Angels with stars in their heads, more better. But the stars stab through—through—through——"

"Bother the stars," said I to myself. "What of Miriam?" I asked, interrupting his penitential confidences.

His references to steel-gray eyes and stars and angels somehow put me in no good mood, for a reason with which most men, but few women, will sympathize.

"Stupid ox!" He spat out the words with unspeakable impatience at my obtuseness. "What of Miriam! Why the priest and the starry eyes and the something inside, they all say, 'Go and get Miriam! Where's the white woman? You lied! You let her go! Get her—get her—get her!' What of Miriam? Pah!"

After that angry outburst, the fountains of his sorrow seemed to dry up and he became more the old, nonchalant Louis whom I knew.

"Where is Miriam?" I asked.

He ignored my question and went on reasoning with himself.

"No more peace—no more quiet—no more sing and rollick till he get Miriam!"

Was the fellow really delirious? The boats were disappearing from view. I could wait no longer.

"Louis," said I, "if you have anything to say, say it quick! I can't wait longer."

"You know I lie to you in the gorge?" and he looked straight at me.

"Certainly," I answered, "and I punished you pretty well for it twice."

"You know what that lie mean"—and he hesitated—"mean to her—to Miriam?"

"Yes, Louis, I know."

"And you forgive all? Call all even?"

"As far as I'm concerned—yes—Louis! God Almighty alone can forgive the suffering you have caused her."

Then Louis Laplante leaped up and, catching my hand, looked long and steadily into my eyes.

"I go and find her," he muttered in a low, tense voice. "I follow their trail—I keep her from suffer—I bring them all back—back here in the bush on this river—I bring her back, or I kill Louis Laplante!"

"Old comrade—you were always generous," I began; but the words choked in my throat.

"I know not where they are, but I find them! I know not how soon—perhaps a year—but I bring them back! Go on with the boats," and he dropped my hand.

"I can't leave you here," I protested.

"You come back this way," he said. "May be you find me."

Poor Louis! His tongue tripped in its old evasive ways even at the moment of his penitence, which goes to prove—I suppose—that we are all the sum total of the thing called habit, that even spontaneous acts are evidences of the summed result of past years. I did not expect to find him when I came back, and I did not. He had vanished into the woods like the wild creature that he was; but I was placing a strange, reasonless reliance on his promise to find Miriam.

When I caught up with the boats, the river was widening so that attack would be impossible, and I did not ride far. Heading my horse about, I spurred back to Fort Douglas. Passing Seven Oaks, I saw some of the Hudson's Bay men, who had remained burying the dead—not removing them. That was impossible after the wolves and three days of a blistering sun.

I told Hamilton of neither Le Grand Diable's death, nor Louis Laplante's promise. He had suffered disappointments enough and could ill stand any sort of excitement. I found him walking about in the up-stairs hall, but his own grief had deadened him to the fortunes of the warring companies.

"Confound you, boy! Tell me the truth!" said Father Holland to me afterwards in the courtyard.

Le Grand Diable's death and Louis Laplante's promise seemed to make a great impression on the priest.

"I tell you the Lord delivered that evil one into the hands of the punisher; and of

the innocent, the Lord, Himself, is the defender. Await His purpose! Await His time!"

"Mighty long time," said I, with the bitter impatience of youth.

"Quiet, youngster! I tell you she shall be delivered!"

At last the Nor-Westers' Fort William brigade with its sixty men and numerous well-loaded canoes—whose cargoes had been the bone of contention between Hudson's Bay and Nor'-Westers at Seven Oaks—arrived at Fort Douglas. The newcomers were surprised to find us in possession of the enemy's fort. The last news they had heard was of wanton and successful aggression on the part of Lord Selkirk's Company; and I think the extra crews sent north were quite as much for purposes of defence as swift travel. But the gravity of affairs startled the men from Fort William; for they, themselves, had astounding news. Lord Selkirk was on his way north with munitions of war and an army of mercenaries formerly of the De Meurons' regiment, numbering two hundred, some said three or four hundred men; but this was an exaggeration. For what was he coming to Red River in this warlike fashion? His purpose would probably show itself. Also, if his intent were hostile, would not Seven Oaks massacre afford him the very pretence he wanted for chastising Nor'-Westers out of the country? The canoemen had met the ejected settlers bound up the lake; and with them, whom did they see but the bellicose Captain Miles McDonell, given free passage but a year before to Montreal and now on "the prosperous return," which he, himself, had prophesied?

The settlers' news of Seven Oaks sent the brave captain hurrying southward to inform Lord Selkirk of the massacre.

We had had a victory; but how long would it last? Truly the sky was darkening and few of us felt hopeful about the bursting of the storm.

CHAPTER XXV

HIS LORDSHIP TO THE RESCUE

Even at the hour of our triumph, we Nor'-Westers knew that we had yet to reckon with Lord Selkirk; and a speedy reckoning the indomitable nobleman brought about. The massacre at Seven Oaks afforded our rivals the very pretext they desired. Clothed with the authority of an officer of the law, Lord Selkirk hurried northward; and a personage of his importance could not venture into the wilderness without a strong body-guard. At least, that was the excuse given for the retinue of two or three hundred mercenaries decked out in all the regimentals of war, whom Lord Selkirk brought with him to the north. A more rascally, daring crew of ragamuffins could not have been found to defend Selkirk's side of the gentlemen adventurers' feud. The men were the offscourings of European armies engaged in the Napoleonic wars, and came directly from the old De Meurons' regiment. The information which the Fort William brigade brought of Selkirk's approach, also explained why that same brigade hastened back to the defence of Nor'-West quarters on Lake Superior; and their help was needed. News of events at Fort William came to us in the Red River department tardily. First, there was a vague rumor among the Indian *voyageurs*, who were ever gliding back and forward on the labyrinthine waters of that north land like the birds of passage overhead. Then came definite reports from freemen who had been expelled from Fort William; and we could no longer doubt that Nor'-West headquarters, with all the wealth of furs and provisions therein had fallen into the hands of the Hudson's Bay forces. Afterwards came warning from our *Bourgeois*, driven out of Fort William, for Fort Douglas to be prepared. Lord Selkirk would only rest long enough at Fort William to take possession of everything worth possessing, in the name of the law—for was he not a justice of the peace?—and in the name of the law would he move with like intent against Fort Douglas. To the earl's credit, be it said, that his victories were bloodless; but they were bloodless because the Nor'-Westers had no mind to unleash those redskin bloodhounds a second time, preferring to suffer loss rather than resort to violence. Nevertheless, we called in every available hand of the Nor'-West staff to man Fort Douglas against attack. But summer dragged into autumn and autumn into winter, and no Lord Selkirk. Then we began to think ourselves secure; for the streams were frozen to a depth of four feet like adamant, and

unless Selkirk were a madman, he would not attempt to bring his soldiers north by dog-train during the bitter cold of mid-winter. But 'tis ever the policy of the astute madman to discount the enemy's calculations; and Selkirk utterly discounted ours by sending his hardy, dare-devil De Meurons across country under the leadership of that prince of braggarts, Captain D'Orsonnens. Indeed, we had only heard the rumor of their coming, when we awakened one morning after an obscure, stormy night to find them encamped at St. James, westward on the Assiniboine River. Day after day the menacing force remained quiet and inoffensive, and we began to look upon these notorious ruffians as harmless. For our part, vigilance was not lacking. Sentinels were posted in the towers day and night. Nor'-West spies shadowed every movement of the enemy; and it was seriously considered whether we should not open communication with D'Orsonnens to ascertain what he wanted; but, truth to say, we knew very well what he wanted, and had had such a surfeit of blood, we were not anxious to re-open hostilities.

As for Hamilton, I can hardly call his life at Fort Douglas anything more than a mere existence. A blow stuns, but one may recover. Repeated failure gradually benumbs hope and willpower and effort, like some ghoulish vampire sucking away a man's life-blood till he faint and die from very inanition. The blow, poor Eric had suffered, when he lost Miriam; the repeated failure, when we could not restore her; and I saw this strong, athletic man slowly succumb as to some insidious, paralyzing disease. The thought of effort seemed to burden him. He would silently mope by the hour in some dark corner of Fort Douglas, or wander aimlessly about the courtyard, muttering and talking to himself. He was weary and fatigued without a stroke of work; and what little sleep he snatched from wakeful vigils seemed to give him no rest. His food, he thrust from him with the petulance of a child; and at every suggestion I could make, he sneered with a quiet, gentle insistence that was utterly discomfiting. To be sure, I had Father Holland's boisterous good cheer as a counter-irritant; for the priest had remained at Fort Douglas, and was ministering to the tribes of the Red and Assiniboine. But it was on her, who had been my guiding star and hope and inspiration from the first, that I mainly depended. As hard, merciless winter closed in, I could not think of those shelterless colonists driven to the lake, without shuddering at the distress I knew they must suffer; and I despatched a runner, urging them to return to Red River, and giving personal guarantee for their safety. Among those, who came back, were the Sutherlands; and if my quest had entailed far greater hardship than it did, that quiet interval with leisure to spend much time at the Selkirk settlement would have repaid all suffering. After sundown, I was free

from fort duties. Tying on snow-shoes after the manner of the natives, I would speed over the whitened drifts of billowy snow. The surface, melted by the sun-glare of mid-day and encrusted with brittle, glistening ice, never gave under my weight; and, oddly enough, my way always led to the Sutherland homestead. After the coming of the De Meurons, Frances used to expostulate against what she called my foolhardiness in making these evening visits; but their presence made no difference to me.

"I don't believe those drones intend doing anything very dreadful, after all, sir," I remarked one night to Frances Sutherland's father, referring to the soldiers.

Following his daughter's directions I had been coming very early, also very often, with the object of accustoming the dour Scotchman to my staying late; and he had softened enough towards me to take part in occasional argument.

"Don't believe they intend doing a thing, sir," I reiterated.

Pushing his spectacles up on his forehead, he closed the book of sermons, which he had been reading, and puckered his brows as if he were compromising a hard point with conscience, which, indeed, I afterwards knew, was exactly what he had been doing.

"Aye," said he, "aye, aye, young man. But I'm thinking ye'll no do y'r company ony harm by speerin' after the designs o' fightin' men who make ladders."

"Oh!" I cried, all alert for information. "Have they been making ladders?"

He pulled the spectacles down on his nose and deliberately reopened the book of sermons.

"Of that, I canna say," he replied.

Only once again did he emerge from his readings. I had risen to go. Frances usually accompanied me to the outer door, where I tied my snow-shoes and took a farewell unobserved by the father; but when I opened the door, such a blast of wind and snow drove in, I instantly clapped it shut again and began tying the racquets on inside.

"O Rufus!" exclaimed Frances, "you can't go back to Fort Douglas in that storm!"

Then we both noticed for the first time that a hurricane of wind was rocking the

little house to its foundations.

"Did that spring up all of a sudden?" I cried. "I never saw a blizzard do that before."

"I'm afraid, Rufus, we were not noticing."

"No, we were otherwise interested," said I, innocently enough; but she laughed.

"You can't go," she declared.

"The wind will be on my back," I assured her. "I'll be all right," and I went on lacing the snow-shoe thongs about my ankle.

The book of sermons shut with a snap and the father turned towards us.

"Let no one say any man left the Sutherland hearth on such a night! Put by those senseless things," and he pointed to the snow-shoes.

"But those ladders," I interposed. "Let no one say when the enemy came Rufus Gillespie was absent from his citadel!"

The wind roared round the house corners like a storm at sea; and the father looked down at me with a strange, quizzical expression.

"Ye're a headstrong young man, Rufus Gillespie," said the hard-set mouth. "Ye maun knock a hole in the head, or the wall! Will ye go?"

"Knock the hole in the wall," I laughed back. "Of course I go."

"Then, tak' the dogs," said he, with a sparkle of kindliness in the cold eyes. So it came that I set out in the Sutherlands' dog-sled with a supply of robes to defy biting frost.

And I needed them every one. Old settlers, describing winter storms, have been accused of an imagination as expansive as the prairie; but I affirm no man could exaggerate the fury of a blizzard on the unbroken prairie. To one thing only may it be likened—a hurricane at sea. People in lands boxed off at short compass by mountain ridges forget with what violence a wind sweeping half a continent can disport itself. In the boisterous roar of the gale, my shouts to the dogs were a feeble whisper caught from my lips and lost in the shrieking wind. The fine snowy particles were a powdered ice that drove through seams of clothing and cut one's skin like a whip lash. Without the fringe of woods along the river bank

to guide me, it would have been madness to set out by day, and worse than madness by night; but I kept the dogs close to the woods. The trees broke the wind and prevented me losing all sense of direction in the tornado whirl of open prairie. Not enough snow had fallen on the hard-crusted drifts to impede the dogs. They scarcely sank and with the wind on their backs dashed ahead till the woods were passed and we were on the bare plains. No light could be seen through the storm, but I knew I was within a short distance of the fort gate and wheeled the dogs toward the river flats of the left. The creatures seemed to scent human presence. They leaped forward and brought the sleigh against the wall with a knock that rolled me out.

"Good fellows;" I cried, springing up, uncertain where I was.

The huskies crouched around my feet almost tripping me and I felt through the snowy darkness against the stockades, stake by stake.

Ah! There was a post! Here were close-fitted boards—here, iron-lining—this must be the gate; but where was the lantern that hung behind? A gust of wind might have extinguished the light; so I drubbed loudly on the gate and shouted to the sentry, who should have been inside.

The wind lulled for a moment and up burst wild shouting from the courtyard intermingled with the jeers of Frenchmen and cries of terror from our people. Then I knew judgment had come for the deeds at Seven Oaks. The gale broke again with a hissing of serpents, or red irons, and the howling wind rose in shrill, angry bursts. Hugging the wall, while the dogs whined behind, I ran towards the rear. Men jostled through the snowy dark, and I was among the De Meurons. They were too busy scaling the stockade on the ladders of which I had heard to notice an intruder. Taking advantage of the storm, I mounted a ladder, vaulted over the pickets and alighted in the courtyard. Here all was noise, flight, pursuit and confusion. I made for the main hall, where valuable papers were kept, and at the door, cannoned against one of our men, who shrieked with fright and begged for mercy.

"Coward!" said I, giving him a cuff. "What has happened?"

A flare fell on us both, and he recognized me.

"The De Meurons!" he gasped. "The De Meurons!"

I left him bawling out his fear and rushed inside.

"What has happened?" I asked, tripping up a clerk who was flying through the hallway.

"The De Meurons!" he gasped. "The De Meurons!"

"Stop!" I commanded, grasping the lap of his coat. "What—*has*—happened?"

"The De Meurons!" This was fairly screamed.

I shook him till he sputtered something more.

"They've captured the fort—our people didn't want to shed blood——"

"And threw down their guns," I interjected, disgusted beyond word.

"Threw down their guns," he repeated, as though that were a praiseworthy action. "The s-s-sentinels—saw the court—full—full—full of s-soldiers!"

"Full of soldiers!" I thundered. "There are not a hundred in the gang."

Thereupon I gave the caitiff a toss that sent him reeling against the wall, and dashed up-stairs for the papers. All was darkness, and I nigh broke my neck over a coffin-shaped rough box made for one of the trappers, who had died in the fort. Why was the thing lying there, anyway? The man should have been put into it and buried at once without any drinking bout and dead wake, I reflected with some sharpness, as I rubbed my bruised shins and shoved the box aside. Shouts rang up from the courtyard. Heavy feet trampled in the hall below. Hamilton, as a Hudson's Bay man, and Father Holland, I knew, were perfectly safe. But I was far from safe. Why were they not there to help me, I wondered, with the sort of rage we all vent on our friends when we are cornered and they at ease. I fumbled across the apartment, found the right desk, pried the drawer open with my knife, and was in the very act of seizing the documents when I saw my own shadow on the floor. Lantern light burst with a glare through the gloom of the doorway.

CHAPTER XXVI

FATHER HOLLAND AND I IN THE TOILS

Behind the lantern was a face with terrified eyes and gaping mouth. It was the priest, his genial countenance a very picture of fear.

"What's wrong, Father?" I asked. "You needn't be alarmed; you're all right."

"But I am alarmed, for you're all wrong! Lord, boy, why didn't ye stay with that peppery Scotchman? What did Frances mane by lettin' you out to-night?" and he shaded the light of the lantern with his hand.

"I wanted these things," I explained.

"Ye want a broad thumpin', I'm thinkin', ye rattle-pate, to risk y'r precious noodle here to-night," he whispered, coming forward and fussing about me with all the maternal anxiety of a hen over her only chicken.

"Listen," said I. "The whole mob's coming in."

"Go!" he urged, pushing me from the desk over which I still fumbled.

"Run for those dogs of mercenaries!" I protested.

"Ye swash-buckler! Ye stiff-necked braggart!" bawled the priest. "Out wid y'r nonsense, and what good are y' thinkin' ye'll do—? Stir your stumps, y' stoopid spalpeen!"

"Listen," I urged, undisturbed by the tongue-thrashing that stormed about my ears. In the babel of voices I thought I had heard some one call my name.

"Run, Rufus! Run for y'r life, boy!" urged Father Holland, apparently thinking the ruffians had come solely for me.

"Run yourself, Father; run yourself, and see how you like it," and I tucked the documents inside my coat.

"Divil a bit I'll run," returned the priest.

"Hark!"

The De Meurons' leaders were shouting orders to their men. Above the screams of people fleeing in terror through passage-ways, came a shrill bugle-call.

"Go—go—go—Rufus!" begged Father Holland in a paroxysm of fear. "Go!" he pleaded, pushing me towards the door.

"I won't!" and I jerked away from him. "There, now." I caught up a club and loaded pistol.

The Nor'-Westers had no time to defend themselves. Almost before my stubborn defiance was uttered, the building was filled with a mob of intoxicated De Meurons. Rushing everywhere with fixed bayonets and cursing at the top of their voices, they threatened death to all Nor'-Westers. There was a loud scuffling of men forcing their way through the defended hall downstairs.

"Go, Rufus, go! Think of Frances! Save yourself," urged the priest.

It was too late. I could not escape by the hall. Noisy feet were already trampling up the stairs and the clank of armed men filled every passage.

"Jee-les-pee! Jee-les-pee! Seven Oaks!" bawled a French voice from the half-way landing, and a multitude of men with torches dashed up the stairs. I took a stand to defend myself; for I thought I might be charged with implication in the massacre.

"Jee-les-pee," roared the voices. "Where is Gillespie?" thundered a leader.

"That's you, Rufus, lad! Down with you!" muttered the priest. Before I knew his purpose, he had tripped my feet from under me and knocked me flat on the floor. Overturning the empty coffin-box, he clapped it above my whole length, imprisoning me with the snap and celerity of a mouse-trap. Then I heard the thud of two hundred avoirdupois seating itself on top of the case. The man above my person had whisked out a book of prayers, and with lantern on the desk was conning over devotions, which, I am sure, must have been read with the manual upside down; for bits of the *pater noster*, service of the mass, and vesper psalms were uttered in a disconnected jumble, though I could not but apply the words to my own case.

"*Libera nos a malo—ora pro nobis, peccatoribus—ab hoste maligno defende me —ab homine iniquo et doloso erue me—peccator videbit et irascetur—*

desiderium peccatorum peribit——" came from the priest with torrent speed.

"Jee-les-pee! Jee-les-pee!" roared a dozen throats above the half-way landing. Then came the stamp of many feet to the door.

"Wait, men!" Hamilton's voice commanded. "I'll see if he's here!"

"*Simulacra gentium argentum et aurum, opera manuum hominum*," like hailstones rattled the Latin words down on my prison.

"One moment, men," came Eric's voice; but he could not hold them back. In burst the door with a rush, and immediately the room was crowded with vociferating French soldiers.

"*Manus habent, et non palpabunt; pedes*——"

"Is Gillespie here?" interrupted Hamilton, without the slightest recognition of the priest in his tones.

"*Pedes habent et non ambulabunt; non clamabunt in gutture suo*," muttered the priest, finishing his verse; then to the men with a stiffness which I did not think Father Holland could ever assume—

"How often must I be disturbed by men seeking that young scoundrel? Look at this place, fairly topsy-turvy with their hunt! Faith! The room is before you. Look and see!" and with a great indifference he went on with his devotions.

"*Similes illis fiant qui faciunt ea*——"

"Some one here before us?" interrupted an Englishman with some suspicion.

"Two parties here before ye," answered the priest, icily, as if these repeated questions rumpled ecclesiastical dignity, and he gabbled on with the psalm, "*similes illis fiant qui faciunt ea, et omnes*——"

"If we lifted that box," interrupted the persistent Englishman, "what might there be?"

"If ye lift that box," answered Father Holland with massive solemnity—and I confess every hair on my body bristled as he rose—"If ye lift that box there might be a powr—dead—body," which was very true; for I still held the cocked pistol in hand and would have shot the first man daring to molest me.

But the priest's indifference was not so great as it appeared. I could tell from a

tremor in his voice that he was greatly disturbed; and he certainly lost his place altogether in the vesper psalm.

"*Requiescat in pace,*" were his next words, uttered in funereal gravity. Singularly enough, they seemed to fit the situation.

Father Holland's prompt offer to have the rough box examined satisfied the searchers, and there were no further demands.

"Oh," said the Englishman, taken aback, "I beg your pardon, sir! No offence meant."

"No offence," replied the priest, reseating himself. "*Benedicite*——"

"Sittin' on the coffin!" blurted out the voice of an English youth as the weight of the priest again came down heavily on my prison; and again I breathed easily.

"Come on, men!" shouted Hamilton, apprehensive of more curiosity. "We're wasting time! He may be escaping by the basement window!"

"*Jam hiems transiit, imber abiit et recessit; surge, amica mea, et veni!*" droned the priest, and the whole company clattered downstairs.

"Quick!—Out with you!" commanded Father Holland. "Speed to y'r heels, and blessing on the last o' ye!"

I dashed down the stairs and was bolting through the doorway when some one shouted, "There he is!"

"Run, Gillespie!" cried some one else—one of our men, I suppose—and I had plunged into the storm and raced for the ladders at the rear stockades with a pack of pursuers at my heels. The snow drifts were in my favor, for with my moccasins, I leaped lightly forward, while the booted soldiers floundered deep. I eluded my pursuers and was half-way up a ladder when a soldier's head suddenly appeared above the wall on the other side. Then a bayonet prodded me in the chest and I fell heavily backwards to the ground.

I was captured.

That is all there is to say. No man dilates with pleasure over that part of his life

when he was vanquished. It is not pleasant to have weapons of defence wrested from one's hands, to feel soldiers standing upon one's wrists and rifling pockets.

It is hard to feel every inch the man on the horizontal.

In truth, when the soldiers picked me up without ceremony, or gentleness, and bundling me up the stairs of the main hall, flung me into a miserable pen, with windows iron-barred to mid-sash, I was but a sorry hero. My tormentors did not shackle me; I was spared that humiliation.

"There!" exclaimed a Hudson's Bay man, throwing lantern-light across the dismal low roof as I fell sprawling into the room. "That'll cool the young hot-head," and all the French soldiers laughed at my discomfiture.

They chained and locked the door on the outside. I heard the soldiers' steps reverberating through the empty passages, and was alone in a sort of prison-room, used during the régime of the petty tyrant McDonell. It was cold enough to cool any hot-head, and mine was very hot indeed. I knew the apartment well. Nor'-Westers had used it as a fur storeroom. The wind came through the crevices of the board walls and piled miniature drifts on the floor-cracks, all the while rattling loose timbers like a saw-mill. The roof was but a few feet high, and I crept to the window, finding all the small panes coated with two inches of hoar-frost. Whether the iron bars outside ran across, or up and down, I could not remember; but the fact would make a difference to a man trying to escape. Much as I disliked to break the glass letting in more cold, there was only one way of finding out about those bars. I raised my foot for an outward kick, but remembering I wore only the moccasins with which I had been snowshoeing, I struck my fist through instead, and shattered the whole upper half of the window. I broke away cross-pieces that might obstruct outward passage, and leaning down put my hand on the sharp points of upright spikes. So intense was the frost, the skin of my finger tips stuck to the iron, and I drew my hand in, with the sting of a fresh burn.

It was unfortunate about those bars. I could not possibly get past them down to the ground without making a ladder from my great-coat. I groped round the room hoping that some of the canvas in which we tied the peltries, might be lying about. There was nothing of the sort, or I missed it in the dark. Quickly tearing my coat into strips, I knotted triple plies together and fastened the upper end to the crosspiece of the lower window. Feet first, I poked myself out, caught the strands with both hands, and like a flash struck ground below with badly

skinned palms. That reminded me I had left my mits in the prison room.

The storm had driven the soldiers inside. I did not encounter a soul in the courtyard, and had no difficulty in letting myself out by the main gate.

I whistled for the dogs. They came huddling from the ladders where I had left them, the sleigh still trailing at their heels. One poor animal was so benumbed I cut him from the traces and left him to die. Gathering up the robes, I shook them free of snow, replaced them in the sleigh and led the string of dogs down to the river. It would be bitterly cold facing that sweep of unbroken wind in mid-river; but the trail over ice would permit greater speed, and with the high banks on each side the dogs could not go astray.

To an overruling Providence, and to the instincts of the dogs, I owe my life. The creatures had not gone ten sleigh-lengths when I felt the loss of my coat, and giving one final shout to them, I lay back on the sleigh and covered myself, head and all, under the robes, trusting the huskies to find their way home.

I do not like to recall that return to the Sutherlands. The man, who is frozen to death, knows nothing of the cruelties of northern cold. The icy hand, that takes his life, does not torture, but deadens the victim into an everlasting, easy, painless sleep. This I know, for I felt the deadly frost-slumber, and fought against it. Aching hands and feet stopped paining and became utterly feelingless; and the deadening thing began creeping inch by inch up the stiffening limbs the life centres, till a great drowsiness began to overpower body and mind. Realizing what this meant, I sprang from the sleigh and stopped the dogs. I tried to grip the empty traces of the dead one, but my hands were too feeble; so I twisted the rope round my arm, gave the word, and raced off abreast the dog train. The creatures went faster with lightened sleigh, but every step I took was a knife-thrust through half-frozen awakening limbs. Not the man who is frozen to death, but the man who is half-frozen and thawed back to life, knows the cruelties of northern cold.

In a stupefied way, I was aware the dogs had taken a sudden turn to the left and were scrambling up the bank. Here my strength failed or I tripped; for I only remember being dragged through the snow, rolling over and over, to a doorway, where the huskies stopped and set up a great whining. Somehow, I floundered to my feet. With a blaze of light that blinded me, the door flew open and I fell across the threshold unconscious.

Need I say what door opened, what hands drew me in and chafed life into the benumbed being?

"What was the matter, Rufus Gillespie?" asked a bluff voice the next morning. I had awakened from what seemed a long, troubled sleep and vaguely wondered where I was.

"What happened to ye, Rufus Gillespie?" and the man's hand took hold of my wrist to feel my pulse.

"Don't, father! you'll hurt him!" said a voice that was music to my ears, and a woman's hand, whose touch was healing, began bathing my blistered palms.

At once I knew where I was and forgot pain. In few and confused words I tried to relate what had happened.

"The country's yours, Mr. Sutherland," said I, too weak, thick-tongued and deliriously happy for speech.

"Much to be thankful for," was the Scotchman's comment. "Seven Oaks is avenged. It would ill 'a' become a Sutherland to give his daughter's hand to a conqueror, but I would na' say I'd refuse a wife to a man beaten as you were, Rufus Gillespie," and he strode off to attend to outdoor work.

And what next took place, I refrain from relating; for lovers' eloquence is only eloquent to lovers.

CHAPTER XXVII

UNDER ONE ROOF

Nature is not unlike a bank. When drafts exceed deposits comes a protest, and not infrequently, after the protest, bankruptcy. From the buffalo hunt to the recapture of Fort Douglas by the Hudson's Bay soldiers, drafts on that essential part of a human being called stamina had been very heavy with me. Now came the casting-up of accounts, and my bill was minus reserve strength, with a balance of debt on the wrong side.

The morning after the escape from Fort Douglas, when Mr. Sutherland strode off, leaving his daughter alone with me, I remember very well that Frances abruptly began putting my pillow to rights. Instead of keeping wide awake, as I should by all the codes of romance and common sense, I—poor fool—at once swooned, with a vague, glimmering consciousness that I was dying and this, perhaps, was the first blissful glimpse into paradise. When I came to my senses, Mr. Sutherland was again standing by the bedside with a half-shamed look of compassion under his shaggy brows.

"How far," I began, with a curious inability to use my wits and tongue, "how far —I mean how long have I been asleep, sir?"

"Hoots, mon! Dinna claver in that feckless fashion! It's months, lad, sin' ye opened y'r mouth wi' onything but daft gab."

"Months!" I gasped out. "Have I been here for months?"

"Aye, months. The plain was snaw-white when ye began y'r bit nappie. Noo, d'ye no hear the clack o' the geese through yon open window?"

I tried to turn to that side of the little room, where a great wave of fresh, clear air blew from the prairie. For some reason my head refused to revolve. Stooping, the elder man gently raised the sheet and rolled me over so that I faced the sweet freshness of an open, sunny view.

"Did I rive ye sore, lad?" asked the voice with a gruffness in strange contradiction to the gentleness of the touch.

Now I hold that however rasping a man's words may be, if he handle the sick with gentleness, there is much goodness under the rough surface. Thoughtlessness and stupidity, I know, are patent excuses for half the unkindness and sorrow of life. But thoughtlessness and stupidity are also responsible for most of life's brutality and crime. Not spiteful intentions alone, but the dulled, brutalized, deadened sensibilities—that go under the names of thoughtlessness and stupidity—make a man treat something weaker than himself with roughness, or in an excessive degree, qualify for murder. When the harsh voice asked, "Do I rive ye sore?" I began to understand how surface roughness is as often caused by life's asperities as by the inner dullness akin to the brute.

Indeed, if my thoughts had not been so intent on the daughter, I could have found Mr. Sutherland's character a wonderfully interesting study. The infinite capacity of a canny Scot for keeping his mouth shut I never realized till I knew Mr. Sutherland. For instance, now that consciousness had returned, I noticed that the father himself, and not the daughter, did all the waiting on me even to the carrying of my meals.

"How is your daughter, Mr. Sutherland?" I asked, surely a natural enough question to merit a civil reply.

"Aye—is it Frances y'r speerin' after?" he answered, meeting my question with a question; and he deigned not another word. But I lay in wait for him at the next meal.

"I haven't seen your daughter yet, Mr. Sutherland," I stuttered out with a deal of blushing. "I haven't even heard her about the house."

"No?" he asked with a show of surprise. "Have ye no seen Frances?" And that was all the satisfaction I got.

Between the dinner hour and supper time I conjured up various plots to hoodwink paternal caution.

"Mr. Sutherland," I began, "I have a message for your daughter."

"Aye," said he.

"I wish her to hear it personally."

"Aye."

"When may I see her?"

"Ye maun bide patient, lad!"

"But the message is urgent." That was true; for had not forty-eight hours passed since I had regained consciousness and I had heard neither her footsteps nor her voice?

"Aye," said the imperturbable father.

"Very urgent, Mr. Sutherland," I added.

"Aye."

"When may I see her, Sir?"

"All in guid time. Ye maun bide quiet, lad."

"The message cannot wait," I declared. "It must be given at once."

"Then deleever it word for word to me, young mon, and I'll trudge off to Frances."

"Your daughter is not at home?"

"What words wu'l ye have me bear to her, lad?" he asked.

That was too much for a youth in a peevish state of convalescence. What lover could send his heart's eloquence by word of mouth with a peppery, prosaic father?

"Tell Mistress Sutherland I must see her at once," I quickly responded with a flash of temper that was ever wont to flare up when put to the test.

"Aye," he answered, with an amused look in the cold, steel eyes. "I'll deleever y'r message when—when"—and he hesitated in a way suggestive of eternity—"I'll deleever y'r message when I see her."

At that I turned my face to the wall in the bitterness of spirit which only the invalid, with all the strength of a man in his whims and the weakness of an infant in his body, knows. I spent a feverish, restless night, with the hard-faced Scotchman watching from his armchair at my bedside. Once, when I suddenly awakened from sleep, or delirium, his eyes were fastened on my face with a gleam of grave kindliness.

"Mr. Sutherland," I cried, with all the impatience of a child, "please tell me, where is your daughter?"

"I sent her to a neighbor, sin' ye came to y'r senses, lad," said he. "Ye hae kept her about ye night and day sin' ye gaed daft, and losh, mon, ye hae gabbled wild talk enough to turn the head o' ony lassie clean daft. An' ye claver sic' nonsense when ye're daft, what would ye say when ye're sane? Hoots, mon, ye maun learn to haud y'r tongue——"

"Mr. Sutherland," I interrupted in a great heat, quite forgetful of his hospitality, "I'm sorry to be the means of driving your daughter from her home. I beg you to send me back to Fort Douglas——"

"Haud quiet," he ordered with a wave of his hand. "An' wa'd ye have me expose the head of a mitherless bairn to a' the clack o' the auld geese in the settlement? Temper y'r ardor wi' discretion, lad! 'Twas but the day before yesterday she left and she was sair done wi' nursing you and losing of sleep! Till ye're fair y'rsel' again and up, and she's weel and rosy wi' full sleep, bide patient!"

That speech sent my face to the wall again; but this time not in anger. And that dogged fashion Mr. Sutherland had of taking his own way did me many a good turn. Often have I heard those bragging captains of the Hudson's Bay mercenaries swagger into the little cottage sitting-room, while I lay in bed on the other side of the thin board partition, and relate to Mr. Sutherland all the incidents of their day's search for me.

"So many pounds sterling for the man who captures the rascal," declares D'Orsonnens.

"Aye, 'tis a goodly price for one poor rattle-pate," says Mr. Sutherland.

Whereupon, D'Orsonnens swears the price is more than my poor empty head is worth, and proceeds to describe me in terms which Mr. Sutherland will only tolerate when thundered from an orthodox pulpit.

"I'd have ye understand, Sir," he would declare with great dignity, "I'll have no papistical profanity under my roof."

Forthwith, he would show D'Orsonnens the door, lecturing the astonished soldier on the errors of Romanism; for whatever Mr. Sutherland deemed evil, from oaths to theological errors, he attributed directly to the pope.

"The ne'er-do-weel can hawk naething frae me," said he when relating the incident.

Once I heard a Fort Douglas man observe that, as the search had proved futile, I must have fallen into one of the air-holes of the ice.

"Nae doot the headstrong young mon is' gettin' what he deserves. I warrant he's warm in his present abode," answered Mr. Sutherland.

On another occasion D'Orsonnens asked who the man was that Mr. Sutherland's daughter had been nursing all winter.

"A puir body driven from Fort Douglas by those bloodthirsty villains," answered Mr. Sutherland, giving his visitor a strong toddy; and he at once improved the occasion by taking down a volume and reading the French officer a series of selections against Romanism. After that D'Orsonnens came no more.

"I hope I did not tell Nor'-West secrets in a Hudson's Bay house when I was delirious, Mr. Sutherland," I remarked.

The Scotchman had lugged me from bed in a gentle, lumbering, well-meant fashion, and I was sitting up for the first time.

"Ye're no the mon wi' a leak t' y'r mouth. I dinna say, though, ye're aye as discreet wi' the thoughts o' y'r heart as y'r head! Ye need na fash y'r noodle wi' remorse aboot company secrets. I canna say ye'll no fret aboot some other things ye hae told. A' the winter lang, 'twas Frances and stars and spooks and speerits and bogies and statues and graven images—wha' are forbidden by the Holy Scriptures—till the lassie thought ye gane clean daft! 'Twas a bonnie e'e, like silver stars; or a bit blush, like the pippin; or laughter, like a wimplin' brook; or lips, like posies; or hair, like links o' gold; and mair o' the like till the lassie came rinnin' oot o' y'r room, fair red wi' shame! Losh, mon, ye maun keep a still tongue in y'r head and not blab oot y'r thoughts o' a wife till she believes na mon can hae peace wi'out her. I wad na hae ye abate one jot o' all ye think, for her price is far above rubies; but hae a care wi' y'r grand talk! After ye gang to the kirk, lad, na mon can keep that up."

His warning I laughed to the winds, as youth the world over has ever laughed sage counsels of chilling age.

I can compare my recovery only to the swift transition of seasons in those northern latitudes. Without any lingering spring, the cold grayness of long, tense

winter gives place to a radiant sun-burst of warm, yellow light. The uplands have long since been blown bare of snow by the March winds, and through the tangle of matted turf shoot myriad purple cups of the prairie anemone, while the russet grass takes on emerald tints. One day the last blizzard may be sweeping a white trail of stormy majesty across the prairie; the next a fragrance of flowers rises from the steaming earth and the snow-filled ravines have become miniature lakes reflecting the dazzle of a sunny sky and fleece clouds.

My convalescence was similar to the coming of summer. Without any weary fluctuation from well to ill, and ill to well—which sickens the heart with a deferred hope—all my old-time strength came back with the glow of that year's June sun.

"There's nae accountin' for some wilful folk, lad," was Mr. Sutherland's remark, one evening after I was able to leave my room. "Ye hae risen frae y'r bed like the crocus frae snaw. An' Frances were hangin' aboot y'r pillow, lad, I'm nae sure y'd be up sae dapper and smart."

"I thought my nurse was to return when I was able to be up," I answered, strolling to the cottage door.

"Come back frae the door, lad. Dinna show y'rsel' tae the enemy. There be more speerin' for ye than hae love for y'r health. Have y'r wits aboot ye! Dinna be frettin' y'rsel' for Frances! The lassies aye rin fast enow tae the mon wi' sense to hold his ain!"

With that advice he motioned me to the only armchair in the room, and sitting down on the outer step to keep watch, began reading some theological disputation aloud.

"Odds, lad, ye should see the papist so'diers rin when I hae Calvin by me," he remarked.

"It's a pity you can't lay the theological thunderers on the doorstep to drive stray De Meurons off. Then you could come in and take this chair yourself," I answered, sitting back where no visitor could see me.

But Mr. Sutherland did not hear. He was deep in polemics, rolling out stout threats, that used Scriptural texts as a cudgel, with a zest that testified enjoyment. "The wicked bend their bow," began the rasping voice; but when he cleared his throat, preparatory to the main argument, my thoughts went wandering far from

the reader on the steps. As one whose dream is jarred by outward sound, I heard his tones quaver.

"Aye, Frances, 'tis you," he said, and away he went, pounding at the sophistries of some straw enemy.

A shadow was on the threshold, and before I had recalled my listless fancy, in tripped Frances Sutherland, herself, feigning not to see me. The gray eyes were veiled in the misty fashion of those fluffy things women wear, which let through all beauty, but bar out intrusion. I do not mean she wore a veil: veils and frills were not seen among the colonists in those days. But the heavy lashes hung low in the slumbrous, dreamy way that sees all and reveals nothing. Instinctively I started up, with wild thoughts thronging to my lips. At the same moment Mr. Sutherland did the most chivalrous thing I have seen in homespun or broadcloth.

"Hoots wi' y'r giddy claver," said he, before I had spoken a word; and walking off, he sat down at some distance.

Thereupon his daughter laughed merrily with a whole quiver of dangerous archery about her lips.

"That is the nearest to an untruth I have ever heard him tell," she said, which mightily relieved my embarrassment.

"Why did he say that?" I asked, with my usual stupidity.

"I am sure I cannot say," and looking straight at me, she let go the barbed shaft, that lies hidden in fair eyes for unwary mortals.

"Sit down," she commanded, sinking into the chair I had vacated. "Sit down, Rufus, please!" This with an after-shot of alarm from the heavy lashes; for if a woman's eyes may speak, so may a man's, and their language is sometimes bolder.

"Thanks," and I sat down on the arm of that same chair.

For once in my life I had sense to keep my tongue still; for, if I had spoken, I must have let bolt some impetuous thing better left unsaid.

"Rufus," she began, in the low, thrilling tones that had enthralled me from the first, "do you know I was your sole nurse all the time you were delirious?"

"No wonder I was delirious! Dolt, that I was, to have been delirious!" thought I

to myself; but I choked down the foolish rejoinder and endeavored to look as wise as if my head had been ballasted with the weight of a patriarch's wisdom instead of ballooning about like a kite run wild.

"I think I know all your secrets."

"Oh!" A man usually has some secrets he would rather not share; and though I had not swung the full tether of wild west freedom—thanks solely to her, not to me—I trembled at recollection of the passes that come to every man's life when he has been near enough the precipice to know the sensation of falling without going over.

"You talked incessantly of Miriam and Mr. Hamilton and Father Holland."

"And what did I say about Frances?"

"You said things about Frances that made her tremble."

"Tremble? What a brute, and you waiting on me day and——"

"Hush," she broke in. "Tremble because I am just a woman and not an angel, just a woman and not a star. We women are mortals just as you men are. Sometimes we're fools as well as mortals, just as you men are; but I don't think we're knaves quite so often, because we're denied the opportunity and hedged about and not tempted."

As she gently stripped away the pretty hypocrisies with which lovers delude themselves and lay up store for disappointment, I began to discount that old belief about truth and knowledge rendering a woman mannish and arrogant and assertive.

"You men marry women, expecting them to be angels, and very often the angel's highest ambition is to be considered a doll. Then your hope goes out and your faith——"

"But, Frances," I cried, "if any sensible man had his choice of an angel and a fair, good woman——"

"Be sure to say fair, or he'd grumble because he hadn't a doll," she laughed.

"No levity! If he had choice of angels and stars and a good woman, he'd choose the woman. The star is mighty far away and cold and steely. The angel's a deal too perfect to know sympathy with faults and blunders. I tell you, Little Statue,

life is only moil and toil, unless love transmutes the base metal of hard duty into the pure gold of unalloyed delight."

"That's why I tremble. I must do more than angel or star! Oh, Rufus, if I can only live up to what you think I am—and you can live up to what I think you are, life will be worth living."

"That's love's leverage," said I.

Then there was silence; for the sun had set and the father was no longer reading. Shadows deepened into twilight, and twilight into gloaming. And it was the hour when the brooding spirit of the vast prairie solitudes fills the stillness of night with voiceless eloquence. Why should I attempt to transcribe the silent music of the prairie at twilight, which every plain-dweller knows and none but a plain-dweller may understand? What wonder that the race native to this boundless land hears the rustling of spirits in the night wind, the sigh of those who have lost their way to the happy hunting-ground, and the wail of little ones whose feet are bruised on the shadow trail? What wonder the gauzy northern lights are bands of marshaling warriors and the stars torches lighting those who ride the plains of heaven? Indeed, I defy a white man with all the discipline of science and reason to restrain the wanderings of mystic fancy during the hours of sunset on the prairie.

There is, I affirm, no such thing as time for lovers. If they have watches and clocks, the wretched things run too fast; and if the sun himself stood still in sympathy, time would not be long. So I confess I have no record of time that night Frances Sutherland returned to her home and Mr. Sutherland kept guard at the door. When he had passed the threshold impatiently twice, I recollected with regret that it was impossible to read theology in the dark. The third time he thrust his head in.

"Mind y'rselves," he called. "I hear men coming frae the river, a pretty hour, indeed, for visitin'. Frances, go ben and see yon back window's open!"

"The soldiers from the fort," cried Frances with a little gasp.

"Don't move," said I. "They can't see me here. It's dark. I want to hear what they say and the window is open. Indeed, Frances, I'm an expert at window-jumping," and I had begun to tell her of my scrape with Louis' drunken comrades in Fort Douglas, when I heard Mr. Sutherland's grating tones according the newcomers a curious welcome. "Ye swearin', blasphemin', rampag'us, carousin' infidel, ye'll

no darken my doorway this night. Y'r French gab may be foul wi' oaths for all I ken; but ye'll no come into my hoose! An' you, Sir, a blind leader o' the blind, a disciple o' Beelzebub, wi' y'r Babylonish idolatries, wi' y'r incense that fair stinks in the nostrils o' decent folk, wi' y'r images and mummery and crossin' o' y'rsel', wi' y'r pagan, popish practises, wi' y'r skirts and petticoats, I'll no hae ye on my premises, no, not an' ye leave y'r religion outside! An' you, Meester Hamilton, a respectable Protestant, I'm fair surprised to see ye in sic' company."

"'Tis Eric and Father Holland and Laplante," I shouted, springing to my feet and rushing to the doorway, but Frances put herself before me.

"Keep back," she whispered. "The priest and Mr. Hamilton have been here before; but father would not let them in. The other man may be a De Meuron. Be careful, Rufus! There's a price on your head."

"Ho—ho—my *Ursus Major*, prime guardian of *Ursa Major*, first of the heavenly constellations in the north," insolently laughed Louis Laplante through the dusk.

"Let me pass, Frances," I begged, thrusting her gently aside, but her trembling hands still clung to my arm.

"Impertinent rascal," rasped the irate Scotchman. "I'd have ye understand my name's Sutherland, not *Major Ursus*. I'll no bide wi' y'r impudence! Leave this place——"

"The Bruin growls," interrupted Louis with a laugh, and I heard Mr. Sutherland's gasp of amazed rage at the lengths of the Frenchman's insolence.

"I must, dearest," I whispered, disengaging the slender hands from my arm; and I flung out into the dusk.

In the gloom, my approach was unnoticed; and when I came upon the group, Father Holland had laid his hand upon Mr. Sutherland's shoulder and in a low, tense voice was uttering words, which—thank an all-bountiful Providence!—have no sectarian limits.

"And the King shall answer and say unto them, 'I was a stranger and ye took me not in: naked and ye clothed me not: sick and in prison and ye visited me not. Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me'——"

"Dinna con Holy Writ to me, Sir," interrupted Mr. Sutherland, throwing the

priest's hand off and jerking back.

Then Louis Laplante saw me. There was a long, low whistle.

"Ye daft gommerel," gasped Mr. Sutherland, facing me with unutterable disgust. "Ye daft gommerel! A' my care and fret, waste—gane clean to waste. I wash m' hands o' ye——"

But Louis had knocked the Scotchman aside and tumbled into my arms, half laughing, half crying and altogether as hysterical as was his wont.

"I pay you back at las', my comrade! Ha—old solemncholy! You thought the bird of passage, he come not back at all! But the birds return! So does Louis! He decoy-duck the whole covey! You generous? No more not generous than the son of a seigneur, mine enemy! You give life? He give life! You give liberty! So does Louis! You help one able help himself? Louis help one not able help himself! Ha! *Très bien! Noblesse oblige! La Gloire!* She—near! She here! She where I, Louis Laplante, son of a seigneur, snare that she-devil, trap that fox, trick the tigress! Ha—ol' tombstone! *Noblesse oblige*—I say! She near—she here," and he flung up both arms like a frenzied maniac.

"Man! Are you mad?" I demanded, uncertain whether he were apostrophizing Diable's squaw, or abstract glory. "Speak out!" I shouted, shaking him by the shoulder.

"These—are they all friends?" asked Louis, suddenly cooled and looking suspiciously at the group.

"All," said I, still holding him by the shoulder.

"That—that thing—that bear—that bruin—he a friend?" and Louis pointed to Mr. Sutherland.

"Friend to the core," said I, laying both hands upon his shoulders. "Core with prickles outside," gibed Louis.

"Louis," I commanded, utterly out of patience, "what of Miriam? Speak plain, man! Have you brought the tribe as you promised?"

It must have been mention of Miriam's name, for the white, drawn face of Eric Hamilton bent over my shoulder and fiery, glowing eyes burned into the very soul of the Frenchman. Louis staggered back as if red irons had been thrust in his

face.

"*Sacredie*," said he, backing against Father Holland, "I am no murderer."

It was then I observed that Frances Sutherland had followed me. Her slender white fingers were about the bronzed hand of the French adventurer.

"Monsieur Laplante will tell us what he knows," she said softly, and she waited for his answer.

"The daughter of *L'Aigle*," he replied slowly and collectedly, all the while feasting upon that fair face, "comes down the Red with her tribe and captives, many captive women. They pass here to-night. They camp south the rapids, this side of the rapids. Last night I leave them. I run forward, I find Le Petit Garçon —how you call him?—Leetle Fellow? He take me to the priest. He bring canoe here. He wait now for carry us down. We must go to the rapids—to the camp! There my contract! My bargain, it is finished," and he shrugged his shoulders, for Frances had removed her hand from his.

Whether Louis Laplante's excitable nature were momentarily unbalanced by the success of his feat, I leave to psychologists. Whether some premonition of his impending fate had wrought upon him strangely, let psychical speculators decide. Or whether Louis, the sly rogue, worked up the whole situation for the purpose of drawing Frances Sutherland into the scene—which is what I myself suspect—I refer to private judgment, and merely set down the incidents as they occurred. That was how Louis Laplante told us of bringing Diable's squaw and her captives back to Red River. And that was how Father Holland and Eric and Louis and Mr. Sutherland and myself came to be embarking with a camping outfit for a canoe-trip down the river.

"Have the Indians passed, or are they to come?" I asked Louis as Mr. Sutherland and Eric settled themselves in a swift, light canoe, leaving the rest of us to take our places in a larger craft, where Little Fellow, gurgling pleased recognition of me, acted as steersman.

"They come later. The fast canoe go forward and camp. We watch behind," ordered Louis, winking at me significantly.

I saw Frances step to her father's canoe.

"You're no coming, Frances," he protested, querulously.

"Don't say that, father. I never disobeyed you in my life, and I *am* coming! Don't tell me not to! Push out, Mr. Hamilton," and she picked up a paddle and I saw the canoe dart swiftly forward into mid-current, where the darkness enveloped it; and we followed fast in its wake.

"Louis," said I, trying to fathom the meaning of his wink, "are those Indians to come yet?"

"No. Simpleton—you think Louis a fool?" he asked.

"Why did you lie to them?"

"Get them out of the way."

"Why?"

"Because, stupid, some ones they be killed to-night! The Englishman, he have a wife—he not be killed! Mademoiselle—she love a poor fool—or break her pretty heart! The father—he needed to stick-pin you both—so you never want for to fight each other," and Louis laughed low like the purr of water on his paddle-blade.

"Faith, lad," cried the priest, who had been unnaturally silent, because, I suppose, he was among aliens to his faith, "faith, lad, 'tis a good heart ye have, if ye'd but cut loose from the binding past. May this night put an end to your devil pranks!"

And that night did!

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LAST OF LOUIS' ADVENTURES

I think, perhaps, the reason good enterprises fail so often where evil ventures succeed, is that the good man blunders forward, trusting to the merits of his cause, where the evil manipulator proceeds warily as a cat over broken glass. And so, altogether apart from his services as guide, I felt Louis Laplante's presence on the river a distinct advantage.

"The Lord is with us, lad. She shall be delivered! The Lord is with us; but don't you bungle His plans!" ejaculated Father Holland for the twentieth time; and each time the French trapper looked waggishly over his shoulder at me and winked.

"Bungle! Pah!" Louis clapped his paddle athwart the canoe and laughed a low, sly, defiant laugh. "Bungle! Pah! Catch Louis bungle his cards, ha, ha! Trumps! He play trumps—he hold his hand low—careless—nodings in it—he keep quiet—nodings worth play in his hand—but his sleeve—ha, ha!" and Louis laughed softly and winked at the full moon.

"The daughter of L'Aigle, she cuff Louis, she slap his cheek, she call him lump—lout—slouch! Ha, ha!—Louis no fool—he pare the claws of L'Aigle to-night!"

At that, Little Fellow's stolid face took on a vindictive gleam, and he snapped out something in Indian tongue which set Louis to laughing. Suddenly the Indian's paddle was suspended in mid-air, and Little Fellow bent over the prow, gazing at the moon-tracked water.

"*Sacredie!*" cried Louis, catching up water that trickled through his fingers, "'tis dried rabbit thong! They are ahead of us! They have passed while that Scotch mule was balk! We must catch the Englishman," and he began hitting out with his paddle at a great rate.

We had overtaken Mr. Sutherland's canoe within half an hour of Louis' discovery, and Eric wheeled about with a querulous demand.

"What's wrong? Are they ahead? I thought you said they were behind," and he

turned suspiciously to Laplante.

"You thought wrong," said Louis, ever facile with subterfuges. "You thought wrong, Mister High-and-Mighty! Camp here and watch; they come before morning!"

"No lies to me," shouted Eric, becoming uncontrollably excited. "If you mislead us, your life shall——"

"Pig-head! I no save your wife for back chin! Camp here, I say," and Louis' fitful temper began to show signs of sulking.

"For goodness' sake, Eric, do what you're told! We've made a bad enough business of it——"

"Give the Frenchman a chance! Do what you're told, I say, ye blunderers! Troth, the Lord Himself couldn't bring success to such blundering idiots," was Father Holland's comment.

"I'll take na orders frae meddlesome papists," began the Scotchman; but Little Fellow had forcibly turned the prow of the canoe shoreward. I gave them a shove with my paddle. Frances took the cue, and while her father was yet scolding raised her paddle and had them close to the river bank.

"Get your tent up here," I called to conciliate them. "Then come to the bank and watch for the Indians."

A bit of clean gravel ran out from the clay cliff.

"That's the ground," said I, as the other canoe bumped over the pebbles; and I stopped paddling and dangled my hand in the water.

Something in the dark drifted wet and soft against my fingers. Ordinarily such an incident would not have alarmed me; but instantly a shudder of apprehension ran through my frame. I scarce had courage to look into the river lest the white face of a woman should appear through the watery depths. Clutching the water-soaked tangle, I jerked it up. Something gave with a rip, and my hand was full of shawl fringe.

"What's that, Rufus?" asked Father Holland. "Don't know." I motioned him to be silent and held it up in the moonlight. Distinctly it was, or had been, red fringe.

"Do you think—" he began, then stopped. Our keel had rubbed bottom and

Hamilton was springing out of the other canoe.

"Yes, I do," I replied, choking with dread. "This is too terrible! He'll kill himself! Go up the bank with him! Keep him busy at the tent! Little Fellow and I'll pole for it. The water's shallow there——"

"What do *you* think?" said the priest to Laplante.

"T'ink! I never t'ink! I finds out." But all the same, Louis' assurance was shaken and he peered searchingly into the river.

"Aren't you coming? What's your plan?" called Eric.

"Certainly we are, but get this truck to higher ground, will you?" I hoisted out the camp trappings. "I want to paddle out for something."

"What is it?" he asked.

"Something lost out there. I lost it out of my hand."

Frances Sutherland, I know, suspected trouble from the alarm which I could not keep out of my speech; for she pressed to the water's edge.

"Get the tent ready," I urged.

"What's the meaning of this mystery?" persisted Hamilton sharply. "What have you lost?"

"Don't press him too closely. Faith, it may be a love token," interjected Father Holland, as he stepped ashore; but he whispered in my ear as he passed, "You're wrong, lad! You're on the wrong track!"

I leaped back to the canoe, Little Fellow and the Frenchman following, and we paddled to the shallows where I had caught the fringe. I prodded the soft mud below and trailed the paddle back and forward over the clay bottom. Louis did likewise; but in vain. Only soft ooze came up on the blade. Then Little Fellow stripped and dived. Of course it was dark under water, as it always is dark under the muddy Red, and the Indian could not feel a thing from which fringe could have ripped. Had my jerk disturbed whatever it was and sent it rolling down to mid-current? I asked Father Holland this when I came back.

"Tush, faint-heart," he muttered, drawing me aside. "'Tis only a trial of your faith."

I said something about trials of faith which I shall not repeat here, but which the majority of people, who are on the tenter-hooks of such trials, have said for themselves.

"Faith! Pah!" exclaimed Louis, joining our whispered conference, while Eric and Mr. Sutherland were hoisting a tent. "That shawl, it mean nodings of things heavenly! It only mean rag stuck in the mud and reds nearabouts here! I have told the Great Bear and his snarl Englishman the Indians not come till morning. They get tent ready and watch! You follow Louis, he lead you to camp. The priest—he good for say a little prayer; the Indian for fight; Louis—for swear; Rufus—to snatch the Englishwoman, he good at snatching the fair, ha-ha."

He darted to the shore, calling Little Fellow from the canoe and leaving Father Holland and me to follow as best we could.

"We'll be back soon, Eric," I shouted. "We're going to get the lie of the land. Keep watch here," and I broke into a run to keep up with the French trapper and the Indian, who were leading into the woods away from the river. I could hear Father Holland puffing behind like a wind-blown racer. Abruptly the priest came to a stop.

"By all the saints," he ordered. "Go back to the tent!"

I turned. A white form emerged from the foliage and Frances was beside me.

"May I not come?" she asked.

"No—dearest, there will be fighting."

"No—Lord—no," panted Father Holland coming up to us. "We're not swapping one woman for another. What would Rufus do without ye?"

"You are going for Miriam?" she questioned, holding my hand. "God speed you and bring you back safely!"

"Say rather—bring Miriam," and I unfastened the clinging hand almost roughly.

"Come on, slugs, sloths, laggards," commanded Laplante impatiently, and we dashed into the thick of the woods, leaving the white figure alone against the shadowy thicket. She called out something, of which I heard only two words, "Miriam" and "Rufus"; but I knew those names were uttered in supplication and they filled my heart with daring hope. Surely, we must succeed—for the Little

Statue's prayers were following me—and I bounded on with a faith as buoyant as the priest's blind trust. Thus we ran through the moon-shafted woods pursuing the flitting, lithe figures of trapper and Indian, who scarce disturbed a fern leaf, while Father Holland and I floundered through the underbrush like ramping elephants. Then I found myself panting as hard as the priest and clinging to his arm for support; for illness had taken all the bravery out of my muscles, like champagne uncorked and left in the heat.

"Brace yourself, lad," said the priest. "The Lord is with us, but don't you bungle."

A long, low whistle came through the dark, a whistle that was such a perfect imitation of the night hawk, no spy might detect it for the signal of a runner. After the whistle, was the soft, ominous hiss of a serpent in the grass; and we were abreast of Louis Laplante and Little Fellow standing stock still sniffing forward as hounds might scent a foe.

"She may not be there! She may be drown;" whispered Louis, "but we creep on, quiet like hare, no noise like deer, stiller than mountain cat, hist—what that?"

The night breeze set the leaves all atremble—clapping their hands, as the Indians call it—and a whiff of burning bark tainted the air. "That's it," said I under my breath.

The smoke was blowing from wooded flats between us and the river. Cautiously parting interlaced branches and as carefully replacing each bough to prevent backward snap, we turned down the sloping bank. I suppose necessity's training in the wilds must produce the same result in man and beast; and from that fact, faddists of the various "osophies" and "ologies" may draw what conclusions they please; but I affirm that no panther could creep on its prey with more stealth, caution and cunning than the trapper and Indian on the enemy's camp. I have seen wild creatures approaching a foe set each foot down with noiseless tread; but I have never seen such a combination of instincts, brute and human, as Louis and Little Fellow displayed. The Indian felt the ground for tracks and pitfalls and sticks, that might crackle. Louis, with his whole face pricked forward, trusted more to his eyes and ears and that sense of "feel," which is—contradictory as it may seem—utterly intangible. Once the Indian picked up a stick freshly broken. This was examined by both, and the Indian smelt it and tried his tongue on the broken edge. Then both fell on all fours, creeping under the branches of the thicket and pausing at every pace.

"Would that I had taken lessons in forest lore before I went among the Sioux," I thought to myself. Now I knew what had been incomprehensible before—why all my well-laid plans had been detected.

A wind rustled through the foliage. That was in our favor; for in spite of our care the leaves crushed and crinkled beneath us. At intervals a glimmer of light shone from the beach. Louis paused and listened so intently our breathing was distinctly audible. A vague murmur of low voices—like the "talking of the trees" in Little Fellow's language—floated up from the river; and in the moonlight I saw Laplante laugh noiselessly. Trees stood farther apart on the flats and brushwood gave place to a forest of ferns, that concealed us in their deep foliage; but the thick growth also hid the enemy, and we knew not at what moment we might emerge in full view of the camp. So we stretched out flat, spying through the fern stalks before we parted the stems to draw ourselves on a single pace. Presently, the murmur separated into distinct voices, with much low laughing and the bitter jeers that make up Indian mirth. We could hear the crackling of the fire, and wormed forward like caterpillars.

There was a glare of light through the ferns, and Louis stopped. We all three pulled abreast of him. Lying there as a cat watches a mouse, we parted first one and then another of the fronds till the Indian encampment could be clearly seen.

"Is that the tribe?" I whispered; but Louis gripped my arm in a vice that forbade speech.

The camp was not a hundred feet away. Fire blazed in the centre. Poles were up for wigwams, and already skins had been overlaid, completing several lodges. Men lay in lazy attitudes about the fire. Squaws were taking what was left of the evening meal and slave-women were putting things to rights for the night. Sitting apart, with hands tied, were other slaves, chiefly young women taken in some recent fray and not yet trusted unbound. Among these was one better clad than the others. Her wrists were tied; but her hands managed to conceal her face, which was bowed low. In her lap was a sleeping child. Was this Miriam? Children were with the other captives; but to my eyes this woman's torn shawl appeared reddish in the fire glow.

"Let's go boldly up and offer to buy the slaves," I suggested; but Louis' grip tightened forbiddingly and Little Fellow's forefinger pointed towards a big creature, who was ordering the others about. 'Twas a woman of giant, bronzed form, with the bold stride of a conquering warrior and a trophy-decked belt

about her waist. The fire shone against her girdle and the stones in the leather strap glowed back blood-red. Father Holland breathed only one word in my ear, "Agates;" and the fire of the red stones flashed like some mystic flame through my being till brain and heart were hot with vengeance and my hands burned as if every nerve from palm to finger-tips were a blade point reaching out to destroy that creature of cruelty.

"Diable's squaw," I gasped out, beside myself with anger and joy. "Let me but within arm's length of her——"

"Hold quiet," the priest hissed low and angry, gripping my shoulder like a steel winch. "'Vengeance is mine,' saith the Lord! See that you save the white woman! Leave the evil-doer to God! The Lord's with us, but I tell you, don't you bungle!"

"Bungle!" I could have shouted out defiance to the whole band. "Let go!" I ordered, trying to struggle up; for the iron hand still held me. "Let go, or I'll ——"

But Louis Laplante's palm was forcibly slapped across my mouth and his other hand he laid significantly on his dagger, giving me one threatening look. By the firelight I saw his lips mechanically counting the numbers of the enemy and mechanically I audited his count.

"Twenty men, thirty squaws and the slaves," said he under his breath.

An Indian left the fire and approached the captives.

"See! Watch! Is that woman Miriam?" demanded the priest. "She'll take her hands from her face now."

"Of course it is!" I was furious at the restraint and hesitancy; but as I said before, the experienced intriguer proceeds as warily as a cat.

"You not sure—not for sure—*Mon Dieu*—no," muttered Laplante; and he was right. With the forest shadows across the captives, it was impossible to distinguish the color of their faces. Taking a knife from his belt, the Indian cut the cords of all but the woman with her hands across her face. A girl brought refuse of food; but this woman took no notice, never moving her hands. Thereupon the young squaw sneered and the Indian idlers jeered loud in harsh, strident laughter. This roused the big squaw. She strode up, Little Fellow all the while with glistening teeth following her motions as a cat's head turns to a mouse. With the flat of her hand she struck the silent woman, who leaped up and

ran to a wigwam. In speechless fear, the child had scrambled to its feet and backed away from the angry group towards the ferns; but the light was fitful and shadowy, and we could recognize neither woman, nor child.

"I can't stand this any longer," I declared. "I must know if that's Miriam. Let's draw closer."

Father Holland and I crawled stealthily to the very border of fern growth, Louis and the Indian lying still and muttering over some plan of action.

"Hist," said the priest, "we'll try the child."

Unlike naked Indian children, the little thing had a loose garment banded about its waist; but its feet were bare and its hair as raven black as that of any young savage. It stood like some woodland elf in the maze of heavy sleepiness, at each harsh word from the camp, sidling shyly closer to our hiding-place. We dragged forward till I could have touched the child, but feared to startle it.

Putting his hand out slowly, Father Holland caught the little creature's arm. It gave a start, jerked back and looked in mute wonderment at our strange hiding-place.

"Pretty boy," crooned the priest in low, coaxing tones, gently tightening his hold.

"Is it white?" I whispered.

"I can't see."

"Good little man," he went on, slowly folding his hands about it. Drawing quickly back, he lifted the child completely into his arms.

"Is boy sleepy?" he asked.

"Call him 'Eric,'" I urged.

"Is Eric sleepy?"

The child's head fell wearily against the priest's shoulder. Snuggling closer, he lisped back in perfect English, "Eric's tired."

At once Father Holland's free hand caught my arm as if he feared I might rush out. For a moment neither of us spoke.

Then he said, "Give me your coat."

I ripped off my buckskin-smock. Wrapping the sleeping boy about, the priest laid him gently among the ferns.

"Where's the mother?" asked Father Holland with a catching intake of breath.

I pointed to the wigwam. The big squaw had come out, leaving Miriam alone and was engaged in noisy dispute with the men. Louis and Little Fellow had now wriggled abreast of us.

"Ha, ha, *mon brave*—your time, it come now! You save the white woman! I pay my devoirs to the lady, ha, ha—I owe her much—I pay you both back with one stroke, one grand stroke. Little Fellow, he watch for spring surprise and help us both! Swoop—snitch—snatch—snap her up! 'Tis done—tra-la!" and Louis drew up for all the world like a tiger about to spring, but the priest drew him down.

"Listen," commanded the churchman, in the slow, tense way of one who intended to be obeyed. "I'll go back and come up by the beach. I'll brow-beat them and tongue-whack them for having slaves. They'll offer fight; so'll I. They'll all run down; that's your chance. Wait till they all go. I'll make them, every one. That's your chance. You rush! Try that! If it fail, in the name of the Lord, have y'r weapons ready—and the Lord be with us!"

"They'll kill you," I protested. "Let me go!"

"You? What about Frances?"

"Pah!" said Louis. "I go myself—I trick—I trap—I snare 'em——"

"Hush to ye, ye braggart," interrupted the priest. "Gillespie is as flabby as dough from an illness. 'Tis here you sit quiet, and help with Miriam as ye'd save y'r soul! Howld down with y'r bouncing nonsense, lad, and the saints be with ye; for it's a fight there'll be, and there is the fightin' stuff of a soldier in ye! Never turn to me—mind ye never turn to help me, or the curse of the fool be on y'r head—and the Lord be with us!"

"Amen." But I spoke to vacancy. While a rising wind set the branches overhead grating noisily, he had risen and darted away. Louis Laplante, contrary to the priest's orders, also rose and disappeared in the woods. Little Fellow still lay by me, but I could not rely on him for intelligent action, and there came over me that sense of aloneness in danger, which I knew so well in the Mandane country. The child's slightest cry might alarm the camp, and I shivered when he breathed heavily, or turned in his sleep. The Indians might miss the boy and search the

woods. Instinctively my hand was on my pistol. It was well to be as near Miriam's tent as possible; and I, too, took advantage of the wind to change my place. I moved back, signalling the Indian to follow, and skirted round the open till I was directly opposite Miriam's wigwam. Why had Louis gone off, and why did he not come back? Had he gone to keep secret guard over the priest, or to decoy the vigilant Sioux woman? In his intentions I had confidence enough, but not in his judgment. At that moment my speculations were interrupted by a loud shout from the beach. Every Indian in camp started up as if hostiles had uttered their war-cry.

"Hallo, there! Hallo! Hallo!" called the priest. Indians dashed to the river, while bedraggled squaws and naked children rushed from wigwams and stood in clamorous groups between the lodges and the water. The topmost branches of the trees swayed back and forward in the wind, alternately throwing shafts of moonlight and shadows across the opening of Miriam's wigwam. When the light flooded the tent a solitary, white-faced form appeared in dark, sharp outline. The bare arms were tied at the wrists, and beat aimlessly through the darkness. And there was a sound of piteous weeping.

Should I make the final, desperate dash now? "Don't bungle His plans," came the priest's warning; and I waited. The squaws were very near; and the angular figure of Diable's wife hung on the rear of the group. She was scolding like a termagant in the Sioux tongue, ordering the other women to the fray; but still she kept back, looking over her shoulder suspiciously at Miriam's tent, uncertain whether to go or stay. We had failed in every other attempt to rescue Miriam. If the Lord—as the priest believed—had planned the sufferer's aid, His instruments had blundered badly. There must be no more feeble-fingering.

"Thieves! Thieves! Cut-throats!" bawled Father Holland in a storm of abuse. "Ye rascals," he thundered, cutting the air with his stick and purposely backing away from the camp to draw the Indians off. Then his voice was lost in a chorus of shrill screams.

The moonlight shone across the wigwam opening. The captive had heard the English tongue, and was listening. But the Sioux squaw had also heard and recognized the voice of a former prisoner. She ran forward a pace, then hesitated, looking back doubtfully. As she turned her head, out from the gloom of the thicket with the leap of a lynx, lithe and swift, sprang the crouching form of Louis Laplante. I felt Little Fellow all in a tremor by my side; the tremor not of fear, but of the couchant panther; and he uttered the most vicious snarl I have

ever heard from human throat. Louis alighted neatly and noiselessly, directly behind the Sioux woman. She must have felt his presence, for she turned round and round expectantly. Louis, silent and elusive as a shadow, circled about her, tripping from side to side as she turned her head. But the fire betrayed him. She had wheeled towards the forest as if spying for the unseen presence among the foliage, and Louis deftly dodged behind. The move put him between the fire and his antagonist, and the full profile of his queer, bending figure was shadowed clear past the woman. She turned like some vengeful, malign goddess, and I thought it all up with the daring trapper; but he doffed his red toque and swept the advancing fury the low bow of a French courtier. Then he drew himself erect and laughed insolently in the woman's face. His careless assurance allayed her suspicions.

"Oh, 'tis you!" she growled.

"'Tis I, fleet-foot, winged messenger, humble slave," laughed Louis, with another grotesque bow; but the rogue had cleverly put himself between the squaw and Miriam's tent.

I should have rushed to Miriam's rescue long since, instead of watching this by-play between trapper and mountain cat; but as the foray waxed hotter with the priest, the young braves had run back to their tents for guns and clubs.

"Stand off, ye scoundrels," roared the priest, in tones of genuine anger; for the Indians were closing threateningly about him. "Stand back, ye knaves, ye sons of Satan," and every soul but Louis Laplante and the Sioux squaw ran with querulous shouts to the river.

"Cruel! Cruel! Cruel!" sobbed a voice from the wigwam; and there was a straining to break the thongs which bound her. "Cruel! Cruel! Hast Thou no pity? O my God! Hast Thou no pity? Shall not a sparrow fall to the ground without Thy knowledge? Is this Thy pity? O my God!" The voice broke in a torrent of heart-piercing cries.

I could endure it no longer.

"Have at ye, ye villains! Come out like men! Now, me brave bhoys, show the stuff that's in ye! A fig for y'r valor if ye fail! The curse o' the Lord on the coward heart! Back with ye; ye red divils! Out with ye, Rufus! The Lord shall deliver the captive! What, 'an wuld ye dare strike a servant o' the Lord? Let the deliverer appear, I say," he shouted, weaving in commands to us as he dealt stout

blows about him and receded down the river bank. "Take that—and that—and that," I heard him shout, with a rat-tat-too of sharp thuds from the staff accompanying each word. Then I knew the quarrel on the beach was at its height; and Louis Laplante was still foiling the Sioux's approach to Miriam's wigwam like a deft fencer.

"Follow me, Little Fellow," I commanded. "Have your knife ready," and I had not finished speaking when three shrill whistles came from Louis. 'Twas his old-time signal of danger. Above the hubbub at the river the Sioux squaw was screaming to the braves.

Bounding from concealment, I tore off the layer roofing of the wigwam, plunged through the tapering pole frame, shaking the frail lean-to like a house of cards, and was beside Miriam. Again I heard Louis' whistle and again the squaw's angry scream; but Little Fellow had followed on my heels and stood with knife-blade glittering bare at the tent-entrance.

"Hush," I whispered, slashing my dagger through the thongs around her hands and cutting the rope that held her to the central stake. "We've found you at last. Come! Come!" and I caught her up.

"O my God!" she cried. "At last! At last! Where is the child? They have taken little Eric!"

"We have him safe! His father is waiting! Don't hesitate, Miriam!"

"Run, Little Fellow," I ordered, "Across the camp. Get the child," and I sprang from the wigwam, which crashed to the ground behind me. I had thought to save skirting the woods by a run across the camping-ground; but when my Indian dashed for the child and the Sioux saw me undefended with the white woman in my arms, she made a desperate lunge at Laplante and called at the top of her voice for the braves.

Louis, with weapons in hand, still kept between the fury and Miriam; but I think his French chivalry must have been restraining him. Though the Sioux offered him many opportunities and was doing her best to sheathe a knife in his heart, he seemed to refrain from using either dagger or pistol. An insolent laugh was on his face. The life-and-death game which he was playing was to his daring spirit something novel and amusing.

"The lady is—perturbed," he laughed, dodging a thrust at his neck; "she fences

wide, tra-la," this as the barrel of his pistol parried a drive of her knife; "she hits afar—ho—ho—not so fast, my fury—not so furious, my fair—zipp, ha—ha—ha—another miss—another miss—the lady's a-miss," for the squaw's weapon struck fire against his own.

"Look out for the braves, have a care," I shouted; for a dozen young bucks were running up behind to the woman's aid.

"Ha—ha—-*prenez garde*—my tiger-cat has kittens," he laughed; and he looked over his shoulder.

That backward look gave the fury her opportunity. In the firelight blue steel flashed bright. The Frenchman reeled, threw up his arms, and fell. One sharp, deep, broken draw of breath, and with a laugh on his lips, Louis Laplante died as he had lived. Then the tiger-cat leaped over the dead form at Miriam and me.

What happened next I can no more set down consecutively than I can distinguish the parts in a confused picture with a red-eyed fury striking at me, naked Indians brandishing war-clubs, flashes of powder smoke, a circle of gesticulating, screeching dark faces in the background, my Indian fighting like a very fiend, and a pale-faced woman with a little curly-headed boy at her feet standing against the woods.

"Run, *Monsieur*; I keep bad Indians off," urged Little Fellow. "Run—save white squaw and papoose—run, *Monsieur*."

Now, whatever may be said to the contrary, however brave two men may be, they cannot stand off a horde of armed savages. I let go my whole pistol-charge, which sent the red demons to a distance and intended dashing for the woods, when the Sioux woman put her hand in her pocket and hurled a flint head at Little Fellow. The brave Indian sprang aside and the thing fell to the ground. With it fell a crumpled sheet of paper. I heard rather than saw Little Fellow's crouching leap. Two forms rolled over and over in the camp ashes; and with Miriam on my shoulder and the child under the other arm, I had dashed into the thicket of the upper ground.

Overhead tossed the trees in a swelling wind, and up from the shore rushed the din of wrangling tongues, screaming and swearing in a clamor of savage wrath. The wind grew more boisterous as I ran. Behind the Indian cries died faintly away; but still with a strength not my own, always keeping the river in view, and often mistaking the pointed branches, which tore clothing and flesh from head to

feet, for the hands of enemies—I fled as if wolves had been pursuing.

Again and again sobbed Miriam—"O, my God! At last! At last! Thanks be to God! At last! At last!"

We were on a hillock above our camp. Putting Miriam down, I gave her my hand and carried the child. When I related our long, futile search and told her that Eric was waiting, agitation overcame her, and I said no more till we were within a few feet of the tents.

"Please wait." I left her a short distance from the camp that I might go and forewarn Eric.

Frances Sutherland met me in the way and read the news which I could not speak.

"Have you—oh—have you?" she asked. "Who is that?" and she pointed to the child in my arms.

"Where's Hamilton? Where's your father?" I demanded, trembling from exhaustion and all undone.

"Mr. Hamilton is in his tent priming a gun. Father is watching the river. And oh, Rufus! is it really so?" she cried, catching, sight of Miriam's stooped, ragged figure. Then she darted past me. Both her arms encircled Miriam, and the two began weeping on each other's shoulders after the fashion of women.

I heard a cough inside Hamilton's tent. Going forward, I lifted the canvas flap and found Eric sitting gloomily on a pile of robes.

"Eric," I cried, in as steady a voice as I command, which indeed, was shaking sadly, and I held the child back that Hamilton might not see, "Eric, old man, I think at last we've run the knaves down."

"Hullo!" he exclaimed with a start, not knowing what I had said. "Are you men back? Did you find out anything?"

"Why—yes," said I: "we found this," and I signalled Frances to bring Miriam.

This was no way to prepare a man for a shock that might unhinge reason; but my mind had become a vacuum and the warm breath of the child nestling about my neck brought a mist before my eyes.

"What did you say you had found?" asked Hamilton, looking up from his gun to the tent-way; for the morning light already smote through the dark.

"This," I said, lifting the canvas a second time and drawing Miriam forward.

I could but place the child in her arms. She glided in. The flap fell. There was the smothered outcry of one soul—rent by pain.

"Miriam—Miriam—my God—Miriam!" "Come away," whispered a choky voice by my side, and Frances linked her arm through mine.

Then the tent was filled and the night air palpitated with sounds of anguished weeping. And with tears raining from my eyes, I hastened away from what was too sacred for any ear but a pitying God's. That had come to my life which taught me the depths of Hamilton's suffering.

"Dearest," said I, "now we understand both the pain and the joy of loving," and I kissed her white brow.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE PRIEST JOURNEYS TO A FAR COUNTRY

Again the guest-chamber of the Sutherland home was occupied.

How came it that a Catholic priest lay under a Protestant roof? How comes it that the new west ever ruthlessly strips reality naked of creed and prejudice and caste, ever breaks down the barrier relics of a mouldering past, ever forces recognition of men as individuals with individual rights, apart from sect and class and unmerited prerogatives? The Catholic priest was wounded. The Protestant home was near. Manhood in Protestant garb recognized manhood in Roman cassock. Necessity commanded. Prejudice obeyed as it ever obeys in that vast land of untrameled freedom. So Father Holland was cared for in the Protestant home with a tenderness which Mr. Sutherland would have repudiated. For my part, I have always thanked God for that leveling influence of the west. It pulls the fools from high places and awards only one crown—merit.

It was Little Fellow who had brought Father Holland, wounded and insensible, from the Sioux camp.

"What of Louis Laplante's body, Little Fellow?" I asked, as soon as I had seen all the others set out for the settlement with Father Holland lying unconscious in the bottom of the canoe.

"The white man, I buried in the earth as the white men do—deep in the clay to the roots of the willow, so I buried the Frenchman," answered the Indian. "And the squaw, I weighted with stones at her feet; for they trod on the captives. And with stones I weighted her throat, which was marked like the deer's when the mountain cat springs. With the stones at her throat and her feet, the squaw, I rolled into the water."

"What, Little Fellow," I cried, remembering how I had seen him roll over and over through the camp-fire, with his hands locked on the Sioux woman's throat, "did you kill the daughter of L'Aigle?"

"Non, *Monsieur*; Little Fellow no bad Indian. But the squaw threw a flint and the flint was poison, and my hands were on her throat, and the squaw fell into the

ashes, and when Little Fellow arose she was dead. Did she not slay La Robe Noire? Did she not slay the white man before Monsieur's eyes? Did she not bind the white woman? Did she not drag me over the ground like a dead stag? So my fingers caught hard in her throat, and when I arose she lay dead in the ashes. So I fled and hid till the tribe left. So I shoved her into the water and pushed her under, and she sank like a heavy rock. Then I found the priest."

I had no reproaches to offer Little Fellow. He had only obeyed the savage instincts of a savage race, exacting satisfaction after his own fashion.

"The squaw threw a flint. The flint was poison. Also the squaw threw this at Little Fellow, white man's paper with signs which are magic," and the Indian handed me the sheet, which had fallen from the woman's pocket as she hurled her last weapon.

Without fear of the magic so terrifying to him, I took the dirty, crumpled missive and unfolded it. The superscription of Quebec citadel was at the top. With overwhelming revulsion came memory of poor Louis Laplante lying at the camp-fire in the gorge tossing a crumpled piece of paper wide of the flames, where the Sioux squaw surreptitiously picked it up. The paper was foul and tattered almost beyond legibility; but through the stains I deciphered in delicate penciling these words:

> "In memory of last night's carouse in Lower Town, (one favor deserves another, you know, and I got you free of that scrape), spike the gun of my friend the enemy. If R-f-s G—p—e, E. H—l-t-n, J—k MacK, or any of that prig gang come prying round your camp for news, put them on the wrong track. I owe the whole —— —— set a score. Pay it for me, and we'll call the loan square."

No name was signed; but the scene in the Quebec club three years before, when Eric had come to blows with Colonel Adderly, explained not only the authorship but Louis' treachery. 'Tis the misfortune of errant rogues like poor Louis that to get out of one scrape ever involves them in a worse. Now I understood the tumult of contradictory emotions that had wrought upon him when I had saved his life and he had resolved to undo the wrong to Miriam.

Little Fellow put the small canoe to rights, and I had soon joined the others at the Sutherland homestead. But for two days the priest lay as one dead, neither moaning nor speaking. On the morning of the third, though he neither opened his eyes nor gave sign of recognition, he asked for bread. Then my heart gave a

great bound of hope—for surely a man desiring food is recovering!—and I sent Frances Sutherland to him and went out among the trees above the river.

That sense of resilient relief which a man feels on discharging an impossible task, or throwing off too heavy a burden, came over me. Miriam was rescued, the priest restored, and I dowered with God's best gift—the love of a noble, fair woman. Hard duty's compulsion no longer spurred me; but my thoughts still drove in a wild whirl. There was a glassy reflection of a faded moon on the water, and daybreak came rustling through the trees which nodded and swayed overhead. A twittering of winged things arose in the branches, first only the cadence of a robin's call, an oriole's flute-whistle, the stirring wren's mellow note. Then, suddenly, out burst from the leafed sprays a chorus of song that might have rivaled angels' melodies. The robin's call was a gust of triumph. The oriole's strain lilted exultant and a thousand throats gushed out golden notes.

"Now God be praised for love and beauty and goodness—and above all—for Frances—for Frances," were the words that every bird seemed to be singing; though, indeed, the interpretation was only my heart's response. I know not how it was, but I found myself with hat off and bowed head, feeling a gratitude which words could not frame—for the splendor of the universe and the glory of God.

"Rufus," called a voice more musical to my ear than any bird song; and Frances was at my side with a troubled face. "He's conscious and talking, but I can't understand what he means. Neither can Miriam and Eric. I wish you would come in."

I found the priest pale as the pillows against which he leaned, with glistening eyes gazing fixedly high above the lintel of the door. Miriam, with her snow-white hair and sad-lined face, was fanning the air before him. At the other side stood Eric with the boy in his arms. Mr. Sutherland and I entered the room abreast. For a moment his wistful gaze fell on the group about the bed. First he looked at Eric and the child, then at Miriam, and from Miriam to me, then back to the child. The meaning of it all dawned, gleamed and broke in full knowledge upon him; and his face shone as one transfigured.

"The Lord was with us," he muttered, stroking Miriam's white hair. "Praise be to God! Now I can die in peace——"

"No, you can't, Father," I cried impetuously.

"Ye irriverent ruffian," he murmured with a flash of old mirth and a gentle

pressure of my hand. "Ye irriverent ruffian. Peace! Peace! I die in peace," and again the wistful eyes gazed above the door.

"Rufus," he whispered softly, "where are they taking me?"

"Taking you?" I asked in surprise; but Frances Sutherland's finger was on her lips, and I stopped myself before saying more.

"Troth, yes, lad, where are they taking me? The northern tribes have heard not a word of the love of the Lord; and I must journey to a far, far country."

At that the boy set up some meaningless child prattle. The priest heard him and listened.

"Father," asked the child in the language of Indians when referring to a priest, "Father, if the good white father goes to a far, far away, who'll go to northern tribes?" "And a little child shall lead them," murmured the priest, thinking he, himself, had been addressed and feeling out blindly for the boy. Eric placed the child on the bed, and Father Holland's wasted hands ran through the lad's tangled curls.

"A little child shall lead them," he whispered. "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation. A light to lighten the Gentiles—and a little child shall lead them."

Then I first noticed the filmy glaze, as of glass, spreading slowly across the priest's white face. Blue lines were on his temples and his lips were drawn. A cold chill struck to my heart, like icy steel. Too well I read the signs and knew the summons; and what can love, or gratitude, do in the presence of that summons? Miriam's face was hidden in her hands and she was weeping silently.

"The northern tribes know not the Lord and I go to a far country; but a little child shall lead them!" repeated the priest.

"Indeed, Sir, he shall be dedicated to God," sobbed Miriam. "I shall train him to serve God among the northern tribes. Do not worry! God will raise up a servant ——"

But her words were not heeded by the priest.

"Rufus, lad," he said, gazing afar as before, "Lift me up," and I took him in my arms.

"My sight is not so good as it was," he whispered. "There's a dimness before my face, lad! Can *you* see anything up there?" he asked, staring longingly forward.

"Faith, now, what might they all be doing with stars for diadems? What for might the angels o' Heaven be doin' going up and down betwane the blue sky and the green earth? Faith, lad, 'tis daft ye are, a-changin' of me clothes! Lave the black gown, lad! 'Tis the badge of poverty and He was poor and knew not where to lay His head of a weary night! Lave the black gown, I say! What for wu'd a powr Irish priest be doin' a-wearin' of radiant white? Where are they takin' me, Rufus? Not too near the light, lad! I ask but to kneel at the Master's feet an' kiss the hem of His robe!"

There was silence in the room, but for the subdued sobbing of Miriam. Frances had caught the priest's wrists in both her hands, and had buried her face on the white coverlet. With his back to the bed, Mr. Sutherland stood by the window and I knew by the heaving of his angular shoulders that flood-gates of grief had opened. There was silence; but for the hard, sharp, quick, short breathings of the priest. A crested bird hopped to the window-sill with a chirp, then darted off through the quivering air with a glint of sunlight from his flashing wings. I heard the rustle of morning wind and felt the priest's face growing cold against my cheek.

"I must work the Master's work," he whispered, in short broken breaths, "while it is day—for the night cometh—when no man—can work.—Don't hold me back, lad—for I must go—to a far, far country—It's cold, cold, Rufus—the way is—rugged—my feet are slipping—slipping—give a hand—lad!—Praise to God—there's a resting-place—somewhere!—Farewell—boy—be brave—farewell—I may not come back soon—but I must—journey—to—a——far——far——"

There was a little gasp for breath. His head felt forward and Frances sobbed out, "He is gone! He is gone!"

And the warmth of pulsing life in the form against my shoulder gave place to the rigid cold of motionless death.

"May the Lord God of Israel receive the soul of His righteous servant," cried Mr. Sutherland in awesome tones.

With streaming eyes he came forward and helped me to lay the priest back.

Then we all passed out from that chamber, made sacred by an invisible presence.

VALEDICTORY.

'Twas twenty years after Father Holland's death that a keen-eyed, dark-skinned, young priest came from Montreal on his way to Athabasca.

This was Miriam's son.

To-day it is he, the missionary famous in the north land, who passing back and forward between his lonely mission in the Athabasca and the headquarters of his order, comes to us and occupies the guest-chamber in our little, old-fashioned, vine-grown cottage.

The retaking of Fort Douglas virtually closed the bitter war between Hudson's Bay and Nor'-Westers. To both companies the conflict had proved ruinous. Each was as anxious as the other for the terms of peace by which the great fur-trading rivals were united a few years after the massacre of Seven Oaks.

So ended the despotic rule of gentlemen adventurers in the far north. The massacre turned the attention of Britain to this unknown land and the daring heroism of explorers has given place to the patient nation-building of multitudes who follow the pioneer. Such is the record of a day that is done.

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