



A CANADIAN FARM MYSTERY

BESSIE MARCHANT



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Or, Pam the Pioneer

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“WHAT IS THAT?” WHISPERED SOPHY SHARPLY,
AND PAM’S HEART GAVE A SUDDEN LEAP

A
Canadian Farm Mystery
Or, Pam the Pioneer

BY

BESSIE MARCHANT

Author of "The Unknown Island"
"Joyce Harrington's Trust"
"A Girl and a Caravan"
"Molly Angel's Adventures"
&c. &c.

Illustrated by Cyrus Cuneo

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A Canadian Farm Mystery

Or, Pam the Pioneer

CHAPTER I

Her Great Idea

“Jack, Jack, I have had a truly wonderful inspiration!” cried Pam as she came dashing down the stairs like a whirlwind.

Unfortunately Barbara, the little maid-of-all-work, was at that moment toiling upwards with the soup tureen and a pile of plates on a tray. She was near the top, too, and very much out of breath. She had no strength to stand against the violent impact, but went down before it, being brought up in a heap at the turn of the stairs while tray, tureen, and plates went careering to the bottom, accompanied by a stream of soup.

“Now you’ve done it!” exclaimed Jack, with an ominous growl in his voice, as, leaning on his stick, he came limping from the kitchen to survey the ruins.

“Oh, haven’t I just!” cried Pam in heartfelt contrition. Then she gasped: “Whatever will Mother say?”

The afflicted Barbara, who still lay at the bend of the stairway where she had fallen, burst into noisy crying at this. She had been dismissed from her last place for ravages among the crockery, and if she had to leave the house of Mrs. Walsh for a similar cause, where would her character be?

“Dry up!” burst out Jack impatiently. “We have too much moisture here already by the look of it.” As he spoke he hopped aside to let a rivulet of soup go past him. Such good soup it had been too! The savoury odours steamed up under his nose, and as he was desperately hungry the waste was all the more exasperating.

Just at this moment the green baize door at the top of the stairs opened smartly, and Greg called down: “Jack, Mother says don’t let Barbara bring up the soup for another ten minutes, because Colonel Seaford has ’phoned to say that he can’t be here till then.”

“What luck!” exclaimed Pam. “Come along, Barbara, we can make a fresh lot of soup in ten minutes, and we will serve it in a salad bowl and porridge plates. Dear me, nothing is ever so bad that it might not be worse!”

“You can’t make soup out of nothing, and there is not a teacupful of stock in the house,” growled Jack.

“Wait and see!” laughed Pam, as she lightly sprang over the ruins at the bottom of the stairs, dodged brown rivulets of soup that meandered along the

floor, and darted in at the kitchen door. "Come along, Barbara! England expects, &c."

"If you had done your duty and looked where you were going, the soup would not have been spilled," growled Jack, but Pam was too busy to heed him.

Seizing the empty soup saucepan, she half-filled it with hot water from the boiler and set it over the fire. Then she darted to the table, where she stood busily stirring, mixing, and pounding, calling all the time for a succession of things which Barbara was quick to supply. "There, that will do, I think," she exclaimed in great satisfaction. "Corn flour, tomato powder, salt, pepper—a good lot of that — Worcester sauce, burnt sugar, and a dash of shrimp sauce just by way of piquancy. Very nice to look at, and interesting to taste; not very nourishing, perhaps, but that will not matter for once."

The hot water was poured on the concoction, the stuff was returned to the saucepan and brought to the boil; then, the ten minutes being up, Pam carried the emergency soup to the dining-room herself, while Barbara collected the fragments of broken earthenware and swabbed up the river of soup with a grubby mop.

"Well, you take the cake, and no mistake about it, in rising to the occasion!" admitted Jack with grudging admiration, as he limped about the kitchen, getting ready for the fish course, and seeing that other things were keeping in a state of readiness.

Pam's merry laugh rang out. "It is a mercy I can do so much, for it is my fate to be always creating situations that call for dispatch and skill in the managing."

Jack looked at her in silent wonder. Somehow he always was wondering at Pam. It was barely more than half an hour by the clock since she had been drowned in tears because of that curt letter from Lady Dalby, who had written to say that as she could not have Miss Walsh when she needed her so much, she had secured another governess. Pam's salary had not been much, but in poverty like theirs every little counts. There was the doctor's bill for Muriel's illness, with all the other bills which had sprung from the same source, while winter was coming on. But it was of no use to "grouse" over things, it did not make them the least bit better. So he left off speculating about Pam, and ordered Barbara round in fine style for the next twenty minutes, and the courses of the dinner went up one by one until it was all over.

When coffee had been taken to the drawing-room, Greg and Sid cleared the dinner-table, and then came down to their supper in the breakfast-room, which opened out of the kitchen. Pam, who had rushed upstairs to see if Muriel was comfortably asleep, came hurrying back to help in washing up the silver and glass.

Then, "What is your great idea?" asked Jack, who was seated on a high stool at the table, and was rapidly polishing the spoons and forks which Pam had washed.

She glanced round, saw that the door of the scullery, where Barbara was washing plates and dishes, was a little way open, and darting across the room closed it softly.

"Jack!" she cried, with positive rapture in her tone, as she plunged her hands into the soapy water again, "Jack, I am going to ask Mother to let me go to Grandfather!"

"You can't go alone — you are only a girl!" he exclaimed, dropping a handful of spoons with a clatter because he was so amazed at the daring and audacity of Pam's great idea.

She laughed softly; it always amused her to hear Jack talk in this fashion. She was four years older than he was, and although she lacked his steadiness and balance, she knew that she was vastly ahead of him when it came to dealing with an emergency. "You are a dear, Jack, but you have your limitations. You are quite early Victorian in your ideas of what girls should or should not do. But you have got to widen your outlook a bit before Mother comes down from the drawing-room, because you must back me up in this. We can always influence Mother when we stand solid, and my great idea is for the general good."

"For instance?" Jack had retrieved the fallen spoons, and was polishing vigorously. Pam had a good many great ideas of one sort and another, but he had a cautious streak, and was not going to back her up in any wild scheme just because she wanted him to do so.

"Grandfather told Mother to send one of us out to him, and he promised to pay a salary. He said one of the children, but he did not mention whether it was a boy or a girl that he would prefer." Pam put out her facts with a calm decision, and Jack nodded approvingly. "Very well, you can't go. It will be another month before you can walk without a stick, and when you can, there is your work at Gay & Grainger's waiting for you, while until you go back they are paying you _____"

"A mere pittance — half a crown a week, accident insurance!" he groaned. "If only I had been over sixteen I could have had the proper State Insurance. It is a rotten shame, and the grossest injustice!"

"Be quiet, and let me talk!" Pam lifted an impatient hand to stay the tide of his eloquence, sprinkling him with soapy water in the process. "You have this pittance, and work waiting for you, but I have nothing. You also are twice the help to Mother that I am. Don't interrupt! Compliments are not necessary at this juncture; we are out for facts without trimmings, and don't you forget it.

Suppose that you had gone out to Grandfather this month. Mother says the winters in New Brunswick are dreadfully cold. Being a boy, you would naturally have had to work out of doors, and if there is no woman in the house, you would have had little comfort when you came in. Now, if I go, the dear little old man can hardly send me out into the forest chopping trees down when the temperature is miles below zero, but I can make him so comfortable in the house that by the spring he will be wanting the lot of us."

"Query as to that." Jack shook his head, and reached for the plate basket to put away his spoons.

"Oh, but he will. I shall lay myself out to win his heart; then when he has got so fond of me that he simply can't bear me out of his sight, I shall turn home-sick. I shall refuse my food, and tell him that I am pining for my family, that I can bear the cruel separation no longer. He will soften towards Mother then, and write her an imperative letter to sell up and come out to him without a moment's unnecessary delay. Oh, I can manage him, I have no doubt of it at all!"

"I don't think that I have either, if you go straight at it," admitted Jack, who spoke from experience, knowing himself to be weak as water in the hands of Pam when she had really made up her mind to influence him. "The question in my mind is whether Mother and he will hit it off comfortably when they live together. She is mistress here, and does as she likes; but it would not be happy for her if the old man took to ordering her round as I do Barbara."

"Indeed, no; but I tell you he can be managed, he must be managed for his own good," she said earnestly. "If he is very happy and comfortable, he will not want to be tiresome. Think how good it will be for Muriel to have a country life for the next few years. Think, too, what it will do for the boys. Greg is growing much too fast. He ought to have quiet evenings, and to be in bed by eight o'clock, instead of which he and Sid are working hard until after nine on most evenings, waiting at table and clearing away, qualifying for posts as footmen and butlers, but missing all the free and easy life of boyhood that they ought to have."

Jack drew a long breath which ended in a whistle.

"My word, if you talk to the old man like that, he will be sending for us all by the next boat! I will back you up for all I am worth, see if I don't. Three cheers for Pam the Pioneer, the intrepid and the brave! Of all the great ideas you ever had, this is the greatest!"

Pam flushed with pleasure. Jack had the balance and steadiness which she lacked; he was apt to sit in judgment on her, and that sort of thing is rather unbearable as a rule. Her mother was always holding Jack before her eyes as a model to be studied and copied, which, of course, was more unbearable still; so

that the present moment was sweet indeed, compensating for many a bad quarter of an hour which had come before.

“I must hurry up to Muriel now,” she said, ten minutes later, when they had discussed the scheme in all its bearings. “Be sure you stick by me, Jack, when it comes to the arguments, for you know I do not shine there.”

“Oh, I’ll stick by you, never fear,” he answered in a cheery tone. “I would do a good deal to see a way out of this boarding-house business. This stewing and grilling down here every night, to give those people upstairs a chance to overfeed themselves, gets on my nerves. The folks who are so keen on big dinners at eight o’clock at night ought to have to cook for themselves; then they would soon be cured of the habit.”

“I daresay they would, but think what a crowd of people would suffer from loss of income.” Pam laughed as she gave him a bear-like hug by way of showing her gratitude. “Think, too, what a slump there would be in the medical business, for Dr. Scott said yesterday that it was the people who ate too much who provided the doctors with a living.”

But Jack only grunted by way of answer, and then, taking his stick, limped out to the scullery to see if Barbara had fastened up for the night.

CHAPTER II

Business Enterprise

Galena Gittins had her hair screwed up tightly in curling-pins. Reggie Furness was late in coming to do “chores” that morning, and so he had crept in by way of the milk-room door with as little ostentation as possible. He had found by experience that it was not wise to attract attention to himself when he was behind time. Directly he noticed the curling-pins his courage revived. The fair Galena was never hard to live with when there was a festivity to the fore.

She was dashing round at such a rate that she even failed to notice his silent entrance. He picked up the milk-buckets and scurried away to the barn, well pleased at his escape, but actively curious as to the sort of frolic to which Galena was bound that day.

“There’s no one dead, so it can’t be a funeral,” he muttered, as he tied the white cow’s leg to a post to prevent her kicking while he milked. “It isn’t a wedding either, or else I should have been bound to hear about it. Her aunt has gone to Fredericton, so she ain’t going there.”

He was so absorbed in his meditations that he did not notice that the rope had come unfastened, until the cow by an adroit movement knocked him sprawling. He was used to her pranks by this time, and he contrived to keep the bucket from being kicked over, so his own upset did not count; and as he always pretended to himself that the white cow was a playful creature, instead of, as was actually the case, a bad-tempered animal, his feelings were not ruffled by his being rolled over and having his head thumped against a post.

When he carried the milk-buckets in to the little chamber that was scooped out from the side of the hill, he heard signs of unusual bustle in the kitchen, and poking his head cautiously round the post of the door, he was amazed to see a big baking in progress.

“Is that you, Reggie Furness?” called the voice of Miss Galena, who was darting here and there, apparently trying to do three things at once. “Step lively, will you, and help me here. I want eggs whisked, and currants washed, sugar rolled, and a dozen things done all nearly at once. You can’t have a sitting-down breakfast this morning. But none of us have had that. You will have to be content to feed as you run about.”

“I don’t care how I have my breakfast as long as I do have one,” said Reggie,

who had got hold of the whisker, and was turning it at a great rate, while the eggs churned into yellow foam under his active exertions.

Galena laughed at the broadness of the hint, but she had not had six brothers without knowing that boys were the hungriest creatures under the sun; so she brought him a great wedge of pumpkin pie, just to keep him from starving, and promised him some hot cookies as soon as they were out of the oven. The pie was fragrant with spice and black with currants. Reggie was in clover for once in his life. Breakfast, which was part of his wage, consisted in a usual way of buckwheat or oatmeal porridge drowned out with skim milk. There was no porridge pot visible this morning, so plainly there was something very unusual on hand.

“Please, are you going to be married to-day?” he asked, his eyes fairly bulging with curiosity. The ham boiler was on the stove, and it was beginning to bubble, while delicious odours filled the kitchen and made their way out through the open door. His question was only a wild hazard. He had never heard that Miss Galena had any views with regard to matrimony, but he guessed that in any case it would please her to be asked, and so he would be the more likely to find out what he wanted to know so badly. He was through with the whisking by now, and Miss Galena had set him rolling sugar. He would not have taken any, of course, being irreproachably honest so far as he understood what honesty meant; but he saw no harm in continually licking his fingers as he drew the sugar in a lump for the rolling-pin. It was good! He would have enjoyed rolling sugar all day long.

Galena burst into a great laugh of derision, but she was not ill-pleased at the suggestion.

“Dear me, no; I am not going to be married yet, though you never can tell what may happen.” She lifted her head and tried to look sprightly, but she was so worn with hard work and much dyspepsia that the attempt was rather a failure.

Reggie looked disappointed. If the festivity were not a wedding or a funeral, he did not see what it could be. No church functions were in progress this month, for the parson was away on holiday, and it would not have been considered in good taste to have a church frolic in his absence.

Galena’s eyes sparkled. She was aching for someone to talk things over with. The men were always in a hurry when they came in from the field, and there was not another woman within half a mile of the place. She hesitated, and was lost.

“We are going to have a great frolic to-night; it was only decided late last night, that is why I am so driven with cooking this morning. We are going to have a big surprise party at old Wrack Peveril’s; you know where he lives — over the Ridge at Ripple. They say he is a most fearfully disagreeable

old man. He lives quite alone, and has done so for more years than you have been alive. I have heard he made a vow that no woman should enter his house, on account of his only daughter having run away from him to get married. Don't you expect it will make him sit up when all the lot of us go walking in?"

"Suppose he won't let you inside the door?" Reggie stared at her with bulging eyes. He was thinking of what had happened at his own poor home two winters before, when he and Mose had gone to bed, and had been hounded out of it by a surprise party that threatened to pull the shingles off the roof if they were not admitted. Mose had been furious at the invasion, for the cupboard was empty, and the stark poverty of the home had been all laid bare to the laughing, careless crowd who had taken the place by storm.

"Suppose he can't keep us out!" she mocked. "I just love surprise parties when there is a spice of mischief in them. When we go to parson's and take more food than we could eat in a month, and leave it all behind for him and Mrs. White, it is most as tame as going to church on Sunday, or having a missionary meeting and giving money to convert the heathen; but when we go to surprise someone who does not want to see us, why, that is where the fun begins."

Reggie nodded in token of understanding, but he was spared the necessity of reply by the entrance of Nathan Gittins, the eldest brother of Galena, who ran the farm and the saw-mill, all the four brothers in between having left New Brunswick for the Far West when they came to man's estate.

All the way to school that morning Reggie fumed over the injustice to old Wrack Peveril in forcing a surprise party, mostly of women, upon him when he had said that no woman should enter his house.

Reggie had not had much to do with women since his mother died. He had been only a shaver of five years old then, and he had been "dragged up" ever since by his step-brother, Mose Paget, who owned a long strip of rather unfertile land running parallel with the creek, but separated from the water by Sam Buckle's quarter-section of water frontage. All through morning school Reggie debated the matter with so much absorption that he had no attention to give to mischief, and in consequence earned the good-conduct mark, to his great amazement.

Directly school was out he set off to climb the Ridge, not going by the ordinary trail that led past Ripple, but taking a bee-line through the woods and up over the gap where the forest fire had been two years before. He had serious business on hand, while his conscience troubled him a little, because he was going to betray the confidence of Galena. He had made up his mind to warn Wrack of what was impending, so that the old man should have a chance of doing as he liked about being at home when the visitors came.

The day was very hot although it was October. The maples on the Ridge were aflame with their autumn splendours, and the scarlet of the oaks at Cumberland Crossing was a sight to see. But Reggie had scant attention for the beauties of nature, for he was in a hurry. Make the best speed he could, it would still be almost impossible for him to get back to the schoolhouse before afternoon school began, and if he had no satisfactory excuse for being late he would have the cane. To be late at morning school was a forgivable offence, because of the long distances the scholars had to come and the heaviness of the morning "chores" at most of the homes; but there was no excuse for being late in the afternoon, because no one went home then, and it did not take long to eat the noon-piece each scholar brought in his or her school bag.

From the top of the Ridge to Ripple was easy going, downhill all the way. Reggie crashed through the undergrowth at a great rate. He had no watch, and could only guess at the time. Every minute gained would make one stroke of the cane the less, for the rule was one stroke for every minute late, so it was necessary to use dispatch.

When he emerged at the clearing in front of the house he saw the old man doing something to a gun, in front of the chiphouse door. Quickening his pace, Reggie was making straight towards him, but before he could clamber through the hole in the garden fence a quavering shout reached him.

"Now, then, stay where you are, boy! If you come a step nearer I will set the dog at you." Wrack's aspect was so threatening that Reggie decided it to be the best part of valour to stay where he was, especially as a powerful dog which had been lying on the ground rose at this moment and growled in a menacing fashion.

"I've come to tell you something that you will be glad to know," called Reggie.

"Tell it, then, and be off. I don't want a lot of loafers on these premises," growled the old man. And enraged though he was, Reggie's face twitched in a grin of amusement. One small and perspiring boy who had run all the way from the schoolhouse could hardly be described as a lot of loafers.

"Gittins's folks and a lot of women are going to have a surprise party here to-night. They are going to bring supper, and dance to an accordion afterwards," called out Reggie in clear tones which carried amazingly in the hot, still air. If he had been able to whisper the information it would not have seemed so bad, but to be obliged to shout out what in honour he ought to have kept silent about made him so angry that he hated the old man he had come so far to serve.

Wrack gave a scornful, cackling laugh, and the dog growled in sympathy.

"If the surprise party come here it is likely they may find themselves a bit

surprised,” the old man called back, then went on cleaning his gun as if no one were there.

“Ain’t you going to give me nothing for coming all this way to tell you?” demanded Reggie in a shrill tone of indignation. It was past believing that this disagreeable old man should actually refuse to reward him for all his trouble.

“I’ll give you the stick if you don’t clear out of this sharp,” the old man retorted with a snarl, and he looked as if he meant it.

Reggie was insistent, and inclined to clamour for what he deemed his rights, so he burst into noisy abuse after the manner of his kind.

“Think I’m going to put up with that sort of treatment, do you? A regular old skin-flint you are, and no mistake. I hope the surprise party will come, scores of ’em, and I hope they will dance and dance till your carpets are in rags, and they have worn holes in your floors.”

“Here, dog, after him!” exclaimed the old man, swinging his hand with an air of exasperation in Reggie’s direction. But Reggie was not going to stay on the chance of a mauling. The dog was a big animal, and he was only rather a small boy; so he fled away with the speed of a hunted fox, and the dog, having pursued him to the end of the cleared ground, gave up the chase, returning towards the house at a languid trot, as if the exertion was too much on such a hot day.

There was no slackening of Reggie’s speed until he was well on his way; then, as the ascent of the Ridge grew steeper, he dropped into a walk. There was black hate in his heart for the old man who had treated him so badly, and he was meditating all manner of wildly impossible schemes for getting the better of him as he toiled over the Ridge, then broke into a trot again where the ground sloped to the schoolhouse.

He would be late, he was sure of it, and he would have the cane. He had broken a confidence reposed in him, and he had gained nothing by it. No wonder he was furious. As he turned to enter the school door he shook his fist in impotent rage at the wooded ridge he had just crossed.

CHAPTER III

The Surprise Party

Pam stepped off the boat at Hunt's Crossing. There was a curious sense of unreality all about her. She felt as if she were walking in her sleep, and she half-expected to wake presently and find herself back in the top bedroom of the boarding-house in London, which she had shared with her mother and Muriel.

The forest had been pushed back a little at Hunt's Crossing. There were three wooden houses and several barns grouped near the river, but they all had a ragged, unfinished look which jarred on Pam, and forced her to the realization of being in a strange land. If she had been merely dreaming these things would not have troubled her.

There was no one to meet her; she had not expected there would be. Her mother, once she had agreed to Pam's plan, had told her all about the road from Hunt's Crossing to Ripple. The trail wound sharply round past Bond's store, which was the Post Office, curved round the angle of the hill, and then stretched in a straight line for three miles and a half to Ripple. There were cross trails here and there, but there was no mistaking the way. Pam even felt as if she had been here before when she saw the cluster of houses near to the river, the tumbledown barns, and the various trails that converged at the crossing.

She went into the store and arranged for her heavy baggage to be kept there until she could send or come for it; then, carrying her bag, her umbrella, and a waterproof, she set her face to the trail.

Curious glances followed her as she left the little cluster of houses. It was so rarely that a stranger of the softer sex left the river boats at this point. Men there were in plenty who came and went, intent on selling something, or looking for something to buy. But a well-dressed girl, who arranged for her baggage to be left at the store and then went marching along the forest trails as if she had lived there all her life, was, indeed, something to speculate over. Life moved fairly easily with the people at Hunt's Crossing, so they were able to lean over their front fences and continue their speculations without any serious upset to the day's work.

It was late in the afternoon, and the October sunshine had a mellow tinge, as if the reflected glories of the crimson and gold of the oaks and maples had somehow coloured the glow of the sunshine to a warmer tint. Pam kept bursting

into “Oh’s” and “Ah’s” of pleasure as she trod the trail with a sprightly step, and gazed on all the wealth of colour with which the forest was painted on that sunny autumn afternoon. Accustomed as her eyes had been to the soft neutral tints of London, and fresh as she was from a week of gazing on the grey Atlantic, all this flaming beauty of the woodland affected her senses, making her giddy.

For a mile or more she went ahead at a brisk pace, but her bag was heavy, her coat was hot, and presently, sitting down for a brief rest, she found herself so comfortable that she fell asleep. It was a foolish thing to do, of course, but who can expect fully-fledged wisdom and hoary-haired discretion in a girl of twenty? Pam awoke with a start after a delicious dream of her grandfather’s warm welcome at the end of the journey; she thought he was telling her with tears in his tired old eyes that he was sure she would be the joy of his life and the solace of his lonely days, but that he would know no real happiness until her mother and the other children came to live with him also.

The glory had faded from the forest, and a cool wind stirred among the rustling leaves. The sun had dropped out of sight, and with a sharp exclamation of dismay Pam rose to her feet to continue her journey. How idiotic she had been to fall asleep in this fashion when she should have been marching straight on! By the way, in which direction did she require to go? Straight on — but now she was not sure which direction was straight on, or which led back to Hunt’s Crossing. If by ill luck she took the wrong way darkness would overtake her, and she would have to ask for a night’s lodging at one of the three houses there. Even if she went forward on the right road she would still have difficulty in reaching Ripple by the time it grew dark, for now she was finding one foot very sore where her boot had rubbed it. She limped along the trail for a few hundred yards, gazing to right and left in a perfect fever of anxiety. There was forest on either side. Cedar, birch, beech, oak, and ash jostled each other, or stood singly or in groups, with wide stretches of lesser growth. It looked so exactly like the way she had been traversing before she went to sleep that after ten minutes or so Pam became convinced that she had turned round and was going back by the way she had come.

“Oh, I am in a hopeless muddle!” she murmured in a rueful tone, and turning back on her tracks she limped along as fast as she could go. Darkness dropped so suddenly on the forest that she was not prepared for its coming, and panic seized her in its grip. She could have screamed from sheer terror; but it was of no use to scream if there was no one to hear.

Suddenly a sound struck her ear — a sound of singing — voices in unison. Whatever could it be? Pam stood motionless in the middle of the trail, straining her ears to listen, while her heart beat so loudly that it seemed to stop her from

catching the words that were sung. It was an old negro melody, and presently the words came to her through the clear air of the evening with quite startling distinctness:

Mother, rock me in the cradle all the day.
You may lay me down to sleep, my mother dear,
But rock me in the cradle all the day.

Pam had never heard anything like it before. The haunting sweetness of the melody, joined to the words, made her so fearfully home-sick that she had the greatest difficulty to keep from crying like a baby. But the singers were coming nearer, and her position of being lost on a straight trail was quite sufficiently ridiculous without her making herself look more absurd by being found in tears; so she stiffened her back and clenched her fists tightly.

Suddenly the singers changed their tune and broke into a rollicking, lilting melody:

I'm so glad the angels brought the tidings down,
I'm hunting for a home.
You'll not get lost in the wilderness,
Hunting for a home.

Pam could hear the measured trot of horses now. The party were coming nearer and nearer. There were the voices of girls mingling with the deeper tones of men, and a sudden wave of confidence surged into her heart, for she knew that she would not be afraid to trust these people.

“Stop, will you please stop, I have lost my way!” Her voice sounded strange and shrill in her own ears as she ran out to the middle of the trail and held up her arms to stop the first wagon. By this time she had gathered that there were two wagons, and that they were very near together. The rising moon sent a pale shaft of light down among the forest trees, falling on Pam, lighting her face with an unearthly brilliance, and turning her fair hair into a mass of gleaming gold. The horses were startled by the sudden apparition in the track. They stopped short, tried to rear, and veering round would have bolted but for the firm hand on the lines and the reassuring shouts of the driver in their ears.

“Whoa, there! Steady, Tom and Firefly! What possesses you to cut capers like unbroken colts every time you meet a lady on the trail?”

“A lady, is it? I declare I thought it was a ghost!” cried another voice. “What eyes you have, Don! You are a perfect bat to see like that in the dark!”

The singing came to an abrupt end, and a perfect babel of questions broke out from both wagons.

The driver of the first, a young man with broad shoulders and a determined manner, jumped down from the high seat and, approaching Pam, who had retreated to the side of the trail through fear of being run over, asked her politely:

“What can we do for you? Have you lost your way?”

“Yes,” admitted Pam, and now she was tingling all over with mortification. “I am going to Ripple, and I am not sure that I am on the right trail.”

“You are going away from Ripple at this moment, as straight away from it as possible,” said the young man. Then he asked the question which Pam had expected would come. “Where have you come from? Excuse my curiosity, but this trail only leads to Ripple, you see, so it is passing wonderful that you failed to find it.”

The stupidity of the situation struck Pam then. Oh, what an idiot she had been! How these people would laugh at her! But it could not be helped, and so she began by laughing at herself.

“Would you believe it? I was going to Ripple from Hunt’s Crossing, but the afternoon was hot and I sat down to rest, then went so fast asleep that when I woke I did not know which was forward and which was back to the river. I went as I thought forward, then it looked so much like the trail I had been following before I sat down that I turned round and took the other way; then it got dark, and I was just beginning to be frightened nearly out of my senses when along you came, and the sound of your singing brought my courage back.”

“Poor little girl!” The young man spoke as if she were about ten years old, and Pam coloured hotly with indignation because he had so little discernment.

“I am old enough to take care of myself,” she retorted, with quite crushing dignity.

“I do not doubt it.” He was frankly laughing at her now, but his manner was so kind that she did not care. Then the people in the second wagon shouted to know when the first lot were going to get a move on, and the young man said hurriedly: “We are going to Ripple; won’t you get up in our wagon and come with us? That is my sister Sophy on the front seat — Sophy Grierson. I am Don Grierson.”

A tremendous load was lifted from the heart of Pam. She would not have to walk the dark forest trail alone.

“Thank you, I shall be glad to ride,” she answered, keeping her voice steady with an effort.

“Up you get, then. Move along a bit farther, will you, Sophy? There will be room for this young lady between us if I sit a bit on the side. Ah, steady there! Where have you been raised? It looks as if you don’t know how to board a wagon.” The young man caught Pam in his arms as she stumbled in climbing,

and his quickness saved her from a nasty fall.

“I can board a motor bus when it is moving, but this is different,” she said with a gasp when she was fairly settled between Sophy and Don, and the horses had started forward again. “I come from London, and I have never been in the country except for a holiday.”

“And then to set out to walk a forest trail for the first time alone, and to go to sleep on the way! What next, I wonder?” Don flourished his whip in the air to express all the things he could not put into language, but the horses took it as a hint to go faster, and they tore along at such a pace that Pam was breathless and giddy from being shaken and bumped.

“Old Wrack Peveril will sit up when we come walking in upon him, I guess,” said a girl with a loud voice who was sitting at the rear of the wagon.

“He will sit up still more when he sees the supper we have brought him,” replied Galena Gittins, who was sitting just behind Pam. “Folks say the old man never has a decent meal, because he is too mean to spend money on proper food, the wretched old skin-a-flint!”

Pam wrenched herself round with a violence which all but upset Sophy Grierson, who was rather cramped for room.

“It is not fair to talk like that before me,” she said explosively. “Mr. Wrack Peveril is my grandfather, and I have come all the way from England to live with him. I don’t believe he is so mean, but I am afraid that he is poor, and he sent the money to pay my passage, so perhaps he has not been able to buy things for himself.”

“Are you Nancy Peveril’s girl?” cried a stout woman who sat on the seat with Galena Gittins, and as she asked the question she leaned forward and gripped the shoulder of Pam in the friendliest fashion imaginable.

“I am Pamela Walsh, and my mother was Nancy Peveril before she married my father,” replied Pam with great dignity, and then her shoulder was gripped more heartily than before by the excitable stout woman.

“Dear, dear, how time flies! I declare it makes me feel quite old to think of Nancy having a grown-up daughter. My dear, we are ever so glad to see you; but I don’t think your mother should have let you come all this way alone to live with an old man like Wrack Peveril, who won’t have a woman inside his doors.”

“He won’t be able to help himself to-night!” chuckled the girl with the loud voice.

Pam caught her breath in a gasp of dismay. Her mother had written to Ripple to say that Pam was coming instead of Jack, but there had been no time for an answer to that letter. It was the very first time since she had left England that a doubt of her welcome assailed her. Now she was suddenly afraid, and she

cowered closer against Sophy Grierson, while she wondered what sort of a greeting she would get when Ripple was reached.

“We are going to have a surprise party at your grandfather’s house to-night,” said Galena Gittins, leaning forward and speaking over the shoulder of Pam in a very friendly fashion. “We’ve got a jolly good supper here in the wagons with us, and there is another wagon coming from over the Ridge. That lot will bring a fiddle and a melodeon with them, so we shall have some music, and be able to dance all night. I just love surprise parties, don’t you?”

“I have never been to one,” answered Pam. After a brief hesitation she asked: “Will Grandfather like a lot of folks coming along unexpected like this? And to stay all night, too?”

“I guess he won’t!” broke in the stout woman with a jolly, rollicking laugh. “But, my dear, it is the good of the many that we have to study in this part of the world; and what would become of the young people if there was no fun going at all? For myself, I’d nearly as soon stay at home o’ nights now as go racketing round and losing my night’s rest. But well I know it is good for the boys and girls to have someone to mother them a bit at their play, so I don’t shy at a frolic, even though it takes me a week to get over it.”

“The folks don’t have to suffer when we go round surprising them, Miss Walsh,” said Don, who had not spoken for some time save to shout at the horses, the trail at this part being very difficult and dark; tall trees stood in serried ranks on either side of the way, and the moonlight had no chance at all. “We always take about twice as many provisions as we can possibly eat; and if we upset a house a bit, we always put everything straight before we leave. You should see how glad they are to have us at some places.”

“I don’t care for a surprise party where the folks like to have us. I would rather go where we were not wanted,” broke in the girl with the loud voice, whom the others called Sissy. “What fun we did have that time we surprised Mose Paget, and he would not get up to let us in until we threatened to break the door down! Do you remember that night, Galena? You had that pink blouse on, and Mose was most insulting in what he said about the way you had dressed up.”

“That is Ripple, Miss Walsh.” The quiet voice of Don broke in upon Sissy’s loud-toned reminiscences, and Pam gave a start of surprise as the dim outlines of a big timber house came into view. It stood in a clearing with a background of lofty trees, and the light of the rising moon fell full upon the long brown front.

“It looks so different from what I expected, and yet I have known it all my life,” said Pam eagerly, and she leaned forward to get a better view. Then she cried out sharply: “But there is no one at home, and it looks like a dead house. Don’t you think so?”

CHAPTER IV

What They Found

Don drew his horses up with a jerk and sprang to the ground.

“The other lot from over the Ridge have not got here yet, so we are first,” he remarked cheerfully, and then he held out his arms to Pam, so that she might descend with safety. But she drew back with a sudden shyness.

“You go first, please, and show me the way,” she said to Sophy, who laughed, and then dropped into the strong arms of her brother, which was certainly the easiest mode of descent.

“Come, Miss Walsh, I promise not to drop you, and I don’t expect that you are heavier than Sophy.” Don had turned to the wagon again, and now Pam had no excuse for holding back; so, dropping as she had seen Sophy do, she was speedily standing on the ground by her side and looking at the blank windows of the house that was to be her home. She could not repress a shiver as she thought how angry her grandfather would probably be when he found the sort of company in which she had arrived.

“Let us go and knock at the door while the others are unloading,” suggested Sophy, who seemed to understand Pam’s secret fear, and was anxious to reassure her.

Pam moved forward on unsteady feet. There was a queer sensation all about her that she was walking in a dream; nothing seemed real, least of all the girl with the kindly face and the quiet voice who stood at her side, gently encouraging and wholly sympathetic. The outlines of the house were vaguely familiar. Mrs. Walsh had talked so often to her children of her childhood’s home that Pam would never feel strange at Ripple; she had known it at second-hand for so long.

“I wish you would knock,” she said in a low voice, shrinking back behind Sophy as they stood before the heavy door. They were quite alone now, for all the others were busy about the wagons, taking out the supper baskets, and talking excitedly about something that was missing.

“What are you afraid of?” asked Sophy, when she had beat upon the door with her fists and they stood waiting for it to be opened.

Pam shivered, for she was genuinely scared. In the background a dog was barking in angry protest, but the house itself was absolutely deserted, to all

appearance. She did not answer Sophy, but remembering that she was in a manner at home, whilst these others were only outsiders, she laid her hand on the door and tried to open it. Of course it was fast, and after a little more time spent in knocking at the door she turned to Sophy, asking: "What will you do? There does not seem to be anyone at home."

"The men will find a way to get in, they always do," replied Sophy laughing softly. Then she called to her brother: "Don, come here. There seems to be no one at home. How will you get in?"

"I will go and see if I can find a way. Don't let the others start beating the door in until I have tried what I can do," he said with a backward wag of his head in the direction of the noisy group by the wagon, who were still wrangling over the problem of a missing basket. Then came quite a long wait, or so it seemed to Pam, who was trying to form little sentences of explanation so that she might appease her grandfather if he should suddenly arrive upon the scene to demand the reason of her arrival with such a turbulent company.

"Here comes Don!" cried Sophy, as a step sounded inside the house, and there was a noise of a bolt being dragged back. "How did you get in?" she asked, as the heavy door came open, and Don with a lantern in his hand appeared on the threshold.

"The old fellow went away in a hurry, and forgot to shut the pantry window," said Don, laughing as he stood back to let the others enter the house. Then he held the lantern high above his head to show them the way.

Pam went in first. A sudden sense of proprietorship had come to her; it was as if this were her own house and all that turbulent company outside were her guests. They might not be quite all that she would wish them to be, but she would make the best of them. There was a lamp standing on a small table near the stove, and she turned at once to light it.

"Don't you think we ought to go over the house to see if he is at home?" she asked. "He might be ill, you see. I am sure we ought to do that first, before the others come in."

"So am I," Sophy agreed quickly. "Don, do you light the fire in the stove while we are gone; there are kindlings lying in that corner. Come along, Miss Walsh; the others will be here directly, so we must make haste!"

Sophy had taken the lantern from Don, and she handed it to Pam, instinctively taking her place in the rear, for this girl who was a stranger in a strange country moved with the assured air of one who was at home.

Pam held the lantern high, looking about her with absorbed interest. This was the living-room, and the outer door opened right into it, and that door in the corner would lead into the kitchen. She knew it well, for her mother had shown

Jack how to draw a plan of the house. The door on the other side led to a sitting-room, the best room, which was only used on state occasions; a dreary place, so her mother had said. Beyond it was the bedroom where her grandfather slept, the very room in which her mother had been born. That was where she expected to find her grandfather if he was in the house. The best room had an unwholesome smell, as of a place never used and never aired. There was no carpet on the floor, but there was a couch, a cabinet, some chairs, and a table. Even in walking across the room with the lantern in her hand, Pam noticed that the stove was red with rust, and she wondered if there had been a fire there in all the years since her mother had run away from home to get married.

At the inner door she paused and knocked; then, as there was no reply, and the door stood ajar, she pushed it open and went in. It was a wide chamber, like the others, and being a corner room it had windows on two sides. It was even more airless and stuffy than the sitting-room. A heap of rugs and a mattress on the bed were a sign that someone slept there, while there was a heap of ashes before the stove which showed that, early in the autumn as it was, the old man had begun having a fire at nights. He was not there. Pam made quite sure of that, even pausing to lift the heap of tumbled rugs on the bed as if she expected to find him tucked away underneath. Sophy came to help her, and they peered under the bed, and in the old press which stood in the corner.

“He is not here, we must go upstairs,” said Pam, who was breathing hard, as if she had been running.

“Is there any upstairs to the house?” asked the other. She had not observed the outlines of the house particularly when they arrived, and it was the first time she had ever been to Ripple.

“Yes, there are three rooms,” Pam replied, and turning, she led the way back across the dreary sitting-room, and out to the living-room, where by this time Don had a fire roaring in the stove. Galena Gittins, the woman named Sissy, and one or two others were busy bringing in the supper baskets, but she took no notice of them. Crossing the floor, she went out by the door on the other side of the stove to the wide kitchen, or out-place, whence a narrow wooden stair led to the three bedrooms in the roof. These also were wide chambers, but only one of them had any furniture. This had been her mother’s old bedroom, as Pam recognized at the very first glance. There was a big press of red pine, which smelled like cedar, and was just as good at keeping away moths. There was the little bed with the carved head-board, the work of her great-grandfather, and the table that her great-uncle Zach had carved. There were even some old garments hanging on pegs behind the door, and she wondered if they had hung there ever since her mother went away. What a Rip-van-Winkle kind of business it was!

Perhaps the room had hardly been entered for twenty years; it smelled stuffy enough.

“There is no one here,” said Sophy softly. She stood just behind Pam and looked about her in wonder. She did not understand how it was that this stranger from across the sea was so at home in this deserted house.

“No, he is not here,” said Pam. “He is not in the house, unless he is in the cellar. We ought to look there at once, before that lot downstairs start making a noise. Oh, pardon me, I forgot they are your friends, and of course they mean well.”

Sophy made a wry face, for the unconscious reproach in the voice of Pam made her wince.

“Yes, they — we mean all right,” she answered. She hesitated a moment, and then burst out: “It would have been rather horrid for you if you had come straight here, and found no one at all.”

“Indeed it would, and I am properly grateful down underneath,” replied Pam, and then she led the way towards the cellar, while Sophy followed behind. The cellar stretched right under the whole length of the house, as is common in New Brunswick, the severity of the winters making it essential to have a good storage that frost cannot touch.

But downstairs the merry crowd had been augmented by the other wagonload of people from over the Ridge; these were all presented to Pam in due course, and she found herself thrust, whether she would or no, into the position of hostess. It was in her to rise to the occasion, and she did it right royally, only there was all the time that feeling in her heart that she must search in the cellar before she allowed herself to be drawn into any merry-making. She slipped away with Sophy while the others were all busy trying to make the supper-table bigger by the addition of boards laid across the backs of chairs, and holding her lantern high above her head, she went carefully down the ladder-like stairs, while Sophy came close behind.

“Take care, there should be a very bad place about half-way down,” said Pam, who was breathing in little gasps again, for she was tremendously excited. “Ah, here it is! Mother has told me that she sprained her ankle over that step at three different times. Don’t you wonder what some people are made of, to leave necessary things neglected for so long?”

Sophy stumbled, nearly fell, and recovered herself with an effort; and steadying herself with a hand on Pam’s shoulder she answered with a laugh:

“Wait until you have lived at Ripple for a year before you pass judgment. Our summers are a fierce rush to do the things that must be done, and in the winter we are more or less torpid.”

“I shall not be torpid,” cried Pam in merry defiance. Then she paused and cried out in rapturous delight, as, reaching the bottom step, she came in sight of shelves piled with apples — bushels and bushels of them, some quite enormous in size, some so rosy and tempting to look at that she wanted to stretch out her hand and start eating then and there. Others were green and hard, as if they would not be mellow enough to eat for months to come. “What can my grandfather do with so much fruit?” she asked in surprise, as the flashing light of her lantern showed shelf after shelf piled with apples, while of pumpkins, squashes, and the harder sort of melons there was a goodly array.

“One needs a good lot of provisions to face a winter that is seven months long,” replied Sophy, who was also peering about with great interest, for she was of a housewifely turn. “But really, for an old man living alone, your grandfather has stored a considerable lot of apples. I suppose he has not lifted his potatoes yet, or we should smell them.”

“The potatoes always went into the inner cellar, so Mother said. Here they are, and what a lot! I shall live on roasted apples and potatoes this winter, I think. They will be easy to cook, and that will give me time for other things. Do you think I ought to take some of these apples up for the surprise party, or would Grandfather object to my making free with his property?”

“We have brought apples in plenty,” said Sophy. “If you are asked out to a surprise party yourself this fall (autumn), you might bring along some of those yellow ones over there; I don’t think there is another tree of that variety in the district. Mother has sent over here to buy some every winter since I can remember, and ever so many folks have asked to have scions from the tree, but Mr. Peveril would neither give nor sell them.”

“Poor Grandfather; I am afraid he is rather disobliging sometimes!” Pam murmured with wistful regret in her tone.

When they had thoroughly inspected the cellar, as they had done the rest of the house, they went back to the living-room, where the fun was now uproarious. The young men were making coffee, while the girls set the table, and the older women unpacked the food. There were even one or two middle-aged men, but Pam noticed that these withdrew into a corner, where they sat talking, quite heedless of the confusion all around them. They were much too tired to care for anything in the way of festivity which entailed any labour, but a chance to exchange opinions with a neighbour, and to hear a little gossip, was inducement sufficient to bring them long distances, and make them willing to be all night out of bed.

Old Wrack Peveril’s supply of lamps was limited, but the resourceful surprise party had succeeded in getting a fine illumination notwithstanding. A

generous supply of pine knots had been brought along in a basket, and these, tossed on the fire a few at a time, lighted the big room with a vivid, flashing glare. There were also several lanterns, and these were hung in the outer kitchen, in the dreary best sitting-room, and even in the old man's bedroom. This surprise party was not going to do things by halves, and they wanted room in which to spread themselves. A supply of candles eked out the lanterns, but these, being home-made, were not very brilliant, and they guttered fearfully in the liberal draughts.

Pam was not allowed to lift a finger to do anything. She was of the family, they told her, even though she had arrived with the company. Failing her grandfather, she was hostess. Entering into the spirit of the thing, some of the girls rushed out of doors and gathered great boughs of foliage by moonlight; these they wreathed in the back of a ponderous arm-chair, and dragging it to the head of the supper-table, installed Pam there in regal state.

"Oh, I cannot take the head of the table; it is not my house!" she cried. "My grandfather might be angry with me if he came back and found that I was taking his place in such a fashion, and it would be dreadful to start with him in that way."

"I don't fancy he will be back before to-morrow," said Mrs. Morse, the stout woman who had known Pam's mother. "It is awkward travelling the forest trails at night, and the moon will soon be down. We mostly stay where sundown finds us, and let travelling wait until daylight comes again. That is what your grandfather is going to do, I expect, so you might as well get all the fun you can. We are only young once, and there is no sense in being dismal when you can have the time of your life."

"If the old man happens along we will square him somehow, Miss Walsh, don't you be afraid," put in Don Grierson, who, having undertaken the work of head coffee-maker, was busy at the stove.

Pam yielded then, and really it would have been silly to protest. She was excited, too, and the whole affair had taken on the character of an adventure. She permitted herself to be placed in the great chair, she let the girls take her hat off and twine a wreath of yellow maple leaves for her hair, and she sat at the head of the long table, a veritable queen of the ceremonies. Her face was flushed, her eyes were shining, and she entered into the fun with an abandon that surprised even herself.

The supper was very good, and she was so hungry that she could have devoured almost anything. Never, never had she tasted such chicken pie, or such delicious cake. They had given her an earthenware plate — cracked it is true, and browned with having been put in the oven, but it was a plate — and as there

were only about three others this was a distinction indeed. Mrs. Morse, sitting at her side, was placidly eating from an old baking-tin, while Galena Gittins, farther down the table, had a saucepan lid by way of plate. These small drawbacks did but add to the fun, however, and gales of laughter resounded through the wide room, which must have been silent for so many years.

Suddenly Pam felt something pressing against her, and looking down she saw the shaggy head of a big dog pressed against her knee, while two wistful eyes looked into hers, and an eager tail thumped the floor.

“A dog, and such a dear! Where did it come from?” she asked, stooping to pat the shaggy head, and then sharing a liberal bit of pie with the hungry animal.

“It is old Wrack’s dog, and was going to eat us all when we took our horses into the barn; but a mouthful of food soon brought it to a better frame of mind,” said a young man, edging a little nearer for a chance of talking to Pam. She was having a triumph in a small way, and the surprise party were feeling that they themselves had had a very charming surprise at Ripple that night, for it is always the unexpected that appeals to people.

“If it is Grandfather’s dog, then it belongs to me in a way, and we must be friends, of course.” Pam stooped over the animal again, feeding it with morsels from her plate, and doing her very best to win the creature’s liking. Perhaps if the dog loved her, the old man would also find it easy to care for her. That was how she argued the matter to herself, as she sat at the head of the table playing hostess in a house she had never before entered, to a company of people she had never before seen.

“Funny the old man did not take his dog along with him where he has gone. Folks say that he is never seen without the beast,” remarked the young man who had just been talking to Pam, and for want of some one better he addressed his remark to Mrs. Morse.

“The old man knew his own business best, I guess,” rejoined the stout woman tartly. “It is likely he left the critter here to guard the place a bit. But it does seem a bit strange to me that the old fellow should have gone out for the night, and he expecting his granddaughter at any time, as you might say. Now you suppose what the situation would have been for that poor girl, if we had not taken it into our heads to surprise old Wrack to-night! I declare it fairly makes my flesh creep to think about it.”

“Then don’t think about it, Mrs. Morse,” said Pam, who had overheard the remark. “Grandfather would not have meant to treat me badly, I am sure; perhaps he has even gone some part of the way to meet me, and by ill fortune we missed each other.”

The company looked at each other, as much as to say that was about the most

unlikely thing to have happened, but no one ventured to say so. There was not one present in the room who would have said or done anything to sadden Pam or put any foreboding as to her future into her heart. When supper was over, the food remaining — a goodly pile — was carefully stacked out of the way, the table was dragged to one side of the room, and then the fun began. One of the party had brought a fiddle, and one had a melodeon, and with these for orchestra, dancing went on with great spirit. Sir Roger de Coverley was first favourite, and they danced it over and over again until they were fairly tired out, and subsided on to chairs and forms to play General Post. This entailed so many forfeits, and so much hilarity in the paying of them, that midnight was long past before anyone even thought of wanting any fresh amusement. Singing was called for then, and chorus after chorus rang round the heavy timbers of the ceiling. Pam noticed that it was all sacred music, chorales, anthems, and sonorous fugues which had been learned at church, and which matched with the sombre grandeur of the leagues on leagues of forest surrounding Ripple on every side.

“Won’t you sing something?” Sophy asked, coming over to Pam, whose face was wearing a rather awed expression.

“I can’t sing — not by myself, I mean. I am not accomplished really, though I can play the piano enough to teach young children,” Pam answered, thinking of the governess life which she had left so far behind.

“Ah, the piano is rather out of it here. The useful instrument is one that can be carried about, like the violin or the melodeon,” Sophy said. She went on to tell Pam that so far as she knew there was only one piano in the township, and that was broken.

“I shall learn to play the jews’ harp; I am sure that I could manage it, for I could perform quite creditably with a comb and a piece of paper.” Pam laughed at her own small wit, then suddenly grew serious, for the night was wearing, and with the first streaks of dawn to light the forest trails these lively people would be gone, and she would be left alone to face whatever might come.

“Could you stay with me, just until my grandfather comes back? Would it be asking too much?” There was such a wistful look in the eyes she turned to Sophy as betrayed the heart-shrinking that was behind.

“I think so, but I will ask Don what he thinks. Mother is not very strong, but I know she will do her best to let me help you,” Sophy said. She made her way across to Don, who was just going to start making coffee again: a minute of consultation and she was back by the side of Pam. “Don says he is sure that I ought to stay, and that he will drive over for me this afternoon, unless Father happens to have a round in this direction. Father is the township doctor, you know, so he is all over the place, and we never know where he will have to go

next. If I stay here with you we will do the clearing up after the company are gone. That will please them all, because, you see, it is proper for them to do it.”

CHAPTER V

The Next Day

Dawn was only faintly creeping up through the avenues of the forest when the last wagon, filled with tired merrymakers, drove away from Ripple. The silence which dropped when they had gone was so appalling that Pam turned to Sophy with actual consternation in her eyes.

“Is it always as deadly quiet as this?” she asked, and now it was hard work to keep her voice from quavering. She did not realize that she was worn out with all the excitement she had gone through.

“You don’t think of the quiet when you are used to it,” Sophy answered. “At least, I never think about it; but of course our house is not so remote as this. The fact is, you are so tired that you can hardly stand on your two feet. Suppose you lie down for a little rest before your grandfather comes back, and I will do the clearing up.”

“As if I should even dream of letting you work while I take my ease!” cried Pam in a shocked tone. “I am quite sure that you must be as tired as I am, only you are made of better stuff and will not cry out about it. Let us do what is necessary as quickly as we can, then we will just lie down and sleep the worst of it off. I wonder when Grandfather will come back, and what he will say when he finds that I have come?”

“He ought to say how sorry he is that he was not here to give you a welcome,” replied Sophy, as she moved to and fro straightening the furniture, picking up bits of paper, and restoring the room to the condition in which they had found it. The house door stood wide open, and presently they heard the sound of a cow mooing in the barn.

“There are the animals to be fed, and if you are a London girl you will not know much about milking.” Sophy had paused in her work of clearing and was standing still with a frown on her face. She did not know very much about it herself, for in the doctor’s household there were always men or boys to do that sort of work. But she was going to help Pam all she could, and if it entailed milking a cow, well, she did not intend to be beaten at the business. She had seen cows milked often enough, the operation looked fairly easy, and she was not afraid of the animals.

“I know that milk comes from cows — and coconuts, and that is about all,”

said Pam, shrugging her shoulders as she realized the extent of her ignorance.

“Come and have your first lesson in milking, then.” Sophy caught up the cleanest bucket she could find, and tied a towel over her best frock. “We may have to feed pigs if there are any in the barn. If I had thought about the live stock I should certainly have asked one of the menfolks to stay and see us through with the morning chores. As it is, we must just do the best we can until your grandfather comes home again.”

“You never know what you can do until you try,” exclaimed Pam, as she, too, tied a towel over her frock in imitation of Sophy. The two stepped out into the keen, crisp air of the morning, and went across grass which sparkled with frost to the barn. They were closely followed by the dog. The creature had apparently decided that Pam was one of the family, and meant to treat her accordingly.

There were pigs and poultry to be fed, there was a cow to be milked and turned into a little paddock, which sloped like a wedge into the forest. There were half a score of sheep in the paddock also, but Sophy said these would not need feeding, as they were quite able to get their own living. When the “chores” were all done Pam went back to the house feeling as if her education had taken great strides since the previous day, and she envied the ease with which Sophy tackled all the mysteries of milking and feeding.

The two were just deciding that, now the “chores” were done, they were free to lie down and take a rest, when from the open door they caught the sounds of horses approaching. A moment later two men in police uniform rode up to the front of the house and dismounted.

“The police!” cried Sophy, and her face went as white as her blouse. “Courage, Pam! I am afraid something must have happened to your grandfather.”

Pam caught her breath in a little sobbing gasp, and clung to Sophy as the men rode up and dismounted before the door of the house.

“Is Mr. Peveril at home?” demanded the elder of the two, and at the question Pam’s courage instantly rose, for of course if the old man had been found injured or dead the police would not ask if he were at home.

Putting Sophy gently in the background Pam came forward, flushing a little as she looked into the strong, weather-beaten face of the policeman. Her voice was quite steady as she answered:

“My grandfather is not at home just now, and we do not know when he will be back, but we are expecting him at any minute.”

“Is Mr. Peveril your grandfather? I did not know he had any relatives,” said the officer, and Pam noticed with exceeding dismay that he looked as if he were sorry for her.

“Mr. Peveril has a daughter, my mother, who lives in England, and I have come from there to live with Grandfather and take care of him,” she said. Now there was defiance in her tone, for she was telling herself that she did not want this man’s pity. Why should people pity her for coming to live with her grandfather? It was horrid! Moreover, it was a slur on his character, and because blood is thicker than water every instinct of affection and defence of which Pam was capable rallied to champion the old man.

The officer nodded. “What time did Mr. Peveril leave here yesterday?” he asked. Then, suddenly recognizing Sophy, who had remained in the background where Pam had thrust her, he said: “Good morning, Miss Grierson; I am afraid we worked the Doctor rather hard last night.”

“Was Father called out last night?” cried Sophy in dismay. “Oh, I am sorry for Mother, for Don and I were both away. I do hate for her to be left alone like that. What time was Father called?”

“Between seven and eight o’clock. He was called to attend Sam Buckle, whose wife had found him lying near the fence that divides his quarter-section from Ripple. He was most fearfully battered, but just alive. I fear there is not much hope of his recovery, he is so badly knocked about.”

“Oh dear, oh dear, how truly dreadful!” gasped Sophy, and Pam, whose senses were by this time quite abnormally acute, noticed that she turned a glance full of pity upon herself.

“What time did Mr. Peveril leave here yesterday?” demanded the officer, turning to Pam once more, and now his voice had a more peremptory ring.

“I do not know; he was not here when we came last night,” she faltered. A chill dismay was creeping over her, and she was wondering why Sophy looked so distressed, and why she had so carefully averted her face.

“What time did you come?” asked the officer sharply.

This time it was Sophy who answered.

“It must have been about half an hour, perhaps three-quarters, after sundown. We came for a surprise party. We were in two wagons coming along the trail when we met Miss Walsh, who in walking here from Hunt’s Crossing had lost her way. We took her into our wagon and brought her along with us. We found the house deserted, and stayed all night enjoying ourselves. When the others went at dawn I remained with Miss Walsh, who is a stranger and a city girl, so she would have been hard put to it alone. That is all we know.”

“Can you remain here with Miss Walsh still, Miss Grierson? I will tell your father you are here.”

“Oh, yes, I will stay, of course. I could not leave Miss Walsh alone at such a time!” exclaimed Sophy, and there was such a thrill in her tone that Pam’s face

blanched with a sudden terror. What was the hidden meaning of this compassion, and what had Sam Buckle's accident to do with her or her grandfather? But she could not ask the officer. Indeed, she had no chance. Staying only to give a few instructions to Sophy, and saying that he would probably look round that way later in the day, the officer rode away accompanied by his companion, and the silence settled down again.

All desire to sleep seemed to have vanished from both girls. Directly they were alone, Pam turned to Sophy.

"Why did that man seem to pity me so much? Why should he come here to know where Grandfather is?" she demanded.

Sophy put her hand up in protest.

"It may be nothing, of course; but when such things happen people always jump to conclusions. Your grandfather and Sam Buckle have quarrelled about that fence ever since I was a small girl; as often as Sam has put it up your grandfather has broken it down. Maybe Sam had been putting the fence up before he was found so badly hurt."

A long moment of silence passed. Pam was staring at Sophy with dilated eyes, and such a feeling of terror in her heart as she had never experienced before. Then finally she found her tongue.

"Do you mean to tell me," she asked, "that you think Grandfather injured that poor man so dreadfully?"

Sophy put her arms about Pam in protecting wise, and her voice was kind and soothing when she spoke.

"Dear," she said, "Mr. Peveril was very likely nowhere near the place where Sam Buckle was found, and when he comes back he will be able to tell people where he has been; but until then you have this hard thing to bear, and you will have to be as brave as ever you can."

"Suppose he never does come back?" Pam shuddered violently, and then hid her face in her hands, feeling that the trouble was really more than she could bear.

"He will surely come back unless something has happened to him," said Sophy soothingly; then she bent over Pam's bowed head and comforted her as best she could. She succeeded so well that presently Pam suffered herself to be persuaded into lying down. She promptly fell asleep then, and lay wrapped in profound slumber while the hours of the hot, sunny noon came and passed. Sophy slept too, but fitfully; there was a sense of responsibility on her that kept her wakeful and alert. The house door was open, and the big dog slumbered on the threshold. The creature seemed to share Sophy's wakefulness, for it kept lifting an uneasy head. Once or twice it growled, although apparently there was

nothing anywhere near to growl at, except the chipmunks darting to and fro, busy in the collection of their winter store of nuts.

Then far away along the trail from the westward came the faint beat of a horse's hoofs. Immediately the dog rose to its feet and stood growling, while Sophy, who had been drifting into deeper slumber, also rose and rubbed her eyes to get the sleepiness out of them.

"Pam," she called softly, "Pam, dear, there is someone coming; you had better wake up."

But Pam was so sound asleep that it was hard work to rouse her. The horseman was very near, indeed, before she had come to a real understanding of what Sophy was saying. Then she stood for some seconds swaying to and fro, more asleep than awake.

"There is water in the out-kitchen. Run, dip your face in the bucket, you will feel better then!" urged Sophy, and Pam moved slowly away, found the bucket of water and a coarse towel, dipped her face, and, rubbing it vigorously, at once began to feel better. "Why, it is Father!" Sophy fairly shouted with delight as a grey-haired man mounted on a powerful black horse rode into view and lifted his whip in salutation. He rode up to the doorstep, slid from his horse, and Sophy rushed into his arms.

"The police told me that I should find you here, so I rode round this way," said Dr. Grierson, as he held his daughter with one hand and lifted his hat to Pam with the other. "Is this Miss Walsh, of whom I have been hearing? I am very pleased to meet you, but I am real sorry that you should have been pitchforked, as it were, into such a peck of trouble, my dear. I have heard of your mother very often. Quite the belle of these parts she was, I should imagine, but more than a bit headstrong. Do you take after her?"

"I don't know," answered Pam, a little dubiously, for she thought the Doctor was making fun of her. "I am not so wise as my mother, and I am always getting into muddles."

"So did she, according to all accounts, so doubtless you are a chip off the old block," he said with a laugh; then he asked if Wrack Peveril had come back.

"No; we have seen nothing of him," Pam replied; and Sophy immediately asked how Sam Buckle was.

"He is very bad indeed." The Doctor's tone was curt, a sure sign, as Sophy knew, that there was not much hope. The Doctor simply hated having his patients die, and he always behaved as if it were a personal affront when they showed signs of slipping out of life.

"Has he said anything about — about who hurt him?" asked Pam. She was determined to know all there was to be known, and she feared they would hide

things from her unless she asked right out.

“He has not said much of anything that we can understand except to mutter over and over again that ‘it is his right, it is his right’,” said the Doctor; and Pam suddenly felt a great sinking of heart, for why should the injured man say words like those unless he were living over again the quarrel with his neighbour?

“He is such a fearfully disagreeable man!” exclaimed Sophy, as if she read the thought in the heart of Pam, and would give her comfort if she could. “I never knew anyone yet who really liked Mr. Buckle; even his own wife admits that he is a dreadfully hard man to live with. Father, you will never get your money for attending him; he will say that he did not call you himself, and so there is no obligation to pay you. That was how he served you the time the tree fell on him and nearly killed him; don’t you remember it?”

“Some people are made that way,” said the Doctor. “But I guess that I shall be no poorer in the long run for doing my duty by my fellow creatures. Would you two like Don to come and stay the night here with you? It is a lonesome place for two girls.”

“We shall not mind, I think,” put in Sophy hastily. She was thinking of her mother, and how Mrs. Grierson hated to be left at home at night with the younger children only.

“Oh, no, we shall not mind!” cried Pam, who understood perfectly the reason why Sophy did not want Don to come. She, for her own part, was anxious to get used to being alone at Ripple. If her grandfather failed to come back, she would have to do as best she could until her family came out from England to live with her, so it was just as well to get used to things. “We have the dog, and there are two guns in the sitting-room; that is one each, and I don’t think we need more than that.”

“If you take my advice you will leave the guns severely alone,” broke in the Doctor hastily. “There is nothing so dangerous as fire-arms in the hands of people who know nothing about them. We don’t want any more tragedies in the neighbourhood just now.”

“Keep your mind easy, Dad,” said Sophy with a laugh. “The guns are here right enough, but so far as I have been able to find there is not a dust of powder or any shot on the place.”

“Hush, don’t talk of it!” cried Pam, holding up her finger in warning. “All the time no one knows that we have no ammunition the guns will serve their purpose. If we pointed the things full at any intruder he would be properly scared, of course, and we should be in no danger, so it would be quite right.”

“You will do!” said the Doctor heartily, patting Pam on the shoulder as if she were a little schoolgirl. “Now I must go, but I will look along to-morrow and let

you know how Sam Buckle is getting on. Have you got enough clothes, Sophy, or would you like Don to bring some over for you this evening?"

"I have nothing but what I have on, and this is my best frock," she answered in a rueful tone, for her best frocks had to last a long time, and this was only about the third time of wearing that one. "I would spend the time I am here in helping Pam to clean this house down — very needful work, too — but what can one do in a best frock?"

"I will ask your mother to put some things in a bag for you, then Don shall ride over with them," said the Doctor, who was in a hurry to mount and ride away, for he was needed in another direction.

"Sophy, I am haunted by the thought that poor Grandfather may have met with an accident somewhere out in the woods or the fields," said Pam when the last echoes of the Doctor's horse had died away. "Could we not go and look to see if we can find him?"

"We might, but it would be awkward if he came back while we were away," answered Sophy.

"We will leave a paper here on the table to say that we have gone to look for him, and we can shut the dog indoors to take care of the place." Pam had rummaged a pencil and a piece of paper from her bag, and writing her message, she left it lying in a prominent place on the table, with a blue mug standing on the edge of the paper to keep it from being blown away by any draught from the door. The dog was coaxed in and left to guard the place, and then the two set forth on their quest.

Sophy had never been at Ripple before. Pam also was a stranger in a sense, and yet she knew so much more of the place from hearsay as to seem quite at home.

"We will go right round the cleared land first," she said to Sophy, who had naturally fallen into the second place and was following Pam's lead.

"There does not seem to be much cleared land," Sophy remarked, gazing round at the crowding forest trees. Here and there a little field had been made, but even in these great stumps were still standing.

"We will go round all the fields first, and then we will search in the forest." A little sob came up in Pam's throat as she added: "I must find him somehow, the poor lonely old man!"

CHAPTER VI

Where has He Gone?

It was quite late in the afternoon when the two girls reached the house again. They were both of them tired out, for the day was fiercely hot. They had come upon no trace of the old man, but of one thing they had made quite certain: he was not lying in a dying or dead condition in any of his fields, which was, as Pam said, a comfort of a sort.

They heard the dog barking wildly as they reached the house, and a man was turning away from the door as if he had been trying to get admission and had failed.

“Who is that?” cried Pam. At the first sight of the man she had jumped to the conclusion that it was her grandfather, but a second glance had shown her that this man was young, or comparatively young.

“It is Mose Paget,” Sophy whispered hurriedly, and there was so much disapproval in her tone that Pam gathered the arrival was something of a detrimental. And indeed he looked it, from the torn brim of his weather-beaten hat to the burst boots on his feet.

“Good afternoon!” said Pam politely. She would have supposed the man to be a tramp, only her companion knew his name, and so far as she knew tramps had no names, or if they had no one knew them. To her surprise the man swept off his ragged hat with a flourish, and he spoke like an educated man when he returned her greeting, and asked if Mr. Wrack Peveril was at home.

Pam’s face clouded. She had hoped that the man had come to give her news of her grandfather, and here he was asking where he was, just like all the other folks! She would have poured out the story of their long search that afternoon, only Sophy’s hand dropped with a warning touch on her arm, and instead of being confidential she merely said:

“I do not think that he has come back yet. If you will wait a moment I will go into the house and see.”

The man nodded, then leaned against the fence very much at his ease, while Pam, with Sophy at her side, walked to the door of the house and opened it. With a howl of rage the dog burst out, but seeing it was the two girls who were there the creature at once mended its manners, the growls died in its throat, and it came to fawn upon them with every appearance of joyfulness. Then, catching

sight of the shabby figure leaning on the fence, it began growling again, and would have dashed away to do the man a serious injury, only Pam caught it round its neck and held it fast.

One glance into the room showed her that it was just as they had left it. The paper still lay on the table. No one had been there, and the old man had not returned.

“My grandfather has not come home yet. Is there any message you would like to leave for him?” she asked, raising her voice a little so that it might reach the man who leaned against the fence. The dog still struggled in her grasp, being plainly anxious to rend the man if only it could reach him.

“Well, no, I can’t say that I have,” he answered. As he spoke he drew himself erect from his leaning posture, and there was so much relief in his face that both girls noticed it and wondered. “Perhaps I shall meet him at The Corner in a day or two, or I may be round this way again soon. It ain’t no sort of consequence. Good afternoon!”

“Didn’t you think he seemed very glad to find that Grandfather was not at home?” said Pam, turning to Sophy as the retreating figure of Mose Paget was hid by the winding of the trail. She was still gripping the dog, and that sagacious beast was being nearly choked with its own growls. Plainly the man did not appeal to the dog, or perhaps the wise animal had some past grudge against him.

“Yes, I think that his wanting to see Mr. Peveril was only an excuse. It was a good thing we left the dog shut in the house, or we might have found the place had been ransacked while we were away. Mose Paget has not much of a reputation, though folks do say he is very kind to his half-brother, Reggie Furness.”

“A man would have to be very bad indeed if he had no good points,” remarked Pam, as the two turned into the house. Then she asked: “Do you suppose that there would be anything here worth stealing?”

“Not by the look of the place,” said Sophy, gazing round the wide, bare room. The solid furniture was mostly home-made, very clumsy, and only worth firewood price, which in that part of the world would not be worth consideration. Of household plenishing of the more movable sort, such as plate, glass, and cutlery, there was almost nothing; in fact, it was the most hopeless wilderness, from the point of view of a burglar, that could be imagined. “But Mose Paget might have heard that your grandfather was not at home, and so just happened round to see if there were any money to be picked up. When a man lives in the fashion Mr. Peveril has done people are apt to think that there must be money hidden somewhere close at hand, and to be had for the finding; and it is these people who find it almost impossible to believe that it is poverty and not

miserliness which accounts for the barren look of things.”

Pam nodded, and was conscious of some secret sinking of heart. Sophy had spoken of the old man’s poverty by way of reassuring Pam, who might have been afraid to be compelled to guard the secret hoards of a miser. Besides, everyone believed that Wrack Peveril was very poor, and even in the wilderness people can make a very fair guess at the business of their neighbours. If Pam’s grandfather were so poor, it would be madly impracticable for her mother to give up the London boarding-house and come to the old home in New Brunswick. But Pam was longing for her family, and feeling that she could never be really happy while the wide Atlantic rolled between herself and them.

The two girls did the evening “chores” between them, only to-night it was Pam who sat on the stool and milked the cow under the able tuition of Sophy, whose best frock was still the barrier to happiness in work. Pam had to learn, however, and there was no time like the present, for without doubt Sophy was a more patient teacher than the old man would be when he came back; and Pam made up her mind to imbibe as much information as was possible in the time. The pigs and the poultry had fed themselves with the harvest of field and forest, but they had to be shut up because of the nocturnal marauders, to whom a chicken, or even a small porker, would not come amiss.

“We are all farmers more or less,” exclaimed Sophy, when Pam openly wondered at her cleverness and the extent of her knowledge. “That is to say, there is land under cultivation round most of the houses; and so we all grow our own milk and butter, and rear our own pigs and poultry.”

“I feel so dreadfully ignorant now that I am here, for the sort of knowledge I possess seems of no use at all,” said Pam, who had even to be instructed in the art of lighting a fire with a back stick.^[1] She had never seen a cooking-stove of such a pattern before, and she would have been very much at a loss in her new surroundings had it not been for Sophy.

“You will soon pick up the ways of daily living that are most suited to this part of the world,” Sophy said in a comforting tone. Then the two proceeded to set supper. The food left over from the surprise party would keep them supplied with provisions for several days to come, which was just as well, for a house more bare of things to eat it would be hard to imagine. There was no tea, no coffee, only a little dust of sugar screwed up in a grimy paper bag, and a little meal in a tub. Pam was ready to cry, thinking that her grandfather must have been on the brink of starvation. Sophy reminded her of the cow, and pointed out that, supposing he lived on new milk, with meal porridge, he would be even better nourished than people who had tea, coffee, and all sorts of groceries.

“Poor old man!” wailed Pam, as she inspected that bare house, “I feel as if I

could nearly break my heart over him. But if he comes back, and is fearfully hard to live with, then I shall feel like breaking it from another standpoint altogether.”

“Just so; and neither way will do any good, so it is much better to keep cheerful,” said Sophy, who was of a very literal turn of mind. “Here comes Don with some garments for me. Shall we ask him to stay for supper, or do you think your grandfather would object?”

“Time enough to think about that when the dear old man shows up; meanwhile we could not be so inhuman as to let anyone go away unfed. Bring your brother in, and we will feed him on chicken pie and spiced cake. What a good thing it is for me that the surprise party had such liberal ideas with regard to food!” Pam whisked round to find another plate as she spoke, but she left Sophy to go and invite the visitor in to supper.

Don was looking very serious. He muttered to Sophy in that moment of meeting that it was to be hoped old Wrack Peveril would not turn up in the township just now, for the people were ready to rise and slay him, because of the manner in which Sam Buckle had been knocked about.

“But they are not sure, are they, that Mr. Peveril did it?” gasped Sophy, with a quick backward glance to make certain that Pam was nowhere within earshot.

Don shrugged his broad shoulders.

“Who else was there to do it? The two were known to be at enmity. Sam Buckle keeps muttering that it was his right, and everyone knows he always declared it was his right to put a fence just there.”

“Sam Buckle is such a disagreeable old man that I cannot feel he is worth much pity,” remarked Sophy with a scornful tilt of her nose, as she laid her hand on the bag of clothes which her brother had brought for her.

“I don’t feel any for him,” said Don quickly, “nor for old Wrack either; the pair are about as amiable as a couple of old bull moose, and there is nothing for it but to let them fight to a finish, that I can see. The one that I am sorry for is that nice little girl in yonder, and whatever her mother could have been thinking about to let her come so far with no one to take care of her is more than I can imagine.”

“Oh, Pam can take care of herself, don’t you fret! She might be a Canadian by the way she takes hold of life, and she does not seem to be afraid of anything except the old mother-pig, and anyone might be forgiven for being a bit scared at facing her, she looks so very fierce.” Sophy was leading the way into the house as she spoke, and looking back over her shoulder at her brother. She did not remember having seen Don look so grave before, but she decided that gravity certainly became him, for it gave him a dignity which was quite new to him.

They were very merry at supper that night, despite the cloud which overhung the house. Sophy had carried her bag upstairs, and had slipped into a working frock. With her mind at ease about her clothes her spirits had mounted at once. She made little jokes, and went off into bursts of laughter about anything or nothing in a fashion which proved so infectious that the other two were speedily laughing also.

Directly supper was over Don rose to go. Not having been in bed on the previous night, and having been hard at work all day, he was so sleepy that he could hardly keep his eyes open. Sophy would have besought him to lie down on the settle in the living-room and have his sleep out there, but she was so concerned that her mother should not be alone another night that she would not even suggest his remaining at Ripple.

“Where are you two going to sleep to-night?” he asked, just as he was going to mount his horse.

“In one of the upstairs rooms. We have had the bed out in the sun all day,” said Sophy, and there was in her mind a swift wonder at his concern.

“That is right. Look here, sis, if there is a bolt to the stairs door, mind you shoot it when you go upstairs, and don’t come down in the night whatever you may hear. I’m not afraid that anyone would harm either of you — if you keep out of the way, that is. But I should not be surprised if someone tried a bit of burgling on here, for there are plenty of people silly enough to think that old Wrack was a miser, and not so bed-rock poor as he looked.”

“We won’t come down, I promise you,” said Sophy. Then she added, with a merry laugh: “Not even if another surprise party happens along this way, and dances all night to the strains of a cornet and flute. Oh, I say, wouldn’t it be weird!”

“I should think it would,” replied Don, and bothered though he was by the lonely condition of the two, he could not forbear a chuckle of amusement at the fancy picture his sister had called up. “Mose Paget is the only man that can play the cornet in the township that I know of, and he is going to help Mrs. Buckle with Sam to-night.”

It was very weird and still at Ripple when Don had ridden away. The darkness dropped over the forest like a pall. It was cloudy to-night, and the young moon had no chance at all against the billowy masses of cloud that were piled along the horizon. It would rain before morning, so Sophy said. If the weather broke it might even be dull and stormy for a week or more, and she sighed, because she loved fine weather so much the best. Pam sighed too, and her face was a little white and drawn when she dropped the heavy bar of ironwood into the socket at the side of the door. Sophy had told her that the

nearest house was three miles away, and she was trying to picture the situation. Brought up in London, taught from her childhood to understand that there were bristling dangers all around her, the solitude of Ripple seemed to put her almost outside the world. She argued that if there were no people there could be no danger, and then was surprised because she was scared at the solitude.

The dog had attached itself to her with slavish devotion. The creature accorded Sophy a bare tolerance, but there was perfect worship in the gaze it turned on Pam, and she was tremendously flattered by its preference. It even wanted to come up to bed with her that night when, soon after Don had gone, they betook themselves to the upstairs room where they intended to sleep. They humoured the animal, feeling that it would really be a comfort to have it upstairs with them, and they did not forget to bolt the door at the bottom of the stairs when they shut it.

They were so tired that the night passed for both of them in dreamless slumber, and they did not rouse until the dog woke them by whining to be let out. It was Pam who, with a dressing-gown round her, came down to open the house door that the creature might go free. She stood on the doorstep for a moment sniffing the freshness and drinking in the beauty of the morning. There was a chill in the air which made her shiver, for the dressing-gown was thin and the sun was not up yet. It was the magical beauty of the forest that was drawing her, the call of the wild that was in her blood.

“I love it, I love it, I would not go back to England if I could!” she whispered as she turned into the house again to go upstairs and dress. Then it suddenly occurred to her to wonder what would happen if her grandfather failed to return. “It is silly even to think of such a thing. Of course he will come back!” she murmured as she went upstairs; but she could not repress a little shiver, for the possibility would haunt her despite her efforts to banish it.

The morning “chores” were done, breakfast was out of the way, and Sophy was discussing with Pam what was the most necessary bit of work for them to start that morning, when the Doctor rode up, and they both ran out to greet him. The dog growled languidly. There had been so many people at Ripple in the last two days that the creature plainly felt it was too much fag to growl at everyone and so was indifferent about the business, although when an arrival was a once-a-week or once-a-fortnight event it had been ready to tear the new-comer to pieces.

“How is Mr. Buckle?” demanded Pam, giving Sophy no time to do the asking, but shouting the question as she ran.

“He died at midnight,” replied the Doctor briefly, and Pam flung up her hands in horror and consternation at the news. Of course she knew yesterday that

the poor man was very ill, but she had never thought that he was going to die. Oh, it was too dreadful! Suppose her grandfather really had hurt him, then the poor old man would not be able to come home now, but would have to be a wanderer always, hiding from the punishment which would await him if he were found.

“Father, you should not have told her so suddenly!” cried Sophy with acute reproach in her tone as Pam turned and clung to her.

“So it seems,” replied the Doctor, as he slid from his horse and came to help in the restoration of Pam. “But there are some things that do not improve by keeping, and this is one of them. Miss Walsh, you have need of every atom of courage you possess. I think you are made of good stuff, and you have got to rise to the occasion somehow.”

“I will if I can!” whispered Pam, but she was white to the lips, and there was such dismay in her heart that she was ready to sink with the pain of it all.

“It is all very well to tell her to be brave, but think of the shock for the poor girl! Why, I feel downright bad myself, and I am only an outsider. Poor Pam! Whatever will become of her? Will she have to turn round and go back to England?” Sophy was firing out a stream of questions, for she was tremendously excited. Nothing like this had ever come her way before, and she was a little thrown off her balance by it.

“I can’t go back to England, I have not money enough, and Mother cannot afford to send me any either,” said Pam, recovering herself a little. Then drawing away from Sophy she stood erect, though she was still white and trembling. “I shall stay here and make the best of it!” she declared.

“That is right!” The Doctor’s voice had such a ring of approval in it that Pam began at once to feel better. “Nothing is proved against Mr. Peveril, of course,” the Doctor went on. “He might not even have been suspected of having hurt Sam Buckle but for his unaccountable absence. As it is, people are disposed to think the very worst of him, and yet he may be as innocent as you or I.”

“I believe he is. I cannot think that he would hurt anyone,” murmured Pam, and the Doctor shook his head, but whether in agreement or dissent did not appear.

“Will Pam have to live on here alone? Will she have to run the farm?” demanded Sophy in a blaze of excitement. She was wondering whatever the city girl would do alone in the wilderness with winter coming on.

For a moment the Doctor looked from one girl to the other as if he was making up his mind, and then he spoke with brisk decision.

“No, she certainly cannot live alone; it is not to be thought of. You will have to stay with her until some of her own people can come out to her, or until she

can find someone she likes better — that is, always supposing her grandfather makes no sign.”

“I shall love to have Sophy with me, but I am afraid it is more than I have any right to expect,” said Pam, striving to speak steadily. “I am such an absolute stranger, and she has been so good to me.”

“We have to be good to each other out here in the backwoods, or we should certainly get left every time there is trouble,” the Doctor replied. He went on in a lighter tone: “You need not worry overmuch about keeping Sophy. She is going to be married in the spring, and she has mountains of sewing to do. At home she will never get time for it; here she may.”

“Oh, and she never told me!” cried Pam, looking with new interest at Sophy, whose face was covered with blushes, and a sight to see.

“Did she not? I thought girls always told such things,” said Doctor Grierson with a glance of pride at his eldest daughter. Sophy had always been his right hand ever since she had been old enough to do anything at all. It was a piece of real self-sacrifice to spare her to stay with Pam at Ripple, but the plight of the stranger girl was so serious that he did not hesitate for a moment as to where his duty lay. He rode away in a great hurry as usual, and when he had gone Pam for a time broke down and cried.

Sophy, with rare wisdom, crept away and left her alone to have her cry out. A moaning wind swept through the trees and sighed away in the distance. Pam sobbed on until she had no more tears to shed, then she gathered her courage to face what lay before her. She realized that she was up against the hardest thing she had ever faced in her life; and she was going to meet it boldly if she could. Her courage might feel like water, but other people must not know it. For the sake of her grandfather, who had so mysteriously disappeared, she must stay on at Ripple and do her best. The thought of running a farm tickled her so much that her tears were dry, and she was laughing when Sophy crept back to see how it was with her.

“Well, you are a queer girl!” she exclaimed, and her opinion of Pam went up by leaps and bounds.

[1] A “back stick” is a fair-sized log of hard wood which is slow in burning. It is lit in the stove of a Canadian house at bedtime, and smoulders through the night, so that in the morning a fire may easily enough be kindled from it.

CHAPTER VII

Searching

Days passed. The police came and went. Indeed, they might be said to haunt Ripple at this time. The dog grew so used to strange faces and visitors at all hours that it took no notice of them at all. It was tired, too. Morning, noon, and night Pam was searching for some trace of the old man whom she had come so far to live with, and yet had never seen; and where she went the dog went too. It was a dead body she was looking for now, and she had tramped the fields until she knew the land literally foot by foot. Then she penetrated into the forest, going very warily at first, for she had all a city girl's dread of the unknown, and who could tell what terrors might lurk unseen beneath the brambles and the undergrowth?

She did not find anything. Sometimes the dog would stop suddenly, and lifting its head, would howl in a manner calculated to make the warm blood in her veins turn cold, for she believed herself on the brink of a find; but always there was nothing.

While Pam was away searching, Sophy sat in the house and sewed. She was to be married in the spring, as her father had said, and she had her own ideas as to the amount of plenishing it was proper to take with her to her husband. At home she was harassed and hurried between her duty and her inclination. Here there was no duty to harass her, and she felt as if she was having the best holiday she had known for years. Every morning after the "chores" were done she and Pam cleaned a room; when that was finished, Sophy sat down to her sewing, and Pam started out to search. The house was beginning to look different already, and it had lost the odour of exceeding fustiness which had struck them both on the night of the surprise party.

Then the inevitable happened, and Pam lost her way in the forest one day. She walked on and on, realizing that she was getting more hopelessly bewildered every minute. Suddenly she remembered the dog, and catching the creature round the neck, she told it all about her difficulty, winding up by telling it in the most forcible language she possessed to take her home.

"Woof! woof! woo-o-o-h!" The dog flung up its head and howled in such a fearfully dismal fashion that Pam gave an involuntary cry.

"You must not make such an awful row, I simply cannot bear it!" she

exclaimed, seizing the creature round the neck and giving it a great hug. "We are in trouble, both of us, but you must learn to keep yours to yourself a bit, my friend; this sort of thing is past bearing. Now, take me home, dear, and make haste about it, or Sophy will certainly have a fit."

The animal gave a short bark as if perfectly understanding what was required of it, then started off along a cross-trail, going at a businesslike trot, but looking round every few minutes as if to make sure that Pam was following all right. The trail turned suddenly through a belt of beechwood thick with foliage into a bare and desolate region, which made Pam cry out in amazement. As far as she could see the forest had been burned. Even the ground appeared to have been charred, and there was hardly a vestige of green to be seen anywhere. The mighty trunks had been the sport of the winter tempests since being ravaged by fire, and here and there they were blown into heaps of gigantic confusion. They lay in piles, or were bunched together in groups, while heaps of cinders and charred fragments lay in all directions. The dog went steadily on through this desolate region, and Pam saw that the creature was following a well-defined trail. She was beginning to wonder where she would find herself by and by, when her guide turned short round into the living forest once more, the trail grew broader and broader, and suddenly she was in a little clearing where there was a long, low, brown house in front of her, and just beyond the shimmering waters of the creek.

"Oh, how pretty!" she murmured to herself, for the autumn sunshine fell full on the water, while a little wind was ruffling the surface, making it catch a thousand sparkles that seemed to light the woodland and the strip of brown field through which it ran.

An elderly woman came to the door of the house, and seeing Pam and the dog, beckoned her to come nearer. Pam went at once, needing no second invitation, for she was very anxious to know where she was, and how long it would take her to reach home again. But the dog was growling and growling, while a ridge of hair bristled erect along its spine.

"There, there, mend your manners, can't you? Don't you see that the lady is a friend?" cried Pam, catching at the old strap which the dog wore round its neck by way of a collar, for she was afraid that it was going to fly at the woman who was smiling in such friendly welcome.

"Now, say, ain't that Wrack Peveril's dog? And I do believe you must be his granddaughter! My dear, I do take it kind that you should have come to see me so soon. Come in, come in, and don't take no notice of the dog growling. Because men fall out is no reason why women should be at enmity, and it is glad I am to see you, my dear!"

Pam suddenly began to tremble, tried to speak and could not, then, giving

herself a shake, gasped out, "Are you Mrs. Buckle?"

"Why, yes, my dear, of course. Didn't you know, and hadn't you come to see me?" There was so much disappointment in the woman's face and manner that Pam hastened to soothe her.

"I would have come before if I had had the faintest idea that you would care to see me, but I naturally supposed that I was the very last person you would want to have for a visitor." To her exceeding dismay Pam found herself on the verge of tears. It was dreadful to think that she should have blundered into the presence of the woman whom of all others she would have chosen to avoid.

"I should have come to Ripple myself to see you," said Mrs. Buckle, shaking hands with Pam in the friendliest fashion imaginable, and then leading her into the house, and literally forcing her to sit in the big cushioned chair that stood between the window and the stove. "But, you see, the trouble is I haven't got my widow's bonnet made yet, and it would not be honouring to poor Sam's memory for me to go paying calls in a hat with a blue feather, which is all the outdoor wear I've got at the present. I went to the funeral in Mrs. O'Rafferty's bonnet, a dreadfully shabby affair, as you may guess, for her man has been gone nearly two years, and she was never good at taking care of things. She is not too clean either, and I did not fancy wearing her bonnet, I can tell you. Miss Johnson, the milliner at The Corner, was quite out of widows' crape — that is, the sort with the big tear-drops, you know — so I had to wait until she had got a fresh lot in from St. John."

"It was very kind of you to think of coming in to see me!" murmured Pam, when Mrs. Buckle paused for want of breath. "I am so very, very sorry for the trouble you have had, but I cannot think that my grandfather, an old man himself, would have knocked Mr. Buckle about so cruelly."

"Ah, you never knew my poor Sam!" cried Mrs. Buckle, shaking her head, as she wiped away a tear to her husband's memory. "He was the most aggravating man that ever was, and I ought to know, seeing that I bore with his infirmity for hard on twenty-nine years. And, my dear, if your grandfather didn't do it, poor man, why should his axe, with his name branded on the handle, have been found lying on the ground close to the broken fence?"

"Was it found there?" breathed Pam in a cold horror, and from that moment the iron of a deep humiliation and disgrace entered into her very soul.

"Why, yes. Didn't they tell you?" asked Mrs. Buckle. "But, there! I expect they kept it back just to spare your feelings, poor child!" The kindly woman came nearer as she spoke, and her work-worn hand dropped in a consoling fashion on to Pam's arm. "But you must not blame the poor old man too much, for doubtless he was angered past bearing. Everyone knew that he had a violent

temper, and he would be deaf and blind to the consequences when once he began to lay on. It is well when people learn to restrain themselves when they are young, for when they have come to years they lose control over their passions. I wish your grandfather had stayed to face the music, though. I am sure that the inquiry would have brought in that there were extenuating circumstances, and so he would have got off lighter. Now, he will have to face the very worst when they find him.”

“Oh, I do not think they will find him alive; it is his dead body that I am looking for!” said Pam, and her voice was sharp with pain.

Mrs. Buckle shook her head.

“You did not know your grandfather, and so you think of him as a feeble old man; but he was not, he was strong and vigorous. I saw him once knock Sam down as clean as if he were bowling a ninepin over, and I did not pity Sam either, for that time, at least, I knew very well he deserved all he got. From my heart I pity your grandfather now; it is cruel hard that a man at his time of life should have to be a wanderer.”

“Oh, it is dreadful, dreadful!” wailed Pam, hiding her face in her hands. The trouble had been bearable when she thought of her grandfather as dead, for then he at least would have been beyond the reach of hunger and cold; but if he had done this terrible thing of beating a fellow-man to death, and was forced by his crime to be a fugitive from justice, how the poor old man would suffer! She would never be at peace now, but would always be looking for him to come stealing back to his home for money, for food, and for shelter.

“Child, you must not take on like that!” said Mrs. Buckle, whose own tears were falling like rain. “You have just got to be bright and brave, and to keep your end up as best you can. It is hard lines for you to be pitchforked into a trouble of this sort, but just figure to yourself how much worse it would have been for the poor old man if you had not been at Ripple just now. The place would have been in the hands of strangers; there would have been no one to look after his interests or to keep the place going. Now he will most likely come creeping back some stormy night this fall, for he will want money to help him get clear away from parts where he is known. You must keep some handy for him when he comes. Have you got any?”

“Only a few shillings — I mean, dollars,” replied Pam, who had constantly to remind herself of the difference in currency.

“I thought as much!” muttered Mrs. Buckle. Telling Pam to sit still a minute, she went away to an inner room, whence she returned a minute later to thrust a bundle of dirty-looking papers into the girl’s hand. “Take that, my dear, it is only twenty dollars, but it is all I have to spare; and it may make the difference for

him between starvation and security, for he is a man that can do with very little, from having lived alone so long.”

“But I cannot take your money, yours of all people’s, to help my grandfather!” protested Pam, in a voice of awe, and she looked up at the kindly old woman, trying to thrust back the little bundle of paper money.

But Mrs. Buckle was obdurate.

“You must take it, please, my dear,” she insisted. “It is my right to spare myself what suffering I can, for I have had enough to bear. I feel that it would be the last straw to my endurance if the police were to find your grandfather, and all that old trouble had to be raked up in a court of justice. It is not likely I have many more years to live, and they might as well be peaceful years, but I should never know another happy hour if your grandfather were put in prison for wounding my husband. I’ve no doubt that poor Sam’s aggravating ways were a sort of infirmity, like a hare-lip or a crooked back, and I would rather leave the punishment of the man who did him to death in the hands of Almighty God; so you will please take the money and say no more about it. Only you must keep it in a place where the poor old man can get it himself if he happens along when there is no one about; for he may break into his own house, don’t you see, because he won’t know how we feel about his escaping.”

“The desk in his bedroom is locked,” said Pam faintly. She could protest no more, and taking the roll of notes, she thrust it for security into the front of her blouse.

“Try if you have got a key that will open it,” said Mrs. Buckle, who was plainly a person of resource. “If not, perhaps I can pick it for you as soon as I get my bonnet and can come to pay a call. Oh, it wouldn’t be the first lock I have picked by a good many. When a woman has a husband who keeps her as short as my man kept me, she is apt to do things that won’t bear daylight; but he is dead now, and his faults ain’t going to be talked about except in the way of stopping other people from having to suffer for them. You are a dear good girl for coming to see me; it has done me a power of good to have you to talk to. I feel better than I have done since Sam was taken.”

“It is very sweet of you to feel like this, Mrs. Buckle, and I thank you for myself and for my mother. But oh, I wish that I had some way of repaying you for your kindness to us!” Pam’s eyes were wet with tears as she leaned forward and warmly kissed Mrs. Buckle’s cheek.

“There is something that perhaps you may be able to do for me if you have a mind,” said Mrs. Buckle slowly.

“Oh, tell me, please, what it is, and I will so gladly do it if it is in my power.” Pam was thinking how she must in her own person expiate what she could of her

grandfather's wrong-doing. She could not bring Sam back to life again, but she might be able to do some service for the widow.

Mrs. Buckle hesitated. She was not a woman of fine feeling, and yet she hated to tell this nice girl, with the straightforward, fearless gaze, that the old man, her grandfather, was a thief. Yet there it was, and although she might soften it down, the ugly fact remained the same. Nervously she cleared her throat, and a hot flush crept over her kindly old face as she burst into speech.

"Sam was found with his pockets cleared out. Some money he had on him, I know, but whether it was much or little I can't say, and of course I shan't ever know now; but what upset me more than the loss of the money was that poor Sam's watch had been taken. A good watch it was, and it had belonged to my father, who gave it to Sam when he died. My word, but I did value that watch! Of course I'm not saying that your grandfather took it for the sake of stealing from the man he'd hurt so badly, but I think perhaps, when he found that he had knocked the sense out of Sam, he just took the money and the watch to make it look as if the whole thing had been done by someone for the sake of stealing. If your grandfather comes creeping back some night, and you see him, I want you to ask him to give you back the watch. Tell him from me that he can keep the money and welcome, for it is sorely he will need it, poor man, if he has got to be a wanderer all through this bitter wintertime that lies before us."

"I will tell him, Mrs. Buckle; I will be sure not to forget," answered Pam, her eyes shining with earnestness. "But oh, since you have told me of the robbery, I am quite sure that Grandfather did not do that. You see, my mother has told us so much about Grandfather, and what an upright man he was; hard and difficult to live with, but straight as a die. I can understand that he might have quarrelled with Mr. Buckle, and in the heat of anger might have beaten and injured him, but I am not going to believe that Grandfather stole the money and the watch. Someone must have come along afterwards and done that. Oh, what a fearful business it is!"

"You are right, my dear; it is a fearful thing, and no mistake about it!" cried Mrs. Buckle, following Pam to the door. Then she exclaimed sharply, "Why, whatever are you hanging round here for, Mose Paget?" and Pam saw the untidy figure of the man whom she had once taken for a tramp leaning against the angle of the house. He was white and trembling, and she was sorry that Mrs. Buckle felt it necessary to speak so harshly to him.

"I'm bad!" the man said briefly. "I was working in my creek-lot when I was took queer, so I came up here to see if you had anything you could give me, something to stop the pain," and he pointed vaguely at his chest as if to indicate the seat of the trouble.

“Come straight in and sit down!” cried the widow heartily. “I wouldn’t turn a sick dog from my door, and certainly I would not turn you away, seeing how you helped me when my husband lay dying. I expect it is colic that you have got, and I’ve a fine remedy for that, though it is a bit nasty. No, Miss Walsh, you need not trouble to stop, for I do just know that you are wanting to get away home. I have got Amanda Higgins here if I want anyone; she is away down in the corner lot picking berries, and I shall just whistle for her if I want her.”

Pam was glad to go. Mrs. Buckle had shown her the right trail to take, telling her that she could make no mistake; nor did she, for, crossing the creek on the log footbridge at the ford, she passed the fence which had been the cause of all the trouble between her grandfather and Sam Buckle, and was at once on their own land at Ripple.

Mrs. Buckle’s account of her grandfather’s axe having been found close beside the injured man had been a great shock to Pam. She had refused to let herself believe that her grandfather would hurt anyone so badly and then disappear, and not a word had been said in her presence of the axe. But when Mrs. Buckle had spoken of the robbery, a gleam of comfort had stolen into her heart again. She was quite, quite sure that her grandfather would not steal money and a watch. Disagreeable he was, and so hard to live with that her mother had been glad to run away from him; but he was bed-rock honest. He owed no man anything, and would rather have lived on buckwheat porridge all the time than run up an account at the store for groceries for which he could not pay. Perhaps he was entirely innocent of this thing, although it did look so black against him. But where was he hiding? And if he had done nothing to be ashamed of, why was he hiding?

These questions, which she could not answer, brought Pam back to her old theory of something having happened to him, and she reached the house at Ripple thoroughly tired out with her search, but with courage unabated to go on again. She told Sophy of her visit to Mrs. Buckle, and how that kindly woman had given her money to supply her grandfather’s need if the poor fugitive should come back; and Sophy dropped her sewing, and sat with parted lips, staring at Pam as she listened to the extraordinary story.

“Just to think of it! Why, Pam, Sam Buckle must have been a tyrant if his widow can feel so kindly to the man who is believed to have caused his death! If I thought all men were like that I should change my mind about getting married. But I know that George is good and kind.”

“People are not all alike, of course,” said Pam, as she leaned back in the big chair and fanned herself with her hat, for the day was hot. “I think that even the very disagreeable ones would not be so bad if they were properly handled. Take

Grandfather, for instance. I know he was hard to live with, but half of his disagreeableness came because he was so upset at Mother wanting to marry Father, who was not particularly hard-working, and I am afraid not too steady. Mother was wayward, she would have her own way, but ah, how bitterly she has had to pay!" Pam sighed as visions of her childhood rose up before her eyes.

Sophy nodded in perfect sympathy, but she asked no questions about those old, sad memories. Pam's past did not concern her, so why be curious about it? Her needle went in and out of the white seam with such soothing regularity, and the house in the forest was so quiet, that presently Pam fell fast asleep, curled up in the big chair with the tired dog at her feet.

CHAPTER VIII

The First Snow

Pam had been five weeks at Ripple. She was getting used to the forest solitude. She was rosy and energetic, keenly resolved to do her very best to keep the farm going until her grandfather came back or made some sign. She was more puzzled than ever that he should have gone and never left one word or sign. It was cruel to her, so she told herself sometimes, because he knew that she was coming; and what a plight she would have been in but for the Griersons! Mrs. Grierson, a kindly but rather dreary woman, had been over once or twice to see the girls at Ripple, and she had told Pam that Sophy should stay through the winter with her. It was a solitary place for two girls alone, but farther down the creek Mrs. Buckle was living with only little Amanda Higgins for company. There was nothing to be afraid of except solitude, and people had to get used to that. Pam was getting used to it, and she was so occupied from morning to night that she had not much time to think about herself.

The neighbours were kind, although they lived so far away. Galena Gittins came over regularly every week, and it was she who was instructing Pam in the mysteries of farmwork. Galena had a shrewd head on her shoulders, and knew what had to be done and the best way to do it, so Pam was rigorously put through her paces. She spent laborious days in the forest with Galena gathering beech-nuts for the pigs, to be stored against the time when the snow would prevent the creatures foraging for themselves. She toiled over harvesting the roots that were still in the fields, and with her own hands dragged the loads on a truck to the house, where the capacious cellar received them and would keep them safe from fear of being spoiled by frost. There was not a horse on the place. Pam had wondered at first how her grandfather had managed without a beast of burden, but Galena told her that a good many people who had only a few cleared fields kept no horses, for the keep of the animals was a big consideration in winter, and it was possible to hire a man and a team when they were needed for purposes of cultivation.

“I am glad not to have a horse to look after, but it will seem rather far to walk to The Corner or to Hunt’s Crossing every time I want to post a letter when the snow comes,” said Pam, who was looking forward to being snowbound with considerable dread, only she took good care that no one should know it. She did

not choose that these people, to whom the forest was so well known and familiar, should ever guess how scared she was at the thought of the long dark nights and the cheerless days which would have to be faced before the summer came again.

THE DOG AND THE UNKNOWN FURY WERE ROLLING
OVER IN THE DEADLIEST OF COMBATS

It was not in her nature to give up, and so much hung on her ability to keep the place going through the winter. If her grandfather did not return in a year, and if he gave no sign of being alive, it was probable that the authorities would allow his death to be assumed. Then, in the event of no will being found, his daughter would naturally take what was left. It was the future of her mother and the other children that Pam was guarding, and she was minded to do her very best.

Ah, how home-sick she was for them during those shortening days, while the forest trees flamed through splendours of crimson and gold to the brown and russet of dead leaves! But she would not speak of her pain, she would not even grumble over her misery. It was when she was most hilarious that Sophy guessed the home-sickness raged the fiercest.

There had been no need for Mrs. Buckle to practise her lock-picking skill on the desk in Wrack Peveril's sleeping-chamber. When Pam's heavy luggage was brought from Hunt's Crossing she discovered that the key of her writing-desk served also to open the desk which the old man had used. This when opened had not been found to contain much. Some money there was, but only a little. There was a small heap of letters well worn with much reading. They were letters from Pam's mother, and Pam cried over them more bitterly than she had ever cried before, for they revealed a side of her home life that she had only faintly guessed at. Mrs. Walsh had not found her marriage a happy one, and she had poured out her bitter disappointment and grief to the old man, her father, whom she had set at naught and run away from in her desperate eagerness to get her own way.

Those letters did not appear to have been answered. Indeed, almost every one of them began with a reproach because the old man had not written. Some of them begged for money to meet some pressing need. The babies had come so fast, and the needs had been so great.

Pam wondered why the old man had not asked his daughter to come home again after the death of her husband. But he had not. He had never even hinted that he would like to see her again. It made Pam shiver to think of it. She could not imagine being parted for years from her mother without her mother wanting to see her again. But she was too just to condemn the old man. Of course there was another side to the question, her mother's side. Without doubt Pam gained a

greater insight to the natural laws, the ethics of give and take between parent and child, in that reading of the letters in her grandfather's desk, than she would have done from any other source.

Her grandfather must be found somehow; then, when she had found him, it must be her work to bring about a reconciliation between him and her mother. Then her mother must come home. Without doubt the place of Mrs. Walsh was at Ripple. The children would love the wild free life of the forest. The boys would grow into strong men here, and if the effort to get an education was greater, the chances were that they would prize it more.

It was this planning for the good of her family that kept Pam's heart warm in those shortening days of the fall. The mornings grew colder and colder; the pond behind the barn which drained into the creek was fringed with ice, and she had to use a long pole to keep a space of open water for the animals. Later on that would not be possible, and she would have to melt snow for them in the boiler that was built into the out-shed which stood between the house and the barn. There was no snow as yet, but it might come any day now. There would be an end to all search for the old man when once the land was covered in its winter mantle, so Pam took advantage of every day when she could spare the time to take long tramps across the forest in every direction. Don Grierson had brought her a pocket compass, and armed with this she found her way back, however hopelessly she might get confused in trying to strike a trail.

There came a day in early November when the dawn seemed as if it could not penetrate through the cloud masses that brooded so closely down over the forest trees. A grey, dreary day, which made Pam more home-sick than ever, though apparently in the wildest of spirits. She rushed about between the house and the barn, doing the morning "chores", and as she hurried to and fro she sang at the top of her voice, the sound of her singing having a weird effect on that drear, cold morning.

Luke Dobson, from Hunt's Crossing, came along about ten o'clock, and wanted to know what was to be done about the lumber-felling. Her grandfather had arranged for twenty acres of black spruce to be cut this fall, and Luke Dobson wanted to know if the work was to be carried through, or what was to be done in the matter.

"You say that Grandfather had settled price and everything?" asked Pam, who was so terribly in the dark about business matters that she had to rely on other people. It was a great comfort to her that this man looked honest and respectable, and Sophy had told her that he did most of the lumbering in the district this side of the Ridge.

"No. If the price had been settled and the contract signed there would have

been nothing for me to do but warn you of the transaction, and cut the lumber at my own convenience,” said Mr. Dobson, who had rather a bothered air. He did not like having to do business with women, for, privately, he considered them lacking in common sense; and this one was only a girl — a girl, moreover, with a skittish look, just for all the world like a young colt, so he told himself, in severe disapproval of Pam’s radiant good spirits and smiling face.

“How much did Grandfather want, and how much were you prepared to give?” asked Pam, who had her own theories on the way to do business.

Mr. Dobson stated the price he was prepared to give and the sum for which Wrack Peveril had stood out, a matter of only a few dollars in reality. He was sufficiently straightforward to say that black spruce was going up in price, and he was willing to make a small advance on his first offer, if Pam was able to do business with him.

“Oh, I am quite willing to do business,” replied Pam in an airy tone. Then she dropped suddenly into graver speech, while lines of care showed on her face. “The trouble is to know what power I have to sell anything belonging to my grandfather. Supposing I took your offer, and when you had cut the lumber he came back and objected to the transaction, it would be out of your power, or mine either, to put the trees back on their stumps again; and what would be my position?”

Mr. Dobson shook his head and looked dubious, hesitated a minute, then said rather uneasily:

“I take it that you are here to do your best for the old man, or if he is dead, for your mother, who is his natural heir. You can leave that lot of trees standing another year if you would prefer it. But if your grandfather comes home, and the police get hold of him for the part he is supposed to have had in the death of Sam Buckle, there will be the expense of his defence, and all the other things that arise out of an action at law, and you will be hard put to it perhaps to find ready money when you most need it. If, on the other hand, he is dead, or is never heard of again, your mother would agree that you had acted for the best in selling, and your trees would be hard cash, and safe from any danger of being destroyed in a forest fire.”

Pam shivered. She was thinking of that awfully desolate region that spread over so many acres of forest near to where Mrs. Buckle lived. Her grandfather’s black spruce would not be worth the trouble of lumbering if a forest fire happened along that way. But she had a cautious streak in her character, and she knew how dreadfully ignorant she was, so she said frankly: “I should like to take your offer straight away, but I think I ought just to ask the advice of someone outside. Dr. Grierson will be round this way to-day or to-morrow; do you mind

letting it stand over until then?”

“That will suit me very well indeed, and I will wish you good morning,” said Mr. Dobson, getting to his feet in a great hurry. But Pam had a question to ask before he went — one that she had been wanting to ask all the while Luke Dobson had been talking.

“Do you mind telling me where that twenty acres of black spruce is?” she asked nervously. Of course she ought to know every bit of her grandfather’s land by this time, and as a matter of fact she had supposed that she did know it, but puzzle her head as she would she could not remember any plantation of trees which would be twenty acres in extent. What a lot of trees there would be on twenty acres of land — a piece that was twice as big as the cleared field at the back of the house! Don Grierson had told her that was ten acres — the ten-acre lot he called it.

“Ah! you would have gone the round of the quarter-section boundary posts,” said Luke Dobson slowly, and then he turned to a roughly-drawn map that was nailed to the wall opposite the window and called Pam’s attention to it. “You see this map, Miss Walsh? Well, this red line is your grandfather’s boundary.” His broad finger was travelling slowly round the red line for her benefit, but he paused where a thick black line crossed the red. “This black line here shows the old tote road.”

“What is a tote road?” demanded Pam.

Luke Dobson rubbed his head in a rueful fashion.

“I don’t know. It has always been called the tote road ever since I can remember, and I have lived about these parts all my life, but I never heard anyone ask before.”

“I know!” cried Sophy, looking up from her work. “A tote road is so called because it is the road along which people ‘tote’ things — that is, carry them. That road leads straight away through the forest to the river miles below Hunt’s Crossing. It is rarely used now, but I have heard some of the old people say that is the way the lumber used to be carried from these parts to be floated down river to Fredericton.”

“Well now, I shouldn’t wonder but what you are right!” exclaimed Mr. Dobson, who was fairly amazed at such a reasonable solution of the mystery.

“What a thing it is to be clever!” cried Pam, and then crossed the room on purpose to give Sophy a little hug, just to show that she had no intention of making fun of her.

“Your grandfather bought that lot cheap about fifteen years ago,” said Luke Dobson, his big finger covering the small red-lined patch on the farther side of the old tote road. “There was a half-breed lived up there, a mighty hunter he was

too. But he got caught napping one day and was clawed by a b'ar, died of it, he did too, and his wife — she was a white woman from St. John — she sold the land at what anyone would give her for it, and cleared out sharp. They used to live in a bit of a shack standing on the tote road; I expect it is standing there still, bits of it, but no one has lived there since.”

“I am sure that I have not been in that direction yet, or I should have seen the house,” said Pam, who was studying the map with close attention. It was bewildering to her to get her bearings in the forest, and she had not hitherto understood the significance of the roughly-drawn map.

“You had better take a stroll round there before fixing up with me about lumbering that bit,” Mr. Dobson advised her as he took his leave, and Pam made up her mind that she would go right away.

The tote road ran on the side of her grandfather's land farthest away from the trail to Hunt's Crossing. It was thick forest in that direction, and Pam with the dog at her heels had to make her way by a narrow trail that was really an old game path; but presently she emerged on a wide avenue running in a straight line east and west, and looking as if it stretched for miles and miles, as indeed it did. It was fast being choked with rubbish, brambles and so forth, but it would not take much trouble to make it fit for traffic once more, and the ground was solid and level beneath her feet, very different from the mossy, marshy trails which abounded in these parts.

“So this is the old tote road!” she murmured, as she stood surveying it. But it was too cold to stand long, and she was anxious to start her inspection of the lot of black spruce. She had learned all she could about trees and lumber generally since she had been at Ripple, and her education was so far advanced that she could tell black spruce when she saw it, also cedar, ash, maple, birch, and oak. She was wise enough already to understand that it was a really valuable lot of trees that stood in serried rows bordering on the old tote road. Sophy had told her that black spruce was valuable because it was so largely used for pulp for paper-making. All those long lines of trees at which she was gazing were potential newspapers, or novels, or perhaps hymn-books. How strange it was to think that trees could be made into paper, a material that she in her ignorance had always associated with rags and straw! She laughed a little as she thought of all the wonders science had wrought, and the dog at the sound of her voice crept closer to her side, pressing its head against her knee with a whimper of affection.

She stooped to pat the shaggy head, for the love of the creature was really precious to her. Suddenly the dog gave a low, savage growl, then stood with its teeth bared, snarling, while a ridge of hair stood up along its spine, sure sign indeed of something wrong.

“Have you heard someone about, or is it only a fancy that you have got in your thick old head?” asked Pam; but although the dog wagged its tail at the sound of her voice, it began to growl again the next moment, and then went creeping forward, its teeth still bared, and looking so fierce and ugly that Pam was more than half-afraid.

Then she caught sight of the angle of a shingled roof, and guessed that she was close to the half-ruined shack that stood on her grandfather’s land.

“Did the poor dear see a house, and didn’t the poor dear like it?” she asked the dog, jumping at once to the conclusion that it was the nearness to a dwelling-place that made the dog growl. It took no notice of her this time, but crept forward with great caution, growling so low down in its throat that it seemed to be swallowing its own voice.

A queer purring noise, such as a very big cat might make, broke on the ears of Pam. The dog heard it too, and growled more fiercely than before. Pam had a cold sensation, and her limbs seemed suddenly paralysed. She lifted one foot by a great effort, took a step forward, tried to lift the other, failed, and would have fallen, for she trembled so badly, only she gripped at the slender stem of a young spruce growing close to the edge of the tote road, and clung to it, quite helpless from the overmastering terror that had seized upon her.

Without doubt it was that same terror which saved her life. If she had not been so badly scared she would have moved forward when the dog went. As it was, she clung to the trunk of the tree, the rough bark bruising her bare hands, her heart beating so fast that it made her feel downright sick.

The broken door of the shack was half-open. The dog was close to it now, creeping and creeping, as if ready for a spring. The purring sound had dropped to silence, and a minute passed which seemed to Pam as long as hours. Then came an awful, ear-splitting yell, as a lithe grey creature hurled itself out from the shattered door like an arrow from a bow straight at the dog. Pam heard a shriek of pure terror, yet had no idea that it was herself who had screamed. The dog swerved, the lithe grey thing hit the ground beside it, and then dog and the unknown fury were rolling over in the deadliest of combats.

The dog would be killed, Pam was sure of it, and she simply could not stand by to see her dumb friend done to death. Instead of running away, which under the circumstances would have been the highest discretion, she dashed towards the door of the shack, intending to get hold of a piece of wood which might do for a weapon. She had almost reached the door when out bounded another creature, sinuous of body, grey of hue, with a thick head, short ears, and fetid breath that seemed to smite her like a poison blast as the beast bowled her over in its mad rush to get away. Pam was somewhat stunned by her fall, for her head

struck against a stump, and she lay where she had been flung, too dazed to rise.

She came to her senses to find a weirdly dishevelled figure helping her to her feet, a man with a familiar voice, but his face so smothered in dirt and blood that it was not easy to remember where she had seen him before. Then she recalled the man whom at the first she had supposed to be a tramp. He was speaking to her, but she had difficulty in understanding what he said, for he mumbled so, and his mouth was bleeding.

“Did the beast claw you? Say, now, did it claw you?” he was asking with desperate anxiety.

Pam put her hand to her head.

“It was a fearful bang I had where my head struck the tree, but I don’t think I am hurt anywhere else. But you — oh, what will you do? You are most fearfully wounded!” she cried, fairly appalled at his condition.

Mose Paget shook his head.

“I have a few scratches where the beast clawed me, but it isn’t worth talking about. It is lucky, though, that I heard you scream, for it might have gone hard with you and the dog if I had not been here.”

“Is the dog killed?” cried Pam, starting up to run back to the spot where the plucky creature had been so mixed up in the fray with the savage grey animal of the sinuous shape.

Mose stopped her with a gesture.

“No, it isn’t dead, but it is a bit clawed about, and it will be a week or two before it is fit to walk again, I’m afraid. I am going to carry it home for you, only I might as well fasten this door, so that those beasts can’t take shelter here again.”

“What were they?” asked Pam. She was shaking horribly still, and she had a feeling of nausea that was horrible.

“Canada lynx is their book name, but we call them Indian devils, and the name fits them to a nicety,” he answered, as he put his head into the tumbledown shack; but he hastily withdrew it, the odour from the animals which had found a shelter there being unpleasantly overpowering. “They are the cutest and wickedest beasts that are found anywhere in the forests. They are very rare, though, and happily they are getting rarer. I had an uncle who was so badly clawed by one that he carried the marks to his grave; fifty years ago that must have been, and I have not heard of any in this neighbourhood since.”

“I shall be afraid to venture into the forest alone after this,” cried Pam, and again she shivered violently, feeling deadly sick, and not understanding that the nausea was almost entirely due to the shock to her nerves.

“No, you won’t,” Mose contradicted her harshly, then drew the broken door

close and fastened it, so that no wild creature could get inside. "You won't see that charming pair again, I'll be bound. There will be a score of men out hunting for them directly word goes round that they have been seen, and it is not likely that you will see another pair if you live in these parts until you are an old woman."

"Oh, the poor dog!" cried Pam, as they reached the spot where the animal lay. It was already feebly trying to lick its wounds — a good sign, Mose told her, for if it had been mortally wounded it would have lain still and not troubled at all. He lifted it carefully, as if it had been a baby, and then went striding back on the way to Ripple, while Pam stumbled along in the rear. He was bleeding from his numerous hurts, but would not let her bind him up with her handkerchief, and he stalked on ahead with the savage dignity which she had always connected with an Indian chief.

It was beginning to snow, but not with the leisurely falling flakes to which Pam had been accustomed in England. The air was suddenly full of a white smother, fine as dust, which, filling eyes and nose and mouth all at once, set up such a choking and confusion that Pam felt as if she would be suffocated. The man in front grew into an indistinct blur, although she was so close to him that by reaching out her hand she could have gripped his coat. A fear seized her that they would be lost and would both perish miserably. Her breath was beaten out of her by the sting of that awful cold, and she cried out sharply.

Mose stopped so suddenly at the sound of her cry that she punted into him without being able to help herself.

"What is wrong, miss; have you hurt yourself?" he asked in a jerky tone, for the dog was heavy and he was short of breath.

"I — I thought we were lost, and this snow is awful!" Pam cried.

"You are close home now; here is the house!" he said in an encouraging tone, just as one might speak to a frightened child.

Pam peered through the snow-blur, and there, just ahead, was the outline of the house, as he had said. A moment later and the door was flung open, and they staggered into the room, where Sophy fell upon them in tearful thanksgiving that Pam had escaped with her life. The blizzard had come on so suddenly that she had been frightened at the thought of Pam exposed to its fury.

While Pam explained the situation in a hurried, incoherent fashion, Mose Paget was caring for the dog. Calling for hot water, he washed its wounds, and bound them so that the dirt could not get into them. Then he made the animal as comfortable as possible on a bit of carpet and some cushions at the back of the stove, called for milk, warm milk, and fed it himself, taking as much care as if the creature had been a human being. But when they wanted to bring him water

and bandages for his own hurts, he brushed them aside brusquely, declaring that there was nothing needed for him.

“I want to get home for my gun; I must have a shot at that vermin if I can,” he said hurriedly. “I am only sorry I could not do for the one the dog had its teeth fixed in. Gee, but the critter had a grip on it, and no mistake!”

“You cannot possibly go out in this storm; you will lose your way and perish!” cried Pam.

“It is clearing, and I have faced worse weather,” he answered briefly. He was so eager to be gone that Pam could not insist on his staying longer, especially as Sophy was curiously silent on the matter.

Mose was quite right. The gloom was lifting and the snowfall was thinner when he opened the door, and, shutting it with a bang, disappeared from view. Not a cent would he accept for the work he had done, though Pam had begged him to take some money, if only to pay for the time he had wasted on her and the dog. He warned Pam to keep to the house for a day or two, until the lynxes were either killed or driven away from the neighbourhood, and then he was gone.

“It is dreadful to have him go like that, for I know he is badly hurt, and he saved my life twice over. If I had escaped the lynx, I certainly should have perished in the snow, it is so bewildering.” Pam was distinctly tearful, for she was shaken by the nerve-wracking experience she had gone through.

“Fancy Mose Paget turning out like that!” cried Sophy. “I thought he was bad all through.”

“Even the worst people have streaks of good in places,” answered Pam.

CHAPTER IX

Making the Best of It

Quite a wave of excitement spread over the neighbourhood when the news of Pam's encounter with the lynxes got abroad. Hunting parties were organized, and enthusiastic young men spent nights of watching in the forest. When Nathan Gittins had three sheep mauled the excitement grew to fever heat, everything else was let slide, and the district rose as one man to rid the place of such a serious menace to property.

During these days neither Pam nor Sophy went beyond the few cleared fields surrounding Ripple. Kindly neighbours visited them at intervals of every two or three days to see that they wanted for nothing, bring their mail, and take letters to post for them. The Doctor rode in that direction when he had patients anywhere near, and Don showed a brotherly devotion that set up some private wonders in the mind of Sophy. Of course he had always been kind to her, and better than most brothers; but she argued to herself that his conduct now was not according to nature, and she was shrewd enough to guess that she was not the chief reason of his many journeys across the forest from his father's house at The Corner. The Doctor lived at The Corner because it was the middle of everything; and although it appeared to be misnamed, it had really been so called because it stood at the angle or corner of the hill, just where the creek went tearing down through a wooded defile to join the river a little below Hunt's Crossing.

At last the patience and perseverance of the hunters were rewarded, and both of the great cats were killed. The dwellers at the lone farms lived in peace after that, and children were able to go to school again. The snow was thick in the forest now, and it was owing to their footmarks that the wily animals had been tracked to their doom.

The day after the second lynx was killed a party of men, with Don Grierson at their head, arrived at Ripple to bank the sides of the house with snow. Pam enquired in a rather scared fashion of Sophy how much she would be expected to pay for the work, but Sophy assured her that there would be no charge. She might if she liked give them hot coffee all round when the work was finished, but nothing else was either expected or desired.

"Coffee and cakes it shall be, then!" exclaimed Pam, commencing to roll her

sleeves above her elbows. "I shall have to make the cakes, though, for we have scarcely any in the house. I can manage it if I make haste."

"Make soda-biscuit, that is the quickest," said Sophy. "I will make up the fire for you, and I can bring the things for you and wait upon you. No, they won't want you to help; it is hardly work for girls, and there are enough of them to do the work comfortably. I see Nathan Gittins is there, but I don't think Mose Paget is among the lot. I wonder whether he is better yet?"

"Is he ill? I had not heard." Pam did not pause in her work, she was in too much of a hurry for that; but she looked at Sophy with considerable interest and some anxiety. She was remembering that she owed her life twice over to the ragged, down-at-heel Mose Paget, who had the reputation of being the very laziest man in the township.

"Mrs. Buckle told me that he was bad; that was when she was here the day before yesterday. But of course she is such a kindly old soul that she would say he was ill, even if it was only a lazy fit that was keeping him from work."

There was the sound of a crash outside at this minute, and Pam cried out in alarm. But Sophy, who ran out to see what was the matter, came back to say that it was nothing of great importance, only Don, who had been on a ladder banking the snow, had taken a header into the drift he was helping to pile higher. He was cut rather badly on the cheek, for he had fallen on a shovel, and he came in to have his wound washed and bandaged. Sophy cried out in dismay then, and she turned so white that it was Pam who left her cake-making and ran to offer first aid.

"No, the sight of a cut does not frighten me very much," she laughed, as she dabbed the cut with a handkerchief dipped in warm water. "I have three brothers, you see, so I have served an apprenticeship in looking after cuts and hurts of all sorts."

"It is a great pity that Mose Paget did not let you look after his hurts a bit that time when the lynx clawed him." Don winced as her hand came down rather heavily on the wound, but she was too startled by what he had said to notice that she had hurt him.

"Is Mose ill from his wounds, and is your father looking after him?" Her eyes were anxious now, for she was in a measure responsible, or that was how she felt.

"Mose has gone off to Fredericton, and he was going from there to St. John, so Reggie Furness said this morning. Reggie is half-brother to Mose, you know — a poor half-starved kid, who does chores for Miss Gittins to earn his food. He told me this morning that Mose was real bad from his hurts, and I guessed it was largely his own fault for not keeping them clean."

“We ought to have made him get them washed!” cried Pam in acute distress. “He was so careful to clean the wounds of the dog, but he would not hear of our doing anything for himself.”

“It was downright pig-headedness on his part; but he is like that, and it is of no use to worry about it,” said Don, trying to put the best face on the matter that he could.

Later on, when all the men came in and were gathered about the stove, drinking coffee and eating the soda-biscuits hot from the oven, the talk turned again to Mose Paget, and what his step-brother had said of his condition.

“It would not be so serious if he had been better nourished and a cleaner living man,” said Nathan Gittins, his voice sounding mumbled by reason of his mouth being full of soda-biscuit. “But a whisky-drinking, half-starved chap like that hasn’t a chance when it comes to a case of blood-poisoning.”

“It is all my fault!” Pam’s voice was full of self-reproach. “I ought to have insisted on his taking proper care. He saved my life twice on that dreadful day, and I just let him alone when I might have looked after him.”

“I should rather like to see the person who could make Mose Paget do anything he did not want to do!” exclaimed Nathan with a great laugh, which was promptly echoed by the other men. Then they proceeded to tell Pam stories about the doings of Mose Paget, whose father had been a mighty hunter, and had lost his life in an encounter with a bear.

“Mose has got courage of a sort,” said one man, between bites of hot biscuit. “To me he always seems a good sort spoiled in the making. There is what would have made a decent man, only so much laziness and drunkenness is down underneath that it keeps coming up and spoiling everything, don’t you see.”

The other men nodded in perfect accord with this pronouncement; then the talk veered to other things — the latest news from Europe, the chances of an extra severe winter, and the possibilities of grain-farming out west. But Pam, darting to and fro waiting on these guests of hers who had come to help her that day, kept repeating to herself that Mose had twice saved her life in one day, and so deserved her warmest gratitude.

She went out later to see the effect of the snow-banking, and cried out in dismay at the unsightly appearance of the house, which looked more like a cutting by the side of a dug-out railway than anything.

“It is so dirty to look at!” she complained in confidence to Sophy, who had followed her out.

“It will be all right next time it snows,” Sophy answered. “It is the treading on it and the shovelling that make it look dirty. The frost will not get in so easily, and a banked-up house is so much warmer than one that is not banked. I think

we ought to sleep downstairs at night now, because of the stove. If you do not like to use your grandfather's room, we might put a bed in the best sitting-room."

"We might use his room, then it would be aired if he should come back suddenly," Pam replied, then immediately thought how disastrous it would be for him to come back with the responsibility of Sam Buckle's death hanging over him.

Sophy made no answer. She had tact and sympathy, and was too fond of Pam to say or do anything which might add to the burden of her endurance.

There was a slow monotony about the days now, and the nights were so long that some mornings it seemed as if the day would never dawn. The outside work was very little now, for, acting on the advice of Nathan Gittins, Pam had sold the sheep when the first snow came. It was not wise to keep sheep through the winter in this forest district. If the weather was very severe the wolves always gathered in bands, and a sheepfold, however well protected, would offer no serious obstacles to them. The pigs were also reduced in number, those that were left having comfortable quarters at the end of the barn. The cow was in the barn for a permanency during this bad weather, and the rooster with half a dozen hens spent languid days in picking up crumbs at the door of the house, or standing idly on one leg in the sunshine when there was any.

The money from the sale of the pigs had been lodged with the storekeeper at The Corner. That was Sophy's wisdom. The storekeeper had two prices for everything, one rather high for the people who wanted credit, the other very reasonable indeed for the people who were able to lodge money with him at the beginning of the winter. The difference would mean the saving of many dollars at the end of the winter. As she was there to guard the interests of her grandfather, Pam felt justified in spending so much of his money on necessaries. The money she was to receive for the twenty acres of lumber would be banked for her grandfather's use should he come back to need it. Mrs. Buckle would not take back the twenty dollars she had lent to Pam to meet the needs of the old man if he should return, and that money was kept in the house to be handy if required.

Pam spent laborious hours in the barn, sawing wood to keep the stoves going. Never had she realized what a lot of wood one stove could consume in twelve or fifteen hours, and when it became necessary to have a fire at night also, wood-cutting bade fair to become her sole occupation. But it was fine, healthy work, and it sent her to bed so tired that she slept without dreams until morning, and that was surely worth while, considering the unprotected condition of herself and Sophy.

It had been snowing for two days without stopping — not a raging blizzard, but a steady downfall, which had piled a thick layer of the most dazzling white all over the banked-up house, and had weighed down the forest trees until the air was filled with the creaking, groaning, and snapping of straining branches.

“Will anyone ever come near us again, do you expect? And were you ever shut up in such a fashion before?” demanded Pam, as they sat down to breakfast on the third morning of their isolation.

“I have had it worse than this,” Sophy answered. She was looking radiantly content this morning. It was mail-day, and there would probably be a letter for her from George Lester, who was serving in the Mounted Police out in the wild Skeena country.

“Worse?” Pam’s eyebrows went up. To her it did not seem possible that there could be anything worse than this white imprisonment, walled in on every side, and with the silent but persistent fall of snow.

Sophy laughed, and nodded. “Two years ago I had to go over and keep house for Aunt Marion while she went to Europe. She lives ever so far from here, right away in the beech wood district beyond Selkirk. Her husband, Uncle Horace, had to go to the town for stores. It came on to snow as it has been doing these last two days, and he could not get back, and I was alone with Leo and Winnie, the two children. Leo was ten, and Winnie six. The worst of it was, our stores were nearly out. We had so little kerosene that we had to creep to bed when it got dark, and stay there until daylight came again. We had no sugar, the flour was almost out, and it was nearly a week before anyone could get through to help us.”

“What did you do?” gasped Pam.

“Oh, the best we could. We told each other things. I taught the children how to spell, and we recited the multiplication table every day. Their father said their education had taken great strides by the time he came home. It was just a question of making the best of it, and not worrying. Of course, it was horrid being short of provisions, but we had potatoes, a pail of lard, and some bacon, so we might have been worse off.”

“Sophy, you are one of the world’s splendid women, and I am just proud to know you!” Pam sprang up from her seat as she spoke, and swept Sophy a low bow. They were both laughing over her exaggerated deference when Don came gliding out from the forest on snow-shoes, and they rushed to the door to give him a welcome.

“I tried to get here last night, but the strap of my shoe broke, and as I sank in over my knees, I knew that it was not safe to try.” Don was modestly apologetic, but Sophy cried out in horror that he should have even thought of risking his life

in such a fashion.

“Father was out,” said Don. “He was called to a woman who was very ill on the other side of the Ridge. He did not get home until dawn this morning, and then Nathan Gittins came for him to go over to their place and have a look at that boy, Reggie Furness. Nearly starved the poor kid has been, I should fancy, since Mose Paget has been away. He has been living on in their shack alone — ‘doing for himself’ he called it; ‘doing without’ would be a better way of expressing it, I fancy. He fainted whilst he was doing chores at Gittins’ place yesterday, and Galena put him to bed there. He didn’t get better as she hoped, and was off his head a good bit in the night, and she was so scared about him that she sent Nathan to get Father first thing this morning.”

“When is Mose coming back?” asked Sophy, who was making fresh coffee for her brother, whilst Pam fried bacon at the stove.

“When he is better, I suppose,” replied Don. “He has had a near squeak for his life, I should fancy, and it will take him a little while to get over it. Reggie will be all right now he is with the Gittins, and Galena will not let him go until Mose comes home. She is real kind-hearted, only I always find that a little of her goes a long way; but she means all right, and that is the chief thing. Here is your letter, sis, and such a fat one! An industrious fellow is George, though it beats me what he can find to say!”

Sophy took the letter with a look of positive rapture on her face, and retired to the bedroom, where the fire was not yet out, to read it in peace. This was just what Don wanted, and had counted upon. He liked to talk to Pam best when no one else was by. But this morning she was abstracted and rather dull, a wonderful thing for her. Don thought perhaps it was because there were no letters for her, and he hastened to cheer her by saying he did not believe the English mail was in, for they had said at the post office that no European letters had been received.

“I was not thinking of letters,” replied Pam, and her smile was rather wan. “Mother may not write this mail — she has not much time, you know. Indeed, I always used to write her letters for her, and I think she must miss me so dreadfully at the business, for she always hated writing. I am feeling so bad about that poor Reggie Furness. I have never seen him, but I am constantly hearing about him, and in a way I am responsible for his having been left in such a plight. If I had only insisted on cleansing his brother’s wounds, they would not have done so badly, and then the poor boy would not have been left to such hardship.”

“Why not go a bit farther back when you are at it?” said Don impatiently. “If Mose had only been a clean-living fellow, he might not have been so susceptible

to blood-poisoning. If only he had had a pleasanter manner he would have accepted your offer of water and washed his hurts himself. Oh, I have no patience with all the sentimental sympathy that is wasted on that miserable pair!”

“All the same, you need not allow it to colour all your behaviour when you appear in polite society,” remarked Pam demurely, whereat Don glared at her in downright anger for a moment. Then they both burst out laughing, and the air cleared at once. He offered to teach her to walk on snow-shoes, and Pam, delighted at the prospect of getting out of doors, ran to wrap up warmly.

Sophy came too, and for the next two hours there was riotous fun on the open space before the house. The snow was so soft that every spill meant floundering in billowy clouds of white dust. Pam went down so many times that at the end of the lesson she declared herself tired out. But she had learned to stand erect, to pass one foot before the other, and then to poise herself properly for the next step, so that she was fairly well over the worst drudgery of learning to walk on snow-shoes.

“The snow will pack in a few days, then you will get on fine!” said Don, who was proud of his pupil.

“Pack? Do you mean that it will go away?” she asked with a bewildered air.

“It won’t go away under normal conditions before March or April. By packing, we mean settling down in a close and firm mass. After a few weeks it gets so hard anyone can walk on it without sinking in, even if he has no snow-shoes. That is when life begins to get worth living in these parts. We have parties nearly every night, and we contrive to see more of each other than can be managed in all the rest of the year.” Don found himself growing almost eloquent under the spell of Pam’s interested face, and he launched into a vigorous account of the pleasures of winter parties that lasted until he had to go.

“Your brother must think that I am made of queer stuff if he imagines that I am going here and there enjoying myself this winter,” said Pam, when Don had gone and the two girls were busy in the house again.

“I do not see that there is anything to prevent you from going round and seeing folks when you have the chance,” Sophy answered, looking a little surprised, for she knew what a social person Pam was, and she could not understand the reason of her proposed abstinence from party-going.

“Do you think that people would care to have me at their parties when they all know that my grandfather will have to stand his trial for something that is next door to murder when he is found?” Pam’s tone was very bitter. She had been musing a great deal during these days of isolation, and the result was that deep down in her heart she was getting absolutely scared at the thought of going about and seeing people. Going to church at The Corner, once a fortnight, was

bad enough, but then it was possible to sit at the back and to leave early. Church-going could not be called social intercourse either, and the less she had to do with her neighbours while she was under a cloud the better.

But Sophy only laughed, and putting her hands on Pam's shoulders gave her a gentle shake.

“As if anyone thought the worse of you for a thing you cannot help! Besides, we all want to make much of you for the dear, plucky way in which you have tackled a difficult situation. You will have to find a better excuse than that if you want to be unsociable!”

CHAPTER X

Someone's Desperate Plight

The weeks of winter wore on, and Christmas passed in quite a whirl of hard work and social activities. There were packing bees, when everyone worked with perspiring energy at packing apples in boxes and barrels for sending to the cities. Pam liked that work; the apples reminded her of summer, and they linked her up with warmth and sunshine. There were also bees for making lard, but they were not so interesting. The fat portions of several pigs were cut into small squares, and boiled down in great pans, then strained. It was greasy, horrid work, but, like other unpleasant tasks, it was very necessary, and, as no one else seemed to mind the grease, Pam decided that it was of no use for her to make a fuss about it either.

Christmas brought the most acute home-sickness for Pam, who had never before been away from her family at the great festival. They wanted her rather badly, too, which fact did but add to her pain. Greg was ill with rheumatic fever — very ill, her mother wrote. Pam knew that the doctor's bill for Muriel's illness was not all paid off yet, so it was ghastly to think of another being piled on to it. Mrs. Walsh was in great trouble about Pam, and she wrote that as soon as Greg was able to leave his bed Jack would travel to New Brunswick to help her. It was this last piece of information that gave Pam the courage to wear a smiling face, and to hold her own at the gatherings with which the forest-dwellers beguiled the winter nights.

It had been difficult to travel the forest ways after dark in the summer-time and in the fall. Now, with snow on the ground and the trees bare of leaves, it made little difference, while the moonlight nights were almost as light as the days. Don Grierson had a sleigh with fur robes made from the skins of animals he had shot himself — quite a luxurious vehicle — and he would come driving along after dark to take Sophy and Pam out to the various gatherings. The dog would be left to guard the house, and the two went away feeling certain that all would be right until they came back again.

The new year came in with raging storms, and these were followed at the middle of the month by still colder weather, such cold as Pam had never even dreamed of before. Then people began to talk of having heard wolves howling round the lone farms at night. The children were not allowed to go to school

alone, and men traversing the forest after dark carried fire-arms.

Even Pam carried an ancient but useful fowling-piece when she walked the forest ways. She had learned to shoot, and she could manage to hit the thing she aimed at. One day she contrived to shoot a hare, and although she cried over it all the way home, she had to admit that it was uncommonly good eating, and made a most agreeable change in their usual food. Besides, as Sophy pointed out, the creature would probably have fallen a victim to a wolf or a fox, or it might have perished miserably of starvation.

“I will take the next hare I shoot to Mrs. Buckle; she is not very well, Amanda told me.” Pam rose from her seat at table with largely increased courage and determination; if there was a worse fate for hares than being shot she might as well kill a few and help her neighbour.

“You had better go soon, it gets dark so early. I can do these dishes; in fact, I shall be glad to move about a little, for I am nearly frozen with sitting still.” Sophy shivered, for the day though bright was intensely cold.

“I will be off at once, then.” Pam was wriggling into her coat with all speed. “If I get anything I shall go straight to Mrs. Buckle before coming back. Have you any message for her?”

“You can tell her that I have nearly finished mending those sheets, and when they are done I will start at Amanda’s frock right away.” Sophy was darting to and fro as she talked, intent on getting the noonday meal cleared and the dishes washed, but she came out of the door to watch Pam start, and to beg her to be careful with the gun, which had an uncomfortable trick of kicking in unaccustomed hands.

Pam secured her hare without much trouble, and walking briskly across the cleared fields and over the boundary line, where the broken fence would never be repaired again, she walked in upon Mrs. Buckle and bestowed the hare which had fallen to her gun. She delivered the message also, and then turned back towards Ripple, quickening her steps a little, for it was later than she had intended to be, and there were the “chores” waiting to be done before dark.

She had almost reached the fence again when she saw a man moving towards her along the trail; and her heart gave a great bound as she recognized the slouching figure of Mose Paget. She had not seen him since the day when he saved her life twice over, and now, seeing that he looked as if he were going to avoid her by turning into a cross-trail, she shouted to him to stop, and then ran to catch him up.

“Are you better?” she asked a trifle breathlessly. She was annoyed at the man’s rudeness in turning away when she wanted to speak to him, but that was just as he always treated people, Sophy had told her, and there was nothing to be

done save to ignore his rudeness as much as possible.

“Yes, thank you, Miss,” he replied, and then his hand went with a grudging motion towards his cap, and he lingered awkwardly as if waiting to see if she had any more to say to him.

“I was so very sorry to hear that you had been ill from the wounds you got when you came to my help that day.” Pam’s colour was coming and going; she felt that the man did not want to talk to her, and yet she positively had to do something to let him know she was not ungrateful.

He shifted from one foot to the other in an uneasy manner.

“It ain’t nothing to worry about, Miss,” he said. “The Doctor told me straight that I had only myself to thank for being so bad, and I suppose he ought to know if anyone did. He was honest about it, too, and said just what he thought. It would not have been much loss to anyone if I had gone under, but I pulled through, as you see.”

“It would have been a very lasting regret to me,” said Pam with crushing dignity. Then, because she did not know what to say, she asked if Reggie were better, although Mrs. Buckle had told her only half an hour ago that the boy was doing his work as usual.

“He is quite well again now, thank you, Miss,” said Mose. He moved as if to go on, hesitated, stopped, then lowering his voice to a cautious undertone, although probably there was no one within half a mile of them, he said, “Do you know that the old man has been seen?”

“Grandfather, do you mean?” cried Pam, and the colour ebbed out of her face, leaving her cheeks like ashes.

Mose Paget nodded, gave her a swift but furtive glance, and then his gaze dropped to the ground.

“Where?” she cried. Her tone was imperious now; the man seemed so unwilling to speak, but know she must.

“I ran up against a fellow in St. John who knew him. He said that he had seen the old man at work in a lumber camp away in a back creek of the Miramichi River.”

“Was the man quite sure?” Pam forced the question from her parched lips, while her heart beat with sledge-hammer force.

“I don’t see how he could have been mistaken,” replied Mose. “The fellow knew Wrack as well as I do. He said the old man did not seem to want to be talked to, which was natural under the circumstances. You need not look so scared, Miss; the man wouldn’t give him away to the police — we none of us would do that. I shouldn’t have told you, only I thought you would be glad to know the poor old man was alive.”

Pam nodded, for she could not speak. She felt nearly choked, and a dreadful doubt had crept into her mind as to whether she was glad that her grandfather was alive. She had sought tirelessly for his dead body, and if she had found it she would have grieved for him, cut off untimely, as it seemed to her. In such a case there would have been an end of her fear; but now she would know no peace. She would always be fearing that the police would find him, and that he would have to stand his trial for being the cause of Sam Buckle's death.

"We would not betray him to the police," said Mose again in a tone more emphatic than before. "It is his turn to-day, it might be ours to-morrow, and I take it that we should do as we would be done by. Good day, Miss!"

Lifting his cap he turned away abruptly and walked off, and Pam stood staring after him with fearful dismay in her heart. To be linked even in seeming with a man of this sort was dreadful. He would not betray her grandfather to the police, because he might be in fear of being betrayed himself another day. Her grandfather would be regarded as a "pal" by this down-at-heels tramp. Oh, it was hateful! She stood with clenched hands, staring at the trail by which the man had disappeared, until warned by the cold that it was not wise to linger. As she went her way home she debated with herself as to whether she would tell Sophy, but she shrank in her hurt pride from the humiliation of such a confession, and so decided that for the present she would keep the knowledge to herself.

Reaching Ripple, she had to hurry over the evening "chores", for she had lingered longer with Mrs. Buckle than she should have done, and the meeting with Mose on the way home had, of course, made her later still. She looked so white and pinched when she came indoors to supper that Sophy cried out in dismay at her appearance, thinking she must be ill.

"I am tired, that is all. We will go to bed early to-night," Pam answered, and strove to hide her aching heart under a brave show of good spirits, until she could lie down and shut her eyes on her misery.

Sophy nodded, and said no more. She supposed that Pam was home-sick; she understood the symptoms now, and never bothered or fussed when the attack was extra severe. Pam's conscience was a bit troubled about the deception, for it was like defrauding Sophy of what it was her right to know, to hide this news of the old man having been seen and recognized; but she could not bring herself to talk of it.

They were getting to bed in the room which had been Wrack Peveril's when they were startled by a hideous howling all round the house.

"What is it?" asked Pam, her eyes wide with alarm. The dog was raging and tearing round the kitchen, and barking fit to burst itself.

"Wolves!" murmured Sophy, and she looked so badly scared that Pam rallied

her own courage, and began to make fun of her.

“Suppose there are wolves outside, they cannot get inside, so what does it matter? Of course, the poor dear old dog may have nervous breakdown from too much barking, but otherwise I can’t see that we are to be much the worse.”

“The noise is so weird. A wolf’s howl always does get on my nerves,” faltered Sophy, who was white and trembling from fright.

Pam, who had been undressing, now began to put on her garments again with quick, determined fingers.

“What are you going to do?” cried Sophy in dismay. “You are surely, surely not going out of doors? Why, Pam, it would not be safe!”

“It would be rather silly to go out, seeing that there is nothing to be gained by it,” said Pam. “I am not going out, but I am going upstairs to see if I can get a shot at the creatures. Your brother cleaned that rifle of Grandfather’s last week, and I might be able to kill one of those singing beasties yonder; and just think how well it would sound in one of my letters home!”

Sophy shivered, but uttered no further protest. At the worst Pam would only catch a cold, and if she stopped the howling by scaring the wolves away, she would have accomplished something well worth doing. She heard Pam go upstairs, heard her tramping to and fro on the bare floors; there was silence for a little, then came another burst of wolf music. A shot rang out, and shortly after Pam came down, saying that she believed she had driven the wolves away. The two went to bed then, sleeping without disturbance until morning.

A brilliant day it was, with blazing sun and sparkling frost. The Doctor drove up soon after breakfast, and for a wonder he had Mrs. Grierson with him. They wanted to know if Pam and Sophy would like to go to a lard-making bee at Hunt’s Crossing that night. Mindful of the howling of the wolves last night, both Pam and Sophy declared that they would rather be at home, so Mrs. Grierson was given a message for Don, telling him not to come, as they had no fancy for lard-making just then.

The Doctor said a quiet word to Pam as he was going away.

“Have you heard the rumour there is going round just now that your grandfather has been seen at work in a lumber camp on the Miramichi?”

“Yes, Mose Paget told me yesterday,” faltered Pam; and then she added in an outburst of candour: “But I feel so bad about it. Why has he never sent to see how it fares with his home? Why has he never come back for the money he left behind? It was not much, but every little helps when a man has to earn his daily bread. I have thought about it and thought about it until I begin to wonder whether the person might not be mistaken, and if the man he saw was not Grandfather at all.”

Dr. Grierson nodded thoughtfully.

“That was just my impression,” he agreed. “Still, seeing that the fellow had nothing to gain by setting the story afloat, there seems no reason beyond actual fact why he should have done so. There is nothing to be done that I can see, except to await developments. If it is not true, it is still very bothering that the rumour should have been started, because it puts the assumption of the old man’s death farther away. I mean that supposing he is not heard of again, you will have to take the date at which this man says he saw him at the lumber camp as the last time he was seen alive. That is three months later, don’t you see?”

Pam did see, and the seeing brought no comfort with it. She could not tell the Doctor that she was deadly ashamed of being related to her own grandfather; she could not explain that the disgrace and humiliation that had come to her were almost too hard to be borne.

For the remainder of the day she chopped and sawed wood with great vigour, working off the depression which threatened to break her down. She had a sick longing for someone of her own to turn to, her mother or Jack. As a matter of fact, she had never been in the habit of leaning on her mother, and Jack was mostly sitting in judgment upon her, so that the two had not been greatly in sympathy in those old days, which in retrospect looked so sheltered and so dear. Not a word had she said to Sophy as yet about her grandfather having been seen, and she did not believe that the Doctor had spoken of it either. By and by she would tell Sophy — indeed, it would be necessary for her to be warned, as the old man might come home when he thought the search for him had died down somewhat.

Very silent and absorbed was Pam that evening, and Sophy, thinking that she was tired, suggested that they should go to bed early. There was no probability of visitors to-night, everyone would be gone to the lard-making frolic at Hunt’s Crossing. There was no reason at all why they should sit up if they would be more comfortable in bed. When Sophy proposed it Pam rose and stretched her arms above her head, declaring that there was nothing that she would like better.

It was at that moment that the howl of a wolf sounded somewhere near the house, and Pam’s sleepiness vanished as if it had never been.

“Those wretched creatures round the place again?” she cried. “The uncanny beasts! I thought I had given them something to remember me by last night. We won’t go to bed yet awhile, for I want to see if I can’t bag one. If they come as close to the place as they did last night I ought to be able to manage it.”

“You will get so cold!” objected Sophy.

“I will put my thick coat on. Honestly, I can’t stand that noise, and I am going to end it somehow or know the reason why. Your mother said it was the

smell of the pigs that attracted them. But we cannot afford to get rid of our pigs, so the only thing is to show the wolves that this is not a healthy neighbourhood.”

Taking the gun, Pam went upstairs into the cold, unused bedrooms. Putting her lamp on the table of the chamber in which she had slept on first coming to Ripple, she passed into the next room, and, shutting the door behind her, groped her way across the floor until she reached the window. Softly opening the casement she peered out into the night. It was most intensely cold. There was no moon, but the stars shone with a hard brilliance, and the soft radiance of the snow made even distant objects visible. Soon a long-drawn howl broke the stillness, and this was promptly answered by another and yet another. The wolves seemed to be all round the place, but Pam realized that they were by no means close, and she was just going to draw in her head because of the stinging quality of the cold when she caught sight of a figure gliding in and out among the trees, which on that side grew quite close to the house.

Her heart beat violently. Who was it that lurked yonder among the trees instead of openly approaching the house? Was it her grandfather, who, pressed by his necessities, had found his way back to his home? Her sense of disgrace slipped from her as if it had never been. If her grandfather was out there among the trees, then she must do her best to induce him to come in and be sheltered from the cold. He would be quite safe for that one night at least. He might even lie hidden for days in that lone place without any outsider being the wiser.

“Grandfather!” she called. “Grandfather, is it you? Come to the door, and I will run downstairs and let you in. It is quite safe.”

There was no answer to this, only to her straining eyes it seemed that the figure gliding in and out among the trees waved to her, then sank farther back into the shadows, becoming an indistinguishable blur in the gloom.

“Grandfather, don’t be afraid, you will be quite safe!” she called again, and not waiting this time to get an answer she shut the window, and, groping her way to the door of the next room, picked up the lamp and hurried down the stairs.

Sophy met her at the bottom wearing an anxious look.

“Pam, what is the matter? I heard your voice and I came to see if you wanted me.”

“It is Grandfather out there in the cold, and I am trying to get him inside. Think of it, Sophy, an old man like that and wandering without shelter on such a night!”

“Your grandfather?” cried Sophy in amazement. “Pam, are you sure? Just think, it is months ago since he was heard of, and we have thought him dead.”

Pam groaned. If only she had told Sophy when she had heard the rumour! It was so senseless to keep a thing like that to herself.

“He is not dead, he has been seen; the knowledge is all over the place, but I was ashamed and silly and I would not tell you. Please forgive me, dear, and help me all you can.” Pam was fumbling with the fastening of the door as she spoke. She was so clumsy in her anxiety and distress that she could not get it unfastened, and Sophy came to her help.

“Pam, you should have told me. I cannot help you if I do not know,” she said in her quiet way, and that was all the reproach that Pam ever heard from her. A heaven-sent friend for such a time of trouble!

The door was open at last, and Pam stood on the threshold peering out at the night. The lamp which Sophy was holding in the background threw a shaft of light that sharply outlined her figure, making its anxious pose as plain as spoken words.

“Grandfather, where are you?” Breathlessly Pam waited for the answer to her call. But none came, only presently the howl of a wolf sounded much nearer than before. This was answered from another direction. Then all was silent again. The two girls stood on the threshold, the keen cold wrapping them round. Then suddenly Pam remembered that Sophy had only her indoor garments on and might take a severe chill. “Go, dear, put a coat on and a muffler; cover your head up or you will have bad toothache to-morrow,” she said urgently; adding, as if by an afterthought: “I am going over to those trees yonder to see if I can find the poor old man and bring him into the house.”

“No, you do not, unless I come too,” burst out Sophy, with an explosive vigour that showed how dead in earnest she was. “If you will not wait until I can get a cloak I will come just as I am.”

“I will wait, only make haste.” Pam jerked the words out, for she was feeling nearly desperate. She did not dare let the dog out, although the creature was raging to and fro in the inner room. She was afraid that it would go in pursuit of the wolves and be torn to pieces by them.

What a long time Sophy was! Pam felt that she could not wait another minute, especially as a long-drawn howl close at hand told her that the unpleasant beasts were getting much nearer to the house. Then Sophy came out of the inner room wrapped to the eyes, and holding the dog by her handkerchief slipped through its collar.

“Don’t let it loose, we shall never get it back again to-night,” said Pam, and then she stepped out on to the snow, closely followed by Sophy and the dog, which strained and whimpered in its efforts to get free.

“Grandfather, it is I, Pam Walsh! There is nothing to fear; you can come into the house, at least for to-night!” Pam sent her voice out in a reassuring shout which must have carried far in that lone place. But there was no reply, although

they lingered long, standing in the shadow of the trees and hearing the howling of the wolves in the distance.

“What is that?” whispered Sophy sharply, and Pam’s heart gave a sudden leap of dread. It was a faint cry for help that had reached their ears, and at the sound the dog struggled to be free, tugging and tugging at the lead just as if it understood.

“Come along, he is over there. I expect he has fallen and has hurt himself,” cried Pam, dashing across the snow at a great rate, followed by Sophy and the dog.

“Help! Help!” The cry was louder and more urgent now. The person in trouble had a wavering, cracked voice like an old man’s, and there was not a shadow of doubt in the mind of either girl that it was Wrack Peveril who was calling for help. Why he should have been so close to the place and then have gone away again puzzled Pam, but she put it down to his natural fear of a police trap and his ignorance of what kind of girl his granddaughter really was. They went on and on, answering the call, searching and searching, yet never finding what they looked for. Then suddenly they had an awful scare, for there came a scurrying rush of feet, and an animal of some kind bounded past them, followed by some four or five wolves in full cry. Pam lifted her rifle and fired wildly, as there was no time to take aim, and at that moment the dog wrenched itself free from Sophy’s grasp and tore away in mad pursuit.

“What was it, oh, what was it?” cried Pam.

“A young moose, I expect,” answered Sophy. Then she took hold of Pam, saying urgently: “Come home, dear, we can do no good here!”

CHAPTER XI

Who was It?

Neither Pam nor Sophy had realized how far away they had wandered, when they followed that faint cry for help. Indeed, just at the first Pam could not think where they were, or which direction they ought to take to find the house. The night was clouding over, the fine brilliance was gone, and a chill wind moaned through the leafless trees.

The dog had not come back. Pam had whistled and called until she was tired. Then she turned to help Sophy back, blaming herself bitterly because she had followed that will-o'-the-wisp call for help, which had given them such a fruitless chase.

“Ah!” The ejaculation was forced from Sophy as her foot slipped on an upstanding root, and she went down with a crash.

“You poor thing! Oh, you poor thing!” cried Pam, who was more remorseful than before.

“It was fearfully clumsy of me, and now I have hurt my foot. Pam, whatever shall we do?” There was tragic dismay in Sophy’s tone, and it found its echo in the heart of Pam, in whose ears the howling of the wolves seemed to be still sounding.

“I will get you home somehow, if I have to carry you on my back,” she cried valiantly. It seemed to be half the battle to be brave outwardly, and indeed the sound of her own voice speaking cheerfully took away a lot of her secret fear.

“I am quite sure that you cannot carry me, for I am as big as you, and heavier,” said Sophy, and Pam knew this was true, for they had weighed each other only two days before, when they were using the big scales that were in the barn. “Perhaps I could hop on one foot like a robin if you held me up.”

“I will hold you,” replied Pam. “Come along, it is much too chilly to linger out here. I don’t want to be obliged to render first aid for frost-bite. It will be quite as much as I can do to doctor your hurt foot. I think it is going to snow again. Ah, that was a flake I felt on my face! Sophy, we must make haste, no matter how it hurts you, dear! I can’t find my way in the falling snow, it bewilders me so dreadfully, and to lose our way means that we must perish miserably almost within sight of home.”

“Clutch me tightly, and don’t take any notice if I groan,” muttered Sophy,

who was standing on one foot now, and steeling her courage to endure. "I am not made of heroic stuff, but we have to get home, as you say, no matter at what cost!"

A short distance was traversed: to Sophy it seemed like miles. She had uttered no sound of pain, but what it cost her to put her hurt foot to the ground no one but herself could know. But it was death to linger, and pain did not count when compared with the greater terrors of the forest at night. Then Pam called out in glad relief that she could see the house, Sophy gathered up her courage to endure a little longer, and they pressed forward at the best pace they could make.

"There is a light in our room; did we leave one there?" asked Pam in a bewildered tone as she half-led, half-carried Sophy the remaining distance to the door.

"I am sure that I did not, for I went into the room in the dark; at least, there was no light except the glimmer from the stove."

"Then Grandfather has come home," announced Pam. "Unless, indeed, the stove has somehow contrived to set the place on fire."

"Go and see, go and see!" cried Sophy, wrenching herself free from Pam's supporting grip, and pushing her forward. "Don't trouble about me, I can manage. Hurry, Pam, hurry, or the house may be burned down, and think how helpless we are!"

"I am not helpless, and I don't think it is fire, it doesn't flicker. Most likely it is Grandfather. Oh, I do hope that he will be nice to us!" Pam darted ahead as she spoke, and opening the door burst with impetuous haste into the living-room. This appeared to be exactly as they had left, it. The lamp was standing on the table, the stove was sending out a cheerful glow, and the place was as cosy and comfortable as any home could be. One rapid glance round Pam gave, then pushed open the door into the best sitting-room. All was dark here, but she knew her way too well to stumble over the furniture, and crossing the floor with a brisk, determined tread, she pushed open the door of the inner room, which they had been using as a bedroom.

The place was not on fire. Her first glance told her that. Her second revealed the fact that no one was there; then all at once she realized that someone had been there, someone who had lighted the lamp which stood on the table by the window, and who had then been at the desk in the corner and had wrenched open the lid.

A little inarticulate cry escaped her. She seemed to understand what had happened so well. Her grandfather had doubtless been frightened from his work in the lumber camp when he was recognized, and he had made his way home, hard-pressed perhaps for money. But finding his home occupied, and being

afraid to make himself known to his granddaughter, who was of course a stranger to him, he had hovered about the place, and had beguiled them from the house, luring them away from the place on a false trail. Then he must have hurried home, and, entering the house, have gone straight to the desk in his own room, and pulled it open by force. Great force he must have used, for it was a strong old desk, of the home-made variety, and it would need a powerful wrench to get it open.

A hasty inspection showed her that the money was gone, not only the amount which she had found there when she had opened the desk with her own key, but also the twenty dollars which Mrs. Buckle had given her as a loan, and had refused to take back.

Pam leaned against the rifled desk with a queer mixture of relief and repulsion in her heart. She was thankful that the old man had not stayed to be sheltered and hidden by her. It was humiliating beyond words to have someone belonging to her who was in the unfortunate case of being wanted by the police. It would have been horrid for Sophy to have been mixed up even indirectly with a matter of this sort, seeing that Sophy was going to be married to a member of the mounted police force. The repulsion was because, try hard as she might, Pam could not fight down a bitter dislike for the man who would beat another man, however much in the wrong, as poor Sam Buckle had been beaten. It was horrible, it was brutish, and she was ashamed of being descended from an individual with such a cruel and callous nature.

Then she remembered Sophy. Leaving the room as she had found it — open desk, the lamp burning, and everything — she hurried back through the best sitting-room, to find when she reached the living-room that Sophy had crept into the house, and shutting the door, had sunk down on the nearest bench, too exhausted to go any farther.

“The place is not on fire!” shouted Pam in a cheery tone. “So there is no danger of our having to take refuge for the night with the cow and the pigs, or, worse still, of our having to convey ourselves as far as Mrs. Buckle’s for a night’s lodging. But someone has been here while we were hunting for the supposed person in trouble in the forest, and before I attend to that foot of yours, I am going round the house, just to make sure that the someone has really taken himself off again.”

“You must not go alone, I will come with you,” said Sophy, making a valiant attempt to bear yet more suffering without crying out.

“Indeed you will do no such thing!” Pam cried with decision. “If you are equal to any more exertion, just creep a little nearer to the stove, and get a good warm, while I go my rounds. Oh, I am not afraid; I shall take the poker — it is

light and handy, and I could make very good use of it if need arose.”

“I do not doubt it!” murmured Sophy in honest admiration; then clinging to the furniture she crept slowly to the low seat by the stove which Pam had made from the half of an old apple barrel, and sinking on to it, she thankfully gave up her Spartan pose, and did not even try to feel brave any longer.

Pam went back to the bedroom for the other lamp, and made an exhaustive inspection of the room. It would have been difficult for a cat to have remained hidden in places where she searched for a full-grown man, but, as she told herself in a vigorous undertone, in such a case it did not do to take any risks, and she meant to be quite sure that they were alone before she went to sleep. The bedroom inspected, she opened the window, and getting hold of the heavy wooden shutter she dragged it across the window, and slipped the bolt into the socket. They were now as secure as bolts and bars could make them. Carrying the lamp with her, she then inspected the sitting-room, and passed out to the living-room, where Sophy crouched by the stove.

“Pam, the dog has come home, it is scratching at the door.” Sophy’s voice had a distinct sound of tears in it, but this Pam wisely ignored for the present, being much too busy to have time for consolation just then.

“I will let the silly beast in, and I very much hope that it found itself out of the running when it came to chasing wolves. It is valiant enough to attack anything, but it has no sense at all in regard to being beaten,” she remarked, as she crossed the floor, and slipping back the bolt let the dog into the house. The animal jumped about her in an ecstasy of joyfulness at being indoors again. Then it sniffed curiously about, and finally went to the door of the sitting-room and whined to be let in.

“Ah, the wise beast!” cried Pam, with a catch in her breath. “Do you see, it knows that its old master has been here — evidently it thinks he is here still! No, my dear dog, you are not going into that room, and equally you are not going out into the night again. You are going to stay here with Sophy while I go to examine the upper story of this desirable and beautiful residence.”

“Oh, Pam, how frivolous you sound!” cried Sophy in a rather shocked tone. “To hear you, no one would dream of what we had gone through to-night. Oh, I never saw anything more horrible than the wolves chasing that poor moose; I cannot even imagine anything worse, can you?”

“Yes,” — Pam’s face paled a little as she turned to go upstairs — “I can imagine how very much worse it would have been if those wolves had been chasing us. I feel that we were horribly impulsive and indiscreet to go out as we did, and it is a fine thing for us that nothing worse was the result.”

The dog followed her up the stairs, and sniffed round the rooms in an

inquiring fashion. Once it lifted its head as if about to howl, but happening to see the movement, Pam gripped the creature by its collar, shaking it vigorously.

“No, you don’t, not if I know it!” she said sharply. “That poor girl downstairs has had enough to bear by way of nervous strain to-night, without any uproar from you to add to her burden.”

“You are sure that it was your grandfather who came to-night?” Sophy asked later, when her ankle had been bathed and bandaged, and she was lying at peace in bed.

“Yes, about as sure as if I had seen him.” Try as she would, Pam could not keep the scorn from her voice. “He must have come indoors and gone straight to his room, where he wrenched open the desk and took the money we had been keeping there for him.”

“If it had been your grandfather would he not have had a key to the desk?” Sophy stirred a little restlessly as she spoke; it was very disturbing to have a thing of this kind happen, and she thought she would be afraid to be left alone in the house after this, and, as a rule, she was left alone so much.

“He had a key, I suppose, seeing that the desk was locked, but he might have lost it, or he might have left it somewhere else with his baggage, if he had any baggage. A hundred things might have happened to make it necessary for him to break open his own desk in his own house like an ordinary thief. But, Sophy, we have got to keep the affair to ourselves; no one must know about his coming, do you understand?”

“Not even Father?” demanded Sophy, lifting her head from the pillow to stare at Pam, who was undressing, and rather spinning the business out because the stove was burning so well, and there was such a sense of restful leisure in her heart.

“Not even Dr. Grierson.” Pam was very emphatic. “You see, he might drop a chance word or hint of what had happened, without in the least meaning to injure Grandfather, of course, and then the police might get hold of it and follow up the clue. I should imagine it is not so easy to cover one’s tracks in winter as it is in summer; and, Sophy, I believe that I should die with shame if the poor old man were taken and made to stand his trial!”

“Poor Pam!” murmured Sophy in the deepest, truest sympathy; but Pam wriggled her shoulders impatiently by way of expressing her distaste for pity.

“Proud Pam would be nearer the mark,” she said. “I am quite sure that at the bottom it is my private and personal pride which makes me suffer so badly at the mere thought of Grandfather being taken. I never saw him, of course, and I never received any kindness direct from him. Even the money which paid my passage was sent for Jack. The way my mother has talked of him has not made it easy to

feel any strong love for him. Yet I would do anything, and suffer almost anything, rather than give the slightest clue to those whose business it is to find him.”

“Then people must not know that we went out to find him to-night,” said Sophy. She blinked sleepily at the lamp, and was conscious of a rather acute disappointment. It would have made her feel almost like a heroine if she could have talked of that escapade of theirs. She knew very well that she was not made of heroic stuff, and it would have given her a very solid satisfaction to have been able to speak of the wild chase they had witnessed, when the pack of wolves dashed past them at the heels of the moose.

“No, indeed!” Pam was more emphatic than ever. “It was a mad thing to rush out of the house in the night like that. I did not realize what fearful risks we might be running until I saw that poor hunted moose. I did not know moose ever came so near to houses before; I thought they kept entirely to the wild lands.”

“They do usually, but pressed by winter and deep snow they will come right into settled places,” replied Sophy, who was plainly getting drowsy. “I have known them come round the houses at The Corner, and they have even helped themselves to Father’s haystacks when the weather has been very severe.”

“I cannot think what men are made of. I should hate to go moose-hunting!” cried Pam with a shiver.

“Wait until you have tasted moose-meat,” murmured Sophy, and then she drifted into dreamland before she could say any more.

Pam was very wide awake, and she sat for a long time crouched over the stove, her eyes fixed on the glowing embers and her thoughts very busy with the future. She would have to work hard to get some more money ready for her grandfather by the time he should need it. How long would the lot he had taken to-night last him? She had no first-hand knowledge of his habits to guide her. When he had been at home he had been apparently something of a miser, unless, indeed, he had been very, very poor. Of course, he might make that money go for a long time. But she would never feel safe, and she must have some more for him if he needed it. Of course there was the money for the black spruce, but she could not touch that; it was lodged in the bank in trust for her grandfather if he should want it for his trial, and to ask for a portion of it might bring suspicion upon him.

The hopelessness of it all weighed upon her as she sat brooding by the fire. Her grandfather might even choose to sell the house and land, when she would be stranded in a strange country, with only her own exertions and the kindness of friends to help her. She had left home with a brave determination to win a place for her brothers in this land of promise. She had cheerfully faced the hardest and

most laborious work, just because she was holding their inheritance for them, but to-night the question in her mind was as to whether she was really doing anything for her family at all. Ripple belonged to her grandfather, and he was plainly alive and in hiding, so that he was still master, even though he might not be able to show his face in his home; and the rosy future she had planned for the boys and Muriel was dependent on what he might choose to do with his own.

A man in hiding would not be able to make a good bargain if he tried to sell his property, so she told herself, and from her mother's description of her grandfather she could not imagine the old man being willing to let the place go at less than its market value. He would be more likely to give her discretionary powers to do her best with the place, and hand over some portion of the profits as he might need them. She wondered when he would come again, and if she would see him next time. It was a pity that she could not live at Ripple alone, then he would not be afraid to venture. She herself had perfect trust in the fidelity of Sophy, but unless she could see her grandfather and talk to him, she could not make him understand this.

"If only Jack were here what a comfort it would be just now!" Pam murmured the words to herself, then yawned and rose from her seat. It was very late, nearly midnight, and there was much wood-sawing waiting for her tomorrow.

She would write and tell her mother as much as it seemed wise, and, after all, it would not be long to wait now until Jack came. Pam laughed softly to herself at the difference Jack would find in her. Oh, she knew that she had changed; the old carelessness was gone, she was more heedful of consequences than before. She had learned a lot of self-reliance too. Of course she still made blunders, some of them rather ghastly ones too; but then, as she argued, Rome was not built in a day, and she could not expect to learn wisdom all at once, so it was of no use being dismal when she made mistakes.

She crept into bed beside Sophy and quickly fell asleep. Outside the house a wild snowstorm was raging, the wind howled round the lone abode, and presently Pam began to dream that the old man, her grandfather, had come back, and was reproaching her for letting his money be stolen.

"But you came and stole it yourself!" she exclaimed in surprise, and then was awakened by the sound of her own voice. The lamp which she had left burning was going out for want of oil, and the dog was scratching at the door, sure sign that morning had come.

CHAPTER XII

Sugaring

Spring was coming with swift and certain steps. A breath of life was sweeping through the forest, and there was a stir and a movement which quickened the pulses of the forest-dwellers. The snow lay deep on hill and valley, and the cold was more intense than ever, but the days were lengthening, and the sun had more heat in it when it shone at midday.

Pam was casting about for some way to earn money, or at least to save money, for in that isolated region saving often stood for earning, and to go without a thing, or without many things, was equal to a rise in income. It was the store bill which was bothering her now. The deposit at the store was nearly at an end, and in a few weeks she would have to choose between paying ready money and submitting to being charged the credit price for all goods, and that was so high that she hated the thought of it.

It was true she was a Londoner by birth and upbringing, but she was descended from generations of forest-dwellers, and the lore of the woods was somehow bred in the bone. Other people could make a living in the forest, and she would do it too, or perish in the attempt.

“Sophy, did you ever go sugaring?” she asked one evening when she had come in rather late to supper, and was pulling off her heavy boots, groaning a little because she was so stiff and sore from long hours of splitting and sawing firewood.

Sophy was frying flapjacks for supper, and she had to turn one very carefully before she answered.

“Yes,” she said, “I have been several times, but I always fail to see where the fun comes in.”

“Mother used to love sugaring,” Pam remarked in a thoughtful tone as she attacked her second boot.

“I dare say she did.” Sophy turned her flapjack out on to the dish, where it fell with a sputtering hiss. She put another chunk of lard in the pan, and set it on the stove to get hot. “There are sugaring parties most years, and people seem to think it is great fun; but we are not all made alike, and I never can see much pleasure in getting my clothes all messed up, catching bad colds, and working until every bone in my body aches, just for amusement.”

“My dear, to hear you talk anyone would think that you were qualifying for speedy development into a suburban old maid of the most conventional sort,” laughed Pam. “Instead of which, you are making your trousseau for marriage with a man in the most adventurous profession that can be found. Now, I would enjoy a sugaring party more than anything else; really for the fun of it, I mean. But there is solid gain too, is there not? It is the profit side of the question that appeals to me at the present. Do you think I could get up a party?”

“I don’t doubt it,” Sophy gurgled with amused laughter. “Don would give anything for a chance to come, and so, of course, would Nathan Gittins, though I expect they would quarrel a bit over the best mode of procedure. Don can never forget that he has been to college and has been trained in the most expert and scientific fashion, while Nathan is quite sure that weight of years and experience should take the first place. The two Hubbards would like to come too, also young Will Palmer from over the Ridge, and, oh — half a dozen more perhaps.”

“But they are all young men, or at least unmarried men; I could not go sugaring with them. Sophy, I think you are horrid!” cried Pam, but the laughter in her voice took the edge from her speech, and Sophy was laughing also.

Over supper they sketched out a plan of campaign. The maples on the Ripple land had not been tapped for several years, and should yield a fine lot of syrup. It was the boiling that would be the trouble; experience was necessary here, and although Pam would have preferred what she called a hen-party for her sugaring, it was plain the business could not be carried to a successful finish without masculine aid.

“I will go over to-morrow and ask Galena what she thinks about it,” said Pam with decision; and when supper was done she went round the house, and even hunted through the cellar, to see how many pans and buckets were available for use in holding syrup. There was a tremendous lot of rubbish of one sort and another stored in the cellar under the house at Ripple. Pam had never seemed to have the time to turn the place out and sort things up, but after she had been poking round that evening she made up her mind she would have to do it before the sugaring took place, so that she might get some clear idea as to her storage capacity.

Galena Gittins welcomed Pam’s great idea with acclamation.

“You are really wonderful for a city girl, and an English city girl too!” she exclaimed. “You think and plan as if you had been reared in the backwoods.”

“It is in my bones,” replied Pam. “Sometimes I feel as if all the other part of my life had been a dream, and only this is real. Although I was brought up in the city, I have never really belonged to it; consciously or unconsciously, it is the country I have been pining for, and my mother has always hated London so

much that it is not wonderful we, her children, have hated it too. Then you think we can go sugaring?”

“Why, yes, of course; it is a fine idea!” Galena’s tone was hearty, for the work promised a frolic, which appealed to the frivolous part of her. It would also be a paying piece of work, and that appealed to the prudent side of her character, so no wonder she approved!

Together they arranged details — the time, the company to be invited, and the terms on which they should be asked to come. Sugaring was usually paid for in kind, Galena told Pam — that is, every member of the sugaring party had a percentage of the sugar that was obtained.

“The trees are all fairly near to your house, so we can go and come in a day. One of the men had better camp at the ground, but there will be no need for the women to do it, and that will save any amount of trouble.” Galena’s tone was brisk and business-like. She and her brother were two of the very few people who made farming in those parts downright profitable, as Pam knew, and that was why, in all matters pertaining to outdoors, she came to sit at the feet of Galena.

“Camping would be more fun,” said Pam, whose tone was actually wistful. She would have dearly loved to camp out by the trees which were to be forced to yield their sweetness. It would be an experience indeed to have a tent on the snow, to sit at the tent door to warm by a fire of logs, and then to dream through the solemn midnight hours, while the wind moaned through the leafless branches of the trees and the stir of the rising sap sent new life among the whispering twigs. But she had plenty of common sense, and it was easy to see how dangerous it would be for anyone who had been sleeping all the winter in a banked house, with a fire in the bedroom, to go camping in the forest before the snow was entirely gone. This was a case where sentiment had to be flung overboard, and common sense had to dictate the mode of daily life. So far, Pam had not ailed the whole winter through, she had not even had a bad cold. But spring was the testing time, and it would never do, from the point of view of economy, for her to be ill now that work was about to increase on her hands.

Nathan Gittins readily promised to lend a hand with the boiling, but he advised her to ask Don Grierson to take the management of the affair.

“The lad has got book-learning to help out experience, and it is when the two go together that the best results are obtained,” said Nathan in his deep voice. Then he went on to say: “If he is bossing the show I shan’t feel so tied and responsible. I’m willing enough to give labour, but I don’t want the burden of thinking and planning the whole business.”

After this there was nothing for it but that Pam should ask Don if he would

take the lead in the sugaring, and in truth Don was very willing to accept the responsibility. He had been busy enough all the winter lumbering the black larch on his own land, for he had taken a farm near to The Corner which had dropped out of cultivation for nearly ten years, and it would require a tremendous lot of hard work and a considerable amount of money to make it a paying venture. But just for a few weeks, until the snows were melted, work was easy with him, and sugaring would be something of a holiday.

He came over one damp afternoon to go the round of the trees with Pam. The forest was full of the music of tinkling streams and falling water. Pam had rubbers over her boots, or she would have been foot-wet before she had gone ten steps, for it was like wading in a pond.

Taking the narrow trail, where now they had to walk high on the ridge of the drifted snow, they came out on to the old tote road; and following it for nearly half a mile, they descended a steep dip and plunged into a forest of maples.

“Are all these sugar maples?” demanded Pam. There was an inflection of awe in her voice, for it seemed to her that if all the trees she could see yielded maple sugar she would be in process of becoming a millionaire, or rather her grandfather would be, seeing that the property belonged to him and not to her.

“No, there is a lot of red maple here,” replied Don, whose gaze was searching the bare trunks with the eye of an expert.

“How can you tell them apart?” she asked, then sighed a little, because the more she knew of forest lore the more she found there was to learn.

“By formation largely,” he said, pointing out to her this and that difference in shape. “But if I were seriously at a loss there is one infallible test. Just drop a little sulphate of iron on to the wood, and if it is sugar maple it turns a greenish hue, but if it is red maple it goes a deep blue colour. But that would be quite an extreme test; it is easy enough to tell them apart as a rule.”

“They look dreadfully alike to me,” she said ruefully; then burst out, “Oh, how I wish Jack were here! How he would enjoy all the fun of the sugaring!”

“Can’t he get here in time?” Don was counting and measuring, and so he asked his question in an abstracted fashion. Of course it would be to Pam’s advantage to have her brother to help, for it would mean one share of sugar saved, seeing that every worker from outside would take from her profits.

“Mother said the end of the month, and I did not like to press her to send him sooner, because he is earning a really good salary for a boy of his age. Messrs. Gay & Grainger have been very good to him, and they do not like losing him. Then, of course, Mother has got to find the money for his fare. It has made me feel so bad that I could not help her with that, but I dared not take Grandfather’s money in case it might be wanted before I could make it up again.”

“Do you still think he will come back or be found by the police?” Don looked at her in amazement. He knew nothing of that night’s experience when Sophy and Pam had been lured from the house by that false cry for help, for Sophy had kept the secret most loyally.

Pam winced. She always did wince at any mention of the police in connection with her grandfather, for she was very proud, and the shame of it all scorched her very soul. It was quite bad enough to be poor, but happily there was no shame in that when the poverty could not be helped.

“Of course I think he will come back when he feels inclined,” she answered, and in spite of herself a note of offence, crept into her tone. “Then when he does come back the police will have to do their duty, and that is why the money must be kept for his defence.”

“It is hard on your mother, though.” Don was still keenly surveying the trees, and so his eyes were away from the face of his companion, where the red blood was mounting in a burning blush of shame, right to the roots of her hair. “Mrs. Walsh has had no help from you all the winter, and now she will have to lose your brother’s help, too.”

“It is not quite so bad as it might be.” Pam was smiling a little ruefully at the remembrance of what she was and comparing it with what she had been forced by circumstances to become. “I was out of a situation when I came here, and as Grandfather sent the money for my fare, I did not cost Mother anything, and she has not had to keep me all the winter. Then I was not much good at home; I always seemed to do the wrong things. I upset the boarders by laughing at them. I could not get as much work out of the servants as Jack could, and I was always breaking things, or tearing things, or doing things wrong.”

“Did you change your nature on the voyage?” asked Don, turning to look at her in amazement, for she had struck him as about the most capable and clever girl it had ever been his lot to meet, and he valued her accordingly.

Pam laughed merrily; she was not even embarrassed by the very evident admiration in her companion’s face. He was so plainly unconscious of it that it would be in the worst possible taste to notice or appear to resent it.

“I don’t think I changed my nature, only that my peculiar gifts have now found a more suitable setting,” she answered indifferently, then asked a question about the sugaring which diverted the talk from personalities and kept it in a strictly business groove.

Don was great on sugaring, and after some deliberation he declared that the boiling would be best done at the house. It would add to the labour a good deal to have to carry the syrup so far, but there was so much less risk of spoiling the colour by any over-boiling, the fire could be kept steadier, and the work could be

done in a more satisfactory manner.

Then came busy days of trough-making. This was all done at Ripple — indeed, most of it was done by Pam after Don had made a few as patterns; for Dr. Grierson was spilled from his sledge just at that time, and was so much hurt that he could not go to his patients except when Don went with him, to lift him in and out of the sledge and help him to the bedsides of those who needed him badly. It was the sickness-time; the fierce cold was relaxing its grip on the land, and everyone was feeling the change. Nathan Gittins, who had said that he would come and help to make the troughs, was ill in bed with influenza, and Galena was tied hand and foot with the work of the house and the farm, to say nothing of the nursing. Indeed, Nathan was so ill for three days that Mrs. Buckle went over to the Gittins farm to help Galena, who was nearly worn out. Then he began to improve, and got better almost as fast as he had got ill.

Then the sugaring began. The trees selected were carefully numbered, an incision was made in the bark, and the little troughs made by Pam were fixed under the openings to catch the oozing syrup. When the troughs were full they were emptied into a cooking pot, which two of the sugar workers carried the round of the trees; then the pot was brought to the house, and the work of boiling and skimming began. But the accidents, the frights, and the surprises were so numerous that Pam began to wonder whether after all her sugaring venture would pay its expenses. The snow was melting fast, and the sun was so hot at midday that the bears, which had been sleeping for most of the winter snugly tucked into some cranny of the hillside, or in hollow trees, came out of their long slumber and cast about for food to satisfy them after their long fast. As a matter of course they found the troughs under the tapped trees, and equally as a matter of course they helped themselves to the syrup, knocked the troughs down, so that the escaping syrup was wasted, and generally upset things. After this a very close watch had to be kept, and although it was impossible to keep the bears from stealing the syrup, it was possible to prevent the waste by fixing the troughs anew, or by replacing them, when they were damaged, with fresh ones.

The boiling was an anxious business, too, but here Pam proved her mettle. It took her some days to discover just how big to make her fire, and just how fast it was safe to let the syrup boil without its boiling over; but when once she had succeeded in mastering these details, she was able to run the boiling business single-handed whilst the others of the party were away collecting syrup. Sophy's time was fairly well filled in catering for such a big party, and the fun at meal-times was fast and furious. Luckily the weather was fine, and so the work went on with dispatch. The house was redolent of the smell of boiling syrup, and when Sophy complained that it made her feel sick, Pam pointed out to her how

much worse it would be if the stuff were allowed to boil over on the stove and the odour of burning were added to the smell of the syrup.

At last the long hours of bending over the boiling syrup began to affect Pam; she had a fearful headache, then came nausea and sickness. Galena was forced to take the place of boiler, while Pam went out to the woods to help in the collecting. Don wanted her to come with him. It was necessary for them to work in pairs, and Pam looked so shockingly bad from her bilious fit that she was really an object of pity. But Pam had a perverse fit and would not go. She told Don that he must go with Nathan and work as fast as possible, while she strolled along behind with little Amanda Higgins, whom Mrs. Buckle had generously spared for a day's outing in the forest. Don was reluctant to leave her; he said that Amanda could go with Nathan, and they two would go together, when he would see that she did not have to work hard, nor yet to walk farther than she felt fit for. But Pam was bent on having her own way, and, like most perverse people, she had to suffer in consequence.

Amanda was a feckless girl, whose idea of sugaring was to run here and there looking in sheltered places, and on the sunny sides of the banks, to see if the colt's-foot was coming into blossom. She left Pam to do the work of emptying the troughs and refixing them, and she was a proud and happy girl when she announced with a shout of jubilation that she had found the first flower. Pam dropped her trough in a hurry then, and let the exuding sap drip to waste while she ran to look at the tiny yellow blossom, which was indeed the harbinger of the hosts of flowers that were waiting to carpet the waste places with beauty.

"It is too early for flower-hunting yet," said Pam, mindful of her duty, as she picked up the trough which she had flung down in such a hurry and went off to fix it to the tree. "Come and help me, Amanda, and then next week, when this sugar business is all out of the way, I will ask Mrs. Buckle to spare you, and we will have a long afternoon in the forest hunting for flowers. They will all be new to me, but I expect you know all about them, and which come first?"

"I should just think I do!" cried Amanda, who was skipping and prancing like a young lamb, and was almost as irresponsible. She started to run down a little bank that was clear of snow, and to jump the hollow at the bottom, where the drift still lay in unsullied whiteness on the top of last year's leaves; but she caught her foot in an upstanding root, tried to save herself, failed, then went sprawling into the drift, clutching wildly for something by which to save herself, and screaming at the top of her voice.

Pam put the pot of syrup carefully on the ground and went to the help of Amanda. Privately she was sharply regretting the fit of perversity which had

made her refuse to go with Don, for if Amanda had been with Nathan Gittins, he would have taken good care that she did not get up to pranks of this sort, which not merely wasted time, but endangered her limbs likewise. There was so much sickness about at this time that it was of all things foolish to run risks which might be avoided.

“Catch hold of my hand and I will pull you out!” cried Pam, and holding to the stem of a slender young birch with one hand, she reached out the other to assist Amanda from the hollow, which was a deep one.

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” Amanda’s voice rose in a crescendo of shrieks as she squirmed round and round in an agitated endeavour to get on her feet, and she was in such a hurry that it took about twice as long to scramble up as it would have done if she had gone to work in a cooler fashion. “Ah! Oh! Ah! There is a dead man here down under me, and I am frightened out of my life!”

“Catch hold of me, I will pull you out; but do not trample about in that fashion, it is horrible!” Pam’s voice was sharp with authority now. It was dreadful that Amanda should be trampling on what had once been a human being, and the child seemed too demoralized by her fear to do the sensible thing, and get out of the hole as quickly as possible. She was shrieking and crying, but Pam did not once check the noise, for it seemed to her it was the best way of letting the others know that something serious was the matter.

There was an answering shout from the distance, but the two men did not arrive before Pam had managed to grip Amanda and land her on the bank. She was shivering and crying at such a rate that she was wholly incoherent, and it was Pam who had to tell the two men the cause of the trouble. But she kept her back turned upon the hollow, so desperately afraid was she of seeing something of what had scared Amanda so badly.

Nathan slid carefully into the hollow, and began scraping away the melting snow with his hands. Then Don crept down also, and Pam hushed Amanda with a gesture of authority, while she still kept her back turned upon the scene.

“We found that, and that,” said the voice of Don at her elbow; “but there is little else save a few bones. It looks as if the poor fellow, whoever he was, had been set upon and eaten by wolves.”

Pam glanced at the objects he was holding out to her, and then gave a startled cry, for the first, a little wallet with leather cover and metal corners, was one of the things taken from her grandfather’s desk that night when she and Sophy had been lured from the house; and the other thing was a stout little canvas bag containing coin.

CHAPTER XIII

Just a Doubt!

“It is Grandfather!” cried Pam in a startled tone. She had recognized the things at once, and of course she came to the most obvious conclusion concerning them.

“You can’t be sure, unless you can swear to his having carried the bag and the wallet when he went away from Ripple, and you were not here yourself to know anything about it,” objected Nathan, who prided himself on having a judicial mind, and not accepting anything as fact which had not been proved inside and out.

Pam thrust out her hands with an impatient gesture. She had never felt so much like fainting in her life. She wanted something to cling to, to keep her from falling, but there was nothing except Amanda, who was clinging to her, and crying as if her heart would break.

“You do not know, and I have never dared to speak of it before,” she said, plunging into her story with a desperate haste to get it told, and realizing, now that it was too late, how very much better it would have been if she had never made Sophy keep silence on the subject. “Grandfather came back one night in January, and — and he took the money. Of course, he had a perfect right to what was in his own desk!”

Don stared at Pam in surprise. Why did she fling up her head as if she were defying the whole world in championing the cause of her grandfather?

“The poor old fellow came home, and you never let on to us about it!” exclaimed Nathan in amazed disapproval. “You don’t mean to say you really thought that any one of us would have betrayed him to the police? Why, he might have stayed hidden in our house all the winter, and no one outside the township would have been a bit the wiser. How long did he stay? Was he very much cut up? Dreadful hard on a man of his sort to be forced into wandering!”

“I don’t know; I did not see him,” faltered Pam, who could not repress a shudder as she thought of what Amanda had found in the ditch. Almost unconsciously she moved a step nearer to Don and farther from the hollow.

“If you did not see him, how was it that you knew he had come?” asked Don hurriedly. He had seen the black frown on the face of Nathan, and was dreadfully afraid of what he might say to Pam. Nathan was a Justice of the Peace for the

district, but all the same he had his own ideas of how far it was wise to obey the law, which, according to him, had been made for the instruction of fools.

Pam gave a little gasp as if she were choking, and then she went on with the story of that night when she and Sophy had braved the dangers of the forest to find the person who had called for help. She told how they had seen the wolves in pursuit of the moose, and had made their way back to the house, to find that someone had been there who had taken the money from the desk. She explained how she had firmly believed this to be the work of her grandfather, who, pressed by his dire need, had lured them out in order to get in and help himself to his own money.

“But it was not all his own money,” objected Nathan. “You say that twenty dollars of it belonged to Mrs. Buckle, and that was taken too.”

Pam lifted her head, and there was a stormy light in her eyes.

“Why should he not take the money that was in his own desk? As it happened, he had a perfect right to it too, for Mrs. Buckle had given it to me for him, she was so afraid he would be found by the police and punished for what happened to her husband, and she said there had been quite enough suffering and misery already. Are you trying to insinuate that my grandfather was a thief?”

“No, I am not,” said Nathan in his slow and stolid manner; “and if I did think he was, you would be the last person who would hear of it from me. All the same, it was a thief who entered the house that night. It was a thief who knew the neighbourhood pretty well, too. That means we have a thief living amongst us, a pretty low-down sort of a rogue too, seeing that he would lure a couple of defenceless girls out to take the choice of several ways of dying at night in midwinter, the snow deep on the ground, the wolves hunting in packs. I just wish I had caught the wretch red-handed; I would have choked the life out of him then and there!”

“Oh, hush!” cried Pam, aghast at the passion of the quiet man’s tone. “Remember that the thief, whoever he was, is dead.”

“If he is dead, then it certainly was no one from round about here,” said Don. “We have had no one disappear from the neighbourhood this winter.” He had been running over in his mind all the persons of shady character that he knew, but none of them filled this bill.

“I do not think it was a thief,” protested Pam. “I think it was poor Grandfather himself, who came to get the money from his own desk because he was so hard pressed by want. Then when he got clear of the house he must have lost his way in the forest. Where would he have been heading for in this direction?”

Both Don and Nathan knew the forests like a book, but this question of

Pam's seemed to puzzle them very much.

"So far as I can judge he would not have been heading for anywhere," answered Don, and Nathan nodded in complete acquiescence. "If it was your grandfather, he must have been wandering for the sake of wandering, or else he must have lost his way in the snow, and that is not likely, seeing how well he knew the ground. But we may know more about it when we have scooped the snow away. You and Amanda had better go back to the house and not worry about this." Don nodded in the direction of the hollow, and Pam shivered anew.

"Will you bring the remains to our house?" she asked, and before her eyes came a picture which made her feel as if she would faint.

"No, we shan't, we shall carry them to The Corner," answered Don briefly; and then he hurried Pam off the scene, and hustled Amanda until she turned on him with a childish impertinence on her tongue, though she burst into noisy crying before it was uttered. Her nerves were shaken by the tragedy on which she had stumbled, and she clung to Pam, sobbing violently.

"You must help me carry the pot of syrup; you can cry when you get home," said Pam in a matter-of-fact fashion intended for the soothing of Amanda.

"She had better wait until she has something to cry about," put in Nathan, who was also doing his best to speed their going.

Pam picked up the pot with the syrup.

"What about the trees I have not done?" she said to Don. "Will you be able to go over them later, or shall I come back presently?"

"I will do them when I come back from The Corner," replied Don, and then he watched until Pam and the weeping Amanda had passed out of sight.

Gone was the joy of the sugaring! The grim story which the melting snows revealed was on every tongue. Nothing else was talked about, or thought about. A formal inquiry was held at The Corner, the Doctor's wagon-house being used as a court-house for want of a better. Pam had to attend, also Sophy, and both of them told the story of the night alarm, describing how they had heard someone crying for help, and how, in spite of the fact that they knew wolves were in the neighbourhood, they had gone into the forest to hunt for the person they believed to be in difficulties.

"You must have been mad to do such a thing!" exclaimed the Doctor, looking at his daughter with horror on his face. He had thought so much of Sophy's level-headed discretion that he had never seriously worried about the unprotected state in which she and Pam had lived all the winter. But the story of their wandering made him inclined to change his estimate of his daughter's good sense. "Of course Miss Walsh would not understand how full of danger such a search might be; but you have been reared in the forest, or near it. If you had

failed to hit the trail back to the house you would both have perished miserably by morning.”

“Would you have had us remain in the warmth and security of the house while someone was perhaps perishing within shouting distance of us?” demanded Pam with fire in her eyes. All this talk of taking care of themselves rather grated on her nerves.

“We should all have felt pretty bad if harm had come to you,” answered the Doctor, looking up at her with a smile which completely disarmed her resentment.

It was dreadful to Pam to have to stand in that crowded wagon-house and tell the assembled men that she had hidden the fact of the house being robbed, because she was afraid that if she spoke of her loss it would put the police on the track of her grandfather.

“If you did not see the person who entered the house and took the money, how could you be sure that it was your grandfather who had done it?” asked the legal gentleman in charge of the inquiry.

“I was not sure,” said Pam, turning to him with wistful appeal in her eyes. “I only felt that it must be Grandfather, who, pressed by his sore need, had lured us out so that he could enter the house, his own house, unobserved, to get the money.”

“I happened to know your grandfather,” said the lawyer, “and anything less likely for him to do I cannot conceive. No, Miss Walsh, if ever the story of that night is known, you will find that it was not your grandfather, coming, as you pathetically put it, to take his own money, but a miserable scamp of a thief, who, not content with robbing a lone house at night, made his wrong-doing into black crime by exposing two girls to risks of the gravest kind. It is deeds of this sort which call for summary justice, only the trouble is the wily rogues are hard to catch.”

“At least the justice of heaven overtook this one,” said the Doctor as a murmur of anger went through the crowd, and Pam realized with a thrill how kindly was the feeling for her and Sophy. She had to listen meekly enough to the lecture which the lawyer read her on her wrong-headedness in trying to keep what she thought was the visit of her grandfather from the police, but in her heart she knew that in similar circumstances she would do the same again.

The verdict of the inquiry was that a man had been found dead in the forest, but that there was not sufficient evidence to show whether he had died first and his body had then been eaten by wolves, or whether he had fallen a victim to the hungry creatures when he was making his way from Ripple. There was no evidence to show who he was; from the size of the bones it might have been

Wrack Peveril, but equally it might not. One thing only was certain — that it must have been the man who entered the house at Ripple in the absence of Pam and Sophy, for both Pam and Mrs. Buckle testified to this. Mrs. Buckle had marked the paper money with a little cross on the flourishes of one capital letter, which she pointed out, while Pam testified to the stout little wallet being the one in which she had stored the twenty dollars. One thing was very puzzling to her, and that was the fact that the canvas bag only contained seven dollars in cash, whereas it should have had fourteen dollars, this being the amount of the money she had found in her grandfather's desk, and left there against the time of his necessity.

“You are quite sure about this amount?” the lawyer asked her. And Pam was quite sure. Conjecture was busy then, but it amounted to no more than conjecture, and the affair had to be left shrouded in mystery.

The remains were buried in a nameless grave. The lawyer would not permit it to be assumed that the bones were those of Wrack Peveril, while the strictest search revealed nothing by which an identity could be set up. The torn clothing, such as remained, was what anyone might have worn, the boots had no name on them, and there was nothing else to go by.

Pam came out of the wagon-house at the close of the inquiry feeling as if she would like to run away and never show her face in the neighbourhood again. She was acutely miserable, and it did not tend to raise her spirits when a small boy, lean and ragged, who hung on the outskirts of the crowd, deliberately stuck his tongue out at her. She flushed scarlet at the insult and turned away so sharply that she punted into Sophy, who was walking on the other side of her, and who immediately wanted to know what was the matter that she was so red in the face, because she had been so pale before.

Pam would not tell her. She would not even inquire the name of the ragged boy. It was such an emphasis of what she had been feeling, just as if her secret thoughts had been put into speech, and shouted out so that all might hear. Surely never before had a girl so hard a thing to bear! The very pity of these kindly folk did but add to her suffering. She thought of her mother, and it was only the urgent necessity for safe-guarding the interests of the dear home people that enabled her to bear the ordeal with patience.

In her own mind Pam was absolutely certain that the poor remains found in the forest were those of her grandfather. She found it best to keep silent about her belief, however. The neighbours were indignant that that idea should gain a moment's credence. They held it an insult to his memory that such a thing should be believed of him as that he should enter his own house like a burglar and steal his own money! Yet everyone believed he had beaten Sam Buckle so

sorely that the man had died from his wounds! Pam would have laughed at the absurdity of their standpoints, if she had not been so sore at heart about it all. If only the remains had had anything upon them to prove her right, most of her troubles would have been over; she could have written to her mother to say that her grandfather was dead, and then Mrs. Walsh would have disposed of the boarding-house, and would have come out to Ripple with the other children. It was Pam's comfort that Jack was coming. Perhaps when he arrived, and heard all that there was to be told, he would be able to persuade her mother that it was best to come.

The maple trees on Ripple had not been tapped for so long that the yield was quite wonderful. Pam found herself in the position of being able to sell a couple of hundredweights of sugar, as well as having enough for home consumption for a long time to come. She reckoned that her trees had averaged twenty pounds weight of sugar each. Of course higher averages had been made; some people talked of having had trees which yielded thirty pounds each. But, as Galena said, you would not find more than one tree in a few hundreds do as much as that; the average of twenty pounds was very high, and it would not be safe to tap those trees again next spring, as it would probably kill them.

By the time the sugaring was safely over, the snow had melted sufficiently for the plough to get to work. Neither Pam nor her next neighbour, Mrs. Buckle, had horses for ploughing. Mrs. Buckle did certainly possess an ancient nag, knock-kneed and a roarer, which drew her to meetings on Sundays, but the creature was not capable of very much in the way of exertion, so the ploughing on both farms had to be done by outside labour. Nathan Gittins having undertaken the work, in addition to his own fields, his plough was going every day and all day. Then the wind veered round to the cold quarter, there was another blizzard, and they were back in winter again, to the secret disgust of Pam, who had seen enough of snow to last her for that season.

But spring snow is swift to go. The brown earth was showing, and a brisk but warm wind was blowing on the day when Pam went to borrow Mrs. Buckle's ancient horse to drive to Hunt's Crossing to meet Jack. It was amazing to Pam that the widow should be such a kind friend to her. Indeed, Mrs. Buckle's attitude was something remarkable, seeing how her husband had met his death. But she had no strong prejudices, and common sense told her that Pam, the stranger, was in no way to blame for the long-standing animosity between the men who had quarrelled for so many years about the fence, which, in point of fact, made no difference to either.

"Can you spare the horse?" asked Pam, standing on the threshold of Mrs. Buckle's little brown house, her feet with difficulty refraining from dancing, and

her face wreathed in smiles. Such happiness she had not known since her feet had first pressed Canadian soil, and she was thinking of what Jack would say when he saw the house and the land at Ripple, for the keeping of which, for him and the others, she had borne so much.

“Why, yes, of course,” replied Mrs. Buckle with an answering smile. “It is not Sunday, so I don’t want to go to meeting, and there is nowhere else to go to in these benighted parts that I know of.”

“You might go to school.” Pam gurgled into happy laughter at her own small joke. It is so easy to find things to laugh about when one is happy.

“Well, well, of course. I had not thought of the school; I might go there. The youngsters would laugh, and nudge each other as we used to do in the old days, and they would wonder what Martha Buckle was up to. They would maybe want me to spell something, and oh, my word! where should I be then!” Mrs. Buckle leaned against the door-post and fairly rocked with laughter, while Pam laughed too, until Amanda came running from the out-place, where she had been washing the breakfast dishes, and joined in the merriment, although she had not the remotest idea what the others were laughing about.

Pam harnessed the horse herself, an accomplishment she had learned from Mrs. Buckle, and then she mounted the rickety old wagon and drove out on to the trail which led to Hunt’s Crossing. She had asked Sophy to come with her, but Sophy, with a rare understanding of what that meeting would mean to Pam, had pleaded too much work, at the same time pointing out to Pam what a heavy load they would be on the homeward journey — Jack and his baggage, Pam and herself. The ancient horse might well object to so much weight behind it, and Pam was fain to see that the excuse was reasonable. She was even glad, right down at the bottom of her heart, that she could be alone when she met her brother again.

The sun was very hot to-day, and the old horse was not disposed to move very fast. Pam got so tired of trying to get some pace out of the creature that she finally got out of the wagon and walked on ahead, with the lines over her arm. It was really pleasant walking too; the grass was fresh, flowers were springing on all sides, while over the forest was creeping a daily thickening veil of green. It was springtime, and the winter was past and gone!

“Hullo! How far is it to Ripple?” A lanky youth rose from a fallen log which lay by the side of the trail, and advanced upon Pam before she was aware of anyone being near at hand. One long look she gave him, and then she shrieked joyfully.

“Jack! Why, Jack, how enormously you have grown!” She cast the lines from her as she spoke, and rushing towards the youth hugged him rapturously.

“Pam, old girl, you are quite a beauty!” exclaimed Jack, holding her at arm’s length, and surveying her critically. “You always were pretty fair, as far as looks go, but now you are a peach, and a daisy, and everything else that is blooming!”

“The life suits me, I guess!” laughed Pam, and then she hugged Jack again, just to convince herself that he was really here in the flesh; and because she was very silly she had to cry a little in memory of the fierce home-sickness which had been upon her so often in the winter that was past.

“Hullo! Where is the ancient horse off to with so much haste?” demanded Jack, as he looked round in time to see that the horse had deliberately turned back on its tracks, and was proceeding along the trail at a brisk walk.

“Oh, the wretched creature!” cried Pam. “I have had such a task to get it along this morning, it seemed so old and spent. Now look at it!” She and Jack had both started to run after the animal, and when it heard them coming it broke into a run, going at a shambling trot that made it exceedingly difficult to overhaul it.

“Moral: never leave go of the lines when you go a journey with a racer of this description!” said Jack, who was panting heavily by the time they had overtaken and stopped the horse. He had not the wind of Pam, and seemed quite done up by the scramble.

“The lazy creature has got to turn round again, and do the bit to the river,” she said, tugging its head round with great energy. “Did you bring any books, Jack?”

“Nearly all we possess. I say, Pam, what trees! Why, they are giants!”

“Wait until you see some of ours on Ripple!” cried Pam, with an unconscious air of proprietorship. “Mr. Dobson told me last fall that he believed we had some of the finest timber anywhere round here.”

“Turn it into money then, before anything happens to it,” advised Jack, as the horse went slowly along the trail to Hunt’s Crossing.

“I must not sell any more just yet,” she answered nervously. “You see, it is not as if we had a clear title to the land.”

“Was that Grandfather who was found in the forest?” Jack asked, his face very serious now. The tragedy looked more real now that he was here close to it. The descriptions in Pam’s letters had been of necessity meagre. Then, too, she was not particularly good at letter-writing, and so had failed to give many details which would help to the understanding of the affair. Now, when she had loaded Jack’s baggage on to the wagon, and they had started back along the trail to Ripple, she plunged into a full and circumstantial account of everything connected with that grim find in the forest.

Presently Jack drew a long breath, made an explosive sound as if he were

letting off steam, and then burst into speech.

“Oh, I say, isn’t it just ripping! To think that I am really here at last! Pam, you were a brick to come when you did, and to stick by things for us. It would have been just wasted if you had not been here! My word, though, you must have wanted some pluck, to live the life you have done here all through the winter!”

“I could not have done it if Sophy had not stayed with me!” cried Pam. “You will love her, Jack, she is such a dear!”

Jack gave a wriggle, then demanded abruptly: “Going to be married, isn’t she?”

“Yes, in June or July. It is lucky you were able to come to me, for I could not live alone at Ripple. I wish Mother and the others would come out this summer. The children would love it so much, and I am certain that Mother would not have as much anxiety as she has with that wretched old boarding-house. Does it pay better than it did?”

“Not much. We are full up, and the takings are good, but the expenses are frightful, and they run away with any chance of making the thing pay. It will be worse now that I have left home, for I could keep an eye on the kitchen in the evenings.”

“You were all the time doing your best to keep expenses down. You will have to do it still, for I need looking after. But there is Ripple, Jack, just showing through the trees. Welcome home, dear!”

CHAPTER XIV

From an Unexpected Quarter

“It is downright ripping!” burst out Jack with explosive energy. Then he dropped into sudden silence, and said never a word while Pam was guiding the obstinate old horse as close to the door of the house as she could persuade it to go. She stole a glance at him once, and was so awed by the expression of his face that she turned her head quickly, for she guessed he would not want her to know how he was feeling.

The horse had its own ideas about how close to the door of the house it intended to draw the wagon, and being obstinate as a mule it planted its fore feet wide apart in an attitude worthy of FitzJames when he cried:

“Come one, come all! this rock shall fly
From its firm base as soon as I”.

“If you were my horse you would have to come, but seeing you belong to my neighbour it does not seem worth the trouble to make you,” said Pam, giving in gracefully, determined not to let a small difference of opinion between herself and the horse upset for her the joy of having Jack reach Ripple safe and sound.

Sophy burst out of the door, coming at a run to welcome the traveller, and chaffing Pam because she could not manage the stupid old horse.

“If it were merely stupid I could manage it fast enough,” replied Pam. “It is so crafty, and I lose my temper in trying to circumvent it.” She went round to the back of the wagon as she spoke, and started to haul out the trunks which Jack had brought with him.

“What a lot of baggage for a boy!” cried Sophy. “Why, Jack, you must be quite a dandy! How many dress suits have you brought with you?”

“Just you wait and see!” chuckled Jack, who had come out of his quiet fit, and was ready to answer chaff with chaff, to laugh and see the funny side of everything. “Of course I need football togs, and golfing duds, a rowing rig-out, and another set of nautical clothes for when I go out on my yacht. Then there are garments for sitting and for standing, there are things to sleep in, a swimming outfit, a set of go-to-meeting clothes, and — and a court dress, only I am afraid that won’t be of much use in this part of the world, so any reasonable offer will not be refused.”

“Don’t take any notice of him, Sophy,” said Pam, who was laughing at his glib description of his fictitious wardrobe. “The boxes are crammed with books, and things about the house that Mother thought he might as well bring. I guess he has not many more clothes than what he is wearing, and even those will be outgrown in a few months at the rate he is going on. Shall we have a feed before I take the wagon back, or shall I drive the horse and wagon back to Mrs. Buckle straight away?”

“Dinner is quite ready, and if you have it now I can get the dishes washed while you are away,” replied Sophy.

“Have it now, by all means. I am almost hungry enough to start on eating the old horse, although by the look of it the creature would be tough,” said Jack. He ducked his head nearer to that of the animal, and worked his jaws in a fashion so fierce and suggestive that the horse suddenly started forward, drew the wagon close to the house door, and stopped again, while the three laughed until the tears came, over the success of Jack’s manoeuvre.

They carried the luggage into the house, tied the horse to the hitching-post and gave it a feed of hay, then went indoors to the dinner which Sophy had ready for them. It was so warm that they had the door wide open, letting in the sunshine, the scents of trees and flowers, and the rippling notes of the bobolink in the big red maple near the house. Oh! the forest was a delightful place on a day in early spring, and Pam, stealing glances at Jack’s face, realized that behind the nonsense in which he was indulging, he was fighting back a whole storm of emotion.

The two went off when the meal was over, to restore the horse and wagon to Mrs. Buckle. When they came back there would be the afternoon “chores” to get through, and a lot of other things which Pam had been forced to neglect in order to reach Hunt’s Crossing in time to meet Jack. Even then she had not reached the river until long after the boat had passed. Last summer the boats up from Fredericton had done the journey in the daytime, passing Hunt’s Crossing in the afternoon; now they left the wharf of the city at midnight, and so reached the nearest point for Ripple early in the day.

“Do we pass the fence that made all the trouble?” Jack asked, as the horse moved away from the hitching-post, and broke into a shambling trot when it found it had its head towards home.

“Yes, I will show you,” said Pam, and then they began to talk of the mystery of their grandfather’s disappearance afresh.

“I can’t see why he needed to run away at all,” said Jack. “The two men quarrelled, and started to fight, I expect, and for aught we know Grandfather might have been as badly hurt as the other man. He might even have crawled

into the shelter of the trees to die. I say, Pam, where was it the bones were found when you were sugaring? Anywhere near here?"

"No, miles away in an opposite direction," she answered. "Besides, you forget the money which had been taken from Grandfather's desk was found with those remains. I thought, as you have done, that he might have crept into the woods to die, and I tramped through the undergrowth in every direction last fall; the police hunted too. But he has been seen alive since then, you know."

Jack nodded.

"I had forgotten that. I don't suppose it is of any use for me to try to spring new theories on to you, seeing that you have been on the spot, and have had all the winter to think the matter round. You will have to be patient with me when I start any extra silly idea about it. But I can't rest while we don't know what has become of him. It does not seem right to enjoy being here either, for it is his place, and not ours at all."

Pam nodded her head sadly.

"That is just how I feel about it. But there are two sides to think of, and if we were not here just think how the place would go to ruin! We are doing our best for him, and keeping the home together. If we can be happy while we are doing it, so much the better for us, and our happiness does not injure him if he is alive, nor is it any disrespect to him if he has gone."

Jack gave a non-committal grunt, and then sat in silence, staring at the mighty trees which walled in the trail, or stood singly or in groups here and there, the lesser growths crowding about the big trunks like children round a mother's knee.

"There is Mrs. Buckle, and that is her house," Pam exclaimed presently, as they emerged from the forest and began to cross the fields. "Is it not strange that she has been one of my kindest friends?"

"Yes, it seems to me against nature," he answered shortly. "It is one of the things that make me think that perhaps after all Grandfather had no hand in hurting Sam Buckle; for if he had, her instinct would have been dead against her being friends with you. And a woman usually follows her instinct, while a man trusts to his judgment. You need not laugh; I told you I should be springing all sorts of silly theories upon you about every ten minutes or so."

"I am not going to laugh at you," said Pam, turning a face that was deeply troubled upon him. "But, Jack, if Grandfather did not hurt the other man, why did he disappear? Where is he now? And why was his axe found beside the poor fellow? Why, too, did Sam Buckle keep muttering that it was his right?"

"I'm not a blooming detective!" growled Jack, who looked every bit as troubled as his sister. "But this I do know, that there are mostly two ways of

explaining everything — a wrong way and a right. It is possible that all, or nearly all, your reasonable explanations are wrong ones, after all.”

“What solemn faces you have both got!” exclaimed Mrs. Buckle, as she hurried to meet them. She told Jack that he was a great acquisition, that the forest wanted young men more than it wanted anything, and that she was very glad indeed to see him there.

“Thank you, ma’am: I am sure that I am very glad to be here,” said Jack politely; and then he followed Mrs. Buckle round her small domain, listening in interested silence to all she had to say about things. He was as fond as most boys of talking and giving his opinion on this and that. But he was up against a most complete ignorance of the things she was discussing, so he had the sense to keep quiet until he knew something about it all.

Then Pam came along from the barn, where she had been to unhitch the horse; but because he was unwilling to go just yet, Jack pulled out his watch to see the time.

“Why, Jack, I did not know that you had a watch!” cried Pam in surprise. “Where did you get it from?”

“I bought it in St. John,” replied Jack. “Colonel Seaford came with Mother to see me on board. He gave me a sovereign to do what I liked with. Mother said I had better have a look round the second-hand shops in St. John when I landed, to see if I could buy a watch with the money, because she had not been able to get me one. I saw this priced at three dollars, and so I bought it. It is a jolly good one to go, and it is a fair size for the money.”

“What an old-fashioned watch!” cried Pam. “It looks good, though. See, Mrs. Buckle, wouldn’t you say that it was a good one?”

Mrs. Buckle took the watch which Pam handed to her, and turned it over in her hand. Pam noticed that she went very pale. Then she pressed the spring that opened the back, and immediately uttered a startled cry.

“It is Sam’s watch that was stolen from him before he died!”

It was Pam’s turn to become white now. Her cheeks were colourless, and her eyes dilated with fear as she gasped:

“How do you know? How can you be sure of a thing like that?”

Mrs. Buckle held the watch towards her with shaking hands.

“See that!” she whispered hoarsely. “Just down there by the keyhole — M. P. That stands for Moses Pratt, which was my father’s name. He scratched the initials there himself. Don’t you see how he boggled the loop of the P? He said it was easy enough to do the strokes, it was the curves that were the trouble. It is Sam’s watch. I would swear to it before any jury in the Dominion. Do you see that mark there? — I mean the little dash by the side of the name. That stands

for my father's marriage. The next little dash means me; he put it there when I was born. His record of blessings, he called it. Then the dot underneath was put when Mother died; and when Father was dying he used to say he had been such a fortunate man, for he had only one dot to two dashes!"

Mrs. Buckle broke down over her reminiscences, and sobbed aloud. Jack looked supremely uncomfortable, just as if he would have liked to run away. It was Pam who realized what had to be done.

"You must give her the watch." The whisper was inaudible to the sobbing Mrs. Buckle, but Jack heard it and made a wry face, which was not to be wondered at. A boy's first watch is mostly a treasured possession, and Mrs. Buckle was only a stranger. He had not even lived in touch with the tragic happenings of last fall, as Pam had done, so he was to be forgiven his momentary unwillingness to yield the watch he had valued so much. He was made of good stuff, though; for as Mrs. Buckle caught her breath on an extra big sob, and looked up to put a request to him, before she could utter one word of it he had thrust his hand out with a hasty movement, and was saying hurriedly:

"You will keep the watch, of course. I had no idea that it had been stolen. I am very glad that I have been able to bring it back to you."

"Stolen!" cried Pam, aghast at the word. "Jack, Grandfather must have taken it!"

"We can't be sure of that. All the same, it was stolen, whoever did it, seeing it was not his own," said Jack with a sullen note in his voice; and he was turning away in a great hurry, for the scene was too emotional for him, when he knocked against a man who had come upon the group without being noticed, and who was standing staring at the watch in Mrs. Buckle's hand.

"Hullo! I beg your pardon," he said, expecting to be pulled up for his carelessness.

The man took no notice of him, only stared at Mrs. Buckle, who, now becoming aware of his presence, held the watch toward him, saying eagerly:

"See here, Mose Paget, this boy, Miss Walsh's brother from England, has got my husband's watch, and I knew it again directly. Isn't it just wonderful?"

The man shook his head slightly, then said in a gruff voice:

"I don't see anything very remarkable about it myself. Everyone knows that Wrack Peveril stole the watch from poor Sam, so what more natural than he should give it to his grandson?"

Jack flamed with sudden wrath, and thrusting out his fist he shook it within an inch of the tip of Mose Paget's nose.

"Are you insinuating that my grandfather was a thief?" he asked; and Pam shivered at the thrill in his quiet voice. He was one of the most even-tempered

people she knew, but when he did get roused he flared into hotter anger than any of them.

Mose laughed in a casual fashion that was infinitely irritating, then swung round with his back to Jack, as if the boy in his righteous anger were a thing of no account at all. He addressed himself again to Mrs. Buckle.

“I have come to say that I can’t take on that job we talked about. I have had an offer to join a man out west, and he wants me to go to-night.”

“But a bargain is a bargain,” expostulated Mrs. Buckle, who for the moment forgot the miraculous finding of the treasured watch, while she threshed out the matter in hand. “You said that you would see me through the farmwork this summer, you agreed upon the price and everything, and you can’t back out now.”

“Can’t I?” The man smiled in an ugly, aggravating fashion. “I guess, now my chance has come to better myself, I am going to take it. It isn’t a woman that is going to turn me when I have made up my mind. I should be obliged if you would pay me what is owing, as I’ve to get down river to-night, so as to catch the cars for the west to-morrow.”

Mrs. Buckle’s mouth set itself in lines of stern determination.

“I suppose I can’t force you to stay here and keep your word, but I can do as I like about paying you, and not a cent-piece shall you have before the end of the week. I am not used to paying every minute a lazy man wants his money, and, being a lone woman, I don’t keep no hard cash worth speaking of in the house, not being willing to have it stolen. If you want to go down river to-night you will have to go without that money, and I will pay it to Reggie — or are you going to take him with you?”

“No, I can’t be bothered with a kid at my heels all day,” rejoined Mose in a sulky tone. Hearing this, Pam felt again the swift repulsion for the man that was so nearly detestation; and yet, as she told herself, the man was not all bad, for had he not saved her life, and that at the risk of his own?

“Well, you won’t have the money, that is flat. I have not got it in the house for you,” said Mrs. Buckle; and then she burst into stormy invective because of the way he was treating her, in going off in this fashion and leaving her with the summer’s work on her hands.

Pam stepped a little closer to her as the man turned away.

“Never mind, dear Mrs. Buckle,” she said. “Jack and I will see you through. We don’t know much, it is true; but we are strong and can work, and we will take your land on as well as our own, so you will not be left in the lurch.”

“Yes, we will see you through, never you fear!” put in Jack. Then he burst out in a stormy fashion: “You are not going to believe that Grandfather is a thief, Mrs. Buckle, or that I knew I had no right to the watch?”

“Of course not. What a silly boy it is!” Mrs. Buckle looked up at the sky, as if she were talking to someone above her head, and she took no notice at all of Mose Paget, who hovered still in the background, as if to see if there was any chance that she would pay up. “It is not at Ripple that I shall look when I want to find the thief. Don’t you think that I have sense enough to know an honest man when I see one?”

“Is it me you are wanting to call a thief?” burst out Mose, looking as if he would do her an injury there and then, while his face was fairly convulsed with anger.

Mrs. Buckle looked him over with a calm scorn that made him wince.

“I have always found you honest,” she said; then added, with a suspicion of malice in her tone, “but then I have always believed that it was opportunity that made the thief, and it is precious little opportunity you have had in my house to be anything but an honest man.”

“You are right enough there!” retorted Mose with hearty spite. “Yours is reckoned the meanest house in the township, and the stuff that is thrown away would not keep a sparrow. The mice die from want of nourishment, and the one or two rats that I have seen were just walking skeletons. Talk about the tender mercies of a woman! Why, you are the meanest creature alive!”

“Well, Amanda is fat enough even if the vermin are thin,” replied Mrs. Buckle with a jolly laugh at being able to get the last word. Then she said sternly: “Now, Mose Paget, if you are not going to keep your side of the bargain, out you get, and that sharp, for I don’t allow no lazy, idle vagabonds to sauce me twice. Now, then, get!”

For a moment Mrs. Buckle stared into the face of the furious man, while he glared back at her; then, without another word, he swung round on his heel and took the trail which led east to the river, although his home was in the opposite direction.

“It looks funny, that it does!” Mrs. Buckle remarked as if talking to herself, and seeming for the moment quite unaware of the others standing near her. “Something has scared him pretty badly, or my name is not Martha Buckle. I don’t believe he has seen anyone this morning. If any stranger had been about the place surely I should have known about it.”

“Perhaps he had the offer made to him yesterday, only did not feel disposed to take it then,” put in Pam. Then, mindful of the long time they had been lingering, she said: “We must go now, Mrs. Buckle, but one of us will be over tomorrow to see how you are getting on, and if you want us before that, just send Amanda to Ripple to fetch us.”

“You can’t go yet; I must know about this,” said Mrs. Buckle, indicating the

watch in her hand. "Then I want to pay your brother the value of it."

"Oh, Jack would not take money for it!" cried Pam. "Especially after that most hateful thing said by Mose Paget, about Grandfather having stolen it and given it to Jack."

"Of course I don't want to be paid for what was not my own," agreed Jack; but he was sore at heart all the same, for he had valued that watch very highly. It was such a substantial affair, and it made him feel as if he were almost, if not quite a man.

Mrs. Buckle laughed.

"Do you think I am really as hard up as I would have Mose Paget believe?" she asked, and her voice dropped to a cautious undertone. "It is quite true I have almost no money in the house, and I have kept none there ever since that mysterious theft from Ripple leaked out. But there are other places in which to keep money. You tell me how much this watch is worth to you, then go into the house and sit down while I find the cash, do you hear?"

"Yes, but I am not going to do it," said Jack hurriedly. "Come along, Pam, it is time we were marching."

The two marched off in spite of Mrs. Buckle's protestations, and when they were well on their way Jack turned to Pam, demanding: "What do you think now?"

"I don't know what to think," she answered sadly.

"I think that you are all working on a wrong idea, and that poor old Grandfather was as innocent as I am of any hand in hurting Sam Buckle!" Jack's voice had a confident, happy ring that was most inspiring. He had a host of theories, too, and he treated Pam to so many of them on the way back to Ripple that she arrived at home almost disposed to believe he might be right; only the circumstantial evidence of the axe being found near to Sam Buckle, and that other still more damaging fact of her grandfather's disappearance, were so hard to explain away.

CHAPTER XV

Pam's Big Adventure

Never before had Pam realized how much one's brother might be to one. Those first days of Jack's coming to Ripple would have spelled unalloyed happiness for her had it not been for the trouble about her grandfather. It was of no use to tell herself that she knew the old man was not a thief, and that he would not have dreamed of robbing the man he had hurt so badly. The fear that he had done it in a moment of evil temper was always present with her to spoil her peace. She worried, too, as she thought of what his suffering must have been when he was outcast from his home. In spite of all that Jack and Sophy could say to the contrary, the fear was on her that the old man lay in the nameless grave where that little heap of bones found in the forest had been put.

Laughing and talking with Jack, labouring hard with him over the tasks to which they were both so unaccustomed, Pam found it easy to be happy and to put even the remembrance of the trouble away. It was in the nights, when sometimes she was too tired to sleep, that the burden of her care dropped upon her, and then she was as acutely miserable as it was possible for a healthy girl to be.

The poultry was increasing on her hands. One brood of chickens was safely hatched, and the ten downy, fluffy chicks threatened to be great time-wasters, they were so dear and so cunning. But Sophy reminded her that she was out to make the place pay, and the chicks were neither ornaments nor playthings, but just a detail of farm life; after which Pam hardened her heart and tore herself away to less congenial tasks. The pigs failed to rouse much enthusiasm in her. She was glad to resign the care of them to Jack, even though he was six months younger to farm life than she was, and ignorant in proportion. Yet in spite of this drawback he was showing uncommon wisdom, or perhaps it was adaptability, in looking after the animals. When a litter of young was born, he was as enthusiastic over it as Pam was over the chickens. He talked largely of going in for pig-breeding on a large scale, because, as he very truly said, people always wanted bacon for breakfast, so there would always be a market for his stuff.

Pam only laughed at him, and wrinkled her nose in a little grimace of disgust every time she came near his end of the barn. She was secretly delighted at the way in which he was taking hold of things and adapting himself to the new life.

She had been afraid that he might hark back to city life, and want to be a clerk or something of that sort. The younger boys had never been so fond of books as Jack. She was slow in understanding that his love of books arose from the honest desire for information, and was not an indication of any wish for life in a city office.

When Jack had been at Ripple two weeks Sophy went home for a few days. She and her mother were going down river to Fredericton to buy the wedding frock, or, at least, the material for it. Nothing would suit Sophy but that she should make it herself, and as she was so expert with her needle, it would have been folly to pay another to do work that would bring exquisite pleasure to herself.

It was very strange at Ripple without her. Jack took his share of getting meals and in washing dishes, but all the same it was Pam who had to feel the great want. Sophy had been a comrade worth having. She had tact and sympathy, she never wanted to talk when Pam had a quiet fit, and she was so helpful in a quiet way that she had to go before it was possible to understand how useful she was.

With Sophy away, Pam found it necessary to be in the house more. When the morning “chores” were done, Jack went off most days to help Nathan Gittins, who was planting corn and potatoes in the fields of Mrs. Buckle, and also on the cleared land at Ripple. Reggie Furness, who did the “chores” for the Gittins’s place, was only a night and morning boy — that is to say, he had to go to school, and was only available out of school hours. Left so much to herself, Pam decided that it was a fine chance for turning the house upside down. She argued that if she did it thoroughly now, it would keep fairly tidy in the brief brilliant summer weather, when the outdoor work would be too pressing to allow much time for anything else.

A spell of wet weather set in. Every day it rained and rained as if it would never leave off. The creek rose and rose, until there was danger that Mrs. Buckle would be cut off, and the field in which her house stood made temporarily into an island. There was no such danger for Ripple, where the house stood on rising ground, and was a whole field distant from the swollen creek.

But corn planting had to stop while the rain came down. Jack had more time for the work in the barn now, so Pam was free for her campaign of scouring and scrubbing. Oh, how dirty the house was! Surely never had a place been as long without a spring clean as this comfortable old timber house at Ripple! The best sitting-room had been a dumping-ground for all manner of things during the winter. Extra firewood had been neatly stacked in a remote corner. Sophy had kept her big rolls of flannel and calico on the massive centre table. All kinds of

rubbish had gathered there. But now Pam meant that it should be clean, as clean as her mother doubtless kept it in those long-past days before Mrs. Walsh had run away to be married.

It was a pouring wet day when Pam started on her campaign. The rain was coming down with a steady slant that promised more flooding later on. Jack wanted to help in the cleaning, but Pam thought he would be of more use elsewhere, so she suggested that he should do all the outside “chores”, and get breakfast also, which would leave her free for her great campaign. This suited Jack finely; he had scored a distinct success in the making of Indian corn cake and buckwheat porridge, which was uncommonly good when eaten with maple syrup. He went to work with great zest when he came in from the barn, while Pam for her part was busy sorting the lumber and carrying the things which belonged to Sophy to the sanctuary of one of the clean rooms upstairs.

Breakfast was about an hour late, but Pam was so hard at work that she did not notice that, although she was faint and fagged from want of food. When Jack called to her that it was ready he apologized meekly enough for the delay, which had been owing to accident; he had upset the porridge into the fire, and had been obliged to make a fresh lot.

“Oh, Jack, it is just lovely for you to upset something, because in the past it was poor unlucky me who had all the accidents!” cried Pam, as she drew up her chair to the table and fell upon the second edition of porridge with keen appetite.

“It makes one feel so horribly mad with oneself — such a silly thing to do!” growled Jack, who was by way of being very cross over his stupidity.

“I suppose even that state of mind is rather an advantage than otherwise, since it takes away any tendency to swelled head,” said Pam, as she helped herself to more syrup — then, abruptly, she changed the subject — “Jack, I wonder who it was that sold Sam Buckle’s watch to the second-hand shop at St. John?”

Jack scraped the saucepan with great care, for he was not minded to waste any of the porridge which had bothered him so much in the making. Then he said with deliberation: “If we knew so much we should most likely be able to get the miserable business cleared up. But you know what the manager said when we wrote to him — he had so many men in during the winter selling their watches because they were hard up that it was impossible to remember any details.”

“It is very mysterious,” said Pam thoughtfully. “Still, it is only reasonable that the man should not be able to remember. There is one thing about it that bothers me though——”

“Only one? You are lucky. There are a round dozen bothering me at this very

moment!” exclaimed Jack, and then he got up from his place at the table and went to fetch the letter which had been received from the manager of the second-hand shop at St. John where he had purchased the watch.

“One is enough for me at this minute,” Pam went on with her face overcast. “There was one man from here who went to St. John during last fall, or just after the first snow came. I have only now remembered about it. You see, here we only think of Fredericton; St. John is out of the world to us.”

“Who was the man? Out with it, and now we may get on a little!” and Jack slapped his letter down on the table with great gusto, and waited for Pam to speak.

“Oh, but it is horridly mean of me even to let such a thought come into my head, for he saved my life before he went.” Pam looked so miserable, and she wore such an aspect of guilt, that anyone to look at her would have thought she was the culprit.

PAM WAS DRAGGED UP AND TUGGED HERE
AND PULLED THERE

“Do you mean Mose Paget?” cried Jack, leaping to his feet with a startled air.

“He certainly went to Fredericton, and I understood that he went farther — all the way to St. John, where he was very ill — and that poor little step-brother of his was half-starved here at home. Then, Jack, just remember it was at the moment when Mrs. Buckle recognized the watch that Mose Paget came along, saying he was going out west. No one had heard anything about his going off until that very minute, and he went straight away, not even staying to say good-bye to his brother, so Galena told me. Poor Galena! Years ago, when they were both quite young, they were lovers, but the thrift in her resented the unthrift in him, so they quarrelled and parted. But she would have made a man of him if anyone could!”

“It is mighty hard on a woman to have to form her husband’s character. I shan’t expect my wife to form me,” said Jack, with a squaring of his shoulders that made Pam laugh, for it was very evident that there would not be much for Jack’s wife — if he had one — to do in the way of character-forming. Then he went on: “But I don’t see that you have anything but coincidence to work on. Even if Mose was in St. John, you have no proof that it was he who sold the watch, although of course he might have done it. Then as to his throwing up his work for Mrs. Buckle, you must remember that he was coming to do it when he stumbled into the scene of her recognition of the watch. If he had not been coming to tell her that he was going to throw up the work he would not have been there at the moment, don’t you see? That disposes of clue number two, as

you might call it, while always behind everything else we have got to find out why Grandfather is missing. If he did not damage his neighbour, then why did he go? And who was it that stole the money from Ripple, whose bones were afterwards gnawed by the wolves?"

Pam put up her hands in dismay.

"Don't, Jack!" she protested. "I feel sometimes as if my poor brain will give way under the strain of trying to think it all out and to supply a reason for everything. I should lie awake at night to puzzle about it, only I am always so tired when I go to bed that I am asleep before I know I am sleepy, and the next thing I know is that getting-up time has come again. Oh, there is great compensation in hard work, for it most often stops hard worry!"

"Well, go and get on with your cleaning; I will wash the dishes and get this room into shape," said Jack, rising from the table and stretching his arms high above his head. He always stretched himself to his full height after a meal, for someone had told him that it assisted growth, and he fairly yearned to be tall. His father had been rather short, and Jack was desperately afraid of failing in the matter of height.

"I wonder if it is ever going to leave off raining?" Pam went to the door and peered out at the steady downpour. "I want to scrub those rag carpets that I found tucked away in that old chest in Grandfather's room; it is my belief he put them there because they were too dirty to lie on the floor. I think if I took them across to the creek and washed them there I should have plenty of water to rinse them; you see, they are much too thick and heavy for the ordinary sort of washing, and they want such a lot of water, too."

"Why don't you put them out in the rain now? They would have a chance to get soaked." Jack's wisdom was mostly equal to the demand for it, and Pam was quick to avail herself of it.

"Leave the dishes, Jack dear, and I will get my mackintosh and rubbers, while you bring the little truck from the barn. We will pile the carpets on the truck, and take them across the field to the side of the creek and hang them in a safe place where they are not likely to be washed away. I don't want Grandfather's rag carpets travelling to Fredericton by water. If we hang them over there it will save carrying them about while they are wet, and they can stay there until they are dry, for of course they will be fearfully heavy when they are full of water."

Jack went for the truck, while Pam got into waterproof and rubbers as quick as she could. Then she dragged out the heavy home-made rugs, the work of her mother and her grandmother, which she had found stowed away in safety, but so plastered with dirt that it was quite impossible to use them until they had been

cleansed. Sophy had told her months ago that they would have to be washed, and that it was of no use to think of it until the snow melted, and they could be rinsed in abundance of water. She offered to do the work herself, but Pam was not minded to pile up the burden of her indebtedness more than could be helped. Sophy had been like an angel to her all through the dreary days of that long, anxious winter; this heavy, dirty task of rug-washing was to be got over before she came back, and Pam decided that there was no time like the present.

One of the rugs was so heavy that Pam could barely lift it alone when it was dry, and when it was wet lifting would be quite out of question. There were stout loops of cord under the fringe, and Pam had threaded a length of rope through these which she meant to fasten to a tree on the bank of the creek. Then, with her rug safely moored, she could beat it with sticks until it was clean, while the running water would wash the dirt away.

They loaded the rugs on the truck, then, heedless of the pouring rain, started to drag it across the field. What heavy work it was! Neither of them was of the looking-back sort, however, and so, despite mud, rain, and the heaviness of the truck, they toiled on, reached a cluster of trees growing at the edge of the swollen creek, and by dint of furious exertions succeeded in getting the rugs afloat and moored to the branches of the trees. They were hot and tired, it rained harder than ever, but they felt so successful that they were ready to shout in triumph over their achievement.

“The water is rising fast. Oh, Jack, I think you ought to go over and see how Mrs. Buckle and Amanda are getting on,” said Pam as they turned back from the creek. “I will do the breakfast dishes before I go back to my cleaning. If Mrs. Buckle is drowned out, tell her she can come over here to stay until the floods go down.”

“Right oh! Shall I help you to tow the truck home first, or will you leave it here until the laundry work is done?” he asked, swinging his hand with a flourish to the rugs that were fastened to the branches.

“Leave it here and go straight. Since I have seen how high the water is I have felt rather bad because we have been so wrapped in our own concerns this morning. Stay and help Mrs. Buckle if she needs it. One’s duty to one’s neighbour is of first importance in this lonely part of the world, you know, and I can manage very well, for I can easily leave undone the things I cannot do.” Pam laughed as she turned away to go back to the house, and Jack echoed her laughter as he went along the back of the creek to Mrs. Buckle’s house.

The hours sped away. Pam was so busy she scarcely noticed their going. The big sitting-room was as clean as hands could make it. The breakfast dishes were washed, and she was busy putting the big kitchen into what she called normal

tidiness, when she was startled by a blaze of sunshine. They had hardly seen the sun for days and days, while the rain had poured down with dreary persistence.

She looked at the clock then, and was surprised to find that it was long past noon. Jack had not come back. Doubtless Mrs. Buckle had need of him, and would give him some dinner there. Pam sighed with thankfulness to think there was no need for her to worry about getting a meal. She got herself some food, which she shared with the dog; then, having fed the chickens, which were clamouring loudly about the door, she put on her hat, and, taking a stout stick from the wood-pile, went across the field to the creek, revelling in the warmth and beauty of the sunshine, and humming a little tune because she felt so very cheerful.

The creek was higher than ever. One of her rugs had been lifted so high that it had floated off its mooring branch and had started on a down-creek trip, but had happily caught on a trail of brambles a little distance down, where it was momentarily held.

“It is lucky I happened along just as I did!” she muttered, and after some skilful handling with her big stick she retrieved the errant rug, towed it back to its mooring and proceeded to beat it, laying on the strokes with great vigour, although her arms were beginning to ache with all the work she had done that day. She was raising so much water with her active strokes that in spite of her waterproof there seemed a likelihood of her getting wet through, when she was startled by the amount of wreckage floating past. There were boxes and barrels, a chicken coop or two, and a bamboo chair, which rode on the swiftly-flowing current with an air of rakish irresponsibility that would have been amusing if it had not been so horribly suggestive of someone’s drowned-out home.

“I wonder what is the matter, and whose house has been flooded?” she said, and then she stood leaning on her stick surveying the wreckage, which was coming faster and faster, while the creek was crowded with all sorts of things sailing along.

A shrill screaming smote on her ear, and at the sound her heart seemed to stand still. Instinctively she looked about for something to cling to, and, catching at the branch to which her biggest rug was moored, stood peering up-stream to get the first possible glimpse of what was coming.

A big table with its legs uppermost was careering down-stream, and crouching on it was the drenched figure of a small, white-faced boy, who was uttering shrill cries for help. She had seen him before, but where? Even as she asked herself the question there flashed across her mind the remembrance of the inquiry in the Doctor’s wagon-house, and the small boy who had made grimaces at her when she came out. The bitter injustice of the insult had struck her then,

and it came across her now. There had been no reason so far as she could see why he should have treated her in such a fashion, and she was still in the dark as to the cause.

“I will pull him out, and then he shall tell me, the little wretch!” she murmured, and the thought of possible danger to herself never even entered her head. Plunging down into the water until it was up to her waist, she started shouting her loudest to attract his attention, and waving her stick to make him see that help was at hand. The branch would not let her go far enough, but by catching at the rug that floated moored to the branch she was able to get ever so much farther out. Luckily the creek did not seem to be very deep at that place, and the footing was firm. The boy had seen her now, and was shrieking to her to help him, and to save him from being drowned.

“Catch hold of the stick!” she screamed, realizing that she would barely reach him even now, and as she could not swim it would be madness to venture beyond the reach of the floating rug. “If I had not been washing those carpets I could have done nothing for him!” she gasped, and then caught her breath sharply, for, stretch her arm as she might, she could not get her stick within reach of his hand. In another moment he would be beyond reach, the current flowed so fast. She must get him, she must! Putting her foot forward with a cautious movement she found firm ground, and letting the rug go she thrust the stick out farther, and had the joy of feeling it gripped. But the jerk almost upset her. She reeled, recovered herself by a great effort, and tugged at the pole to tow the boy and the table inshore.

Some more wreckage punted into the table from behind, and it came on her with a jerk; the pole slipped from her grasp, and she was down before she had time to see that the table was going to strike her. There was a wild cry from the boy, who felt himself lost, and then Pam made a great effort, and found herself clinging to the table leg, while the boy clung to her, his grip a frantic clutch that had more danger for her in it than anything else, as she knew full well. But she could not get free of him, and she would have to get him to the bank somehow, or be drowned with him. Then she noticed that some of the wreckage in front of her had been caught by something, and was piling into a barrier. It might not hold many minutes, but if it held long enough for her to reach the bank with the boy it was all that she asked of it. There was a noise in her ears as of someone calling, and she was so dazed by her great effort that she thought it was her mother reminding her of some neglected duty, as had so often been the case in those far-away days when duty had no meaning for her beyond an unpleasant something not always to be shirked.

Ah, her feet touched the bottom! She would do it after all! A feeble shout of

triumph burst from her lips and was echoed by the boy, who had plainly pluck of a sort, although he was so desperately afraid of water. Even as the shout left her lips Pam was down again, and this time she seemed to have no strength to pull herself up. She felt it was all over, and there was even a pang because she would never know why that small boy had been so rude to her. Then something struck her with a force that hurt. She was dragged up and tugged here and pulled there. Someone was working hard to get her ashore, and panting heavily in the process. But she could not help. She could not do anything but struggle to get her breath, and to marvel that she was still alive. At first she could not even open her eyes, and she seemed to be slipping, slipping, while a great black void waited to swallow her up, when she heard a voice in her ears calling to her, and she strove with all her might to answer.

“Jack, Jack, I did not know that you were here!” Her voice was so feeble that she was even surprised herself to find how little noise she could make.

“It is lucky that I was coming along the creek when you fell!” he answered. His tone was jerky, and opening her eyes again, Pam felt half-frightened by the look on his face.

“Was it such a near thing? Poor old Jack!” Pam felt a leaping joy at heart to think he cared so much. She had been so home-sick all the winter that it seemed worth while being brought to such a pitch as this, just to have surprised that look of adoring affection in her brother’s eyes. Then she remembered the boy who was the cause of all the trouble, and she cried out sharply: “Where is the boy? Surely he is not drowned, I tried so hard to save him!” The thought that she might have tried in vain was too much for Pam. She saw the black void open close to her once more; she was slipping, slipping again, and then she heard a burst of noisy crying, and a shrill voice calling:

“Can’t you do nothing to save her? She is dying — I say she is dying, and I never told her. Boo-oo-oo!”

It seemed to Pam that she had slipped to the very verge of the void. The slightest further movement, and she would be gone beyond recall; but she hung poised as it were while Jack said sharply:

“Help me to bring her round, can’t you? It is of no good to howl like that.”

“I might have told her, though, and now it is too late!” wailed the boy, and the sharp curiosity in the heart of Pam drew her back again from the edge of the void.

CHAPTER XVI

Why did He Go?

There was a stirring of wind in the willows at the side of the creek. Some wreckage swung gently against a box laden with tinware that was taking a hurried voyage down-stream, and the collision brought a chiming protest from the tinware that made Pam think of church bells in England. She struggled for strength to speak, and tried to lift her hands to clutch at something that would hold her back from that awful gulf into which she had so nearly slipped. What was it the boy had to tell her? and why, oh why, had he made grimaces at her on that day when the inquiry was held on the remains found in the forest?

“Better, old girl?” Jack’s voice sounded so waggly and anxious that Pam could have laughed for sheer joy because he cared so much; the love in it warmed her like sunshine, and she strove with all her might to keep from slipping down, down, down!

The noisy crying broke out again. Then she heard a voice that was fierce and passionate demanding:

“Can’t you do something to bring her round? Dab water in her face or something like that!”

“It seems to me that she has had too much water already,” replied Jack’s troubled voice. “If I could leave her I would run back to Mrs. Buckle’s. Don Grierson is there, and he would go and fetch his father for me quick!”

“That he would, you bet! They say he just about worships the ground she walks on, and he has always been a regular stand-offish sort.” A hot feeling like a blush surged over Pam, and she made another effort to open her eyes, to speak and let them know how she was, but before she could achieve so much, the boy had burst out again: “I say, do fan her or something! Burnt feathers is good for swooning folks, Miss Gittins says, but we ain’t got no burnt feathers here!”

“What is it you have got to tell me? Say it, quick!” The authority in Pam’s voice was not to be set aside. She struggled to rise, then felt Jack’s arms under her, holding her up to a sitting posture. A broad stream of sunshine smote her eyes, making her blink; then she opened her eyes again, and saw the boy whom she had tried to save sitting on the ground at a little distance, his small thin face all wrinkled and drawn with pain, his eyes pathetic with distress.

“What is it that you ought to have told me?” she asked with hurry in her

voice, some instinct telling her that this thing, whatever it was, mattered a great deal to her, and she must know without delay.

The boy hesitated, a gleam of fear came into his eyes, then he blurted out in a great hurry:

“The old man couldn’t have done Sam Buckle in; I know he couldn’t, there wouldn’t have been time.”

It was as if a rush of new life swept through the veins of Pam. Pushing aside the supporting arms of Jack, she crawled across to where the boy was lying. It seemed to her that she could not trust herself on her feet just yet, for there was no strength in her limbs.

“Tell me what you mean,” she said with sharp insistence. “How do you know that Grandfather did not hurt Sam Buckle?”

“Because I went to Ripple to warn the old man they were going to have a surprise party at his place that night. It is hateful having a surprise party come to your house when you don’t know that they are coming,” said the boy, looking at Pam with a wistful, hungry gaze that made her feel she wanted to cry out of sheer pity for all the limitations and deprivations that the poor child’s life had plainly known.

“Who are you, and where do you come from?” she asked gently. The sunshine was streaming down on her now, and she was feeling the stronger for the genial warmth that took away the deadly chill of her immersion in the creek.

“I am Reggie Furness, Mose Paget’s half-brother; I thought you knowed!” he said. There was surprise in his tone, and Pam was at once conscious that his feelings were hurt because he was of so little importance in the place that she had lived in the district so many months without making his acquaintance.

“Reggie Furness, then, why did you make grimaces at me that day when I came from the inquiry in the Doctor’s wagon-house?” There was blank bewilderment in Pam’s tone. She wanted to ask at least half a dozen questions in a breath, and yet she was so weak and stupid that she could scarcely collect her faculties for coherent speech.

The boy’s eyes fell, and when he answered there was a shamed note in his tone.

“It was pure spite. I knew I could put some things right, but I wasn’t going to then, because it might have hurt Mose. I’ve always stuck by Mose ever since Ma died. Powerful set on Mose she was, though she knowed his weak places better than most. She told me to take care of him for her, and she said it would be good for his character to have me to provide for, but it seems to me I’ve mostly had to provide for myself or to go without. I could do it all right enough if it was not for the time wasted every day in going to school; that is where the trouble comes

in.”

“Why would it have hurt Mose for you to tell?” asked Pam, and then was swift to discover that her question had embarrassed the boy so sorely that she was quick to cover her blunder by another query. “Never mind that now. Tell me what Grandfather said to you when you came to warn him, and how it is that you can be so positive he did not hurt Mrs. Buckle’s husband?”

Reggie gave a wriggle, then winced as if he had hurt himself.

“The old man was downright nasty. It wouldn’t have hurt him to have given me a quarter for my trouble, or if he hadn’t the cash to spare, he might have given me a chunk of food; I can mostly do with a bit of something to eat,” he said, with a wan smile that made Pam feel she wanted to cry more than ever. She thrust out a wet and dirty hand to give the boy a reassuring pat on the arm, then signed for him to go on. She was too anxious to know what he had to tell to have any notice to spare for the supreme discomfort of her condition.

“He didn’t give me nothing,” went on Reggie. “He only growled out that if the surprise party came there they might find that they would get a surprise themselves that they had not bargained for. Then when I asked him out straight what I was to have for my trouble, he just said he would set the dog at me if I did not clear out sharp. He called to the dog, but I did not wait to have the thing come at me; it didn’t seem worth while bringing the creature into the business, especially as I had no stick nor anything to help me in putting up a fight. I just pelted back to the schoolhouse as hard as I could go, and when I got there, it was fifteen minutes past two o’clock.”

“Are you quite, quite positive about the time?” demanded Pam with devouring eagerness.

Reggie gave a weak gurgle of laughter.

“Sure and certain!” he declared. “Schoolmarm she lays on a stroke a minute when we are late at noon spell. We can’t help being late in the mornings, you see, so she says she will take good care that we ain’t encouraged in wasting time in the middle of the day. She is uncommon smart with the stick, and I went sore for days after that.”

“Why did you not tell this before?” cried Pam with anger in her tone. “Just think of the misery I might have been saved!”

“Why should I tell?” cried the boy bitterly. “The old man was not even ordinarily civil to me, yet I had taken all that trouble for him. Then I was afraid, and reckoned that the less said the better.”

“What were you afraid of?” asked Pam.

Reggie gave another wriggle.

“My leg hurts something awful, do you expect that I have broken it?” he

demanded; and now there was a whine in his voice as if he was purposely calling attention to his sufferings in order to draw Pam's notice from things he did not want to have discussed just then.

"Are you hurt?" she asked in quick sympathy. She had not noticed his position before.

"It is either a sprain or a break," put in Jack. "The poor kid was hurt when he came sailing down-stream on the table. Amanda saw him slipping along past Mrs. Buckle's house, and she came screaming to warn me, for he shouted to her that he was hurt and could not help himself. I came as fast as I could, and it was lucky I did, for I was only just in time to pull you out."

"There is the truck!" exclaimed Pam, waving her arm towards the truck, which had been left to carry the rugs back to the house. "We can put him on that and wheel him to the house. Then you must go for the Doctor, Jack. Perhaps Mrs. Buckle will lend you the horse; you can stick on its back if you try hard enough."

"Don is at Mrs. Buckle's, helping to make a dam to keep the water out; he will go for the Doctor," said Jack. Then Pam suddenly remembered what she had heard Reggie saying when she lay in her half-swoon, and she blushed right up to the roots of her hair. It was so absurd for people to put sentimental constructions on every little appearance of friendship between Don and herself; he was her very good friend, just as Sophy was, and that was all. It was stupid to blush like a little schoolgirl! Pam was painfully conscious of a quizzical look from Jack as he brought the truck to the place where Reggie was sitting, and then of course she blushed harder than ever.

Reggie was lifted on to the truck with considerable difficulty. He might be thin and small to look at, but it took all the strength of Pam and Jack to lift him, while his moans and groans when they touched him made Pam feel so bad that she did not know how to bear it. The task of pulling the truck across the sodden field was heavy, too. She and Jack pressed forward shoulder to shoulder, and she had a queer spent feeling as if she would give up the next moment and slip to the ground.

"What makes the kid so certain that Grandfather had no hand in hurting Sam Buckle?" asked Jack. His head was close to hers as they drew the heavy truck, and they could talk in low tones without any danger of Reggie hearing what they had to say.

"It is the time that settles it," replied Pam. "It would take Reggie nearly an hour to go from Ripple to the schoolhouse, though he might do it in three-quarters if he ran all the way. That would make it half-past one when he left Ripple in a hurry, because Grandfather set the dog at him. It was just one when

Sam Buckle left his home that day, and he had not been gone ten minutes by the clock when Mrs. Buckle remembered he had taken the keys with him, and that she would want them when the man from the stores came with the week's groceries. It would take her from twenty minutes to half an hour to walk to our boundary from her house, which would bring her to the place about the time that Reggie was starting away from Ripple. When she got to the fence she found her husband lying on the ground unconscious, and so fearfully battered that at first she thought he must be dead. Grandfather's axe lay on the ground near to him, and it was not wonderful, knowing as she did of the feud between them, that she believed Grandfather had done it. Ripple was the nearest place to run for help, but she would not be likely to come here under the circumstances. Indeed, she could not leave her husband to go anywhere for help at first; she found he was just alive, and so she set to work to keep him from slipping away. It was five o'clock before she was able to get any help of any kind. Even then it was only little Amanda Higgins, who had happened that way round on going home from school, because Mrs. Buckle had promised her some cookies. It was nearly seven before the neighbours arrived to carry the poor man to his home, and then the police and the Doctor had to be sent for."

Jack drew a long breath. "It is something to know that Grandfather did not do a thing like that! But why did he go away? It looks as if he had had something to be ashamed of anyhow. The puzzle seems to grow rather than decrease. Don't you think so?"

Pam nodded. She was so fearfully out of breath, and she was feeling so exhausted, that she had no strength left for any more speculation just then. She could not even feel properly glad over the lifting of one cloud, so afraid was she that another was going to brood close over her. There must have been some strong reason for her grandfather going away and remaining absent, and she quailed lest the reason might be one to be ashamed of. It is not easy to take rosy views of things when one is drenched to the skin with muddy water and aching from head to foot. Hope and courage would spring again presently, but just now they were low down, and nothing would have been easier than for Pam to collapse in a miserable heap and burst into crying.

Her pride saved her. Talk of the sin of pride! A few sermons on the virtues of the proper sort would not be out of place in some phases of life and living, for certain it is that many a man and woman would give up the struggle to present a brave face to the world but for this same proper pride. Pam took her share of dragging the truck, and when the house was reached she helped Jack to carry Reggie to the bedroom that had been her grandfather's. Then she left her brother to the task of getting the boy to bed while she ran upstairs and slipped into clean,

dry clothing. Oh, the comfort of having a clean face and feeling dry! Pam suddenly felt pounds better; half her aches and pains vanished, and she hurried down to help Jack, and to insist that he, too, should stay for dry clothes before he went off to Mrs. Buckle's to send Don to bring the Doctor.

It was easy to see that Reggie was in a rather bad way, and Pam, having had but little experience of sickness, would have been thankful to shift the burden of caring for him on to someone else. When Jack had gone, and she was left alone with him, his moans and cries were incessant. His mind was not clear; very often when she bent over him trying to make him more comfortable he thought she was Mose, and he would look up at her with a face full of reproach, crying out that he should not have stolen the money, that stolen goods were of no use to anyone.

The waiting for the Doctor was about the hardest thing Pam had had to bear for some time. The boy's face was flushed with fever, and he talked in a high-pitched tone that sounded weird and unnatural. His revelations about his home life were to the last degree pathetic, and always he was reminding himself that he had promised his dying mother to do what he could to keep his brother straight.

Jack came back, and set to work on the evening "chores", leaving Pam free to remain in the house. It was necessary that someone should be with the boy every minute now, for he thought himself afloat on the table again, and he was all the time trying to throw himself out of bed in the hope of reaching the bank. His horror of water was very great, and he felt himself drowning every minute.

"Here comes Dr. Grierson, and Sophy is with him!" shouted Jack, putting his head in at the door of the best sitting-room, and Pam uttered a little cry of thankfulness, for she had wanted Sophy that afternoon more than words could express. It was dreadful to feel so helpless and to be able to do so little.

"Broken leg!" said the Doctor. "You will have your work cut out, Miss Walsh, but there is no help for it; he can't be moved. Sophy will stay, though, and the neighbours will do what they can. The trouble is that the boy has no reserve strength, poor child. He has been so nearly starved, too, that a shock of this kind will certainly make things go hard with him."

"You don't think that he will die, do you?" demanded Pam with blank dismay on her face. If Reggie died her grandfather's name could not be cleared. Such an issue to the boy's present condition was too dreadful to be thought of; his life must be saved somehow.

"Doctors never think their patients are going to die," replied Dr. Grierson curtly. "I said that the boy had no reserve of strength, so that he would be more ill than an ordinary case of fracture would warrant; that is to say, he will be very

feverish, and he will wander in his mind a great deal. He will need a great deal of nursing, too, and I expect he will be very bad-tempered and difficult to manage. As I said before, you are going to have your hands full.”

“Anything more?” she asked with a comical gesture of pretended despair. “But you have not frightened me yet, and he is going to be nursed back to strength if care and painstaking can accomplish it. He told me to-day he could prove that Grandfather was here at Ripple at the time when Sam Buckle was so knocked about. If he can clear the name of the poor old man, neither Jack nor myself will grudge the work of nursing him.”

“If he can do that, why has he not done it already?” asked the Doctor. He was in the kitchen now, sitting by the stove, and drinking a cup of tea that Jack had made for him while he was busy with Reggie.

“He was angry with Grandfather, who had not treated him well,” explained Pam; and then she plunged into the story which the boy had told her of how he came to Ripple to warn Wrack Peveril of the surprise party that was coming, and did not get even thanks for his trouble. It hurt her considerably to have to tell of that part, but she must be just, and the old man’s treatment of the boy had not been fair, or kind either.

“Told on the surprise party, did he?” chuckled the Doctor. “I am not so very much surprised at his keeping quiet about it, for Galena would certainly have been very wrathful if she had known; she was the head and front of the affair, and she is spirited, too. But, Miss Walsh, that does but deepen the mystery, because if your grandfather had done nothing to be ashamed of, why did he disappear in such a strange fashion? He must have dropped everything and gone.”

“The only explanation that I can think of is that something happened to him in the forest, and we have never found his body,” said Pam.

“Not likely,” objected the Doctor. “Supposing that he had dropped dead from unsuspected heart disease or anything of that sort, he would have fallen on the open trail, and his body would have been found. Then, if he did not do the damage to Sam Buckle, why did the poor chap keep muttering that it was his right, always that it was his right? Then remember the rumour of the old man having been seen in the lumber camp. How can it be explained?”

“I don’t know. It is as mysterious to me as it is to you,” said Pam, drawing a long breath. Then she looked into the face of the Doctor, and the steadfast light in her eyes was a sight to see, as she continued: “I am quite sure that Reggie has told the truth. He had nothing to gain by telling me, but perhaps a good deal to lose, for Galena can be hard sometimes, and he works there, you see. It has given me hope. I can hold up my head and look people in the face again, now I

know Grandfather did not do that shameful thing. Oh, you cannot think how I have suffered in my pride because of it!”

“Yes, I can, because I know how proud you are!” The Doctor rose to go, and stood looking at Pam with a good deal of kindness in his gaze; he liked her very much, and he guessed that his son liked her still more.

It was just at this moment that there came a swift run of feet across the best sitting-room, the door was flung hastily open, and Sophy appeared on the threshold crying urgently:

“Oh, Father, do come back again before you go, for the boy is saying such dreadful things!”

CHAPTER XVII

What Reggie Suspects

His eyes bright, and his face flushed with fever, Reggie Furness was sitting up in bed talking rapidly in a low tone.

“What is the matter, old fellow?” asked the Doctor, entering the room with Sophy, greatly perturbed, at his heels, while Pam brought up the rear, and stood halting on the threshold, as if uncertain whether to go in or to remain outside.

“It is Mose, only I didn’t like to say so.” Reggie turned his flushed face to the Doctor and talked rapidly, as if he were afraid he would forget what he wanted to say. “Mose hated Sam Buckle like poison; he talked, too, when he had had too much to drink. I used to be afraid he would say something when folks was round, but he always seemed to know enough to hold his tongue then.”

“I don’t see why he should hate him so much?” The Doctor’s tone had a note of query in it, and he frowned a little. The wanderings of a feverish patient were not to be trusted, and this would create a prejudice against Mose Paget, which would be grossly unfair if the things Reggie was babbling of were untrue.

Reggie laughed in an unmirthful fashion.

“Things have always gone against our Mose, but he ain’t a bad sort at the bottom — not when he doesn’t forget, that is. I told Ma I would stick by him and keep him straight when I could; I’ve done it too, only now he’s gone away, didn’t even stop to say good-bye to me, he didn’t — looks as if he didn’t care a red cent whether I lived or died.”

“Well, go to sleep now, and leave Mose alone till you feel a bit better,” the Doctor said soothingly. Then he laid Reggie down in bed, drew the coverlet over him, and waited until his eyes closed and he seemed to sleep.

“It is of no use to take any notice of what the boy says while he is in this condition,” he then said, drawing Sophy out of the room, and closing the door so that Reggie should not be disturbed. “When he comes to his senses he will most likely have forgotten everything he has said. Are you two afraid to be left here alone with him? I dare say Mrs. Buckle would come over and lend you a hand until he gets a bit more in his right mind.”

“I am not afraid,” said Pam sturdily. “I don’t think that I want Mrs. Buckle here at present. Just think how hard it would be for her to hear all this talk of the poor boy’s! We will manage somehow, and we have Jack now, you know.”

“We shall do very well,” agreed Sophy, who still looked white and scared. “I called you because I thought I ought to do it for the sake of Pam; but if you don’t think there is any truth in what he is saying, of course it is of no use taking any notice of it.”

“I did not say there was no truth in it. I said it could not be regarded as evidence,” corrected her father. “What we have to do is to nurse the boy back to health and strength, and when he is better see if he will tell us what he knows, if he really knows anything, that is. But there must be no mention of this in any conscious spells that he may have. Now I must be going; I have to go over to Hunt’s Crossing, and I want to get home before dark if I can. By the way, do you know how the boy got his hurt?”

“Jack says the water began to come into the house where Reggie lives. He was trying to save the furniture when some up-stream wreckage crashed into the side of the house, and the crazy old place collapsed; the boy escaped by a miracle, and managed to scramble on to the table, which was upside down. He was carried past Mrs. Buckle’s in that fashion, but they were all so busy there, trying to barricade the house to keep the water out, that they did not see him until it was too late. Jack started in pursuit, and it was lucky for me that he did, for I was in difficulties when he reached our frontage on the creek. I am not much good where water is concerned. I can’t swim, and I have the most fearful terror of water, too.” Pam shivered as she spoke, and the whole grim struggle seemed to come back upon her; again she was fighting to keep on her feet in the swirling brown current, while she strove to tow the table and the boy to the bank.

The Doctor nodded in complete understanding, then said in his most business-like manner:

“Suppose you go straight to bed now, and lie there until dawn; then you can get up and relieve Sophy. The evening chores bothering you, are they?” he laughed, as Pam began on a spirited objection to being sent to bed like a naughty child in broad daylight. “Jack can manage them, he is a downright capable chap; but I don’t want you for a patient to-morrow, so you must do as you are told.”

It was of no use to protest. Pam felt so bad that she was very thankful to be spared anything further in the way of exertion. She was so tired, too, that she went fast asleep directly her head touched the pillow, and she knew nothing more until the first grey glimmer of dawn began to steal over the tops of the forest trees. She sprang up then, intent on relieving Sophy. Hastily dressing, she stole downstairs, walked softly across the best sitting-room, and gently pushed open the door of the bedroom, which stood ajar.

Sophy was fast asleep, her head resting on the side of the bed. Reggie was asleep too, and he looked such a small boy, his face so pinched and white and

pathetic, that Pam could have wept in sheer pity as she looked at him. She withdrew as softly as she had entered, and, going out to the kitchen, set to work to rouse the fire in the stove, and to make coffee. She would not disturb Sophy yet; better to sleep in an uncomfortable position than not to sleep at all.

Breakfast was ready, a very early breakfast, and the big kitchen was full of the odours of coffee, fried bacon, and toast, when Pam went across to the bedroom carrying a cup of milk for the invalid and some toast. Sophy woke then, cramped, stiff, and miserable, and was ordered out to the kitchen to have her breakfast, while Pam stayed to look after the patient, who was also awake. The old dog had entered the room behind her, and stood wagging a friendly tail by way of welcome to the boy on the bed. The animal was used to fresh faces now, and being of a friendly disposition was ready to welcome everyone that came.

“Better, are you?” asked Pam briskly. She put the milk down by the side of the bed, and then stood looking at the boy with kindly pity in her eyes. He was so small and thin that it was to the last degree pathetic to think of him staying alone, and striving to make a living for himself since Mose had deserted him.

“I suppose so; only, things seem queer,” he answered, with an uneasy look round as if he were in search of something.

“People always feel queer when they have a broken leg; but time will mend it, and you will be all the better for the rest in bed. I expect you will grow a bit, too.” Pam spoke in the cheeriest possible tone, and then she added, with intent to make him laugh: “Jack says that my brother Greg grew so much, when he lay in bed ill with rheumatic fever, that when he was able to get up they had to buy new clothes for him because the old ones were too small.”

Reggie looked frightened.

“If that happens to me,” he rejoined, “I shall have to sew myself into a sack, for I have no more clothes, nor any money to buy them. I am dreadful scared because of the Doctor, and all the rest of it. Of course I can work it all out, but it takes time, and going to school makes such a difference. I get up directly it comes daylight, then by school-time I’m so sleepy I can’t see the figures of my sums, and I’m dreaming before I even think of dozing. Schoolmarm lays on for that, and no mistake! My word, she is a rare one at fighting!”

Pam laughed, but her heart was very sore, and she felt that she wanted to put her head down beside Reggie and cry from sheer pity. Instead, she gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder, and said kindly:

“Don’t you worry about expense. The Doctor won’t charge for coming to see you, and we shan’t charge for taking care of you, so you can feel as if you are away from home on a visit, and you need have no worries about anything. Then, when you are better, you can go on earning your living again, unless your

brother has come back to take care of you.”

The reference to Mose was unfortunate. The light which had come into the eyes of Reggie at her words faded into a look of apprehension, and his face set itself in lines of care, while his voice was an anxious whisper as he said:

“Mose won’t come back; he has quit for good and all. If only he had taken me with him I wouldn’t have cared, but it wasn’t playing fair to leave me behind.”

Pam had a choking sensation, and her eyes were smarting with tears; but it would never do to let him see them, so she made an effort to say lightly:

“Perhaps he felt that you would be happier here among the people you know. You have regular work with Miss Gittins, and perhaps she will let you sleep there, now that your house has been washed away.”

“I’ve lost that!” answered the boy, with dumb hopeless misery in his face.

“When did you lose it, and why?” she demanded. She supposed that he had been up to some mischievous prank that had angered Galena, whose patience was not of the most long-suffering kind.

“When she hears that I came here to warn the old man about the surprise party, she won’t never forgive me,” he said in a shamed tone. “She can’t abide folks that run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. She says you ought to be true to one side or the other, and it was she who told me about the surprise party, you see; then I came straight here and told the old man. You can’t clear him without letting on to Miss Gittins that I told, and she won’t get over it, not if I know anything about it.”

“You lie still, and try not to worry,” said Pam hopefully. “More wonderful things have happened than that. You may have Miss Gittins coming to see you one of these fine days, for she is a kind-hearted sort.”

Reggie shook his head.

“I know her better than you,” he said, and Pam could not deny that he did. “She likes you until you do something that makes her despise you; then she never gets over it. Mose and she was going to get married an awful long time ago, when I was a kid, but they quarrelled, and she never got over it. Then one night there was a surprise party came to our house when we was in bed. We hadn’t food, nor fire, nor nothing that time, and Mose and me we just squirmed inside at having all them laughing, joking, dressed-up folks coming to find out how poor we were. They were just dressed up like grand folks in books, and Mose he went on at Galena — that is Miss Gittins, you know — in the most awful way because of her smart rig-out. Folks said that she had helped to get up that surprise party because she wanted to make it up with Mose; but after that, of course, they were worse than ever.”

“Still, she has found work for you,” Pam said gently, though his bitter confidences made her feel unhappy.

“There wasn’t no one else to go,” he answered with great finality. “The only other boy that lives near enough to do chores on Gittins’s place and attend school is Josie Higgins, and his folks have got enough for him to do at home. I don’t know how they will get on without me, and I was downright fond of the beasts and things.”

Pam comforted poor sore-hearted Reggie to the best of her ability, but when the days went past and Galena Gittins made no sign, she began to realize with some consternation that the boy was right in his estimate of his late employer. The Doctor had been to see the school teacher, who at once confirmed Reggie’s statement as to the number of strokes of the cane he had received on that particular day. She even showed the Doctor the punishment record which she kept, and he read for himself the entry in her neat handwriting to the effect that Reginald Furness, being fifteen minutes late for afternoon school, had received fifteen strokes of the cane.

“There is nothing like method,” said the Doctor with a smile, as he handed her back the book, and thought how easy the record would make it for Wrack Peveril to prove his alibi on that particular day — if he ever came back, that was, which at present seemed doubtful.

“No, there is nothing like method,” agreed the teacher; and then she added: “It is of no use to make rules and not keep to them. I do not thrash the boys and girls because I like to do it, or because it gratifies some brutal instinct in me — indeed, I hate it; but, because I have said that I would do it, I keep my word. It is the only thing which will bring them to school in time; and so, unpleasant though it is, I do it as part of my duty.”

The Doctor nodded and went away, but it was noticeable afterwards, when people complained to him that the teacher was so fond of punishing, that he always stood up in her defence, declaring that it was not love of it, but merely an honourable desire to keep her word.

The days were hard for the three at Ripple. Reggie was very ill, and needed nursing night and day. Mrs. Buckle came over when she could, but it was the busy time of the year. She had a great flock of turkeys hatched, and they needed about as much care as if they had been babies. Even Mrs. Higgins, the hard-worked mother of Amanda, put in two or three nights of sitting up, so that Pam and Sophy might not be worn out; and everyone — except Galena — was as kind as could be.

Then the fever abated, and Reggie began to get better; the Doctor only came once a day instead of twice, and even took to missing a day once in a way, and

sending Don over instead to know how the boy was getting on. At least, that was what Don said he came for, and although Sophy screwed her face into an understanding smile, she was loyal enough to her brother not to give him away by announcing that the Doctor never paid proxy visits of that sort.

Don drove a frisky, high-stepping colt which he had bred himself, and was very proud of. He said the creature needed exercise, and when he came to enquire after Reggie, he would take Pam for a drive across the forest, just to keep the colt in proper trim, so he said. Pam enjoyed the swift motion, the fresh air, and the absence of fatigue as only a very hard-worked person can enjoy anything. Don was so beguiling in his conversation, too, and he knew so much, that she was won into forgetfulness of her worries, and that in itself was a benefit indeed.

The question of money was always uppermost. It was quite astonishing what a little they lived upon; but then there was so little coming in. Of course there was the money for the black spruce, but both Pam and Jack would have gone hungry any day rather than touch that. Reggie's confession would save their grandfather from having to stand his trial for wounding Sam Buckle; but all the same the old man might need the money very sorely, and in any case it was not theirs.

By the end of May some of the crops were coming up and needed careful hoeing, the live stock was increasing in number and in size, and there was a look of prosperity about Ripple which the place had not worn for many a long year past, and that in spite of the tightness of money. It was marvellous to Pam what a lot of their wants the farm supplied. Milk they had in generous supply, and butter. There were enough potatoes in the cellar to feed them, and the pigs and poultry, until potatoes came again. Eggs they had also, but as these were in great demand they mostly went to help out the store account, whilst the healthy folk ate corn porridge and milk. Flour they had to buy, but not much else. Jack had snared quite a lot of hares, and these served to vary the bacon, which was home-cured; and other meat they did not buy.

Pam was realizing that she was learning to be thrifty in spite of herself, while Jack was satisfied with anything in the way of food, and would not have been inclined to complain if she had asked him to eat nothing but baked potatoes and buckwheat porridge every day until harvest came round.

In the days of Reggie's slow convalescence Pam, who knew him best, discovered that he was worrying himself most dreadfully because of Galena's attitude. Something would have to be done, that was certain. Pam could not very well keep him at Ripple indefinitely, for she hoped that her mother would consent to bring the children over in a month or two. Even if Mrs. Walsh decided

that she would stay in England for another winter, it was still not advisable to keep Reggie at Ripple. The boy knew everything there was to be known about life in the country, and Jack knew only what he had been able to pick up since he had come to Canada; Reggie was of the very dominant sort, and from very superiority of knowledge he would come to the front and stay there, which would not be good for him nor yet for Jack.

Then Pam had a bright idea, and the next time Don drove over to Ripple to exercise that tireless colt she asked him if he would drive her over to the Gittins's farm, because she had important business with Galena.

"I will drive you anywhere with the greatest pleasure," responded Don with warmth, but Pam was so absorbed that she did not even blush. She was so hard driven that she had no time to be self-conscious these days, and this doubtless added to her charm in Don's eyes, although he could not help being a trifle resentful sometimes because she was so oblivious of his attentions.

It was the last week in May. The fervid warmth of the spring sunshine had made the forest foliage a sight to see. The young and tender greens, freshened up by last night's rain, were at their very best and most beautiful stage, there were flowers everywhere, and the ground was carpeted in places with a mosaic of colour.

"Why do people live in cities when the country is so beautiful?" demanded Pam in a tone of positive awe, as her gaze roamed over the open spaces and the vistas of green which stretched away on either side.

"People love their own species better than Nature," answered Don, with the rare wisdom which sometimes characterizes quiet folk. "So they herd together, the closer the better, and find their happiness so. Half of them don't need any pity, for they would be just miserable if they had to live alone with Nature."

"I have never been in the woods in springtime before," said Pam, who was drawing deep breaths of pure ecstasy. "Every day shows some new miracle, and I tell myself it was worth while enduring the winter to have the glory of the spring."

Nathan Gittins had just come home from a long day of seeding at a little farm high up on the hills beyond the Ridge, where the winter lingered long and was very loath to go. Yet the high ground was astonishingly fertile, and responded more quickly to tillage than even the sheltered valleys, so the long journey and hard work were worth while. Only Nathan had not come home in the most amiable of tempers, for he missed Reggie at every turn, and he often had to get the food for the horses ready himself, after the long day afield, if Galena happened to be hard pressed indoors.

This was the case to-night. Don, who understood about such things, tied his

horse to the hitching-post and went across to the barn to help, while Pam, quaking inwardly, betook herself indoors to do her errand with Galena.

Miss Gittins was on her dignity to-night. A deeply injured person she felt herself, and she showed it in every line of her body as she darted to and fro getting supper. But her manners were equal to the demand hospitality made upon them, and she pressed Pam to stay to supper with real cordiality, albeit she was excessively dignified, a pose that did not suit her because it was unnatural.

“I have had supper, thank you, and I could not eat anything more if I tried. I am very sorry, though, for your cookies do look most delightful. I can’t think how it is you do it; mine never come out so well.”

“It is use,” replied Galena. “I was doing that sort of thing when you were in your cradle, and I have been doing it ever since, while I suppose that you hardly saw a cooky until since you came to live at Ripple.”

“That is it, I suppose; and so I may expect to become proficient by the time I am grey-haired. Galena, why have you never been over to see that poor boy since his accident?” Pam fired her question at Galena with such disconcerting suddenness that she was too much taken aback to consider her reply, and so blurted out the plain, unvarnished truth.

“I do not want to have anything to do with a miserable little sneak that worms himself into my confidence and then goes hot-foot to tell what he has found out. I have no use for two-faced people!”

“Neither have I in an ordinary way,” said Pam quietly. She had gently elbowed Galena from the stove, and was briskly stirring Nathan’s porridge herself. It was the first thing she saw that she could do, and her doing it left Galena’s hands free for something else. “But do you know why he did it? I mean, do you know why he went off to Ripple that day to warn Grandfather about the surprise party?”

“To earn a quarter, I suppose. It is just disgusting to see young children so set on getting money by fair means or foul. I have no patience with it.” Galena was quite splendid in her wrath, but Pam’s eyes were suddenly dim with tears.

“He did want money, I know,” she said quietly; “but he did not get it, for Grandfather set the dog at him in return for his kindness in having come to warn him.”

“Kindness!” snorted Galena, with her head in the air, and she set a dish on the table with so much emphasis that the contents were spilled on the table-cloth.

Pam wanted to laugh, but managed to keep a grave face. She knew that Galena hated to spill things, and this was only Tuesday, so she would have to look at that soiled table-cloth every day for the rest of the week, which would be punishment enough for her without anything else.

“I think it was kindness,” said Pam quietly. “It must be dreadful to have a set of people you do not care for coming to take forcible possession of your house sometime when you have gone, or are just going to bed, to have them go poking and prying through your private places, and seeing all the miserable little shifts that you have to make to present a decent front to the world. Oh, it must be hateful! You would not realize it yourself, because you have never been poor. I don’t mean that you have not had to want something you could not have, but you have never had to make all sorts of miserable little shifts to keep people from finding out how poor you were.”

“But you went to more than one surprise party yourself last winter, and you enjoyed it as much as anyone, or at least you appeared to!” burst out Galena, showing quick resentment, for she thought it was the idea that Pam was attacking.

“I know that I did,” answered Pam. “Indeed, I never enjoyed a frolic more in my life than the night we came here to surprise you and your brother. But then you had nothing to hide. You were friends with every one of us. There was food in your larder and firing in its proper place. You had table-cloths, and dishes, and everything else that was needed. But how would you have felt if you had gone to bed without any supper, or next to none, if there had been no firing in the house, and your only table-cloth was a torn old newspaper, not too clean, while all the house was in the state of the most abject poverty that you can imagine?”

“Your Grandfather’s house was not like that!” cried Galena in amazement and indignant astonishment. “Why, you were there and saw it yourself!”

“I know,” said Pam, whose heart was beating very fast; “but I was not thinking of Grandfather just then, I was showing you the position from Reggie’s standpoint. We cannot correctly judge other people’s motives unless we can see things from their point of view. You blame him for going to Ripple to tell Grandfather that the surprise party was coming, yet you are forgetting how Reggie and his brother suffered from the same infliction of most mistaken kindness. It was because he and Mose Paget had suffered so fiercely in their pride that Reggie went to Ripple that day.”

“Mose Paget has no pride; he would not be where he is to-day if he had had a grain of pride worth having. He is bed-rock lazy, too!” burst out Galena.

“I dare say he is not much good or he would not have left poor Reggie as he has done,” admitted Pam rather ruefully. She hated to have to speak against Mose, because of his goodness to her on that never-to-be-forgotten day when she stumbled on the lynxes at the ruined house on the old tote road. “Still, perhaps he had pride of a sort, only it got so badly wounded that he could not rise above it: people are like that sometimes. But it is Reggie that I am concerned about,

and I have come to ask you to forgive him, and to let him come back here to work when he is better.”

“He was downright useful, I will say that for him, and we are lost without him,” admitted Galena. “But I should hate to have anyone about that I could not trust, and it will always be coming up against him in my mind that he played me false before.”

“You will get over that. Try him again and see,” urged Pam. Then Don called to her that it was time to be going, and she had to leave things, uncertain whether she had scored a success or failed.

CHAPTER XVIII

Met on the Trail

Pam's face was so long when she came out of the house in response to a summons from Don that he took to rallying her on her evident depression as they drove back to Ripple.

"It looks as if you and Galena had been having a little difference of opinion, and that you had come off second best. Why didn't you shout for me? It would have given me all the pleasure in life to have squashed her flat."

"But it would not have mended matters at all," said Pam with an impatient sigh. "I wanted Galena to be willing to take Reggie Furness back to work there when he is well enough, but she has got such an impossible attitude with regard to a wrongdoer. Because a person has once done the thing which is not square she will never trust that person again. She knows she is not perfect herself, and yet she expects perfection in everyone else."

"That is the stand most folks take," he answered with a short laugh. "Self-blindness, I call it, and as a rule the more they shout about the weaknesses of other people the more disposed they are to the same infirmity themselves. But Galena is a good sort at the bottom, and she will very likely turn things over in her mind a bit when she has had a little time. I guess Nathan is more than a little cross with me. He wanted his supper about as much as it is possible for a man to want anything, and I kept him out in the barn, asking him questions about every imaginable thing, from moose-calling to the best and quickest way of plucking chickens. I helped him feed his horses, though, and he said he hated that business worse than anything he had to do all day. He said it made him real bad to see the creatures stuffing their noses into the food and having such a good time, while he felt like sinking into his boots with hunger. Then I reminded him that he would soon have the boy back to get supper ready for his horses, so he cheered up a bit, although he did mention that Galena might have something to say on the subject."

"Oh, it was good of you to put in a word for Reggie like that. If Nathan feels he wants the boy back so badly, Galena may have to give way." There was a catch in Pam's voice, for she was feeling this affair very keenly. Reggie was having to suffer for his vindication of her grandfather, and so it became very much of a personal matter to her.

The colt was spanking along at a fine pace. The trail was very good just at this part, and Don's high-wheeled cart went bumping and swaying along under the shade of the birches and the hemlocks while the level rays of the setting sun lay in bars of gold across the heavy green foliage. In another ten or fifteen minutes they would be at Ripple, and Don's golden evening would be over. It was not wonderful that he wanted to make the most of it while it lasted.

"I am a bit jealous of that boy Reggie. You seem to have no time to think of anyone else," he ventured, greatly daring, and Pam turned to him with a look of astonishment.

"What else could we do but think of him, seeing how ill he has been?" she demanded; then added with a laugh: "Besides, he is not the sort to remain in the background at any time. He has been teaching me all sorts of things about the wild life of the forest, and telling me about racoons and minks and beavers. He told me that there is a beaver meadow about seven miles across the forest from here, and he is going to take me to see it some day when he is stronger."

"I will drive you over. It is too far for you to walk, and the trail is rough," said Don. Then, finding his golden minutes fleeting faster than ever, he burst out in impulsive speech: "I have loved you ever since that night you stopped us on the trail to ask the way to Ripple, and there isn't a thing I would not do to please you, if you would let me."

Pam looked keenly distressed.

"Oh, please, don't!" she said, clasping her hands tightly and feeling that she would love to run away.

But Don, having once started, was not to be easily stopped.

"Why shouldn't I tell you that I care for you more than for anyone else in the world?" he demanded. "I am not so clever as you by a long way, and you always make me feel that I am the very clumsiest animal that ever wore shoe leather; but Mother says that is very good for me, and she told me to-night that she owed a deep debt of gratitude to the little girl at Ripple for smartening up her son. Can't you care for me at all, Pam?"

Pam went very white. What possessed this infatuated young man to talk to her of love, when for aught she knew there might be shame in front of her far greater than any she had had to bear as yet? It was fairly plain that her grandfather had had no hand in the hurting of Sam Buckle, but it was quite possible he was involved in something else which would not bear the light of day, seeing that he must have fled from his home to avoid meeting the surprise party.

"It is not a time to think of oneself," she said in a chilly tone, which was all the colder because of the wave of self-pity that suddenly filled her heart. It did

seem hard that her life should be clouded by this mystery, and just at the time when things might have been really delightful. "We never know what is going to happen next, or whether Grandfather will come home."

"That seems to me all the more reason why you should have someone with a right to stand by you," said Don, whose face was setting into stern lines of determination. "You have Jack here now, it is true, but he is only a boy, and I want the right to stand by you."

She shook her head. Speech was so difficult just now, and oh! she could have cried because her golden evening was spoiled. But in her way she was as resolute as Don, and she was determined that she would avoid anything that might bring more suffering later on.

"It is very nice of you to want to shelter me," she said gently. "But I don't need it. I mean, I am quite able to stand up under things without help. I could not let you care for me — I mean, go on caring for me, when perhaps there is heavy disgrace to come on us in the near future. Of course we know now that Grandfather did not hurt Sam Buckle, but we do not understand why he had to leave his home. We know he did not die in the forest, because Mose Paget knew a man who had seen him and talked to him. This was all easy of understanding while we thought he had gone away because of what happened to his neighbour. Now it is a maddening mystery, and I can't begin to think of myself or to plan for being happy in my own way. I have to do my very best to keep the farm going so that it shall pay, and so that there may be a little money for Grandfather if he comes home. I came to New Brunswick hoping to make a place for Mother and the younger children, but my work seems to go in the direction of helping Grandfather all I can, even though I have never seen him."

Pam was talking now for talking's sake. She wanted to stave off all the things which she instinctively felt Don wanted to say to her. She was stifling back, too, a very real heartache. They had been such friends, such real chums, and it was hard to feel that she must give up what she had had, just because circumstances would not let her give more. But she did not know Don quite as well as she thought she did. He received all she had to say in a very non-committal silence, and then, when the house at Ripple was reached, he said quietly:

"I can wait. You have not said that you did not care for me, or that there was anyone else, and nothing else matters. No, I won't come in to-night, thank you, it is getting late. I shall come over again and take you out when there is time, and things will be just as they were."

Would they? Pam greatly doubted it. She would always be self-conscious now when she was with Don; the old comradeship would have disappeared, and she would feel it necessary to stand on guard always.

It was quite early next morning when Galena Gittins drove up to the house in a smart little wagon that she had bought for herself from her own earnings.

“I thought I would just come over and see for myself if that pickle of a boy is getting better,” she explained a little awkwardly. “Nathan was saying last night that if he could not have Reggie back he would have a hired man in the house for this summer, but I tell him we can’t get men these days, and so we have to be thankful to have boys. Nathan ought to have married years ago, then maybe he would not be dependent on outside labour now.”

Sophy laughed quietly as she led Galena across the best sitting-room to the end bedroom where Reggie lay. Rumour said that back in those far-off years when he was a young man, Nathan Gittins had wanted to get married, but gave up the idea because of the strenuous objections of Galena; but then rumour is not much to be trusted, so perhaps Nathan had not been very keen upon matrimony.

Reggie looked up and flushed scarlet when Galena entered the room. But she walked across the floor with her usual brisk tread, saying, in a matter-of-fact tone:

“Getting better, are you? Well, the sooner you are fit for work the better we shall like it. A rotten time we are having at our place, and Nathan is about worn out with all the things he has to do at night when he comes in from the field.”

Reggie stared at her with unbelieving joy in his eyes.

“Do you mean that I am to come back to work the same as if nothing had happened — I mean, the same as if I had not told?” he asked, in a tone that quavered suspiciously.

Galena snorted, and tossed her head with an air of fine scorn.

“I haven’t much patience with two-faced folks myself, but this time, at least, it has turned out all right, since you can clear Wrack Peveril from such a low-down charge as that brought against him. The pity is that you did not do it before, but the wisest of us make mistakes sometimes.”

Reggie murmured an incoherent something, then lay staring at Galena with shining eyes, while she talked to Sophy about the wedding that was to be so very soon. Then Pam came in from the barn, where she had been helping Jack with the morning “chores”, and very soon afterwards Miss Gittins went away, declaring that she could not stay another minute. But when she bade him good-bye she told Reggie that she was going to ask the Doctor how soon he could be moved, as it would be a comfort to have him at their place, even if he could do nothing better than lie on the settle in the kitchen and tell her when the saucepans boiled.

A week later he was gone, and the house dropped back into its condition of normal quiet. Pam and Jack only came into the house to eat and sleep, while

Sophy worked industriously at her wedding-gown. She had decided that she would rather make it at Ripple than at her own home, where there were so many interruptions. Every day she approached her task with the reverent awe of a priestess performing a religious ceremony, and Pam had many a quiet chuckle to herself over the happiness Sophy got from work that is mostly left to outsiders.

One baking hot morning in early June the cow was missing. The creature had apparently pushed down a weak portion of the fence and gone for a stroll on her own account. There was in consequence no milk for breakfast. Corn porridge and molasses is not bad fare, but coffee without milk is horrid, so many hard things were said about the cow while they had breakfast. In an ordinary way there would have been the milk of the previous night to fall back upon, but it so chanced that the storekeeper from The Corner had been collecting all the evening milk of the district for the last few weeks, because he had bought a separator and was making butter for his customers.

“I will take the dog and go to find the cow,” said Pam. “I was going to hoe potatoes in the field by the creek, but those weeds will have to get a little bigger before they are hoed up. I don’t believe I am sorry either, for I would much rather tramp about the forest than hoe potatoes to-day. Isn’t the weather just gorgeous? I wish, oh, I wish that the boys and Muriel were here to enjoy it!”

People told her that June was not often as hot as this, and that the weather would probably break in a thunder-storm soon, and then it would get cooler.

“You will have to go, because I can’t.” Jack spoke with his mouth full, for he was bolting his breakfast in a great hurry, having lost time in hunting for the cow. “I promised Nathan that I would be at his place in good time. We are going to start haymaking to-day, and now we shall have to hustle for all we are worth.”

Pam started on her quest directly breakfast was over. It was really stupid of the cow to break bounds in this fashion, because if the creature wandered very far the night’s milk would not be so good, and Pam was rapidly developing the farmer instinct, which is dead against waste of this sort.

She went out through the break in the fence made by the cow, and followed the trail of the animal through the long grass, so far as it showed; when she could no longer see it she had to trust to common sense for direction. The cow was out for change of diet rather than from any desire to run away, so most likely it would wander straight along the nearest trail, which was the narrow one that led out to the old tote road. Pam had not been there for some time, work having called her in other directions. Farmers in that part of the world do not often walk for the sake of taking a stroll in the middle of summer, time being too precious.

The dog paced soberly along at her heels, and she wondered if the creature had any recollection of the happening of last fall, when it had encountered the

lynx at the ruined house. Her way this morning led past the ruin, for as she turned into the old tote road she saw far away in the distance something which looked like a cow. The creature was so far away that it was of no use to send the dog in pursuit yet, so she went on, ankle-deep in grass and flowers, while the morning seemed to grow hotter and hotter.

She halted at the door of the ruined house, trying to get courage enough to enter. Apparently the door had not been touched since Mose Paget had tied it up to keep the lynxes from returning to their lair. Pam had a vivid remembrance of the bit of yellow pocket-handkerchief he had used for the purpose, and there it was still tied to the door. The place had a bad name. Luke Dobson told her that he himself had once been scared nearly out of his senses by seeing a grey shape flit along the tote road in front of him one night when he was belated in that part of the forest, and it had disappeared in or near the ruins. Pam had laughed then: it is so easy to laugh when one is hearing of an experience of such a kind second-hand. Now she was shivering at the remembrance, and she did not wonder that even a stolid, unimaginative man like Mr. Dobson had been frightened.

“Oh, but it is all nonsense to be so scared. I will open the door and have a look inside,” she whispered to herself. She was noticing that the shell of the house still appeared sound and good, and she was thinking that the place might be used as a dwelling again if only someone could be found brave enough to live there. She forced her unwilling feet close to the door, laid her hand on the rag with which Mose had fastened the door to the frame, then stood still for a moment to overcome the fierce trembling which had seized her.

A crash sounded overhead, followed by a long, crackling roll of thunder, and at the same moment the dog flung up its head, uttering a most doleful howl. With a sharp cry of fear Pam darted out to the middle of the wide green road, and stood shaking and shivering, for she was dreadfully afraid of thunder. Of choice she would have turned and fled back to Ripple as fast as she could go; but there was the cow. She had found it, and for very shame she could not go back and say that she had run home because she was afraid.

The sun was shining still, and from where she stood she could not see the storm coming up against the wind. The wonder seized her as to whether the crash of thunder had been sent to warn her from trying to enter that haunted ruin. Then she laughed aloud at her own folly in thinking such a thing, and set forward in pursuit of the cow once more. But she did not look back, and she was debating in her mind if there was not a cross-trail that would take her back to Ripple without her having to come back past the ruins.

The cow saw her coming, and moved gently on ahead, as if to prolong the

morning's stroll as far as possible.

"Tiresome thing!" cried Pam, who was shaken by her experience. Then she quickened her pace, for the cow had turned out of the straight wide road into a narrow avenue of mighty beech trees. The sun was certainly clouding over now, and the heat grew every moment more suffocating. She had left the great open space where the black spruce had been lumbered last winter, and had plunged into a dense forest of mighty beech trees. Here and there were dead trees and plentiful windfalls — that is, broken branches stripped off by the tempest in its fury.

Another crash louder than before. A queer sensation of being stunned came to Pam, and she leaned against a tree to recover her breath. How dark it had grown! The cow was out of sight, and the dog crouched at her feet, whimpering as if frightened also. Then came a quick, darting flash, and a cracking, riving noise, followed by a peal of thunder so mighty and overwhelming that Pam shrieked aloud in her terror, yet could not hear her own voice. Such a dead silence followed that her ears fairly ached. A big tree towering above its fellows had been riven from summit to base by lightning, and to her horror and dismay she saw little crackling flames and a thin haze of smoke creeping about its foot.

The forest was on fire — she could smell the burning! Everything she had ever heard or read of forest fires came back to her now, and she turned to flee. She had taken half a dozen flying steps backward to the comparative safety of the old tote road when she remembered what Don had said to her one day, to the effect that there would not be half so many fires in the forest if the people who saw them start were to take the trouble to beat them out.

Could she do it? Would she dare go back to the burning tree? She was running with the wind, and if the fire grew, as sometimes forest fires did grow, then soon the flames would overtake her, and her life would be forfeit. Better face the danger now, and stop it, if stopping was possible.

A moment she halted, then she fled back by the way she had come, just as a loud peal of thunder crashed above her head. The smoke was blinding. It was last year's dead leaves that were burning, for the beech leaves only fell as the new growth pushed them off, except where they were exposed to the fury of the wind. She had a stick in her hand, and although she was nearly blinded by the smoke, she dashed into the circle of burning leaves and began beating out the fire. At first her efforts seemed only to make things worse; instead of extinguishing the fire she flicked the sparks here and there and started other fires. But she grew wiser as she went on, and did her beating in surer fashion. The smoke was certainly growing less, she was gaining on the fire, and she was ready to shout with triumph, when suddenly, without any warning, a blazing

branch fell on the ground in front of her, so close that it was nothing short of marvellous it had not come right on her head. Looking up, she saw that the flames had been creeping up the side of the tree farthest away from where she was working, and, finding a rotten branch as inflammable as tinder, had burst into an active conflagration far above her reach.

Oh, the horror of it! Pam's courage, shaken by the thunder and the fierce efforts she had made to stop the outbreak, gave way altogether now, and again she fled. The dog had disappeared long ago, she had seen nothing of the cow since the fire began, and she was alone with this great terror. Never in all her life had solitude frightened her so much. The fire on the ground had all been beaten out; but for the blazing branch above her head the danger would be nearly all over by now. There was another crash. Pam gave a sideway leap just in time to avoid another decayed branch that came crashing to the ground, throwing out showers of sparks and starting another fire of dead leaves where it fell. She could now hear the flames crackling above her, and she suddenly realized her own danger, for if a blazing branch fell upon her she must burn to death with no one to help her.

She fled then, not back to the old tote road, for the blazing tree was between her and the trail which led that way, but straight ahead by a trail she did not know. To her nothing mattered just then but to get as far away as possible from the burning tree.

The trail she took was a cross-trail, and five minutes later she emerged on a wider one. Glancing distractedly to right and left, she saw to her intense relief a man coming towards her. He was a stranger. The first glance showed her that. But he looked so much at home on the forest trail that she made up her mind he was of the wilderness places.

"A forest fire has started, can you help?" she shouted as she came nearer to him.

He looked at her and broke into a run. No need to tell a forest-dweller to hurry when a fire has started. It is seconds that count then, and a few of them may make all the difference between ruin and security.

"Where is it?" he shouted, and there was something in his voice that brought instant comfort to Pam, for she instinctively realized that here was a man who could grapple with the situation.

"This way!" She had turned, and was speeding back by the way she had come. She had forgotten the cow, she had lost sight of everything save the need of the moment.

A blast of hot air struck her as she neared the tree. But a moment later she saw to her great joy that the fire was still confined to the one tree that had been

struck by lightning. The foliage of the forest was at present so green and tender that it would not readily flame. Scorched and blackened it might be, but it would have to be drier before it would burn easily. The danger lay in the bits of blazing branches that were falling from the stricken tree. There was a large amount of dead wood cumbered up with the living branches, and it was these that were blazing so furiously. The man she had met overtook Pam by the time she came in sight of the tree, and he rapidly summed up the situation, for he plainly understood all about it.

“Beech tree, struck by lightning; dead wood ablaze. Chief danger of spreading lies in the burning fragments that are dropping from the tree. We shall have to beat the fires out as they start. You have a stick; come along!” As he spoke the man sprang forward, and, using the stout walking-stick he carried, started to beat out the flame of a particularly vigorous little fire that had started in a great mass of dried bracken.

What a difference between the wrong way and the right! Pam watched him, fascinated by the way he was doing it, and quite unconscious that a very active blaze had just started within a few paces of her on the other side.

“Look out!” called the man sharply. “You will be on fire yourself in another moment!”

“Oh, oh!” Pam started forward and commenced hitting wildly, raising showers of sparks. Panic had seized her, fire was such a truly horrible thing, and she was almost at the end of her self-control.

“Slower, slower! Don’t be in such a hurry!” called the man, and then he left his own fire and came over to where Pam was trying to beat the fire so that it would go out. “Knock the other stuff down on the top of what is blazing; that smothers it, don’t you see?”

“Be careful!” shrieked Pam, looking up just in time to see that a great fragment of blazing wood was coming straight down on the man; then, because he did not look up and spring away himself, she rushed at him, pushing with so much vigour that, unable to save himself, he was bowled over like a ninepin. Just as he measured his length on the ground, the branch, blazing furiously, struck him on the boot and rolled harmlessly to one side.

“Thank you!” he said, as he picked himself up and again started on smothering the fire. “There is an old proverb among the Mic-macs to the effect that he who fights fire wants eyes all over him. I should have been in a sorry case if you had not come to my help just then.”

“It is horrible — horrible! Shall we ever be able to stop it?” Pam was very near despair, for it seemed to her that for every fire they beat out three more started. Her arms were aching so badly that she could hardly lift her stick. But

she stuck to it because the man who was helping her kept shouting to her to come on, and worked with an amazing vigour himself which was tremendously infectious.

He paused a moment to look at the tree that was blazing far above their heads; then he gave a glance at the sky, dashed to one side to beat out a fresh fire, came back to help Pam with the one she was beating out, and said encouragingly:

“We shall do it, I fancy. The rain will begin inside of ten minutes, and if it comes down according to promise, the fire will be out in another ten minutes. We shall be as wet as if we had been wading, but you will have saved quite a big forest fire.”

“I?” cried Pam in astonishment. “Why, I could not keep it back; that was why I ran away. I was running away when I met you on the trail. Didn’t you know?”

“I guessed that was what you were doing, and small blame to you, for you might easily have lost your life, and no one any the wiser. But when there are two, the danger is so much less, because one can help the other, as you did me when you bowled me over.”

“It was dreadful of me, but there was no other way,” said Pam. Then she cried out in dismay, for the rain was suddenly flung upon the forest, coming down with such force and violence that her breath was nearly taken away, and she could only lean against a tree and gasp.

“Our work is done,” said the stranger, who seemed in no way disturbed by the downpour. “And as there is nothing more to do, we might as well be moving. Can you direct me to the house of Mrs. Sam Buckle?”

“I am not sure, but I think so. I don’t think I have been in this part before, but I have a general idea as to where the trail leads, and I think I can guide you,” said Pam, who was wondering more than ever who this stranger could be.

CHAPTER XIX

The Stranger's Errand

"I could not think of letting you guide me anywhere in this downpour," said the stranger, who had drawn Pam away from the fine tree against which she was leaning, telling her that it was not safe to shelter under a tree, especially a beech tree, until the storm was over. "If you will tell me which way to go I dare say that I can manage, or, if it is very complicated, perhaps you will let me go with you to the nearest shelter. This rain is going to keep on for a few hours, which will be a good thing for the farmers, but it is not worth while to keep more of it off the ground than we can help."

"If I am right as to where we are, Mrs. Buckle's house is the nearest place where we can shelter; and if I am not to lean against a tree, we might as well be going forward, for I don't feel as if I can breathe with all this water dropping on my face." Pam was gasping and choking as she turned into the trail which she thought led to Mrs. Buckle's house, and she felt as if it would be a physical impossibility to reach shelter of any sort unless she could get her breath more easily. She thought of the ruined house on the old tote road, but decided that she would rather be out in the rain than forced to shelter there. Then, too, it was no farther to the house of Mrs. Buckle in one direction than it would be to go back to that place of ill repute.

"Keep your head down, then you will be able to breathe easier!" called out the stranger from the rear, and Pam decided that he was a very understanding sort, and well versed in forest lore likewise, so her curiosity grew and grew as she plodded along through the pouring rain, as wet through as if she had been sitting in the creek.

A turn in the trail, and she saw the angle of the little brown house. She had made no mistake, but had brought the stranger straight as the crow flies to the house he was seeking. They emerged from the forest and were crossing the field, when the door was flung open, and to her surprise Pam saw Jack on the threshold, peering at her and her companion as if he failed to recognize her.

"Just a nice little shower, isn't it?" she called out, trying to make her voice sound as cheerful as possible, although she was feeling pretty bad by this time.

"Pam, is it you? Why, you are nearly drowned! What has happened to bring you out in such a downpour?" demanded Jack, darting out to help her along

those last few steps.

“I went out to find the cow,” she explained; then, reaching the door, paused on the threshold, for the house was clean, and she could not bear to enter in such a condition.

At this moment Mrs. Buckle came upon the scene, and, bursting into a torrent of exclamations and questions, dragged Pam indoors to find dry clothes. Then she made Jack take the stranger away to the barn to change into a suit of her late husband’s. She talked all the time at her very fastest rate, and gave Pam no chance at all of explaining how she came to be in such a plight.

The rain stopped almost as suddenly as it began; the clouds were breaking and the sun was coming out when Pam emerged from Mrs. Buckle’s bedroom wearing an old washing frock of her hostess, which was much too short and much too broad for her. It was at this moment that Jack came hurrying in from the barn, crying excitedly:

“I say, Pam, why didn’t you say that it was Sophy’s policeman that you had in tow? My word, isn’t he a fine chap! Won’t she be pleased to see him, too!”

“Is that Mr. Lester?” cried Pam in amazement. “Why, I never dreamed of such a thing! Besides, he wanted to see Mrs. Buckle!”

“I suppose he can want to see whom he pleases,” retorted Jack. Then, as the stranger came along, looking grotesque and floppy clad in the deceased Sam Buckle’s best “blacks”, he was graceless enough to burst into a shout of laughter, in which he was joined by Pam, who simply could not help her merriment.

“It is not fair that you should laugh at me, Miss Walsh, for your own things are not a very good fit,” said George Lester, and then he shook hands with her, telling her that he was glad to see her, but that he had guessed who she was when they were putting out the fire.

“Why did you not tell me?” she said reproachfully. “If you had said who you were we would have struggled on as far as Ripple instead of coming here, for of course Sophy wants to see you.”

“But I had to see Mrs. Buckle, and it is business first, you know.” He spoke in a quick, firm tone, and, looking at him, Pam decided that certainly Sophy had made no mistake, and that here was a man of whom any girl might very reasonably feel proud.

“Jack and I will go across to the barn and wait while you do your business; then we will guide you to Ripple. Sophy is staying there with us, you know.” Pam spoke a little uncertainly, for after all she did not know how much Mr. Lester might know of the movements of his betrothed.

“My business is rather public than private — at least, so far as you and your brother are concerned. You had better stay and hear about it, then we will go to

Ripple together. Sophy told me in her last letter that I should find her staying there.” Mr. Lester then turned from Pam to speak to Mrs. Buckle, and Pam sat down on the nearest chair, feeling tremendously curious as to the errand that had brought George Lester to this house before he made any attempt to see Sophy, from whom he had been parted for a year.

Amanda Higgins had gone home for the day to help her mother, so there were only Jack and Pam with Mrs. Buckle when George Lester began to state his errand.

“I think you used to know a man named Mose Paget?” He was looking at Mrs. Buckle as he spoke, and Pam felt a queer contraction of her heart as she told herself that Mose was dead; she was sure of it from the stranger’s manner of speaking.

“Yes, I knew him, but I’m sorry to say he was not very well worth knowing,” answered Mrs. Buckle. “He was downright good to my poor husband when he was dying, but the fellow played me rather a dirty trick afterwards in going off and leaving me in the lurch just at seeding time. I can’t think how I would have got through if it had not been for Miss Walsh and her brother. The way Mose treated that poor little half-brother of his was just shameful, too, so I’m not to say proud of his acquaintance.”

“The man is dead.” George Lester spoke in a quiet tone, but his voice sounded loud in the ears of Pam, who had difficulty in suppressing a sob. She was thinking of all the tragedies that lay behind the wasted days of Mose Paget, and of Galena’s spoiled life, for spoiled it had been to a certain extent.

Mrs. Buckle threw up her hands in surprise.

“Dead, is he? Well, the world isn’t much the poorer anyhow. Not but what he had his good streaks; but there! a man would be bad indeed if there was not some good in him.”

“Did you know that he had a quarrel with your husband?” asked George Lester, who had opened a bulky pocket-book, and was busy sorting papers.

“Why, no, Sam never told me anything about it,” replied Mrs. Buckle.

Pam gave a sudden start as a wonderful possibility flashed upon her mind. She went rather white, too, and there was a sound of surging waters in her ears, so that the voice of George Lester seemed to come to her from a great distance.

“Two nights before I left on furlough,” he was saying, “we had word brought us of a shooting affray at a saloon in the mining town at the bottom of Black Cow Pass. Things are pretty lively down there as a rule, and we have to go fully armed; we have to use our weapons, too, for mostly that man is safest who is first in with the shooting irons. On this night I went down with one other man, and we found that there had been a fight between two of the miners, and the one

getting the worst of it had pulled out his revolver, shooting wildly. He did not hit the man with whom he had been fighting, but another man sitting in a far corner got the bullet in his chest. It was easy to see the poor fellow had been badly hit, and one of the boys started to ride for the doctor; fifteen miles he would have to ride, on a bad trail, and the rain coming down at a pour.

“We made the injured man as comfortable as we could, but we could not do much, for it was a hopeless case from the first. I stayed with him, for I knew most of what was best to be done. I took the medical course before I joined the Mounted Police, and that is such a help at times like this. I told the man that if he had anything to say he had better out with it while he had the power to talk. Then he told me his name was Mose Paget, that he came from this part of New Brunswick, and that there was something on his mind that must be told before he died.”

“Ah! I thought it was strange that he should leave here in such a hurry, it was such a trumped-up story!” said Mrs. Buckle. George Lester nodded, then went on with his story, only now he was turning over the papers and sorting out some sheets covered closely with writing.

“The man told me that he owned a strip of ground running by the side of land belonging to Sam Buckle, who had the creek frontage, but only a narrow strip about two hundred yards deep. This bit of land had always been coveted by Mose, who felt that he could develop the land that was his own so much better if he could front the creek. Often and often he had asked Sam Buckle to put a price on it, but he could never get a satisfactory reply.”

“Sam was just like that!” sighed Mrs. Buckle, dropping a tear to her husband’s memory, while she shook her head in disapproval of his unneighbourly ways.

Again George Lester nodded; but he never took his eyes from the papers, and when Mrs. Buckle ceased speaking, he took up the thread of his narrative once more.

“It came to the ears of Mose that Sam Buckle intended planting his strip of frontage with black spruce; the young trees had been already bargained for, and were to be planted before the frost came if the ground could be got ready. This was like a deathknell to the hopes of Mose, and he determined to make one more effort to get Sam to put a price on the land. He had made up his mind that if he could get hold of that piece of ground he would leave off his lazy ways and work hard to retrieve the past. He would have a saw-mill on the creek, and he knew that with the help of his young step-brother he would be able to make his venture pay in very quick time.

“He went in search of Sam Buckle directly he heard the rumour, and meant

to have it out with him and to know for certain what he had to expect. When he got near to this house he saw Sam leaving the door and going off across the field in the direction of Ripple, so, without approaching the house, Mose started in pursuit, for he guessed that the other was going to a fence which had been a bone of contention between Sam Buckle and his neighbour for many years past. When he reached the place he found Sam Buckle in a towering rage. It appeared that Sam had been working on putting up the fence on the previous day, and that Wrack Peveril must have come at dawn and chopped it all down, and then gone away in such a hurry that he had left his axe lying on the ground.

“Mose started on his grievance right away, asking Sam if it was neighbourly, kind, or Christian to try to take the bread out of a man’s mouth. Sam answered that he treated his neighbours as his neighbours in their turn treated him; then he pointed to the demolished fence, and to Wrack’s axe lying on the ground, and he said that because of that last outrage from the old man at Ripple he would do as he chose about planting his frontage with black spruce. It was his right to do as he liked with his land, and no one should stop him. Then Mose seemed to go mad, and flying at Sam, the two fought as only madmen will. Of course Sam got the worst of it. Mose was the younger man; he was, too, the man with the grievance, and that lent power to his arms, while his passion gave him double strength. But it was not until Sam dropped apparently dead at his feet that he realized where his strength had led him. Then he was afraid and fled, for the curse of Cain was on him, and he believed that he had killed his fellow-man.”

“Oh, why did he not come for help straight away? We might have saved poor Sam if only help had been there in time. The Doctor said so!” wailed Mrs. Buckle, while Pam cried from sheer sympathy, and Jack sat staring out through the open door, making the most horrible grimaces at the landscape, as if the peaceful scene had in some way offended him.

“A good deal of misery would be averted if only people would own up when they have done wrong,” remarked George Lester. Then he went on again: “It was not until quite late in the evening that Mose chanced to hear that Sam Buckle was still alive. He had been making up his mind to leave the neighbourhood that night, for he felt that he was a murderer, and from thenceforth he must be a wanderer. If Sam was alive, however, then there was hope for him still. But Sam Buckle died, and, as of course you know, he died saying nothing but the last words that had been on his lips before he and Mose fought — it was his right to do what he would with his own. Mose would have run away then, but he realized that, Wrack Peveril having disappeared, it was safest for him to stay where he was, while the old man’s memory bore the blame.”

“If Wrack Peveril did not hurt my husband, what made him go away?”

demanded Mrs. Buckle.

“That is what we want to know,” put in Pam, brushing away her tears, and looking at George as if she expected him to explain that mystery also.

“Ah, that is more than I can tell you,” he replied. “But doubtless time, which has cleared this mystery, will clear that one also. Of course I was not here to know anything about it. I had no acquaintance with the old man, but from what Sophy has told me in her letters I should incline to the belief either that he went away because he felt he did not dare stay where he was any longer, or else that something happened to him.”

“But he has been seen,” put in Pam in a jerky tone. She always hated to speak of this, because the circumstance seemed to write the old man down as a wrongdoer straight away. “A man met him at a lumber camp in the back country last winter, but Grandfather did not like being recognized.”

“What man was it?” asked George Lester quickly. It was plain he doubted the evidence, and Pam made haste to state her authority.

“He was a man named O’Brien, who used to work for Mr. Luke Dobson at Hunt’s Crossing, years ago. He told Mose Paget of this meeting with Grandfather, and he spoke of it also to Dr. Grierson, but he said he had told no one else, because he was afraid of putting the police on the track of Grandfather’s whereabouts.”

“If it was that O’Brien — Cassidy O’Brien, his full name was — then we shall never know more about it than we do now, for he, too, is dead,” said George, referring again to the papers in his hand. “Do you remember the night when someone entered the house at Ripple, and took the money from the desk?”

“Why, yes. I thought it was — I mean, I had believed it might be Grandfather come back for his own money, to which, of course, he had a perfect right.” Pam’s tone always became defiant when she spoke of her grandfather’s supposed return. How much she hated having to defend that coming back, no one but herself could know. She realized perfectly that it had been a dastardly thing to lure two unprotected girls from the shelter of a warm house on a night in midwinter, when the wolves were hunting in packs, and that no man worthy the name would have done it. But for the sake of her mother she would not alter her attitude, although it was impossible not to feel a little resentful about it all.

“It was not your grandfather who entered the house that night and forced open the desk where the money was kept, then walked off with all he could find. It was Mose Paget,” said George. Pam started up with a little cry of sheer amazement, for if Mose were the thief, how was it that the money had been found with those poor remains which the melting snows had revealed at the time of sugaring?

“How do you know?” she demanded, her heart beating furiously. Had she been misjudging the poor old man all this time? How good it would be to feel that she could respect him in her own private heart, and not have to continually fight down her secret mistrust of him!

“It is here, in the confession,” replied George, giving a shuffle to the papers he was holding; “but because they are mostly in shorthand, as I took the statement down, and I have not had time to transcribe them, I have told my story instead of writing it. Cassidy O’Brien came back to this part of the world to hunt out Mose Paget, who owed him money. He threatened that if Mose did not pay up he, O’Brien, would make known to the police a bit of the past of Mose that would not bear the light of day. The debt was not a big one, but it was more than Mose could pay. He had heard Mrs. Buckle pressing Miss Walsh to take the money to supply the wants of Wrack Peveril if the old man should come creeping back to his home in want. He had heard Miss Walsh say where she intended putting the money, so that her grandfather would be sure to find it if he came when she was not about. It is the opportunity that makes the thief, and because it was all made so plain for him, Mose determined to get that money from Ripple, and to clear his debt with it.

“He arranged to meet O’Brien at a certain place and to take the money to him. It was fifty dollars he owed the man, but there was not sufficient to pay all; so he kept some of the cash for himself, and gave the rest of the cash and the paper money to O’Brien, who vowed that he would go straight to the police and tell what he knew. Apparently he must have started, for the direction in which his remains were found would seem to point to his having tried to hit the trail to the police head-quarters. Either he sat down and was frozen to death, or else he was chased by wolves, and died that way; this we shall never know.

“Mose was amazed to find that his old enemy made no sign. But when the bones were found in the forest it seemed to him as if fate had been working for him, and henceforth he had nothing to fear. Then Jack Walsh came out from England, and suddenly the blow of which Mose had stood in dread fell from a most unexpected quarter. He was coming into the house to see Mrs. Buckle about some small matter connected with his work, when to his horror he saw Mrs. Buckle with Sam’s watch in her hand. He had taken away Sam’s watch and the money in the man’s pockets after their fight, just to make it look like a case of robbery and violence. Then when he had been so ill in St. John from the after-effect of the mauling he got from the lynx, he had sold the watch to pay the doctor.”

“My word!” cried Mrs. Buckle; “he was a bad lot to rob the man he had knocked about so badly!”

“He had got out of the straight, and when once a man gets on the slant, there is no saying what he will do,” replied George, who then went on to tell them how Mose had worked his way out west, tracking backwards and forwards in the going, in order to hide his trail. But the fugitive had known no rest and no peace, and had faced starvation and hardship, until at last he had come by his death-wound in a fray between two strangers, when the bullet meant for another man found its billet in his breast. It was, indeed, a sad and tragic story.

“There is one thing for which I shall be grateful to my dying day,” said Mrs. Buckle between her sobs, “and that is that I was never tempted to visit what I supposed Wrack Peveril had done to my poor man on his granddaughter. She has always been my dear friend, and though sometimes I’ll admit I felt a bit wicked about it all, I stuck to what my instincts told me, and I’m just more glad about it than I can say.”

“You have been truly good to me, and to Jack too!” murmured Pam. Then, the confession having come to an end, she declared that they must be going, for it was not fair to Sophy to keep Mr. Lester away any longer.

“I will come with you,” said Jack. “When I got to the Gittins’s place this morning, Nathan told me he could not get the machine until to-morrow, so, of course, we could not start haymaking; and as he did not need me, I came over to put in some time at Mrs. Buckle’s hoeing corn. Then the rain came and I bolted indoors for shelter, and that is how I happened to be loafing round, apparently doing nothing, in the middle of the day.”

Pam laughed. It was rich to hear Jack trying to explain that he was more industrious than he looked, for those who knew anything about it at all had no trouble in making up their minds as to his hard work, though he always seemed to think that he might do a bit more if only he were a little more energetic. But it was not Jack or his doings that interested her most just then. She was turning over and over in her mind the problem of her grandfather’s mysterious conduct. Now that the old man’s name was entirely cleared, his conduct in going away was more mysterious than ever. Why did he choose to leave home without any warning on the very day that she had arrived at Ripple? It was not even as if he had not known of her coming. To Pam, in her fit of depression, it looked as if he had gone away because of her. A bitter humiliation this! How she winced in her secret heart to think that perhaps it was her self-will in coming that had driven the old man from his home! It might be that his mind had become a little unhinged from his long years of living alone since her mother left him. Perhaps he had vowed that he would never live in a house again that had a woman in it. But how strange that he should drop everything and go like that!

George Lester was talking to Jack, as they went along the trail, of the

solitudes of the far west, but Pam was silent, thinking and thinking of her grandfather, and making herself so acutely miserable over the mystery of his disappearance that she was perilously near the verge of tears.

Then Jack began to speculate on what Sophy would think of her betrothed husband tricked out in the go-to-meeting garments of the late Sam Buckle.

“It looks as if there ought to be some tucks let down in one direction, and some tucking put in in another direction,” said Jack, falling back a few steps to get a better view of what the new-comer looked like from the rear.

“Get in front of me and see how I look from there,” said George. “You don’t surely think I have come over two thousand miles for my wife to give her any chance of seeing a back view of me on the very first day of my arrival, do you? It is the front that matters. A smudge down my nose, or anything of that sort, might be serious; but I can sort of snap my fingers at my clothes, especially as they are big enough. If I couldn’t move without fear of a burst somewhere it would be a different matter, but you can’t deny that they are roomy.”

Jack hopped round to the front of the stranger, and walking backwards began a lively criticism from that point of view.

“Too much ankle, and, though you have a fairly big foot of your own, the late Sam Buckle had a bigger. Then you stick your arms too far through your sleeves; can’t you shrug them up a bit? That is better! Quite an inch of raw wrist has disappeared. I suppose you will do, and your face is the same whatever clothes you wear; but I can’t help being reminded of a man who bought an undertaking business, and the late proprietor’s clothes were thrown in to make the bargain a little better for him.”

“Oh, Jack, you are horrid!” cried Pam, who had to laugh in spite of her low spirits. “Mr. Lester, you do not look like a second-hand undertaker, and Sophy will be so glad to see you that she will not have a thought to spare for your clothes.”

“I hope she will be glad to see me,” said George simply, but there was something in his tone that made Pam say hurriedly, when they came in sight of the house at Ripple:

“There is the house, Mr. Lester, do you go right in and introduce yourself. Jack and I have some work to do in the barn, and we shall be in presently.”

“But——” began Jack, who for all his sharpness lacked the insight of Pam. Her intuition perhaps came from a sympathetic feeling of what she herself would like under the same circumstances.

“But me no buts, only come, as I tell you,” she said with a laugh, catching at his arm and giving it a playful squeeze. “Look, Jack, look, there is the cow, so she came back alone after all! We must milk her straight away. Oh, the silly

creature, what a chase she has led us!”

“I guess it was the old dog that brought her home; and see, there lies the creature in the gap in the fence by which the cow broke out of the pasture!”

Jack and Pam turned abruptly away across the grass to where the cow was feeding as quietly as if she had never broken bounds. But George Lester went with a quick step towards the house. His weird garments of sombre black flapped and flopped with every step he took, and, as Jack had said, his arms and legs stuck ever so much too far through them; but nothing could detract from the real dignity of the man or hamper the splendid alertness of his movements.

As he drew near to the house the door flew open, and Sophy appeared on the threshold.

“George! Is it really you? I thought you were not coming until next week.”

“Have I come too soon?” he asked, as he covered the remaining distance in a few long strides.

“You could not do that,” she said, holding out her hands to him; and gathering them into a tight clasp he drew her over the threshold and shut the door.

CHAPTER XX

Wedding Plans

No trouble was spared to clear the name of Wrack Peveril from the shadow that had rested upon it. The confession left by Mose Paget was read out in the meeting-house on the following Sunday. This was the only place and time, at that busy season of the year, when men and women could be got together for the purpose.

Pam was not present. She went across to the Gittins's place and stayed with Reggie, who was too much of an invalid as yet to stand the shaking and bumping of the wagon on the rough trail. Galena insisted that she was going, and she left the house tricked out in the smartest clothes she possessed. She clambered up into the wagon to sit by the side of her brother, and looked as hard and defiant as you please. Just as the wagon started, Pam, yielding to an impulse, ran out, and, holding up her hand to Nathan to wait a moment, clambered up on the high step. Then, flinging her arms round Galena, she gave her a bear-like hug and a warm kiss.

"What is that for?" demanded Miss Gittins in a caustic tone, and she tossed her head, making the roses on her much-beflowered hat nod vigorously.

"Because I love you," said Pam, looking into the hard face with the quiet daring of a real affection. She added, with a trifle of hesitation: "I shall be thinking of you every minute of the time you are at meeting."

"Which means you think I ought not to go. But I should like to know why?" Again Galena tossed her head, and the roses nodded in reply.

"It is splendid and brave of you to be able to bear it, but I am afraid you will find it very hard; that is why I came." Pam reached up and dropped another kiss on the cheek of Galena, then slid down from the wagon with a nod to Nathan in token that he could go on. Her eyes filled with tears as she watched the two elderly-young people bumping placidly across the rough pasture in the little wagon. She wondered if she could ever go to meeting to hear a confession of Don's read to clear the name of someone of a wrongfully imputed crime. Of course she and Don were not betrothed. Pam had not really owned to herself in plain speech that she loved him. But standing there that morning, watching the backs of Galena and Nathan, she told herself that she could not have borne it. Then she went back to the house to talk as cheerfully as possible to Reggie, and

to make the leaden-footed hours pass for him as pleasantly as might be.

Reggie was very white-faced this morning. He was grieving over his brother's death in a fashion that seemed strange when one remembered the callous neglect of Mose.

"You see, I had him to look after. Ma left him to me, and I can't help feeling that I have left something out that I ought to have done." The boy's tone was so wistful as he spoke that Pam found her heart aching for him so badly as to make her forget how sorry she had just been for Galena. Really, when one comes to think of it, there are so many people to be sorry for that one's own private and particular pain has mostly to be thrust into the background.

"I think you did everything a boy could do, but it is hard to influence a man, you know." Pam spoke soothingly, thinking that if Mose could ignore the affection of his small step-brother, and leave the child as he had done, there could not have been much good stuff in him.

Reggie spoke as if he had read her thoughts.

"Mose would have been different if he had seen anything ahead of him that he could reach. Things were terribly against him. When Galena threw him over because he was lazy, she ought to have said that if he'd work hard and show willing she'd hitch up with him again, but what she did say was that she hadn't no use for lazy people, and that was all. Then there was that bit of creek frontage. If only Sam Buckle would have put a price on that, then Mose would have stirred round and found the money, and he would have been so busy getting what he wanted that he wouldn't have had time to be lazy. His trouble was that he could not have what he wanted, and so he lost heart."

Pam put her head down close beside the thin white face on the pillow.

"Perhaps Galena lost heart too," she said, "and that was why she was not as wise as you wanted her to be. You will have to leave it now, Reggie, because it is all over, but you must not think hard things of Galena, for I am sure she is suffering horribly."

"I should say she is by the way she tries to hustle Nathan round, but it takes a deal of pushing to get him to move, so it does not matter. She is downright good to me, and I like living here. I hope they will let me stay always; they won't lose by it in the long run."

"I am sure they will not!" said Pam. Then she fetched out *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which was one of the few books to be found in the Gittins's house, and read to him the stirring account of Christian's fight with Apollyon in the Valley of Humiliation. It was when she looked up to answer some eager question of his that she caught a glimpse of a figure in a very much beflowered hat coming rapidly across the field, and she realized that Galena had found the ordeal too

much for her after all.

“There is the book, you can read about it yourself if you like,” she said, thrusting the musty-smelling volume into Reggie’s hands. Then she rose from her chair and hurried out to meet Galena.

“I could not face it. I made Nathan stop the horse and let me get out,” said Miss Gittins, who was very pale under the smart hat. “He wanted to turn round and drive me back here, but I just would not have that. Folks would have been able to talk fine if we had both been away from meeting; but if Nathan was there in his place, it would only look as if I had stayed at home with Reggie. I can’t help feeling that it is partly my doing that Mose went so wrong, and I am a miserable woman to-day.”

Pam slid her arm through Galena’s, and turned with her to the strip of forest that still remained on one side of the home pasture. There were big trees here, spruce and birch and maple, and to walk in their shade on this glowing summer morning was like being in some vast cathedral. There were the hush and the calm of the cloistered building, and the sense of nearness to the Infinite. Oh, the forest was wonderful on a day like this! especially when one could turn away from the sordid little brown house, with its clustering barns and piggeries, that stood on the edge of this forest fane.

Galena was sobbing and moaning in her pain. All the way back from the place where she had stopped the wagon she had walked with her head in the air and her mouth set in hard lines of endurance, but when Pam had met her with that silent sympathy, and had drawn her into the shade of the trees, her stoicism broke down, and she could only sob in her misery.

“If I could have the past over again!” wailed the stricken woman.

“You have the present and the future,” Pam reminded her, with the rare wisdom which came to her in moments of need like this.

“What do you mean?” demanded Galena sharply. “Mose is dead, and you can’t bring the dead to life, so the past is past — done with, altogether, I take it.”

“For him, not for you,” ventured Pam softly. How fearful she was of saying the wrong word, or of uttering a word too many! “You have the boy left, and the mistakes you feel you made with Mose can be rectified with his brother.”

“Reggie is not Mose,” snapped Galena, and Pam fairly winced at the revelation of heart hunger and exceeding wretchedness that the words revealed.

“No, I fancy he is much better stuff than Mose, so more worth the helping,” replied Pam. After much hesitation she ventured to say gently: “Don’t scorn him too much when he goes wrong. You could not expect a boy brought up as he has been to keep always above reproach, but it will help him to recover when he stumbles if he knows you love him all the time.”

“I wish that I was dead!” moaned Galena, and she looked a really tragic figure, her eyes swollen and red with weeping, her smart hat tipped rakishly askew, and her equally smart blouse pulled open at the throat, where she had clutched at it in order to give herself more air.

“No, you don’t!” said Pam cheerfully. “Down at the bottom you are just as glad to be alive as I am. You are very miserable just now, but when you have had a rest you will feel better. Shall I run to the house and fetch a rug for you to lie on out here, or would you rather go to your own bedroom?”

“Oh, I will go indoors, thank you, and lie on my bed like a Christian.” Galena turned back towards the house with something of her old arrogance as she spoke. “I don’t hold with sleeping rough when one can get shelter. Besides, the wind in the trees makes such a noise when you have nothing to do but listen to it, and the creeping things in the grass all seem to talk at once. Oh, I have no fancy for lying on the ground when I have a decent bed to go to.”

Pam laughed, but she made no further protest. It was good to hear the old dictatorial tone creeping into Galena’s speech; it was a sure and certain sign of returning spirit and courage. They went to the house together, then Pam went back to amuse Reggie for a while, and Galena went to her own chamber.

Nathan drove Pam back to Ripple when he got home from the meeting, and he imparted a piece of news on the way that made her cry out in dismay. Two of the young Griersons had sickened with something that looked like scarlet fever, and the Doctor would not allow Sophy to enter the house when she went home that morning.

“How dreadful for poor Mrs. Grierson!” cried Pam, and indeed the Doctor’s wife seemed to have anything but a rosy time with those younger children. “Whatever will they do about the wedding?”

“Miss Grierson will have to be married from some other place,” replied Nathan. “It is quite certain that the Doctor won’t let the wedding be held at an infected house. He is always preaching to other people to take care when there is infection about, and he is bound to do as he tells other folks to do. It is a chance for you, but if you don’t want the bother, there are plenty of other people ready and willing for the job.”

“What do you mean?” demanded Pam, turning a startled look on her companion.

Nathan cleared his throat, making so much noise over the business that the horse mistook it for a command to make haste, and tore onward at top speed, so that its driver had to quiet it down before he could say what was on his mind. Then he wanted to cough again, but did not dare because of upsetting the nerves of the horse.

“It is like this,” he began at last, and his speech was slower and more lumbering than usual; “Miss Grierson has been in your house all winter, and you would have been hard put to it without her.”

“Indeed I should!” said Pam in fervent outburst.

“Well, then, it is for you to insist that you shall have the wedding at your place.”

“But we haven’t things for a wedding!” cried Pam, aghast at the bare suggestion. “There are two cups with handles, and one without; we have four whole saucers and a half; there are six plates in the house, and about three dishes, and other things to correspond. Sophy wants to have a big wedding — that is, she has asked a lot of people. And — and — it is horrid to have to say it, but it is the truth, we have no money for a show of that sort. Besides, it is Grandfather’s house, and oh, suppose for yourself what would happen if he came home in the middle!”

Nathan laughed, and his great guffaws rang out with astonishing noise on the noontide stillness of the forest; and distressed as Pam was at the thing which had been suggested to her, she could not help laughing also.

“I will admit the poor old fellow might have reason for complaint if he came back to find the place stuffed as full of women and girls as it will be if the wedding is held there,” said Nathan. “You want him back, though, and everyone wants the mystery cleared up about his going, and as the wedding will certainly bring him back if anything will, I should just advise you to get on with it as fast as you can, and to keep smiling. As to the cups and that sort of thing, there ain’t no cause to fuss; you just say what you want, and the folks will bring it. That way saves a lot of trouble. We don’t give wedding presents in these parts, because we can’t afford it, and we haven’t the sort of stores that sell the kind of trash that is used for that purpose. But when anyone is asked to a wedding they understand that they will have to provide some of the food, or lend crockery or table-cloths, or truck of that sort, only they mostly wait until they are told what is wanted, because it saves confusion.”

“What a perfectly lovely idea!” cried Pam, with her eyes shining, as they always did at any mention of a frolic. “Thank you so much for telling me where my duty lies. But you will have to stand by me if Grandfather should suddenly appear on the scene, for I can imagine that the poor old man would be simply horrified at the bare idea of a wedding at Ripple.”

“Perhaps if there had been a wedding at Ripple in bygone years, instead of the runaway match your mother had to make, things would have been happier all round. But don’t you worry, Miss Walsh, we will all stand by you through thick and thin, though I am thinking you don’t need much outside championing when

the Doctor's son is knocking round, for he is a oner for making things hum!"

Nathan had had his joke, and he appreciated it so immensely that at the sight of the crimson he had called into the cheeks of Pam he burst into another guffaw that ended in a choking fit, and Ripple was reached before he had properly recovered.

"Will you come in and have some dinner?" asked Pam out of politeness, though she did not really want him. But he had driven her home and it was getting late, so she felt she must ask him.

"No, thank you, and you don't want no company either. Just you get indoors and fix up about the wedding before anyone else chips in. And when you ask me and Galena, you ask her to bring food, and you ask me for the loan of our Mam's best chinay, and the table-cloths that Aunt Selina gave us."

"Oh, suppose the china got broken!" cried Pam, as Nathan swung her to the ground.

"A good thing if it did. Then we would buy a common sort that was not too good to use. I don't hold with things that you can't use, so you can smash the lot so far as I am concerned." Nathan waved his hand in an airy flourish as he clambered back into the wagon, and then he drove off along the trail he had come by, while Pam went into the house with mingled feelings, for she rather doubted her ability to organize a proper wedding for Sophy, and yet she owed her friend so much that she would gladly do anything towards paying part of it back.

Jack was in the kitchen getting dinner ready, and told Pam that Sophy had gone upstairs to lie down, saying that she did not want anything.

"Did Nathan tell you that two of the kids have scarlatina, and so Sophy can't be married at home?" he asked. "She is frightfully down about it. George being away for the week-end makes it all the worse for her, because she hasn't him here to say comforting things to her."

"I am going to say comforting things to her!" announced Pam, with her head in the air, although her heart was beating fast with excitement. "We are going to have the wedding here, Jack, and we must make the biggest splash possible, just to show Sophy how really we appreciate what she has done for me. Oh, I know we can't afford it, but Nathan has told me how it can be done with but little expense, and for Sophy's dear sake I am going to put my pride in my pocket, and ask my neighbours to lend me all the things we have not got. If you come to think of it, that is a tremendously long list, for we really have nothing except house-room, and it seems a mad venture, but we have got to do it somehow. Go on getting dinner ready, and be sure to lay a place for Sophy, for I am certain I can coax her into coming down."

“You can mostly get people to do as you wish!” said Jack, and he began to stir round at a lively rate, while Pam went up the stairs two steps at a time, and burst into the bedroom where Sophy was lying face downwards on the bed with despair in every line of her body.

“Sophy, Sophy, we are going to have the wedding here, and the best sitting-room shall justify its existence for once!” cried Pam, hurling herself into the room with so much force that she caught her foot in a board that stood a little above the rest of the flooring. She stumbled and lurched forward, falling on to the bed and getting sadly mixed up with Sophy, who had sprung up at the sound of her voice, and who started at once to protest.

“Pam dear, it is most fearfully good of you, but I could not think of letting you do it. Father thinks I had better have a meeting-house wedding, and he will drive us straight from the church to Hunt’s Crossing to catch the down-river boat. Of course it is rather horrid, and I would much rather have had a house wedding, but no one can have all they want in this world.”

“Yes, they can!” stoutly affirmed Pam. “People can always get what they want, if only they will be careful only to want what they can get. We are going to have a gorgeous time, dearie, and I am really grateful to those children for taking fever just now, and giving me a chance to pay back something of my debt.”

“Pam, you must not take that money you had for the spruce; I could not bear it!” cried Sophy.

“Don’t worry, that money shall not be touched, dear; I am going to do the wedding at the expense of my neighbours. Nathan Gittins has put me on to the idea, and I am going to run it for all I am worth. He told me to ask for his mother’s best china — the loan of it, you know — and her table-cloths. He says that we can smash up the china if we like. Isn’t he a dear?”

“Of course, we could do the wedding that way; people often do. But, Pam, it will be most fearfully hurting to your pride. Just fancy how you will feel when you are pouring out the coffee if that awful Mrs. Brown should say: ‘Be careful how you spill that coffee, Miss Walsh; I paid top-price for it, and I can’t abide seeing things wasted!’ Oh, you would just squirm!”

“I am going to enjoy every bit of it!” announced Pam in a valiant tone, and she meant what she said. “Put your hair tidy and come down to dinner; I am fearfully hungry. We must make out the lists of what we want the folks to lend us to-day. By the way, who has a nice new sitting-room carpet? That will be a first necessity, for you can’t stand up to be married on bare boards.”

“It would have been bare boards at the meeting-house. Oh, Pam, it is lovely of you not to mind asking for the things! I had set my mind on a home wedding, and this house is just made for weddings and things of that sort; there is so much

room, and the sitting-room is so big!”

Sophy was standing at the glass now, and winding up the heavy masses of her hair with quick fingers; all the despair was gone from her figure, and she looked almost radiant, in spite of red eyes and a swollen nose.

“Make haste down, we have got to hustle. Oh, I wish I could think of someone who had bought a new carpet this spring, for I do want you to have something gorgeous to stand upon. I know what I will do; I will get Galena to drive me to the houses over the Ridge, and we will make a systematic house-to-house collection, the same as they do in England when they want to have a rummage sale. Oh, it will be great fun!”

“Pam, you are shameless! It will be absolute begging!” laughed Sophy, and then she came hurrying downstairs in the wake of Pam, and Jack gave a long whistle of pure amazement. His last vision of her had been dismal enough. She had walked with him across the forest from the meeting-house, punctuating the distance with her sobs, and he had wanted to run away as badly as he had ever wanted to do anything, for this was a form of grief that he could not understand. To his way of thinking a fussy wedding was more bother than comfort, and provided she got married, nothing else really mattered.

Pam understood things better, and was able to view the situation from Sophy’s standpoint. All through the long, dark winter Sophy had sewed and planned. Her plans had all centred round her wedding day. Her new home would be a back district of the far west, so distant that her imagination would not stretch so far: but her wedding she could see in fancy, and she had planned and planned for it until she was perfect as to detail. Then came this crowning disaster of being shut out of her home by the infectious illness of the younger children, and her house of cards had tumbled all about her ears. A disaster of this sort would not have meant so much to Pam, for she was cast in a different mould, and the details of her wedding would not have mattered at all. But she sympathized so keenly with Sophy that she was ready to go to almost any length on behalf of her friend.

Dinner was a merry meal, with pencil and paper in constant requisition for jotting down the things that would be required to give Sophy a really good send-off. The ceremony was fixed for next Thursday, it was the busiest time of the year, and what had to be done must be done at once.

“It is lucky that I did not have to walk home this morning, because I am not tired,” said Pam. “If you and Jack will get the dinner dishes out of the way, I will toddle back to the Gittins’s place, and get Galena to take me out driving. She is a bit low-down herself to-day, and so the little outing will do her good. The turkeys will want looking after, Jack, for I may not be home until late. Do you

think that we have put down everything that we shall need, Sophy? I am not used to this sort of thing, and so it is easy to make a muddle.”

“If you get all that you have set your mind on we shall have a record show,” replied Sophy briskly, and then she hurried to help Pam to get ready, for the afternoon was wearing, and the distances to be traversed were so great that Pam would hardly get through her list of friendly calls before bedtime.

Just as Pam was going out of the house, who should come driving up but Galena! Nathan had pitched her such a tale when he got home, after driving Pam to Ripple, that Galena cast her own sorrow and her private regrets to the winds, and leaving Nathan to wash the dinner dishes and look after Reggie, she had hitched the horse to her own wagon, and had come to offer everything she could to furnish the wedding feast.

Of course her prompt appearance on the scene made all the difference to Pam’s venture, and the two of them started out to make the round of their friends and neighbours. They went with the comfortable certainty of getting what they wanted, and they soon found that the chief difficulty lay in drawing a line as to the amount to be lent or given. Pam even secured the loan of the new carpet on which she had set her heart — a gorgeous affair, with roses as big as cabbages, and the sort of colouring that “hits you in the eye”; but it was new and gay, so nothing else really mattered. It was late when the day was ended, and Pam was tired, but her efforts were going to be crowned with success.

CHAPTER XXI

How it was Done

Never in her life had Pam worked so hard as she did in that week before Sophy was married. The house must be scrubbed from top to bottom. It had seemed clean enough for everyday occupation, and she would not have troubled about it until some wet spell had given her the leisure from outside tasks necessary for cleaning out the one or two rooms which seemed to need it most. But the wedding altered everything. Pam cared not at all because the place needed almost everything in the way of household plishing; that was not her fault, nor her responsibility. But her pride would have been hurt in its most vital part if those neighbour women had come in to find dirty floors, and windows bunged up with cobwebs. She was astir at dawn on Monday morning, and started on her campaign against dirt in the most energetic fashion possible. When she began to stir the rooms out she was dismayed to find how really dirty they were, and she worked so hard that Jack declared there would be nothing of her left by Thursday.

Sophy wanted to help with the cleaning, but was sternly reminded that brides were looked upon as being rather ornamental than useful, and she was not allowed to soil her hands for that one week at least. Don came over on Tuesday and scrubbed the big kitchen for Pam; he had been away over the week-end with George Lester, and knew nothing of the trouble at home until he got back late on Monday evening, to find himself billeted at the stores, in company with George, and ordered to keep away from home. The two children who had sickened were not really ill, but of course the next cases might be very bad indeed, so the Doctor was taking no risks. Mrs. Grierson shut herself up with the small invalids, and the rest of the children were taken to a lone house where there were no other children, and their father saw them twice a day to make certain they were not developing the complaint.

Dr. Grierson had done so many kind things for people in his time that all the neighbours vied with each other in their efforts to smooth for him the present embarrassment. Pam had to refuse so many offers of help, and to insist so strongly that supplies should be kept down to the limit she had asked for, that she was amazed, not only at the kindness of everyone, but also at the resources at their disposal. She would not allow them to bring anything to the house until

Wednesday, by which time she would have the place in fit trim to receive all the things that were to be loaned, and all the food that was to be given.

She had refused to let Jack scrub, for she had her own ideas as to how the work should be done, and she meant to have the house brought up to standard somehow. But when Don appeared and took bucket and brush away from her by sheer force, there was nothing for it but to give way, because he was the stronger, and she knew she could not get the things away from him if she tried. Then, too, he did the work in a masterly fashion. It was pure pleasure to see the energy he put into the brush-work, and the capable manner in which he swabbed up the water; the corners, too, got such a routing-out that after watching him for five minutes, Pam stretched her weary arms above her head, and went away to put her hair straight, feeling that so far as the scrubbing was concerned, her responsibility was at an end.

By Wednesday night the house was so transformed that Pam declared her grandfather would not know the place if he came back.

“Do you think he will come back?” asked Jack, as the two had a final look round before going to bed.

“Nathan said that if anything would bring him back it would be the wedding. He would be so scandalized at the thought of having so many women and girls about the place that he would certainly turn up if he were still alive. That is one of the reasons why I have been so keen to have a great fuss. Of course he may be very angry, but even that will be worth while if it only ends this suspense, and lets us know where we are.” Pam sighed. She was so very tired of the uncertainty of her present life, and she so badly wanted her mother and the others to come before the summer was really over. Their help would be useful, too, for each day brought so many things to be done, and two pairs of hands seemed quite inadequate for the task.

Sophy's trunks were packed and labelled for the far west. There was nothing left to be done, except the custards and the coffee, and there would be plenty of help in the morning for them. Dr. Grierson had been over for a last talk with his daughter, and Sophy had gone off to bed drowned in tears, for it did seem cruelly hard that she could not have the support of her mother's presence at this, the most important time in her life. But her father had promised that her mother should come to pay her a visit before very long, and that was a very real consolation. Still, there were tears to be shed, and Sophy was just having a really good cry before Pam came upstairs.

Jack was going to sleep on the settle in the kitchen to-night, because his bedroom had been requisitioned as an extra sitting-room, and it was all arranged, and in the most splendid order. A big table formed from boards from the barn

stretched the length of the kitchen, and was duly spread for the feast with borrowed knives and forks, spoons, and crockery. Oh, it was a fine sight! for no one had been niggardly, and everyone had done their bit to give the Doctor's daughter a good send-off.

"What a lot of fuss for one wedding!" remarked Jack. "If I were you and Don, I would get married at the same time, now that we have got all the things here. It seems a real pity to waste all this fine spread on one couple, and you could not get such a smart carpet every day."

"I am not going to get married yet awhile, so don't worry about that; and if you think the show is wasted on two people, you had better find a wife for yourself, or else help Nathan Gittins to find one," laughed Pam. But her colour mounted, for privately she had been thinking what a lovely place Ripple was for a wedding.

"I should not wonder if it puts the idea in his head," Jack answered soberly; and then he pranced up and down the room, looking at all the things that had been loaned, and wondering what would happen if a burglar came along.

"Oh, don't even mention such a thing!" cried Pam. "I should not know where to put my head if anything happened to any of the things. You must sleep with one eye open, and if you hear a sound you must make a clamour at once. Would you rather that I stayed here with you? I could get quite a lot of sleep sitting in a chair. Indeed, I am so tired that I think I could have a comfortable nap standing on my feet, as Mrs. Buckle's old horse does."

"No, no, my child, you toddle off upstairs and get your beauty sleep, and then you will be properly good-looking for to-morrow," said Jack, taking her by the shoulders and gently pushing her towards the door. "It does not do for a girl to play fast and loose with her complexion; she can only take care of what she has got, and she can't hope to get another when that is gone, unless she can afford to buy one, and even that is not like the real thing. Don't you worry about me. If a burglar comes nosing round after this co-operative furnishing, he will get more than he bargains for from the old dog and me. We are in fine feather to-night I can tell you, so there is no need for you to worry."

Sophy had cried herself to sleep by the time that Pam got upstairs. Pam herself was so sleepy that it was almost too much trouble to slip out of her garments. But when she lay down, and her tired body could rest, she suddenly became tremendously wide-awake. It was the thought of her grandfather that was keeping her from sleep. Ever since Nathan Gittins had declared that the wedding would fetch him back if anything did, Pam had been expecting that he would come, and she was stirred to a wonderful pitch of excitement about it. Of course he would be angry, that was only to be expected. But if only the

ceremony was over, and Sophy safely turned into Mrs. George Lester, Pam decided that she did not much care what happened in the way of a disturbance. There would be plenty of people on hand ready to manage the old man, and she herself could render a good account of her stewardship.

What was it Nathan had said yesterday? Oh, she remembered! He had said that he had never seen the land at Ripple in such a fine state of cultivation before, and he had known the place for a good many years. For much of this he was responsible himself, as he had cultivated the land — that is to say, he had ploughed it and planted it, as he had done Mrs. Buckle's land. But Pam and Jack had paid for this by lending him the use of their hands and their strength on his own fields, and they had kept the crops at Ripple hand-hoed ever since the first bit of green had shown through. It had been hard work, and they had been appallingly ignorant, but they had done exactly as they had been told, and had worked so hard that success was bound to come.

Pam flounced round uneasily. If only she could go to sleep! When morning came she would be so tired that it would be positive misery to drag herself from her bed. Oh, it was stupid to be so wakeful when she could sleep! The moon poured a flood of silvery light into the room, and before it paled dawn would come stealing up over the forest, for the summer nights were at their shortest. She rose softly from the bed she shared with Sophy, and walked to the window. This room looked out on the side of the house where the forest came nearest, which was one of the reasons why Pam loved it so; another of her reasons for being fond of it was because it had been her mother's room — indeed, she had found one of her mother's old cotton frocks hanging in the funny home-made wardrobe that stood in one corner of the wide room.

The forest came so close on this side that only a strip of pasture lay between it and the house. It was here that Pam had shot at the wolves to scare them when they howled round the house in the winter. What a difference between those nights and this one! Pam leaned out of the window, and enjoyed the cool breeze, fragrant with the odours of hemlock and pine, which stole across the wide reaches of the forest. Then her ear was caught by a faint, rustling sound. What was it? Surely the cow had not broken bounds again! It would be too annoying to have to go hunting on Sophy's wedding day. But no, by dint of craning her neck at a most uncomfortable angle Pam got a glimpse of the cow lying peacefully near to the big maple at the far end of the small strip of pasture. Then she heard the rustling again, and she was positive she saw a head poked out from the bracken and brambles.

A head! But whose head? Suddenly there rushed into her mind what Nathan had said about her grandfather, and thrusting her head farther from the window,

so that she might not disturb Sophy, she called softly, "Grandfather, Grandfather, is it you?"

How loud her voice sounded in the silence of the forest! The whirring of the grasshoppers grew faint, as if they had paused listening for the answer to her call; then a cock crowed lustily from the barn, under the mistaken impression that morning was close at hand, and a sleepy bird in a thicket hard by let loose a rippling cadence ending in a plaintive chick-a-dee-dee-dee.

Though Pam strained her ears she heard not a single further movement, and after a long while she crept back to bed, and fell asleep immediately, not waking in the morning until she was aroused by Sophy.

Had it been fancy, or did someone really poke his head from that thicket last night? she wondered. Directly she was dressed, she ran downstairs, and made an exhaustive search of the spot. She got very wet from the dew, and tore a three-corner slit in the sleeve of her blouse, but she accomplished nothing else, and went back to the house feeling very cross with herself for being so foolish.

Sophy was radiantly happy this morning, just as a bride should be. The tears of last night had washed away her natural regret that her mother could not stand by her to-day. After all, it might have been worse; and Don, who came over early, told her that the two invalids were so well that they refused to stay in bed, and were only kept in the house by main force.

"Oh, it is a shame!" cried Sophy. "But there must always be a drawback somewhere, and better that than some things. But it is horrid to be parted from one's mother!"

"So I think," murmured Pam with a wistful sigh. "I have kept you from Mrs. Grierson such a lot, too, that my conscience is troubling me a bit."

"Oh, you could not help yourself, and I have had a lovely chance of doing my sewing," said Sophy. "I cannot think how girls like to have that sort of work done for them. I have had no end of real happiness from making my trousseau."

"That is because you are a hopelessly old-fashioned and stodgy person. Early Victorian, we should call you in London, and we should tilt our noses in quite a superior fashion. But all the same we should admire your industry, and envy you the garments your clever fingers have made." Pam gave Sophy a big hug as she spoke, and then rushed away to look after the custards. Weddings had their sad side, and it would be a real grief to her to lose Sophy from her daily life. But she was not going to shed tears to-day, however bad she might feel. Plenty of time for weeping when the show was over and the guests were gone. She stirred the custards with so much vigour that she spilled the stuff on to the hot plate of the cooking stove, raising awful odours, and rousing the wrath of Galena, who had come over early and assumed the leadership of the food department.

There was so much to do that the hours of the morning simply flew. Pam gave her turkeys a big meal in the middle of the day, and told them that they would have very short commons for supper, and might even get none at all. Then when the poultry and the young pigs had been stuffed until they could eat no more, she and Jack rushed indoors to get into festal attire. There was not much in the way of dress that either of them could manage. Jack's Sunday suit was rather shabby, and too small also, for he had grown so fast since coming to New Brunswick. But he would not be the only person with well-worn garments at the wedding, and when one listened to his jokes, and joined in the laughter he raised, one forgot all about his garb, and thought only of him.

Pam was not in much better case, for she had had no new clothes this summer; but a girl's things are easier to manage, and her white frock, washed and ironed by her own hands, was fresh enough to pass muster anywhere.

The company began to arrive quite early, for everyone was anxious to have as much of the fun as possible. The horses were unharnessed, and turned into the farther pasture with the cow. The poor beasts thought that Sunday had come a little earlier than usual. They were worked so hard at this time of the year that a few extra hours off work meant a lot to them. Some of them had come fourteen or fifteen miles, but they would rest until late in the evening, and so they enjoyed the treat in their own way as much as the humans did in theirs.

Pam and Jack received the company. It was not etiquette that Sophy should be seen as yet, so she remained upstairs, feeling rather out of it, if the truth be told, and wondering what all the laughter was about down below. By peeping from the big empty room which was next to their bedroom she could get glimpses of wagons driving up to the house, filled with people, and every minute the laughter and the fun downstairs grew louder and merrier.

"What a time they are having!" she murmured, then she paced the room restlessly, her little high-heeled shoes making a fitful tapping on the bare floor as she walked. Of course it was lovely to be the bride, the person of most consequence in the crowd, the one to whom all the others were looking; but she realized that the others had their compensations, and that there was a large amount of fun to be got in the hard work of organizing and carrying the festivity through.

Then a hush fell on the place, and the house grew suddenly quiet. Sophy began to tremble then, for she realized that the minister had come, and she guessed that she would soon hear Pam's foot on the stairs. It was Pam who was coming to fetch her. Pam had to act in a good many rôles that day. She was bridesmaid, she was hostess, and she had to mother the poor fluttering little bride as well. These manifold interests left her with no time to think of herself; she had

scarcely a moment either to think of her grandfather, or to wonder what sort of a scene there would be if he chose this moment for his return to his home.

A light run of feet up the stairs, then the door flew open, and Pam burst into the room.

“Oh, you are lovely!” she cried, with positive awe in her voice. “My dear, I never realized before what a beautiful face you have; it has always been the beauty of your character that has appealed to me. Come, it is time, and the clergyman is waiting!”

All Sophy’s impatience and restlessness dropped from her as if it had never been. She rose slowly, and without a word she put her hand in that of Pam, then went with her down to the crowded sitting-room, where the bridegroom awaited her coming. The silence was so profound that the tapping of Sophy’s heels sounded quite loud as she crossed the kitchen and entered the sitting-room, where her father came forward to lead her on to the bright-hued carpet. A bobolink was singing in the tree outside, and the sunshine filtered in through the elegant pair of white lace curtains which Mrs. Luke Dobson of Hunt’s Crossing had lent to adorn the window.

A low murmur of approval swept round the crowded room as the bride walked forward to take her stand on the carpet. It was doubtful whether Sophy heard it, for the full solemnity of what she was doing was on her now, with the exaltation of a great happiness. It was Pam who heard it, and to her it was like sweet music, for she knew that she had succeeded in her undertaking, and that Sophy’s wedding, regarded from the standpoint of a social function, was all that it should be.

It was a very novel sight to Pam, and it upset all her previous notions of what weddings were like. She had been a spectator at several weddings in London churches, but this was quite different, and in some peculiar fashion immeasurably more solemn. In fact, before the ceremony was over she was shaking and shivering, and telling herself that matrimony was such a terrible responsibility that she would never dare to face it on her own account. The old dog poked its head in at the open door, but seeing the number of people gathered in serious state, the creature backed out and fled. It had in a measure got used to seeing people, but a number of persons gathered in one place always seemed to upset its nerves.

When the benediction was pronounced, there was a stir and a movement; everyone wanted to crowd about the bride, to congratulate her. But Pam fled to the out-place where the kettles had been set to boil on the cracked stove. She was responsible for the coffee-making, and she knew that the wedding feast must begin directly the register had been signed, for those of the guests who had come

long distances would be greatly in need of refreshment, and she was not minded to fall short in her duties as hostess.

Amanda Higgins had been entrusted with the task of looking after matters in this direction, but she was rather a feather-headed young person, and all thought of the kettles and the fire went out of her head directly she heard the tap-tapping of Sophy's heels on the stairs. She had rushed to see the bride, and getting squeezed into a corner of the sitting-room whence it was not easy to escape, she had stayed there, revelling in the show, while the fire had died down for want of attention, and the kettles were scarcely warm.

Poor Pam! It was really hard to have succeeded so far to fail at this point. She trembled with anger as she stuffed dry kindlings into the stove, and listened to the roaring of the flames up the rusty old stove-pipe. But it was horrid to feel angry on such an occasion; indeed, it seemed almost like an insult to Sophy to give way to such bad temper just now, and Pam fought with might and main to get calm control of herself, the while she plied her fire with sticks.

Her face was hot and red, her hands were dirty, and even her frock had some smudges, when the Irishman who had driven Janey Robinson and her lame sister to the wedding came in from the barn, and took the work out of her hands. He declared that he was a first-rate hand at making fires burn on all occasions, and that nothing would make him happier than to get those kettles to boil. Pam yielded her task thankfully enough, and was turning to wash her hands before going back to the company when the Irishman said:

"There was an old man came a-creeping round here a while ago, and he was after asking if the young lady were to be seen, and I tould him that if it was yourself he was after wanting to see, he would have to be waiting until the wedding was over. He was moighty curious to know whose wedding it would be, and when I had tould all I knew, and a little more, he said that he would be after resting himself in the shade of the trees, until such time as you might find it convenient to see him."

Pam turned with a jerk, her heart beating so hard that it seemed to her the Irishman must hear it.

"An old man, did you say? Where, oh where has he gone?"

"He said that he would be resting in the shade away out beyant," and the Irishman, whose name was Riley O'Sheen, flung his hand out in a vague direction of the forest.

It was her grandfather, of course! That was Pam's first thought, and her second was that he was afraid to enter his own house because of the wedding crowd, and all the bustle that was on hand. She must go and find him, and bring him in to join in the feast! Oh, this tiresome Irishman, why had he not come

before to let her know she was wanted?

“Go, find Miss Gittins or Mrs. Buckle, and ask one of them to make the coffee for me, and to begin the meal if I am not back. I must go to find my grandfather, and bring him here as quickly as I can!” Pam was wildly excited. She remembered the rustling that she had heard in the undergrowth, and how she had fancied she saw a face poked out. Could that have been the old man, come to reconnoitre before he ventured back to his home? Then came the maddening wonder as to what it was that had kept him away so long, and why he seemed afraid to come back.

She ran swiftly across the narrow strip of pasture, and plunged in among the trees.

“Grandfather, Grandfather, where are you?” She was sending her voice out in a shout, for she argued he might be hard of hearing, and oh, she must make him understand that she wanted him to come. The Irishman had said that he was going to rest in the shade over there, but that was surely foolish, when there was shade in plenty under the trees which stood almost close to the house.

“Grandfather, Grandfather, where are you?” Try as she would, she could not keep a ring of impatience from her voice. They would be wanting her at the house. Neither Mrs. Buckle nor Galena would know quite how much coffee to make, and it was of all things most exasperating to have to run away in this fashion, when there was so much to be done, and the occasion was so unusually festive.

In spite of all the calling there was no response. Perhaps the man had gone farther away. Pam searched along the narrow tracks made by the pigs and the calves, she wandered here and hurried there with feverish persistency, until the perspiration was pouring down her face. She had torn her frock, and her hair, done more elaborately than usual, was streaming down her back.

How really horrid it all was! She was ready to give up the quest in disgust, and to go back to the house, when, shouting once again, she heard a faint response to her calling, and at once plunged forward to meet the one who called. In her haste she went to jump the rotting trunk of a tree that lay half-buried in fern, but catching the heel of her shoe as she tried to clear the obstacle, she came down with a tremendous crash, and was for the time completely stunned.

CHAPTER XXII

Good News

People accustomed to waiting on themselves never feel so much at a loss in times of strain as those who have servants to command in a general way. Galena Gittins, summoned by the Irishman, came to the out-place, and started making coffee for all that big company with the ease and dispatch that came from long years of having to do all sorts of things at the shortest possible notice. She wondered why Pam had not spoken to her before about doing this particular bit of business, but she supposed something had turned up suddenly to call her away.

“Miss Gittins, where is Pam?” demanded Jack, dashing out from the big kitchen like a small tornado. The guests were all filing in and taking their places at the table, but there was no one to look after them, to act as hostess, or to do anything at all.

“I have not the ghost of a notion,” replied Galena, who was very hot, and very much occupied with the coffee. “If the folks are ready you had better start them at feeding, for this coffee is prime now, and some of the people must be fair tuckered out by this time.”

“I can’t sit at the head of the table, and — what do you call it? — dispense hospitality,” said Jack. “I will get Dr. Grierson to do it, and Mrs. Buckle can help him, but I want to know where Pam has got to. Is anything the matter, do you expect?”

“There will be in a minute, if this coffee boils over!” exclaimed Galena, as she hastily lifted two hissing pots from the stove. Jack darted away to see that Dr. Grierson and Mrs. Buckle were looking after the company, and then he came back to tell Galena that someone had seen Pam running across the paddock to the forest.

“What would she be going there for at a time like this?” demanded Galena in blank amazement.

“Perhaps she would be going for to find the ould man that was waiting to see her,” put in the Irishman, who had just come in from the wood pile with another armful of logs, which he proceeded to cram into the stove one by one.

“What old man?” asked Jack.

“Riley O’Sheen, why didn’t you tell me this before? You never said one

word.” Galena stamped with impatience, and turned upon the unfortunate Irishman with so much wrath that he fairly cowered before her.

“Was it yourself then that was wanting to know? Sure an’ faith I’m sorry to have disappointed ye. It was an ould man that was after asking to see the young lady, and when I tould him that it was a wedding that she was seeing through in the next room, he said that he would wait until it was over. He went off to sit in the shade by reason that he was so very hot; and here he comes, but the young lady isn’t with him.”

Jack and Galena faced round in a great hurry at the Irishman’s last words, and then Galena cried out in a tone of disappointment:

“Why, it is only old Gilbert Pomroy, from Corner-Bottom. I expect he has come over to see Pam about the bees; he told her that he would let her know as soon as he had a swarm to spare.”

“When Pam heard it was an old man, I expect she said to herself that it was Grandfather come home, and she would set off hot-foot to find him. I know her!” Jack drew a long breath, and looked decidedly troubled. Their grandfather was a much less real person to him than to Pam, because he had not arrived at Ripple close upon the old man’s disappearance, as she had.

“I will talk to Gilbert; do you go and find Don Grierson, and he will hunt for Pam.” Galena had taken hold of the situation in her usually capable fashion, and sending Amanda to carry the coffee into the next room, she sailed out to talk bees with old Gilbert Pomroy, and finally induced the old man to come into the house and drink the health of the bride in a cup of coffee, which was the strongest beverage at Ripple that day.

Don started on a hasty search for Pam, shouting and calling, but getting no response. Then Jack set off in another direction. But the time passed, and as they did not return, Galena went into the room where the wedding feast was spread, and explained the situation in a few terse words.

“Has Mr. Peveril really come back?” demanded Sophy, going rather white, for she had lived with Pam long enough to know that the old man’s return was longed for and feared by her friend in about equal proportions.

“No,” snapped Galena, who was feeling decidedly cross by this time. Everything regarding the wedding had gone so smoothly before, and it was horrid to have a hitch at this crucial point; she had worked so hard beforehand that she was decidedly aggrieved that she could not be left in peace to enjoy herself now. “That silly idiot of an Irishman said that an old man was waiting to see her, and you know what Pam is! She thought the old man had come home, so she rushed off to find him, and she will run until she drops, unless someone catches up with her and tells her that it was a mistake, and that the old man is

only Gilbert Pomroy from Corner-Bottom.”

Everyone rose from the table now. Food had lost its flavour, and appetite had gone. The men went here and there through the undergrowth searching and searching for Pam, while the women and the girls wandered up and down, calling to her and listening in vain for an answer to their shouts.

It was Don who found her. When he sprang over the log, and saw her lying among the fern and the willow scrub white and unconscious, with a streak of blood on her cheek, he thought she was dead, and cried out in dismay.

Pam opened her eyes at the sound of his voice, staring at him for a few minutes in a bewildered sort of way, as if she could not remember where she was, or what had happened; then she gasped out in a frightened sort of tone: “Oh, Don, Grandfather has come back, and I cannot find him. Whatever shall I do?”

“He has not come back!” burst out Don in an explosive fashion. “It was only old Gilbert Pomroy from Corner-Bottom, who had come up to know if you would have that swarm of bees that you talked about. The Irishman, being a stranger, and not too sharp, did not know him, and you jumped to the conclusion that it was your grandfather; you rushed off without letting anyone know, and now everybody is out searching for you, and we have been in a regular panic.”

“I am so sorry!” murmured Pam, and there were tears in her eyes because of the reproach in his tone.

“This constant expecting to see the old man is wearing you out, and spoiling your life,” said Don, as he helped Pam to her feet, and supported her until she was able to stand alone. “Look here, we have got the clergyman, and we have the company; let us be married when we get back to the house, and then I can stay here and take care of you!”

To poor Pam, sore of head, and still more sore of heart, the suggestion was about the fiercest temptation she had ever had to face. If only she might take the easy way out, and have Don between herself and the ever-present dread of the old man’s return. She was owing to herself now that she did fear his coming back more than anything else, and it was the constant apprehension of it that was spoiling her life. Oh, to have the mystery cleared, and to be done with the uncertainty!

“Say yes, Pam, and it shall be managed; I am quite sure that it can be done, because of the number of witnesses we have here. Or if a longer notice is really necessary, then I will get Mrs. Buckle to stay with you until we can be married,” he urged, and with his arm holding her up, his strength between her and the trouble which shadowed her days, Pam felt as if she must give way, and take the short cut out of the muddle. Then she remembered that she had come as the

pioneer, to make the way easy for the others, and it was not herself that she should be thinking of at this time. Her head was aching so badly from the blow which had stunned her that it was difficult to think and act coherently. She felt bruised and battered, a perfect wreck; all the flavour had gone from the day's festivity, and she was conscious only of a great weariness, and a longing to creep away out of sight, and to be done with it all.

"I can't do it, Don, really, I can't!" she faltered, and her eyes were wistful in their pleading when she raised them to his face. "I must go on as I am doing now, until I know where Grandfather is, or until he comes back again."

"He may be dead; just think how easy it is for anyone to drop out without other people knowing it," urged Don. But there was something in the resolute set of Pam's white face that warned him he would not find it easy to turn her from the course on which she had set her mind.

"That is what I tell myself," she said, and her tone was deeply troubled. "All the same, we have no proof, and so we are bound to go on as usual. Oh, I am sorry to have been so silly, and to have spoiled everyone's pleasure in such a fashion. I can walk now, thank you, and I am not hurt at all, except that my head is so sore where I banged it into the tree-trunk when I caught my foot and fell."

Don urged her no further, seeing the uselessness of it. He helped her back to the house, explained the situation to the others, and made it easy for her to slip away to her room to lie down for a rest. Then he got the fun started in good earnest, and with the help of Jack succeeded in keeping the whole company in a state of bubbling satisfaction. The bride and bridegroom were driven to Hunt's Crossing for the down-river boat and the first stage of the long journey to the far west, and then by twos and threes, in wagons, in carts, and on foot, the company dispersed. Most of them would have "chores" to do when they reached home, and all would need to go to bed with the sun, since the next day's work would call them from their rest at dawn.

Don drove his father home, for the Doctor was glad to rest his horse when he could, and his son mostly drove good cattle, which got over the ground in fine style. They took the corners rather more smartly than the older man approved, but young things have a tendency to be reckless, and so far Don had always contrived to keep clear of accidents.

To-night Don had only secondary attention for his horses, for he was telling his father of Pam's state of mind regarding the possible return of the old grandfather, and he was insisting that the Doctor should write to Mrs. Walsh, and tell her it was her plain duty to come back to her old home.

"It will be some time yet before the law will permit the old man's death to be assumed, especially as he was seen at the lumber camp," said Don.

“It is not clear to my mind that he was seen at that camp,” replied the Doctor. “When I wrote to the foreman of the camp, he said they had had no one of the name of Wrack Peveril there, nor did he remember anyone who answered to the description I gave him of the old man.”

“The trouble is that we can’t prove he was not there.” Don shook his head with a bothered air, then went on: “In any case, it should be Mrs. Walsh who is in command at Ripple. She is the old man’s daughter, and her duty is here. You will write, Father, and you will put it strongly, please. Pam is at the point where every nerve is strained almost to breaking point. She has got Jack, I know; but he is younger than she is, and she needs someone older.”

“Yourself, for instance?” suggested the Doctor slyly, and he laughed in his hearty, genial fashion. Having got rid of his eldest daughter to-day, he was thinking it would be uncommonly pleasant to feel that he had another daughter to take her place.

Don shook his head with a rueful air.

“Pam won’t have me until the mystery is cleared up. If it is never cleared, then I suppose we shall remain single until the end of our lives. It is not a cheerful prospect, and that is another reason why I shall be glad to see Mrs. Walsh and the rest of the family.”

The Doctor nodded in complete comprehension, and promised that the letter should be ready for the next mail. Then he began to talk of other things, and so the journey ended.

The next three weeks slipped by in such a whirl of work that Pam could keep no count of their going. She and Jack were out of doors from morning until night. When Sunday came they managed to get to meeting once in the day, when they saw their neighbours, who were all as busy as they were themselves. The weather was glorious, and all that could be desired from the farmer’s point of view. The crops were looking well, and life was jogging on with only a normal amount of friction. Then one evening Amanda Higgins arrived with a letter for Pam, which she said Nathan Gittins had left at Mrs. Buckle’s on his way home from the post office.

Not finding anyone but the dog at home at Ripple, Amanda walked into the house, and laying the letter on the table, where the uncleared breakfast crockery was still standing, she went out again, closing the door behind her, to keep the poultry from wandering into the house. She met Pam and Jack toiling home from the woods with a great heap of timothy grass piled on the hand truck. There were parts of the forest near Ripple where timothy grass grew in profusion, and they were harvesting some of the patches as provision for the winter, when they hoped to have more cattle.

“There is a letter for you in the house, I left it on the table,” called Amanda, when she came within shouting distance; and then she volunteered the additional information: “It has come from England.”

“A letter from Mother!” cried Pam, with positive ecstasy in her tone. “Oh, how truly delightful! Thank you for bringing it over, Amanda. I had just been dreading going indoors this evening, for the breakfast things are still unwashed, the beds are not made, and we must cook supper, or go without. It was not a rosy prospect, but this has made all the difference.”

“I saw you were a bit behind with things when I went into your house, and I would have stopped and slicked things up a bit for you if I could,” said Amanda, who had a kindly disposition, albeit she was more than a trifle feckless. “But Mrs. Buckle told me to make haste back because we are going to make butter to-night. It is so much firmer this hot weather when it is done in the evening.”

Pam thanked her for the friendly thought, then hurried on her way, putting quite double energy into her task. She had been so tired only the minute before, and almost inclined to tell Jack that if he wanted any supper he would have to cook it himself. Now things looked quite different, and, with the thought of the letter to cheer her, she began to plan a really nice supper that would cook itself while she washed the breakfast dishes and made the beds. It was not often that she left these necessary household tasks undone when she went to work in the fields, but she had slept later than usual, and could not get through her work before Jack was ready and waiting for her help.

When they reached the house Jack went off to do the evening “chores”, while Pam prepared to rush round indoors. She fairly yearned for time to wash her face and do her hair, but a glance at the clock and the keenness of her appetite warned her that she had better get forward with preparations for the evening meal. They had had no dinner that day, there had been no time; and a hunch of harvest-cake had been the only food for which they had stayed during the long hot hours. No wonder Pam felt tired! A year ago she would have thought of such a life with horror; but ideals change as one grows older, and Pam felt that her highest joy now lay in keeping the old home ready for her mother and the children.

The breakfast things were washed and spread for supper, the beds were made, and supper was smelling really good by the time Jack came into the house. Pam had washed her hands and face, she had even put her hair tidy, and she was feeling that she had earned a rest.

“What is the letter about?” asked Jack as he came to the supper-table. He was very damp about face and head, for he had been stuffing his head into a bucket of water, as that was the quickest way of getting clean, and being very anxious

for his supper he had not stayed for much towel work.

“As if I should dream of opening the letter until you were here to share it with me!” cried Pam in fine scorn. “Oh, I do wonder how they are getting on with both of us away! Of course it may be good for the boys and Muriel to learn to help themselves, but it seems to me that they need us as much as ever they did.”

“I need my supper!” sighed Jack, and he reached for the saucepan of “stirabout” which was simmering on the stove.

“We will have a proper midday meal to-morrow,” said Pam. “I do not think it pays to go so long without meals, one feels so tired out; but oh, I do begrudge the time spent in coming indoors to cook it, especially now that there is so much to do.”

“Mother is coming!” yelled Jack, who had opened the letter because his portion of stirabout was too hot to eat. “She and the children are already on their way. Read the letter, Pam; they will be here next week! My word, she has hustled this business, and no mistake!”

“Mother coming!” cried Pam, who had snatched the letter and was eagerly devouring it. “It sounds too good to be true! You won’t get any dinner to-morrow, Jack; we dare not spend time in fussing about ourselves when there is so much to be done to get ready for her. You see what she says — that she has had such a good offer for the house and the furniture that it seemed better to take it, and come off straight away, especially as Dr. Grierson had written to her that for my sake she ought to come at any sacrifice. Oh, how could he write to her in such a fashion?”

“I am very glad that he did, because, don’t you see, his letter got there at the very moment it was needed to help Mother to make up her mind. Now she will come and she will settle down; and if Grandfather comes back she will be able to manage him — at least, we will hope so — or if he does not turn up, then she will be on the spot to claim the property as heir-at-law as soon as we are allowed to assume that he is dead. To my way of thinking there is a great deal in being on hand at a time like this.”

“So I think. But I can’t grasp it yet that Mother is really coming!” cried Pam, who had jumped up from the supper-table, and was rushing round frantically trying to do two or three things all at once. “Jack, I must clean the house down again from top to bottom, for I could not have Mother come and find the place dirty. What would she think of me?”

“She would think you had other things to do, and she would be about right,” replied Jack, leaning back in his chair and stretching out his limbs with an air of luxurious enjoyment. “Leave off fussing round, Pam, and sit down for two

minutes while we let this bit of news soak in. I don't seem able to believe it yet, but I expect it is true. As for the house, if it is not clean enough to suit Mother, she will start at turning it inside out herself, and by the time she has done it she will feel quite at home, and she will wonder why she didn't come back sooner. There is nothing like work for making people contented with their surroundings. That is why folks butter a cat's toes when they take pussy to a fresh home; she has to be so busy at licking her feet clean, and it is such a pleasant occupation, that she forgets she ever lived anywhere else."

Pam laughed. She was shrewd enough to see that Jack's arguments were unanswerable. The house had been thoroughly cleaned for the wedding, but it had hardly been touched since, for every available minute had been spent out-of-doors. It was necessary to be always at work on the growing crops, pulling out the fern and grubbing up the willow shoots. Ripple had been a cleared farm for more than forty years, but if it had been left to lie without attention for six months of summer it would have lapsed back to forest again. The roots were there, and the seeds, and it was only the most careful and vigilant care and attention that kept the wilderness growth in check.

"It will be lovely to have Mother here." Pam heaved a big sigh of pure happiness as she came to sit down in the rocking-chair near the open door. "We shall have a home again, Jack."

"And a dinner every day, which is still more to the point!" he exclaimed, smacking his lips loudly, and screwing his face into such an aspect of absolute enjoyment that Pam had to laugh at him.

"Think of the berries the children will be able to gather! Why, there is enough fruit getting ripe on the bushes down by the creek to keep half a dozen families in pies and puddings. We can have jam made, and heaps of things. I have felt very bad because it was so impossible to get time to do things. When I am in the fields all day I have no energy left to gather fruit in the evening. But, Jack, if we leave the house dirty, we must have that field of potatoes weeded before Mother comes. The fern in some places is smothering the potatoes, and it looks so untidy, too."

"I am going to bed," said Jack, stumbling to his feet. "Perhaps when morning comes I may want to hoe potatoes; just now I don't seem to care whether they are full of weeds or not."

Jack had slept upstairs since the wedding, because it was less lonely for Pam to have him within call at night. She was ten minutes later than he was in coming upstairs, but as she passed his open door on her way to her room she heard his deep breathing. He was already asleep!

It was long before slumber came to her; she was too happy even to remember

that she was tired. Her mother was coming, and her heavy responsibility would be at end. But how good it was to think she had been able to achieve so much!

CHAPTER XXIII

The Mystery Cleared

Mrs. Walsh looked round her with mingled pleasure and pain. The pleasure was because the old house was so unchanged, and it made her feel almost young again to be shot back into the scenes of her girlhood, and to find that the environment had scarcely altered at all. But there was keen pain in the thought of what the old man's lonely years must have been like, and the mystery of his disappearance was brought home to her so much more forcibly now that she stood in her old home once more.

The boys and Muriel had rushed off with Jack to see the barn and the pigs, and the calves which were the pride of Pam's heart. They had two, one that belonged to their own cow, and another that Pam had bought from Mrs. Buckle when it was a week old, and had brought up by hand.

"There are quite a lot of things missing from the house," said Mrs. Walsh with a troubled air, as she walked from room to room. "Of course in an ordinary way this would not have seemed wonderful, but knowing my father as I do, I cannot think he would have parted with Mother's picture, which always hung in his own room. Then there was the safe that he kept his money in, a small iron affair, which used to stand by the side of his bed. Have you seen it anywhere?"

"There is no safe in the house that I know of, and we have turned out every hole and corner," replied Pam. "A finer collection of rubbish was surely never found outside a second-hand shop, but we brushed and dusted it all and put it back for you to sort when you came."

"I cannot think what he could have done with the safe, unless he has buried it somewhere," said Mrs. Walsh in a musing tone. "He did not believe in banks, and he often used to keep a lot of money in the house. It was locked up in the safe and he thought it was all right, but I think it was a very risky thing to do."

"Especially if people got to suspect it, for even this wilderness is not too remote for light-fingered folk." Pam was thinking of Mose Paget as she spoke, and there was, as always, a pang of pity in her heart for the man whose life had been so wasted.

"To me it looks as if his going was a planned affair, and in view of your expected arrival it makes things seem very strange," went on Mrs. Walsh; and then, the two of them being at this moment in the end bedroom downstairs,

which had been prepared for her use, she went down on her knees and started peering curiously at the floor.

“What are you looking for?” demanded Pam with a ring of alarm in her voice, for her mother’s conduct was certainly strange.

“I am looking for the mark on the floor where the safe stood, and — yes, there it is! Do you see those screw-holes? It was screwed to the floor, and by the look of things it has not been removed from the place so very long. Pam, he must have moved that safe when he expected to have one of you children here with him. I expect he buried it, only the puzzle will be to find where. He must have had money in it, and was afraid that you would be curious about it. Oh, what a wearing mystery it all is!”

“But, Mother, Grandfather was poor, everyone says so!” gasped Pam, worried by the look on her mother’s face, and by all the unpleasant possibilities called up by Mrs. Walsh’s words.

“I dare say everyone thought so, and he would do what he could to keep them in their belief. But I do not think he was poor; he was always too fond of money not to have saved when he had the chance. He could live on next to nothing here, and if he only made a little money, that little he could save.”

“Mother, come and have supper, and leave off worrying about this,” said Pam hurriedly, for she could not bear to see how careworn her mother suddenly looked.

“I suppose that is about the only thing to be done, though it is very hard not to worry,” said Mrs. Walsh. She followed Pam across the big sitting-room, littered just now with the luggage of the travellers, and out to the kitchen, where a comfortable meal was spread.

It was the middle of the day, for Mrs. Walsh and her children had come up-river by the night boat. Pam and Jack declared that it gave them a most fearfully dissipated feeling to be sitting down to a meal in the middle of a day that was not Sunday. But weeding and hoeing were off for this one day, which was very much of a festival, and Pam had performed miracles of hard work since dawn in getting the house ready for the travellers. Nathan Gittins had driven his team to Hunt’s Crossing, taking Jack with him, to meet the arrivals, but he had too much tact to come in when they reached Ripple, and had driven off in a great hurry, pleading urgent business.

The boys were in raptures over the place, and Muriel was tearing round like a little wild thing. To them the new life would be like one long holiday, and Greg declared that he did not mind how hard he had to work provided he did not have to wait at table again.

“You may have to do worse than that. You may have to cook your own

supper or go without," laughed Pam.

"As if I should mind that!" snorted Greg. "I used to loathe waiting on the boarders, and seeing the disgusting greed with which they swallowed their food, and their eagerness to get their money's worth. If you want to know what a person is really like, watch him feed, I say."

"A good idea," put in Jack hastily, for he had seen a cloud gather on his mother's face, and he was not going to have her worried with the nonsense of the young ones if he could help it. "A very good idea indeed, Mr. Gregory Walsh, and by the elegant way in which you are at this moment eating flapjacks and molasses, I should be inclined to say that you are a bit of a bounder, and not very well acquainted with the usages of polite society."

The others burst into peals of laughter at the expense of Greg, and the face of Mrs. Walsh smoothed as if by magic. It was only Jack and Pam who understood how any allusion to the hardships of the boarding-house life hurt her, and they spared her when they could.

"There were some friends of Mr. Gay's on the boat we came in," said Mrs. Walsh, as she lingered sitting at the table with Pam and Jack when the others had rushed away again. "They were in the first class, of course, and we were in the second, but they used to come to pay us visits nearly every day. They are going west to British Columbia for the summer, and young Mr. Gay — he is a nephew of the Mr. Gay who was so kind to Jack — asked if he could come here for shooting in the autumn. He and his friend want a moose if they can get one. They will bring a man with them, and they would rather not stay at Ripple, which they declare would be too civilized. I told them if nothing else offered we would build them a shack right out in the forest. They are going to pay me well for coming."

"It is a shockingly busy time for shack-building," said Pam. "They would want an extra special kind, too, because they are not used to roughing it, but we shall certainly have to do what we can, because old Mr. Gay was so good to Jack."

"Why not rig up that old house in the tote road?" suggested Jack. "Nathan told me that is a wonderful place for moose, and as for other game, why, they might almost lie in bed and shoot the stuff that passes the house."

"Oh, they could not go there, it is such a shocking ruin, and it is haunted too!" cried Pam with a shiver, whereupon Jack burst out laughing. But Mrs. Walsh wanted to know what place they were talking of.

"There is a little house, very dilapidated, standing on some ground which borders the old tote road. Grandfather bought the land some few years ago, so Luke Dobson told me," explained Pam.

“I remember the place now,” said Mrs. Walsh. “The man who lived there was an Indian, or else he had an Indian wife, I don’t remember which. But, Pam, don’t you see that this bears out what I have said, that your grandfather was not poor, or he would not have been able to buy land?”

“It was only twenty acres, and he might have taken a mortgage for the bigger part of the price,” replied Pam.

Mrs. Walsh shook her head. She began to talk of other things soon after, but all the time she was puzzling out the matter of her father’s disappearance.

Pam and Jack had to work all the harder in the days that followed to make up for the holiday they had allowed themselves to welcome their mother and the younger children. But life was so much easier that the hard work scarcely counted in comparison. It was beautiful to throw down their hoes at noon, and come walking indoors to find a well-cooked meal spread ready for them to eat. It was even more delightful still to have no supper to cook at the end of a long and fagging day. Then Mrs. Walsh bought a horse and a wagon, for she said that it would never do for Muriel to have so many miles to walk to attend school. Oh, life was easier all round; only there was the one cloud that did not lift, and Pam could not be happy because of that still unexplained mystery of her grandfather’s disappearance.

Don Grierson came and went. He was so fortunate as to win the esteem of Mrs. Walsh, while the younger children adored him. But Pam was resolute in her determination to permit no engagement between him and herself while they still lived under the shadow of what might be a disgrace.

The weeks slipped by so quickly that August came and went, and September came in, with flaming autumn splendours, before anyone at Ripple seemed to realize that summer was on the wane. Then came a letter from Mr. Gay, asking if a shooting-lodge could be ready for him in a couple of weeks, as he wanted to have as much time as possible in New Brunswick before returning to England, where he was due in early November at the latest.

“Whatever shall we do?” cried Pam in dismay. “Jack, do you think we could have a logging bee, and get a framehouse run up and ready in two weeks? It will never do to disappoint these people. Besides, think how glad we shall be to have the money.”

“I should have the bee to put that house in repair that we have already got,” said Jack. He turned to Don Grierson, who had brought the mail over from The Corner, and asked him if he did not think Pam was silly to object to the place being used.

Don was not disposed to think anything Pam might do was foolish, and he said so with a straightforward simplicity which brought the hot blushes to Pam’s

cheeks, and set the others laughing.

“I propose that we go and see this place straight away,” said Mrs. Walsh. “I have been meaning to go over there every week since I came, but there is always so much to be done, and there never seems to be an opportunity for outside things.”

“I can drive you over at this minute if you like,” suggested Don; “it will save you having to hitch your own horse to your wagon, and time is everything these days.”

“That is what I say,” answered Jack. “We will all three go if you can take us; the kids can run the house until we get back. Put a hat on, Mother, and come along. The ride will do you good; it is so hot this morning, and you did not go out all yesterday.”

Mrs. Walsh had a few objections to make, but these were speedily overruled. She was anxious to please Mr. Gay, and, of course, if the building would do it would be silly to put up another, especially as labour was so hard to come by.

The nearest trail to the old tote road was too narrow for a wagon, and Don had to take them by a broader trail, which was more than three miles farther. But for him it was a holiday pure and simple, as Pam sat on the front seat beside him, Jack and Mrs. Walsh being on the seat behind. Pam was brighter, too; more as she used to be before the burden of the old man’s mysterious disappearance had become so hard to bear. All the time it was supposed that he had left his home through fear of being arrested for the wounding of Sam Buckle, it had been a bearable trouble because it was easy to understand; but since the confession of Mose Paget had cleared the character of Wrack Peveril from even the shadow of a stain, Pam had been tortured by the wonder as to whether in her ignorance and inefficiency she might have left undone something that might have cleared the mystery.

There had been a frost on the previous night, and already the maples were flaming in scarlet and gold. Pam thought of her first coming to Ripple, and how the gorgeousness of the forest had impressed her. That was nearly a year ago, and all that time she had lived on the edge of a tragedy, not knowing what a day might reveal — hoping, fearing, and wondering, yet never able to get any light on the mystery.

Mrs. Walsh was telling Jack of some of the adventures of her youth, when they had gone berrying in this part of the forest, and they were both laughing over the story, which gave Don a chance to talk to Pam in a low tone. He was telling her that now her mother had come to Ripple, there was surely no need for her to feel the burden of responsibility was hers alone, and so she might just as well let him announce the fact of their betrothal. But Pam was obdurate still. It

was as if she had inherited the spirit of the old man, and having once made up her mind, nothing could turn her. How much she suffered in making Don suffer, no one but herself could realize. She was white and spent with the effort, and the joy of the morning had turned to weariness by the time the horse reached the old tote road, and quickened its pace because the going was smoother.

“What a place!” cried Mrs. Walsh, when Don drew rein in front of the deserted house. “But the roof looks sound, and with four walls and a roof the other part should be easy enough.”

“It looks as if we ought to have brought a hatchet to chop our way in,” said Jack, as he surveyed the tall weeds and trailing brambles which had grown across the entrance door.

“I think we’ll manage to get in somehow,” replied Don. He drew his horse into the shade of a tall maple, and, jumping from the wagon, tied the animal to the tree, so that it should not take the homeward trail until he was ready. Then he helped Pam and her mother to climb down from the wagon, and, when they were on the ground, helped Jack to stamp down the weeds and the brambles to make a path to the door.

“Hullo! The handle is tied up with a yellow rag; it looks as if it was in quarantine,” called out Jack, as he pulled away a mass of wild bryony which had spread all across the door.

“That rag is a bit of Mose Paget’s handkerchief,” explained Pam. “He tied the door with it on the day when we found the lynxes here. I saw it again on the day when I was round here searching for the cow, and I thought it must have been pretty good stuff to have stood so long.”

“It was like Mose to be obliged to tear his handkerchief; any other man would have had a bit of string in his pocket,” commented Don.

“Now, I thought it was a sign of civilization in him that he possessed a handkerchief at all,” put in Pam, who was always stirred to the defence of Mose because of the rescue of the dog on that day when the creature found the lynxes.

“I don’t admire his taste in handkerchiefs. There is a thought too much yellow in it for my fancy,” said Jack, who had unfastened the rag, and now held it up for their inspection.

They all laughed, but the merriment died to a sudden silence when they opened the door and stood on the threshold. With a quick, involuntary movement Jack’s hand went to his hat, then dropped again, and he cast a furtive glance round, hoping the others had not noticed what he had been doing. A broken window had ventilated the room, which had a musty smell in spite of that. There were the remains of a wooden bed-frame in the far corner, a broken stove was in another corner, and in the centre a table of such solid manufacture that it had

been left there because it was too unwieldy to move.

“Is there only one room? What a nuisance!” cried Mrs. Walsh, who had wrinkled her nose in distaste, for the odour of the lynxes still clung to the place.

“One room and a cellar,” said Don, who had been kicking at the rubbish on the floor, and had thus disclosed a trap-door on the farther side of the room, where the big table cast a shadow.

“A cellar under this place?” exclaimed Pam in amazement. “I should not have thought the house big enough to have a cellar.”

“The place being so small would make it all the more necessary to have a store where the frost could not reach,” said Don. “You see, the folks who lived here must have had some room to store their potatoes and other roots, and it is the cheapest way of doing things to have it under the place where you live.”

“Cheap and nasty, I should say, if they all smell like this! You are surely not going down?” cried Pam, as Don struggled to lift the trap-door.

“Yes, I am, for one must know the condition of the cellar, and find out whether the beams of the floor above are sound, before determining if the house is in good enough repair to be lived in,” said Don, as he wrestled fiercely with the trap-door.

“Is it screwed down?” asked Pam in surprise, for Don was putting out all his strength, and yet failing to raise the trap-door.

“There are no screw-holes that I can see,” he answered. “It feels more as if it were fastened from below, only, of course, that is out of the question. But it is coming up somehow, for I am not going to be beaten over a thing like this. Will you hand me that iron bar — the one leaning by the stove? Thanks; now stand clear. Ah!”

Don gave such a mighty heave that with a ripping, tearing sound the trap-door came in halves, and he crashed backwards on the floor. Though he looked ridiculous enough, no one laughed, and Jack, peering down into the dark cavity, cried out in the blindest surprise:

“I don’t wonder you could not get the door up. It is bolted down. Now, how could that bolt have been shot?”

How, indeed? Don gathered himself up, and stooping low over the broken trap-door proceeded to examine it carefully. There was an iron bolt on the under side, and this was shot fully home, the handle of the bolt being turned to prevent it being shaken back.

“It is certainly queer,” muttered Don, and Pam felt a cold shiver steal all over her.

“I am going down with you,” said Jack, as Don unbolted the bit of the trap-door that had not broken away, and prepared to trust his weight on the ladder that

showed dimly from below.

“Better let me get landed at the bottom first. We don’t know the strength of the ladder, you see; and it is not worth while to invite disaster,” said Don. He set foot on the ladder with extreme caution, and clinging with both hands to the framework of the trap-door, stamped and banged at the ladder to test its firmness. “It feels sound enough, and is more solid than usual, so here goes!”

The silence above was so tense that the noise of the horse munching grass on the other side of the tote road came to the others plainly enough as they stood watching Don disappear in the darkness of the cellar.

“I am down!” he announced a minute later; and Jack had stepped on to the ladder, disappearing also, before Don had time to fumble in his pockets for a match-box to get a light.

Pam was stooping over the opening. She saw the flash of the match, then heard a frightened cry from Jack, and a startled word from Don.

“What is it?” she cried. She was shaking all over as if she had an ague, cold chills were creeping up her back, and yet she could feel the perspiration trickling slowly down her face.

“What have you found?” demanded Mrs. Walsh, thrusting Pam aside in her excitement, and coming to kneel by the yawning hole in the floor.

There was a long moment of silence, then Don’s voice spoke from below.

“A dead man is here, sitting in a chair beside a safe. Mrs. Walsh, I think it must be your father. Will you come down?”

“Grandfather down there?” cried Pam, and her voice was shrill with sheer astonishment.

CHAPTER XXIV

The End

“Hush!” panted Mrs. Walsh, and Pam was immediately ashamed of having made such a noise.

“Will you come, Mrs. Walsh?” asked the voice of Don again from below. But Mrs. Walsh trembled so badly that Pam pulled her back from the top of the ladder.

“Stay here, Mother, I will go. Strike another match, will you, Don? That is right, I can see now!” Pam went steadily down as she spoke. She had screwed her courage to the ordeal because of the manifest unfitness of her mother. Down, down, down she went, until she stood on the floor of the cellar, felt her arm grasped by Don, and heard the loud breathing of Jack.

“Where?” she breathed, and felt a sudden rush of courage because Don gripped her hand so hard.

“There!” As he spoke, Don struck another match, and by its light Pam saw a small iron safe standing on a sort of table, and in a deep, hide-covered chair beside it, a huddled something that looked like a heap of clothes surmounted by an old hat. In the dim light she could make out a gun leaning against the chair, but at that moment the match went out, and Don’s voice sounded in her ear:

“Go up now,” he commanded, “you can’t do any good here.”

Pam climbed up the ladder dazed and wondering. She heard the sobs of her mother, and wondered at it. Then she suddenly felt so faint and queer that she was glad to stumble across to the door, and put her head out to the sunshine, where the horse still munched in contentment, and the blue butterflies hovered over the white cups of the bindweed, as if there were no such thing as death in the world.

Jack came up from the cellar, still breathing heavily as if he had been running. He was immediately followed by Don, who started to turn the table upside down over the broken trap-door.

“Why are you doing that?” asked Pam.

Don carefully let the table drop over the broken door before he spoke, and then he said gravely:

“From what I could see by the light of the matches, the old man must have been in the habit of keeping his valuables there. I expect he thought it was safer

than Ripple, and I daresay he was right, though how he got that safe there alone is more than I can imagine. We don't want anyone going down there until Father and the police have made their examination. If anyone came along when we have gone, he might go down there in all innocence of what there is to find. So it seemed best to cover the hole. Now I will drive you and your mother back to Ripple, then Jack and I will go and fetch the police."

"We can walk by the narrow trail, and that will save time for you," said Pam; but Don would not hear of it, and he drove them back to Ripple. Scarcely a word was spoken by any of them. What Mrs. Walsh was thinking of was the last time she had seen her father, before she ran away to get married. The thoughts of the three who had been in the cellar were busy with the huddled heap of garments resting in the old hide-covered chair.

It was Reggie Furness who had last seen the old man alive, and he identified the remains by the hat and the coat, which had a green patch on one shoulder. The cause of death was not clear, but was supposed to be heart trouble. Wrack Peveril had more than once complained to his neighbours of pain in his side, which might easily have been disease of the heart. Someone suggested that he had shot himself either by accident or intention, but this theory was at once set aside by the fact of the gun being found loaded in every chamber. It was Pam who testified to the fact of the old man having been there at any rate ever since the first snow of the previous fall, as the yellow rag which Mose Paget had tied on the door had never been removed until the day when Don discovered the cellar. This was proof enough that Cassidy O'Brien was either mistaken in stating that he had seen the old man working at the lumber camp, or else he had made the story up to suit his own ends.

From the evidence before them it was fairly easy to understand that the old man, warned by Reggie of the coming of the surprise party, had gone across the forest to his hiding-place in the cellar, intending that his unwanted visitors should not find him at home. He had probably forgotten that his granddaughter was expected that day. Death must have come to him in a very kindly guise, for there was nothing in the position of the body to show that he had suffered. Indeed, the peace of repose lay upon the huddled remains, and on the table by the safe there was an end of candle not burned out, and a box of matches was found in one of the pockets.

All the long apprehension and the fierce anxiety were now over. The lifting of the burden was so great that at first Pam could not realize that there was no longer anything to dread. It was Don who emphasized the fact for her, when he came to see her the week after the funeral, and insisted, in the most masterful fashion possible, that their engagement should be announced.

“There is noth to wait for now, and I have been patient long enough,” he said, standing drawn up to his full height, and looking down at Pam, who was resting in a rocking-chair.

“I don’t think that you have been patient at all,” she said, with a low laugh, and her eyes sparkled with fun as they used to do before the burden of her care dulled their light somewhat.

“Opinions differ,” he said calmly, and then he sat down on a little wooden stool by her chair, and told her that old, old story, which, however it may be varied by circumstances in the telling, always amounts to the same thing in the end. He must have told it well too, for Pam had no more excuses to bring against Don’s desire for an engagement between them.

It was not until later, when the contents of the safe were examined, that it was found Wrack Peveril had been quite a wealthy man. He had made no will, and so Mrs. Walsh inherited all he had to leave. Her future would be assured now, and there would be no poverty to fear in her old age; but it might all have been very different, and her interests must have suffered greatly, had it not been for the enterprise and courage of Pam in acting as Pioneer.

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Obvious printer errors have been corrected including missing periods, apostrophes and closing quotations necessary to the dialogue.

The use of hyphenated words has been retained as written. Where two spellings of the same word appear, the spelling with the highest frequency was adopted.

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