

A COUNTESS FROM CANADA

BESSIE MARCHANT



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A COUNTESS FROM CANADA

A Story of Life in the Backwoods

BY

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"Sisters of Silver Creek" "A Courageous Girl" &c.

ILLUSTRATED BY CYRUS CUNEO

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CHAPTER I

Beyond the Second Portage

“Oh dear, how I should love to go out!”

Katherine Radford stretched her arms wearily above her head as she spoke. There had been five days of persistent snowfall; but this morning the clouds had broken, showing strips and patches of blue sky, and there was bright sunshine flooding the world again, with hard and sparkling frost.

“Why don’t you go?” demanded Phil, who was the youngest. “Miles and me don’t mind having a holiday at all.”

“Speak for yourself if you like,” growled Miles, who was thirteen; “but I want to get this schooling business over and done with, so that I can start doing something useful.”

“And speak grammatically, please, or else keep silent. You should have said, ‘Miles and I,’” remarked Katherine with quite crushing dignity, as she turned from the window to take her place at the table once more. Phil thrust his tongue in his cheek, after the manner beloved of small boys, and subsided into silence and an abstracted study of his spelling book.

The schoolroom was a small chamber, partitioned off from the store by a wall of boards so thin that all conversation about buying and selling, with the gossip of the countryside thrown in, was plainly audible to the pupils, whose studies suffered in consequence. The stovepipe from the store went through this room, keeping it comfortably warm, and in winter ’Duke Radford and the boys slept there, because it was so terribly cold in the loft.

Katherine had come home from college in July, determined to teach school all winter, and to make a success of it, too, in a most unpromising part of the world. But even the most enthusiastic teacher must fail to get on if there are no scholars to teach, and at present she had only Miles and Phil, her two brothers, as pupils. This was most trying to Katherine’s patience, for, of course, if there had only been pupils enough, she could have had a properly constituted school, and a salary also. She might even have had a regular schoolhouse to teach in, instead of being compelled to use a makeshift such as this. But everything must have a beginning, and so she had worked on bravely through the autumn, hoping against hope for more pupils. In the intervals between teaching the boys she kept the books for her father, and even attended to the wants of an occasional customer when ’Duke Radford was busy or absent.

The store at Roaring Water Portage was awkwardly placed for business. It stood on a high bank overlooking the rapids, and when it was built, five years

before, had been the centre of a mining village. But the mining village had been abandoned for three years now, because the vein of copper had ended in a thick seam of coal, which, under present circumstances, was not worth working. Now the nearest approach to a village was at Seal Cove, at the mouth of the river, nearly three miles away, where there were about half a dozen wooden huts, and the liquor saloon kept by Oily Dave when he was at home, and shut up when he was absent on fishing expeditions.

Although houses were so scarce, there was no lack of trade for the lonely store in the woods. All through the summer there was a procession of birchbark canoes, filled with red men and white, coming down the river to the bay, laden with skins of wolf, fox, beaver, wolverine, squirrel, and skunk, the harvest of the winter's trapping. Then in winter the cove and the river were often crowded with boats, driven to anchorage there by the ice, and to escape the fearful storms sweeping over the bay. The river was more favoured as an anchorage than the cove, because it was more sheltered, and also because there was open water at the foot of the rapids even in the severest winter, and had been so long as anyone could remember.

As the morning wore on, Katherine's mood became even more restless, and she simply yearned for the fresh air and the sunshine. She was usually free to go out-of-doors in the afternoons, because the boys only worked until noon, and then again in the evening, when it was night school, and Katherine did her best with such of the fisher folk as preferred learning to loafing and gambling in Oily Dave's saloon.

Even Miles seemed stupid this morning, for he was usually such a good worker; while Phil was quite hopeless. Both boys were bitten with the snow mania, and longing to be out-of-doors, in all the exhilarating brilliancy of sunshine, frost, and snow. Noon came at last, books were packed away; the boys rushed off like mad things, while Katherine went more soberly across the store and entered the living-room, which was sitting-room and kitchen combined.

An older girl was there, looking too young to be called a woman, but who nevertheless was a widow, and the mother of the twin girls who were rolling on the floor and playing with a big, shaggy wolfhound. She was Nellie, Mrs. Burton, whose husband had been drowned while sealing when the twins were twelve months old. Mrs. Burton had come home to live then, and keep house for her father, so that Katherine might go to Montreal to finish her education.

"Did you see Father as you came through the store?" Mrs. Burton asked, as she rapidly spread the dinner on the table in the centre of the room, while Katherine joined in the frolic that was going on with the twins and the dog.

"No, he was not there," Katherine answered.

"He wants you to go up to the second portage with him this afternoon. Another boat got in this morning with some mails on board, and there are stores to be taken

for Astor M’Kree,” said Mrs. Burton.

“That will be lovely!” cried Katherine, giving Lotta a toss up in the air, after which Beth had to be treated in a similar fashion to prevent jealousy. “I am simply yearning to be outside in the sunshine and the cold. I have been wishing all the morning that I were a man; then I could go off hunting, trapping, or even lumbering, and so breathe fresh air all day long.”

Mrs. Burton smiled. “I expect if you were a man you would just do as other men do; that is, smoke a dirty little pipe all day long, and so never breathe fresh air at all.”

“That is not the sort of man I would be,” retorted Katherine, with a toss of her head.

Then she put the twins into their high chairs: her father and the boys came in, and dinner began. It was a hasty meal, as early dinner has to be when half of the day’s work lies beyond it, and in less than half an hour Katherine was getting into a thick pilot coat, fur cap, mittens, and a big muffler; for, although the sun was so bright, the cold was not to be trifled with.

’Duke Radford, short for Marmaduke, was a sombre-looking man of fifty. Twenty-five years of pioneer life in the Keewatin country had worn him considerably, and he looked older than his years. But he was a strong man still, and to-day he had loaded a sledge with stores to draw himself, while Katherine looked after the four great dogs which drew the other sledge.

The track for the first three miles was as bad as a track could be. ’Duke Radford went first, to beat or pack the snow a little firmer for Katherine and the dogs; but even then every movement of her snowshoes sent the white powdery dust flying in clouds. The dogs followed close behind, so close that she had often to show a whip to keep them back, from fear that they would tread on her snowshoes and fling her down.

It was five good long miles to the abode of Astor M’Kree, beyond the second portage, but the last two miles were easy travelling, over a firm level track. “Astor M’Kree has been hauling timber or something over here to-day. I wonder how he managed it?” called out Katherine, as her father’s pace on the well-packed snow quickened, while she flew after him and the dogs came racing on behind. He shouted back some answer that was inaudible, then raced on at a great pace. Those last two miles were pure enjoyment all round, and when they drew up before the little brown house of the boatbuilder, Katherine was sparkling, glowing, and rosy, with a life and animation which she never showed indoors.

Mrs. M’Kree was a worn-looking little woman, with three babies toddling about her feet, and she welcomed her visitors with great effusiveness.

“Well, now, I must say it is right down good of you to get through all this way on the very first fine day. My word, what weather we’ve been having!” she exclaimed. “I was telling Astor only last night that if we had much more of that

sort I'd have to keep him on sawdust puddings and pine-cone soup. That fetched a long face on to him, I can tell you; for it is downright fond of his food he is, and a rare trencherman too."

"It is bad to run short of stores in keen weather like this," said 'Duke Radford, who with the help of his daughter was bringing bags, barrels, and bundles of goods into the house from the two sledges, while the dogs rested with an air of enjoyment delightful to behold.

When the stores were all safely housed, Mrs. M'Kree insisted on their drinking a cup of hot coffee before they returned; and just as she was lifting the coffee pot from the stove her husband came in. He was tall, thin, and sombre of face, as men who live in the woods are apt to be, but he had a genial manner, and that he was no tyrant could be seen from the way his children clung about his legs.

"Dear me, these youngsters!" he exclaimed, sitting down on the nearest bench with a child on each knee. "I wish they were old enough to go to your school, Miss Radford, then I'd get some peace for part of the day at least."

"I wish they were old enough, too," sighed Katherine. "It is really quite dreadful to think what a long time I have got to wait before all the small children in the neighbourhood are of an age to need school."

"By which time I expect you won't be wanting to keep school at all," said Mrs. M'Kree with a laugh. Then to her husband she said: "Mr. Radford brought some letters, Astor; perhaps you'll want to read them before he goes back."

"Ah! yes, I'd better perhaps, though there will be no hurry about the answers, I guess, for this will be the last mail that will get through the Strait before the spring." He stood up as he spoke, sliding the babies on to the ground at his feet, for he could not read his letters with the small people clutching and clawing at his hands. The others went on talking, to be interrupted a few minutes later by a surprised exclamation from the master of the house.

"Now, would you believe it! The Company has been bought out!"

"What company?" asked 'Duke Radford.

"Why, the fishing-fleet owners, Barton and Skinner and that lot," rejoined Astor M'Kree abstractedly, being again buried in his letter. He was a boat-builder by trade, and this change in things might make a considerable difference to him.

"Who is it that has bought the company out?" demanded Mrs. M'Kree anxiously. Life was quite hard enough for her already; she did not want it to become more difficult still.

"An Englishman named Oswald Selincourt," replied Astor. "He is rich, too, and means to put money into the business. He wants me to have four more boats ready by the time the waters are open, and says he is coming himself next summer to see into matters a bit. Now that looks hopeful."

Katherine chanced at that moment to glance across at her father, and was startled by the look on his face; it was just as if something had made him

desperately afraid. But it was only for a moment, and then he had got his features into control, so she hastily averted her head lest he should see her looking, and think that she was trying to pry into what did not concern her. He swallowed down the rest of his coffee at a gulp and rose to go. But his manner now was so changed and uneasy that Katherine must have wondered at it, even if she had not caught a glimpse of that dreadful look on his face when Astor M'Kree announced the change in the ownership of the fishing fleet.

The journey home was taken in a different style from the journey out: the two sledges were tied together, and both pairs of snowshoes piled on the hindmost; then, Katherine and her father taking their places on the first, the dogs started off at a tearing gallop, which made short work of the two miles of level track, and gave Katherine and her father plenty of occupation in holding on. But when they reached the broken ground the pace grew steadier, and conversation became possible once more.

'Duke Radford began to talk then with almost feverish haste, but he carefully avoided any mention of the news contained in the boatbuilder's letter, and a sickening fear of something, she knew not what, crept into the heart of Katherine and spoiled for her the glory of that winter afternoon. The sun went down in flaming splendours of crimson and gold, a young moon hung like a sickle of silver above the dark pine forest, and everywhere below was the white purity of the fresh-fallen snow.

Supper was nearly ready when they got back to Roaring Water Portage, but there were two or three customers in the store, and Katherine went to help her father with them, while Miles unharnessed and fed the four dogs. Oily Dave was one of the people gathered round the stove waiting to be served with flour and bacon, and it was his voice raised in eager talk which Katherine heard when she came back from the sitting-room into the store.

"If it's true what they are saying, that Barton, Skinner, & Co. are in liquidation, then things is going to look queer for some of us when the spring comes, and the question will be as to who can claim the boats, though some of them ain't much good."

"I suppose that you'll stick to your'n, seeing that it is by far the best in the fleet," said another man, who had a deep, rumbling laugh.

Katherine looked at her father in dumb surprise. She had been expecting him to announce the news of the fishing boats having been bought by the Englishman with the remarkable name, instead of which he was just going on with his work, and looking as if he had no more information than the others.

Lifting his head at that moment he caught his daughter's perplexed glance, and, after a moment, said hastily: "I wouldn't be in too much hurry about appropriating the boats if I were you."

"Why not?" chorused the listeners.

“Barton & Skinner have been bought out, and the new owner might not approve of his property being made off with in that fashion,” ’Duke Radford replied.

“Who’s bought it? Who told you? Look here, we want to know,” one man burst out impatiently.

“Then you had better go up to the second portage and ask Astor M’Kree,” rejoined ’Duke Radford slowly. “It was he who told me about it, and he has got the order to build four more boats.”

“Now that looks like business, anyhow. Who is the man?” demanded Rick Portus, who was younger than the others, and meant “to make things hum” when he got a chance.

’Duke Radford fumbled with the head of a flour barrel, and for a moment did not answer. It was an agonizing moment for Katherine, who was entering items in the ledger, and had to be blind and deaf to what was passing round her, yet all the time was acutely conscious that something was wrong somewhere.

The head of the barrel came off with a jerk, and then ’Duke answered with an air of studied indifference: “An Englishman, Astor M’Kree said he was; Selincourt or some such name, I think.”

A burst of eager talk followed this announcement, but, her entries made in the ledger, Katherine slipped away from it all and hurried into the sitting-room, where supper was already beginning. But the food had lost its flavour for her, and she might have been feeding on the sawdust and pine cones of which Mrs. M’Kree had spoken for all the taste her supper possessed. She had to talk, however, and to seem cheerful, yet all the time she was shrinking and shivering because of this mysterious mood displayed by her father at the mention of a strange man’s name.

’Duke Radford did not come in from the store until it was nearly time for night school, so Katherine saw very little more of him, except at a distance, for that evening; but he was so quiet and absorbed that Mrs. Burton asked more than once if he were feeling unwell. She even insisted on his taking a basin of onion gruel before he went to bed, because she thought he had caught a chill. He swallowed the gruel obediently enough, yet knew all the time that the chill was at his heart, where no comforting food nor drink could relieve him.

CHAPTER II

A Curious Accident

The nearest Hudson's Bay store to Roaring Water Portage was fifteen miles away by land, but only five by boat, as it stood on an angle of land jutting into the water, three miles from the mouth of the river. 'Duke Radford's business took him over to this place, which was called Fort Garry, always once a week, and sometimes oftener. Usually either Miles or Phil went with him, although on rare occasions Katherine took the place of the boys and helped to row the boat across the inlet to the grim old blockhouse crowning the height.

It was a week after the trip to the house of Astor M'Kree that the storekeeper announced his intention of going to Fort Garry, and said that he should need Miles to help him.

"I must go by land to-day, which is a nuisance, for it takes so much longer," he declared, as he sat down to breakfast, which at this time of the year had always to be taken by lamplight.

"Shall I come instead?" asked Katherine, who was frying potatoes at the stove. "I am quicker on snowshoes than Miles, and he has got such a bad cold."

"You can if you like, though it isn't work for a girl," he answered in a dispirited tone.

"It is work for a girl if a girl has got it to do," she rejoined, with a merry laugh; "and I shall just love to come with you, Father. When will you start?"

"At dawn," he replied brusquely; and, finishing his meal in silence, he went into the store.

"Katherine, what is the matter with Father? Do you think he is ill?" Mrs. Burton asked in a troubled tone. "He has been so quiet and gloomy for the last few days; he does not eat well, and he does not seem to care to talk to any of us."

Katherine shivered and hesitated. She knew the moment from which the change in her father's manner dated, but she could not speak of it even to her sister. "Perhaps the cold weather tries him a great deal just at first; it has come so suddenly, and we are not seasoned to it yet, you know," she answered evasively.

"I hope it is only that," answered Mrs. Burton, brightening up at the suggestion. "And really the cold has been terribly trying for the last week, though it won't seem so bad when we get used to it. I am glad you are going with Father, though, for Miles has such a dreadful cold, poor boy."

"His own fault," laughed Katherine. "If he will go and sit in a tub half the day, in the hope of shooting swans, he must expect to get a cold."

"Boys will do unwise things, I fancy. They can't help it, so it is of no use to

blame them," Mrs. Burton said with a sigh.

Katherine laughed again. Mrs. Burton had a way of never blaming anyone, and slipped through life always thinking the very best of the people with whom she came in contact, crediting them with good intentions however far short they might prove of good in reality. The sisters were alike in features and in their dainty, womanly ways, but in character they were a wide contrast. Katherine, under her girlish softness and pretty winning manner, had hidden a firm will and purpose, a sound judgment, and a resourcefulness which would stand her in good stead in the emergencies of life. She liked to decide things for herself, and choose what she would do; but Mrs. Burton always needed someone to lean upon and to settle momentous questions for her.

'Duke Radford was ready to start by the time dawn arrived, and Katherine was ready too. It was so very cold that she had twisted a cloud of brilliant scarlet wool all over her head and ears, in addition to her other wrappings. There were some stores to take to Fort Garry, and there would be others to bring back, as considerable trading was done between the fort and the settlement. Very often when 'Duke Radford ran out of some easy-to-sell commodity he was able to replenish his stock from the fort, while he in his turn accepted furs in barter from his customers, which he disposed of to the agent when next he visited the fort. As on the journey to the second portage, 'Duke Radford went first, drawing a laden sledge, followed by Katherine, who looked after the dogs. There would be no riding either way to-day, and the daylight would be only just long enough for the work, the snow on the trail not being hard enough as yet to make the going very easy.

Fort Garry was reached without incident, although, to Katherine's secret dismay, her father had not spoken to her once, but had just gone moodily forward with his head hanging down, and dragging the sledge after him. He roused up a little when the fort was reached, and talked to Peter M'Crawney, the agent, an eager-faced Scot with an insatiable desire for information on all sorts of subjects. Mrs. M'Crawney was an Irishwoman who was always sighing for the mild, moist climate and the peat reek of her childhood's home. But Peter knew when he was well off, and meant to stick to his post until he had saved enough money to live without work.

"Teaching school, are you? Well it's myself that would like to be one of your scholars, for it's bonny you look with that scarlet thing wrapped round your head!" exclaimed Mrs. M'Crawney in an admiring tone, when Katherine sat down to have a talk with her whilst 'Duke Radford did his business with the agent.

"You can come if you like; we don't have any age limit at Roaring Water Portage," Katherine answered with a laugh. She had to be bright and vivacious despite the heaviness of her heart, for it would never do to display her secret uneasiness on her father's account, or to betray his changed condition to strangers.

“And pretty I should look at my age, sitting among the babies learning to do strokes and pothooks,” the Irishwoman said, echoing the laugh. Then she began to question Katherine eagerly concerning the news which had filtered through into the solitudes from the great world outside. “They are saying that the Mr. Selincourt who has bought the fishing fleet will come here when the waters open; but wherever will he stay?”

“I don’t know; perhaps he will have one of the huts down at Seal Cove, although they are very dirty. I think if I were in his place I should have a new hut built, or else live in a tent,” Katherine answered.

“He will have a hut built, I expect; then perhaps if he likes the place he will come every year. Although it’s funny the whims rich people have, to be coming to a place like this, when they might be living in a civilized country, with everything that heart could desire within a hand’s reach,” said Mrs. M’Crawney with a toss of her head.

“I suppose being able to have all they want spoils them so much that they are always wanting a change. But if we don’t start we shall be late in getting home, and travelling is very bad over the broken ground at the end of the bay,” Katherine said, as she rose and began to draw her scarlet cloud closer round her head again.

Her father was still talking to Peter M’Crawney when she came in search of him, but he looked so much relieved at the interruption that she could only suppose the agent had been talking overmuch about the rich Englishman who was expected in that remote quarter of the world next spring, when the waters were open.

“Are you ready to go now?” Katherine asked, a sudden pang of pity stabbing at her heart, for in the strong light her father’s face looked worn and furrowed, more than she had ever seen it before; indeed, a look of age had crept over his countenance during the last few days that was very marked, while his dark hair showed streaks of grey which had certainly not been there a week ago. He had momentarily taken off his cap, to do something to one of the lappets which was not comfortable; but now he put it on again, covering his head, ears, and a good part of his face as well.

“Yes, I am ready, and rather keen on starting, for there is a damp smell coming in the air which may mean a slight thaw or more fall, and either would be bad for us to-day,” he answered, lifting his head and sniffing, like a dog that scents a trail.

“Can’t the dogs pull you a piece, Miss?” asked the agent in a tone of concern. “It is a shocking long way for a bit of a girl, even though she is on snowshoes.”

“It is not longer for me than for Father, and I don’t even have to drag the sledge as he does,” Katherine replied brightly, as she fitted her moccasined feet into the straps of her snowshoes.

The dogs were in a great hurry to start, and one, a great brown-and-white beast which always followed next the leader, kept flinging up its head and howling in

the most dismal manner until they were well on their way. The noise got on Katherine's nerves to such an extent that she was tempted to use her whip to the dog, and only refrained because it seemed so cruel to thrash a creature for just being miserable. To cheer the animals for the heavy work before them, she talked to them as if they were human beings, encouraging them so much that they took the first ten miles at a tremendous rate, following so close on the track of the first sledge that presently 'Duke Radford held up his hand as a signal for stopping, then turned round to expostulate in a peevish tone: "What do you mean by letting the dogs wear themselves out at such a rate? We shall have one of them dropping exhausted presently, and then we shall be in a nice fix."

"I haven't used the whip once, Father, but I thought it was better to get them on as fast as I could, for I have felt and seen ever so many snowflakes in the last half-hour," Katherine said penitently.

'Duke Radford turned his face rather anxiously windward, and was considerably worried to find that a few small snowflakes came dancing slowly down, and that the slight draught of the morning was changing to a raw, cold wind from off the water.

"It is a fall coming, and by the look of it, it may be heavy. You had better keep the dogs coming as fast as you can. But stop if I throw up my hand, or you will be running me down."

"Shall we change places for a time?" asked Katherine. "I am not a bit tired, but you look just worn out."

"No, no, I can't have you dragging a sledge. But be careful and keep the dogs from rushing down the slopes and overrunning me," he answered, then started forward again.

The flakes were falling faster now, but they were so fine that they would have scarcely counted had it not been for the number of them. At the end of the next half-hour the fall was like a fog of whirling atoms, and the travellers looked like moving snow figures. The dogs were still running well, and Katherine found it hard work to keep them back, especially on the slopes, where they would persist in trying to make rushes, so getting thoroughly out of hand. She was keeping them back down one long bad slope which abounded in pitfalls, when to her horror she heard her father cry out, then saw him and his sledge disappear, shooting into a whirling smother of snow.

[Illustration: 'Duke Radford meets with an accident]

With a sharp order to the dogs to stop, which they promptly obeyed by dropping in four panting heaps on the snow, she went forward alone to see what had happened to her father. It was a simple enough accident, and one that had to be constantly guarded against in drawing a sledge when travelling on snowshoes. In going down the slope the sledge had travelled proportionally faster than the man, and, catching against the framework of one of the snowshoes, had flung him

with tremendous force between two trees. The trees, which were really two shoots from one root, grew so close together that when 'Duke Radford was pitched in between them he was wedged fast by the force of the impact, while the sledge, coming on behind, bounded on to his prostrate body. He groaned when Katherine dragged the sledge away, and cried out with the pain when she tried to help him out.

"Did it hurt you so badly? Oh, I am sorry! But I will be more careful next time," she said; and, stepping carefully backwards after that first vain attempt, she slipped her feet clear of the snowshoes and went closer to the tree, so that she might try to lift him out of the fork by sheer strength of arm. But the snow was so soft that she sank in over her ankles, going deeper and deeper with every attempt which she made to wriggle herself free.

"This won't do," she said sharply. "I won't be long, Father dear, but I must pack the snow a bit before I can get firm standing ground."

Slipping her father's snowshoes, one of which was broken, from his feet, she took the broken part and proceeded to beat the snow firm all round the trees. This took perhaps ten minutes, although she worked so hard that she perspired despite the cold. The snow was firm now; she could stand without sinking, and going round in front of her father she exerted all her strength and lifted him up a little. He was bleeding from a wound on his face, and seemed to be quite dazed.

"Can you help yourself at all?" she asked urgently, knowing that it was quite impossible for her unaided strength to get him clear of the fork. But his only reply was a groan, and Katherine began to grow frightened. It was quite impossible to leave him while she went to summon aid, and equally impossible to get help without going for it. Meanwhile the cold was so intense that every moment of waiting became a risk. Even the dogs were whining and restless, impatient to get off again for the last stage of their journey.

"Father, you must help yourself," the girl cried despairingly. "I can't possibly get you out of the tree alone, and you will just freeze to death if you are not quick."

The urgency of her tone seemed to rouse him a little, and, seeing that he appeared to be coming to himself again, she rubbed his face briskly with snow, which quickened his faculties, and incidentally made the wound on his cheek smart horribly; but that was a minor matter, the chief thing being to make him bestir himself. Then by a great effort she lifted him up again, and this time he put out his hand and clutched at the trunk of the tree, and so kept himself from slipping back into the fork, while she ran round and pulled him clear of the trees, making him lean upon her whilst she debated on her next move.

"I don't know how we shall get home; I can't walk," he said feebly.

"Of course you can't; that is entirely out of the question," she said briskly. "I must unload the two sledges, and cache the things close to this tree, under your

sledge; then the dogs can draw you home. There is not much over three miles to be done, so we shall not be long.”

She made him sit on the snow while she set about her preparations, for he seemed too weak to stand alone. Most of the goods were taken from the dog sledge and piled in a heap at the foot of the forked trees. The other sledge was brought alongside and unloaded also, then Katherine dragged the hand sledge on to the top of the packages, with the runners sticking upwards, so that a curious wolf might think it was a trap of a fresh shape, and avoid it accordingly. All this took time, however, and when she had got her father packed into the sledge in readiness for a start it was almost dark, while the snow was coming down thicker than ever. The brown-and-white dog was howling dismally again, while the black one which had a cropped ear seemed disposed to follow suit.

It was of no use trying to guide the dogs now, and, falling into the rear, Katherine shouted to them to go forward, and left it to their instinct to find the way home. She had to keep shouting and singing to them the whole of the way. If from very weariness her voice sank to silence, they dropped into a slow walk; but when it rang out again in a cheery shout, they plunged forward at a great pace, which was maintained only so long as she continued shouting. But at last, after what seemed an interminable time, she heard the noise of the water coming over Roaring Water Portage; the dogs heard it too, and the need for shouting ceased, for they knew they were almost at the end of the journey.

CHAPTER III

Outwitting the Enemy

Among his neighbours at Seal Cove, 'Duke Radford counted one very pronounced enemy, and that was Oily Dave, master of one of the sealing boats, and keeper of the only whisky saloon within twenty or thirty miles of Roaring Water Portage. The cause of the enmity was now nearly two years old, but like a good many other things it had gained strength with age. Oily Dave had been supplying the red man with liquor, and this in defiance of the law which forbade such sales; 'Duke Radford reported him, and Oily Dave was mulcted in a fine so heavy that it consumed all the profits from his Indian traffic, and a good many other and more legitimate profits also. Since then Oily Dave had hated the storekeeper with a zest and energy which bade fair to become the ruling passion of his life; but except for a few minor disagreeables, that could hardly be said to count, his ill will had thus far not gone beyond sneer and invective.

Katherine was always afraid of him, and of what he might do to her father if he had the chance; for his nature was small and mean, so small and so mean that, though he might not risk a reprisal which would bring him within the reach of the law, he would not hesitate at any small, mean act of spite which might injure his victim, yet would not reflect on himself. Since knowing of her father's trouble, she had been more afraid of Oily Dave than ever, for there was a sinister look about the man, and she feared she knew not what.

When the dogs, with their master in the sledge, and Katherine following close behind, dashed up to the door of the store that evening, Oily Dave was the first person to step forward to lend a helping hand in getting 'Duke Radford housed and his hurts examined. There were six or seven men loafing about the store that evening, and they all helped; so Katherine, when she had kicked off her snowshoes, was able to dart indoors to warn Mrs. Burton about what had happened.

"He ought to be put to bed at once, Nellie. Night school must go for to-night, and if he has to keep his bed to-morrow, why, I must teach in here, or even in the store," she said hurriedly, deciding everything on the spot as was her wont, because Mrs. Burton always found it so difficult to make up her mind on any subject.

"Do you think that would be best, or shall we give him our bedroom?—though that would be frightfully inconvenient, and I should be so worried to be obliged to put the children to bed in that other room at night, so far away from us, after the store is closed," sighed Mrs. Burton, who stood still in the middle of the room,

clasping and unclasping her hands in nervous distress, while Katherine dragged off her encumbering wraps, tossing them in a heap on the floor.

“Come and help me to make the bed, Nellie,” she said, turning away and leaving Mrs. Burton’s plaintive questions unanswered.

The elder sister at once did as the younger requested, sighing a little as she went, yet relieved all the same because the matter had been settled for her. By this time some of the men had brought ’Duke Radford into the store, and, sitting him on the bench by the stove, were peeling off his outer wraps. Some of the others had unharnessed the dogs, while Phil carried out their supper. Miles, meanwhile, was looking sharply after the store; for, although these neighbours were so kind and helpful, some of them were not to be trusted farther than they could be seen, and would have helped themselves to sugar, beans, tobacco, or anything else which took their fancy if the opportunity had been given them for doing so.

Whilst two of the men took ’Duke Radford’s clothes off, and got him safely into bed, another man approached Miles and asked for a particular kind of tobacco. The boy sought for it in the place where it was usually kept, but, failing to find it, turned to Katherine, who stood in impatient misery by the stove, waiting to go to her father when the men had done with him.

“Katherine, where is the Black Crow tobacco kept now? It always used to be on the shelf below the tea packets.”

“We are out of it,” she replied. “But we shall have plenty to-morrow. I had to cache most of the stores we were bringing; but they are safe enough, for I turned the little sledge upside down on the top of them, so I guess neither wolf nor wolverine will be able to get at them to tear the packets to pieces.”

“You won’t be able to get them either, for with all this snow you will never be able to find them,” said the man in a disappointed tone, for he was a great smoker who cared for only one sort of tobacco.

“Oh! make your mind quite easy on that score,” replied Katherine. “I hung Father’s broken snowshoe in a branch of the tree, to mark the place, and I shall go over quite early to-morrow to bring the goods home.”

Directly she had spoken she repented her words; for she saw, without appearing to see, a look full of meaning which passed between Oily Dave and the customer who had been disappointed. It was only a glance, and might stand for nothing, but she had seen it and was angry with herself for the indiscretion which had made her utter words which had better not have been spoken. The men came out of the bedroom then, so she and Nellie were able to go in.

’Duke Radford was considerably battered. He had a broken collar bone; one shoulder was bruised so badly that it looked as if it had been beaten with a hammer; and one side of his face had a deep flesh wound. Mrs. Burton was a capital nurse: she and Katherine between them soon had the sufferer as comfortable as it was possible to make him; then they fed him with strong hot

broth, after which Mrs. Burton remembered that Katherine had had no supper, and hustled her off to the other room in search of food. Katherine noticed as she went back through the store that Oily Dave had gone, also the man who had wanted to buy the Black Crow tobacco.

“Miles, can you leave Phil to look after things, and come with me for five minutes?” she said, with a thrill of anxiety in her tone. She was faint and spent with hunger and fatigue, the prospect before her seemed too dreadful to be faced, yet deep down in her heart was the stern determination not to be outwitted if she could help it. But she must first of all get rid of this stupid trembling, which made her feel as if her limbs were not strong enough to bear the weight of her body; so sitting down at the table she prepared to get a good square meal as the first step towards the successful accomplishment of what was to come after. Miles was a minute later in coming, because he had been attending to a customer. “What is the matter; is Father very bad?” he asked, with a quaver of fear in his tone. Accidents, or sickness of any kind, always seemed so much worse in winter, and then death and disaster had already worked havoc in the family.

“Poor Father is bad enough, but I dare say he will do very well with care, and Nellie is a famous one for looking after sick folks,” Katherine answered, as cheerfully as she could, quick to understand what was in the mind of Miles, and feeling genuinely sorry for him. Then she said briskly: “But I have gone and done a fearfully stupid thing to-night, and I want to know if you feel brave enough to help me out of a very big muddle?”

Miles bristled up in an offended fashion. “I suppose I’ve got as much pluck as most people; anyhow I’m not quite a coward.”

“Of course you are not, or I should not have dreamed of asking you to help me to-night,” Katherine said, with a nervous laugh; then in a jerky tone she went on: “I want you to get the store shut up as soon as possible, then, directly the people have cleared off, we have got to go and bring those stores home that I had to cache.”

“But we can’t go at night, and in a snowstorm!” expostulated Miles; but his eyes glowed and his nostrils dilated, as if the very thought of such an expedition sent thrills of delight all through him.

“It is not snowing so badly now, and luckily the moon will help us. Moreover, if we don’t go tonight it will not be of much use to go at all; for if we wait until the morning I fancy we shall find that most of the stores have disappeared, especially the Black Crow tobacco,” Katherine replied, then told him of the look she had seen pass between the man who wanted the tobacco and Oily Dave, after she had been so foolishly frank in explaining where the stores were to be found.

“I’ll go and shut up sharp, then we’ll start as soon as possible,” Miles said, with a jump of irrepressible joyfulness, for nothing appealed to him like adventure.

“Don’t let anyone even guess what we are going to do!” cried Katherine, who felt that enough indiscretion had been committed that night to last them for a long time to come.

“Trust me for that!” replied Miles. “I shall pull a face as long as a fiddle, and yawn my head half off while I’m clearing up. Oh, it will be rich to out-wit that precious pair! I had been wondering why Stee Jenkin should go off so quiet and early with Oily Dave, but I should never have guessed at the reason. I shall be through with the shutting-up in about twenty minutes, and I’ve had my supper, so there won’t be anything to wait for.”

Katherine felt better when she had eaten her supper; the thought of what was before her was less of an ordeal, and she was more than ever determined that Oily Dave and the other man must be outwitted, cost what it might. There was to be no night school that night, so, directly the door of the store was shut and barred, Miles and Katherine were able to set out. The twins were in bed, and fast asleep. Mrs. Burton was still busy in her father’s room, so there was only Phil to look after things.

“Tell Nellie when she comes out of Father’s room that Miles and I have got some work to do outside which may take us an hour or more,” Katherine said to her youngest brother. “Meanwhile you must just make yourself as useful as possible—clear away supper, wash the cups and plates, take care of the fire, and look after things generally. You will have a school holiday to-morrow, so no lessons need be learned to-night. We shall have to do the store work while Father is ill, so you and Miles will have to be satisfied with night school with the men instead of having lessons in the day.”

“Hooray!” chirruped Phil, who had no love of learning, but always yearned for action. Then he asked anxiously: “Couldn’t you stay in and look after things to-night, while I go and help Miles with the outside work?”

Katherine laughed and shook her head. “No, no, the outside work would be too heavy for you to-night; you might even get your nose frozen. But you must stay up until we come back, because Nellie may need you to help her.”

“I’ll stay,” replied the boy, but he manifested so much curiosity about the nature of the outside work that had to be done that Katherine had finally to command him to stay inside the house.

Neither she nor Miles wished anyone to know what they were going to do: there were so many reasons for keeping their errand secret. Mrs. Burton would have wept and wailed at the mere thought of such a journey at night, while Phil simply could not keep a secret.

The dogs were tired and sleepy, very unwilling to be turned out and harnessed again, but directly they were fairly out of their shed the cold seemed to rouse them, and they set off at a great pace. Katherine and Miles were riding in the empty sledge now, with their snowshoes tucked in beside them. The snow-storm

had spent itself; the moon shone out of a cloudless sky, while myriads of stars lent their aid to the illumination of the night. Even the cold was less noticeable than in the afternoon, when the damp wind blew off the water and the snow was falling so fast.

“It was worth while your being indiscreet for once, seeing that it has brought us out on a night like this,” Miles said, as he crouched low in the sledge, holding on with both thickly mittened hands, for Katherine was driving, and the dogs were going with leaps and bounds, which made the sledge bounce and sway in a very erratic fashion.

“You won’t say the indiscretion was worth while if it turns out that we are the second arrivals and not the first,” Katherine answered. But her tone was buoyant and hopeful; for she had little doubt about getting to the scene of her father’s accident before Oily Dave and Stee Jenkin had succeeded in locating the spot.

“Wolves! listen to them!” exclaimed Miles, as a hideous yapping and howling sounded across the snowy waste.

“They are a good way off though, and I brought a pair of Father’s revolvers in case of accident,” Katherine replied, her heart beating a little quicker, although in reality she would much rather have met two or three wolves just then than have encountered Oily Dave and the man who had wanted to buy the Black Crow tobacco.

“I’m glad you thought to bring them,” said Miles. “Nick Jones told me the wolves are uncommonly hungry for so early in the year, and they are in great numbers too. He trapped twenty last week.”

“That means twenty less to bother us to-night, which is a great comfort,” she answered, laughing nervously, for the yapping and howling seemed to be coming nearer and nearer. Then, recognizing a landmark, she cried out joyfully: “Oh, here is the place, and there hangs the broken snowshoe!”

“What is that?” cried Miles sharply, as a shadowy something slid away out of sight among the trees, a something that was so much like its surroundings as to be hardly distinct from them.

“A wolf. Look at the dogs. Mind what you are about, Miles, or they’ll bolt!” she called quickly. They were both on the ground now, and the boy was trying to hold in the dogs, which were barking, raging, howling, and whining, making a violent uproar, and all striving to get free in order to rush at that something which had slid out of sight among the trees a minute before.

“We must tie them up. I can’t hold the brutes. They pull as if they were mad,” said Miles breathlessly, while the dogs struggled and fought, nearly dragging him off his feet, as he tried to keep them from dashing away in pursuit of what they deemed a legitimate quarry.

Katherine swung a rope with a running noose over the head and shoulders of the leader, a huge white dog with a black patch on its back like a saddle.

“There, my fine fellow; now perhaps you will understand that this is not playtime, but a working day extending into the night,” she said, as she patted the great beast in an affectionate manner to show that it was repression, not punishment, which was intended by the tightening of the rope.

The dog whined, licking her mitten, but left off struggling, as if it realized the uselessness of such a course. The other dogs were fastened in like manner, for they had all been trained to hunt wolves, and might bolt at an unexpected moment, wrecking the sledge and scattering the things which were loaded upon it. Then came ten minutes of hard work clearing away the snow and getting at the packages which Katherine had been obliged to cache a few hours before. One package had been torn open, and its contents scattered, which showed that the wolf had already started thieving operations; so that even if Oily Dave and his companion had contemplated no raid on the cache, there would not have been much left later which was worth carrying away.

“I don’t like you having to draw that sledge. Suppose it overruns you, and you get hurt, like Father did this afternoon,” Miles said in a troubled tone, as Katherine prepared to go forward with the hand sledge, while he followed behind with the dogs.

“I don’t intend to let it overrun me, so there is no need to worry. In fact there is much more danger for you if the dogs hear the wolves and try to bolt. But let us get along as fast as we can, or Nellie will be in a fine state of anxiety about us,” Katherine replied. Then, gathering the lines of the sledge round her arms, as her father had taught her, she set out at a good pace, followed by Miles and the dogs.

For a time little was to be heard save the creaking of the babiche lacing of the snowshoes, for the dogs were running silently, and Miles, saving his breath for the work of getting along, was controlling them merely by dumb show, flourishing the whip to hold them back when they took on a spurt, or beckoning them along when they showed signs of lagging. They were less than a mile from home, and going well, when suddenly a hideous uproar broke out near at hand—the long-drawn howling of wolves, human shouts and cries, and the crack of a revolver.

CHAPTER IV

A Night of Rough Work

“Phil, where is Katherine?” asked Mrs. Burton, coming out of her father’s room about half an hour after the two had started to bring home the stores.

“She has gone to help Miles to do some work outside, though what it can be I’m sure I don’t know,” grumbled Phil, who was sleepy and wanted to get to bed. He had washed the supper things after a fashion, had cleared up the kitchen for the night, according to his own ideas of tidiness, and now was sitting in the rocking-chair by the stove, trying very hard to keep his eyes open.

“Oh dear, how unwise of her!” exclaimed Mrs. Burton in a plaintive tone. “I am always so afraid for her to go outside at night when it is freezing so sharply, for her face would be quite spoiled if she were to get it frostbitten, and she is so pretty.”

“Is she?” Phil’s voice had a drowsy drawl, as if the subject of Katherine’s looks had very little interest for him, as indeed it had. But an unexpected lurch of the chair, coming at that moment, landed him in a squirming heap on the floor.

“Oh, Phil, I am so sorry that I upset you, dear, but I had to catch at the chair to save myself from falling over the broom! What made you leave it lying on the floor?” asked Mrs. Burton, who had been the innocent cause of his collapse.

Phil rose to his feet and dusted the ashes from the sleeve of his jacket with a rueful air. “Did I leave the broom there? Oh, I suppose I forgot it! I remember I had it to sweep up the fireplace, because I could not find a brush.”

“There is the brush hanging close to the stove,” remarked Mrs. Burton. Then she broke out again: “I wonder what Katherine can be doing out-of-doors at this time of the night, and Miles too?”

“Perhaps they are gone to a surprise party. Don’t you remember there was one at Astor M’Kree’s last winter?” suggested Phil, whose tumble had dispelled some of his sleepiness, although he still talked in a drowsy tone, and rumbled his hair wildly all over his head.

“Katherine would not go to a surprise party with Father lying in such a condition,” replied Mrs. Burton severely. Then she went on: “Besides, she must be pretty well worn out, poor girl, for she has done thirty miles on snowshoes since the morning, with all the worry and trouble of Father’s accident thrown in.”

“Perhaps she has gone to help Miles to look after his wolf traps. I wanted to go instead, only she wouldn’t let me. I told her that girls ought to stay indoors to wash cups and things, while boys did the outside work,” Phil explained, in a rather injured tone.

Mrs. Burton laughed softly. "I'm glad Katherine did not let you turn out to-night, laddie, though I am sorry she had to go herself. Now make haste and get off to bed; I have put everything ready for you. But you must be very quiet, because I think Father is inclined to go to sleep."

"Katherine said I was not to go to bed until she came in, and I'm not so very tired," replied Phil, choking back a yawn with a great effort.

"I am, though. And if you are in Father's room I shall be able to sit down here by the stove and rest without any worry. So run along, laddie, and be sure that you come to rouse me if Father wants me," Mrs. Burton said. Then, drawing a big shawl round her shoulders, she sat down in the rocking-chair vacated by Phil to wait for the return of her sister and brother.

She wondered why they had gone out, but did not worry about it, except on the score of Katherine's complexion. Even that ceased to trouble her, as she swayed gently to and fro in the comfortable warmth flung out by the stove, and very soon she was fast asleep.

'Duke Radford, who lay in restless discomfort from the pain of his hurts, was the first to hear sounds of an arrival, and he tried to rouse Phil to see what all the commotion was about. But the boy always slept so heavily that it was next to impossible to wake him. The dogs were barking. Katherine called out to Miles, who answered back. Then there were other voices and a great banging at the door of the store. That was when Mrs. Burton first became aware that something was going on, and started up out of the rocking-chair under the impression that she had been there the whole night and that morning had come already.

A glance at the clock showed her, however, that it was not so very late yet, and still a long way from midnight. Then, remembering that Katherine and Miles were out, she guessed it was they who were making such a clamour at the door of the store, and hurried to let them in.

"I hope we haven't frightened Father with all the noise we have had to make, but you seemed so dead asleep that we had to make a great riot in order to get in," Katherine said, as she and Miles towed the sledge inside the store to be unloaded at leisure when morning came.

"I will go and see to Father, but Phil is with him now. Where have you been, Katherine? And oh, I do hope you have not frosted your face!" Mrs. Burton said, with sisterly concern.

Katherine laughed, but even Mrs. Burton noticed that the sound was strained and unmirthful. "My complexion has not suffered, I can assure you. But Nellie, dear, could you get a cup of hot coffee quickly for two men? They have been having a rather terrible time of it, and are a good bit shaken."

"Bring them into the kitchen and I will have the coffee ready directly," Mrs. Burton said promptly. But first of all she just looked into her father's room to tell him there was nothing to worry about. Then she hurried into the kitchen to rouse

up the fire and put the coffee pot on to boil.

Oily Dave and Stee Jenkin accepted Katherine's invitation to walk in, following her through the dark store and into the lighted room beyond with a sheepish expression on their faces, which certainly no one had ever seen there before. Stee Jenkin had his outer garments nearly torn off him, there was blood on his face, and he sank on to the nearest bench as if his trembling limbs refused to support him any longer.

"Why, your face is bleeding! What have you been doing—not fighting, I hope?" There was a touch of severity in Mrs. Burton's tone; for she knew the man did not bear a very good character, and she was not disposed to give herself much trouble on account of anyone who had brought his misfortunes upon his own head.

"Yes, ma'am, I have been fighting, and for my life too, which is a very different thing from a round of fisticuffs with your neighbour," growled Stee Jenkin in a shaken tone, and the hand with which he tried to lift the steaming coffee to his lips shook so violently that he spilled the hot liquid on his clothes.

Katherine and Miles had gone back to the store again, so it was Oily Dave who explained the nature of the fight in which both men had been involved.

"We'd a perticular bit of business on hand to-night," he said, in response to the enquiring look which Mrs. Burton turned upon him, for Stee was plainly too much upset to be coherent. "I'd got a revolver certainly, but Stee had nothing but a knife, for we didn't expect any trouble with wolves so early in the season, though it is a fact we might have done, for everyone knows the place is just about swarming with them this winter."

"Did the wolves attack you? Oh, how truly horrible!" exclaimed Mrs. Burton, with so much genuine sympathy that both men winced under it, hardened offenders though they were; for they knew very well that they deserved the fate which had so nearly fallen upon them.

"About ten of the cowards closed in on us as we were going through a patch of cotton woods, where we couldn't move fast because of catching our snow-shoes," Oily Dave went on, winking and blinking in a nervous fashion. "And we were fairly cornered before we knew where we were. One great brute came at me straight in the face. I knocked him off with my fist and fumbled for my barker, but shot wild and did no more damage than to singe the hair off another brute's back; but I managed to edge a bit closer to Stee, who was getting it rough, and hadn't even a chance to draw his knife. But we should have been down and done for to a dead certainty, if it hadn't been for Miss Radford and Miles. They let the dogs loose from the sledge when they heard the rumpus, and that turned the scale in our favour. That great white dog with the black patch on its back came tearing into the cotton woods roaring like a bull, and then I can tell you there was a stampede among the brutes that were baiting us." Oily Dave drew a long breath as he finished his narration, but the other man groaned.

“Katherine, what were you doing so far away from home at this time of night?” gasped Mrs. Burton, in a shocked tone, as her sister came into the room. “Why, the wolves might have attacked you.”

“Not likely; we had the dogs with us, you see. But we had to go about three miles along the trail to bring home the things I had to leave behind when Father had his accident,” said Katherine, as she stood beside the stove slowly unwinding her wraps. Now that the strain and excitement were over, she looked white and tired, but her face was set in hard, stern lines, which for the time seemed to add years to her age.

“It is dreadful that you should have to go out at night like that. Wouldn’t tomorrow have done as well?” asked Mrs. Burton in a tone of distress.

“No,” replied Katherine slowly, as she wrestled with an obstinate fastening of her coat, keeping her gaze carefully on the ground the while. “We were almost too late as it was. A wolf had found out the cache and was beginning to tear the packages to pieces, in spite of my care in turning the hand sledge upside down on the top of them.”

Oily Dave rose to his feet with a jerky movement. “I think we had best be moving now,” he said gruffly. “Perhaps you’d lend us a couple of the dogs to help us down to Seal Cove; we’ll give ’em a good feed when we get there. But neither Stee nor I can face three miles’ tramp without something to protect us.”

“Yes, you can have two of the dogs on leash; but remember they are dreadfully tired, poor things, for they have had a long, hard day. You had better leave your sledge here to-night, then there will be no temptation for you to let the dogs draw you,” Katherine said, in a hard tone.

Mrs. Burton looked at her in surprise, even meditated a word of excuse, because her attitude was so unfriendly towards these neighbours who had been in such direful peril. But the word was not spoken, for Katherine’s face was too stern for the elder sister to even suggest any change in her manner. Miles tied two of the dogs on a leash while the men put on their snowshoes, then he carefully drew their sledge inside the door of the store, which was afterwards securely barred.

“Katherine, what is the matter? Why did you and Miles go stealing off in that fashion to bring the stores home without telling me? And why, oh! why, did you treat those men as if they were the dirt beneath your feet?” demanded Mrs. Burton, as she plied her sister and brother with hot coffee and comforting food, to make up to them for all the toil and hardship which had gone before.

“Because I regard them as the scum of the earth,” Katherine answered with a yawn, as she stretched out her feet to the glowing warmth of the fire.

“They are not very noble characters certainly, but when men have been face to face with such a terrible death, one feels it is a duty to be kind to them,” Mrs. Burton said, in gentle reproof.

Miles burst out laughing, but Katherine shook her head at him and proceeded

to explain. "It was because I was afraid those two were going to steal our stores that we started off in such a hurry to get the lot home, and we were on our way back when we heard the wolves, then cries and shots. We let the first two dogs go then, and had to hold on to the others with all our might to keep them from going too. I wish you could have seen how silly those men looked, when they discovered to whom they owed their lives. I could have laughed at the spectacle if I had not been so angry."

"It suits you to be angry, I think," broke in Miles. "You ordered those two round just as if you had been a duchess, and they simply squirmed before you, like the worms that they are."

"Silly boy, you have never seen a duchess, so you can't know how she would order people about. Indeed she might be mild as milk, which I am not. But I hate to feel as angry as I have been doing to-night, so I am going to creep in and have a look at Father. That will make me feel better and more amiable, I hope."

"Don't disturb him if he is at all sleepy. I am so afraid he will be feverish to-morrow if he does not get a good night," Mrs. Burton said, in a warning tone.

"I shan't disturb him," answered Katherine; then, taking a lamp, she stole across the dark store to the little room at the other end, where her father was lying.

One look at his face showed her how little chance of sleep there was for him at present; and guessing that it was anxiety as well as pain which kept him awake, she sat down beside him and related again the story of that night's adventures. He laughed, in spite of his pain, at her description of how the precious pair had looked when they found to whom they owed their lives.

"But I don't like you having such hard, rough things to do, Katherine. I wish you and Miles could change places in age," he said, with a sigh.

"I don't," she answered with a shrug. "But you must go to sleep now, Father, or you will be feverish to-morrow. Do the bruises hurt much?" she asked tenderly.

"The bed is full of sore places," he answered, with a whimsical transposition of terms. "But I shall go to sleep presently, I think."

"And wake up in the morning feeling better, I hope," she forced herself to say brightly, though it worried her to see how ill he was looking.

"I don't know about that," he said gravely. "When a man has lived a hard life like mine, a knock-down blow, such as I have had to-day, very often sets a lot of mischief in motion; but there is no need to fear disaster until it actually comes. Get away to your bed now, child. I shan't want anything more until the morning."

Katherine bent and kissed him. With all the strength of her heart she loved her father. In her early girlhood he had been her hero. Since her mother's death he had been her good comrade, and never had there been a shadow between them until that day when they had taken the last mail of the season up to the second portage, and heard the news about the change in the ownership of the fishing fleet from Astor M'Kree. Perhaps he had been taken with some feeling of illness that day,

and this continuing ever since had led to his altered ways and gloomy looks. But even with this idea to comfort her Katherine went to her bed with a heavy heart that night, and a dread of the morning to which before she had been a stranger. Her father had said that it was of no use to fear disaster until it really came, but her heart quailed that night as she lay sleepless, thinking of the days which stretched in front of her. Until her father grew strong again she would have to let the day teaching go, even though it might be possible to keep the night school together. Her days would have to be spent in buying and selling, in bartering barrels of flour and pork for skins of wolf, of ermine, and of beaver. She would have to stand between home and the difficulties that menaced from the outside, and if her heart failed her who could wonder at it?

CHAPTER V

A Sacred Confidence

'Duke Radford was very ill. For a week he hovered between life and death, and Mrs. Burton's skill was taxed to the uttermost. There was no doctor within at least a hundred miles. One of the fishers at Seal Cove had set the broken collar bone, the work being very well done too, although the man was only an amateur in the art of bone-setting. But it was not the broken bone, nor any of his bruises and abrasions, which made 'Duke Radford's peril during that black week of care and anxiety. He was ill in himself, so ill in fact that Mrs. Burton lost heart, declaring that her father's constitution had broken up, and that half a dozen doctors could not pull him through if his time had come.

Katherine would not share this gloomy view, and was always hoping against hope. If only the waters had been open, a doctor might have been procured from somewhere; but in winter time, when the small lakes and many of the lesser rivers were all frozen, nothing in the way of outside help was available, and the dwellers in remote places had to depend upon their own skill, making up in nursing what was lacking in medicine.

By the time the second Sunday came, the sick man showed signs of mending. Mrs. Burton grew hopeful again, while Katherine was nearly beside herself with joy. It had been a fearfully hard week for them all, though the neighbours had been as kind as possible. Stee Jenkin's wife came up from Seal Cove one day, and, after doing as much work as she could find to do, carried the twins off with her to her little house at the Cove, which was a great relief to Mrs. Burton and Katherine. Mrs. M'Kree was ill herself, so could do no more than send a kindly message; but even that was better than nothing, for sympathy is one of the sweetest things on earth when one is in trouble.

Sunday was a blessed relief to them at the end of their troubled week. Finding her father so much better, Mrs. Burton betook herself to bed at noon for the first real untroubled rest she had enjoyed for many days. The boys were stretched in luxurious idleness before the glowing fire in the kitchen, and Katherine was in charge of the sickroom. She was half-asleep herself; the place was so warm and her father lay in such a restful quiet. It had been so terrible all the week because no rest had seemed possible to him. But since last night his symptoms had changed, and now he lay quietly dozing, only rousing to take nourishment. Presently he stirred uneasily, as if the old restlessness were coming back, then asked in a feeble tone:

"Are you there, Nellie?"

“Nellie has gone to lie down, Father; but I will call her if you want her,” Katherine said, coming forward to where the sick man could see her.

“No, I don’t want her; it is you I want to talk to, only I didn’t know whether she was here,” he replied.

“I don’t think you ought to talk at all,” she said, in a doubtful tone. “Drink this broth, dear, and then try to sleep again.”

“I will drink the broth, but I don’t want to go to sleep again just yet,” he said, in a stronger voice.

Katherine fed him as if he were a baby, and indeed he was almost as weak as an infant. But she did not encourage his talking, although she could not prevent it, as he seemed so much better.

“There is something that has been troubling me a great deal, and I want to tell you about it,” he said. “I could not speak of it to anyone else, and I don’t want you to do so either. But it will be a certain comfort to me that you know it, for you are strong and more fitted for bearing burdens than Nellie, who has had more than her share of sorrow already.”

Katherine shivered. There was a longing in her heart to tell her father that she wanted no more burdens, that life was already so hard as to make her shrink from any more responsibility. But, looking at him as he lay there in his weakness, she could not say such words as these.

“What is it you want to tell me, Father?” she asked. Her voice was tender and caressing; he should never have to guess how she shrank from the confidence he wanted to give her, because her instinct told her that it was something which she would not want to hear.

“Do you remember the day we went up to Astor M’Kree’s with the last mail which came through before the waters closed?” he said abruptly, and again Katherine shivered, knowing for a certainty that her father’s trouble was proving too big for him alone.

“Yes, I remember,” she replied very softly,

“That was a black day for me, for it brought dead things to life in a way that I had thought impossible. I used to know that Oswald Selincourt who has bought the fishing fleet.”

“That one? Are you sure it is the same?” she asked in surprise. “The name is uncommon, still it is within the bounds of probability that there might be two, and you said the one you knew was a poor man.”

“I fancy there is no manner of doubt that it is the same,” Duke Radford said slowly. “The day we went to Fort Garry, M’Crawney told me he had a letter from Mr. Selincourt too, in which the new owner said he was a Bristol man, and that he had known what it was to be poor, so did not mean to risk money on ventures he had no chance of controlling, and that was why he was coming here next summer to boss the fleet.”

“Poor Father!” Katherine murmured softly. “Ah, you may well say poor!” he answered bitterly. “If it were not for you, the boys, poor Nellie, and her babies, I’d just be thankful to know that I’d never get up from this bed again, for I don’t feel that I have courage to face life now.”

“Father, you must not talk nor think like that, indeed you must not!” she exclaimed, in an imploring tone. “Think how we need you and how we love you. Think, too, how desolate we should be without you.”

“That is what I tell myself every hour in the twenty-four, and I shall make as brave a fight for it as I can for your sakes,” he said in a regretful tone, as if his family cares were holding him to life against his will. Then he went on: “Oswald Selincourt and I were in the same business house in Bristol years ago, and I did him a great wrong.”

Katherine had a sensation that was almost akin to what she would have felt if someone had dashed a bucket of ice-cold water in her face. But she did not move nor cry out, did not even gasp, only sat still with the dumb horror of it all filling her heart, until she felt as if she would never feel happy again. Her father had always seemed to her the noblest of men, and she had revered him so, because he always stood for what was right and true. Then some instinct told her that he must be suffering horribly too, and because she could not speak she slid her warm fingers into his trembling hand and held it fast.

“Thank you, dear, I felt I could trust you,” he said simply, and the words braced Katherine for bearing what had to come, more than anything else could have done.

“What is it you want me to know?” she asked, for he had lain for some minutes without speech, as if the task he had set himself was harder than he could perform.

“I wanted to tell you about the wrong I did Selincourt,” the sick man said in a reluctant tone. He had brought himself to the point of confiding in his daughter, yet even now he shrank from it as if fearing to lower himself in her eyes. “We were clerks in one business house, only Selincourt was above me, and taking a much higher salary; but if anything happened to move him, I knew that his desk would be offered to me. I was poor, but he in a sense was poorer still, because he had an invalid father and young sisters dependent on him.”

“Father, surely there is no need to tell me of this dead-and-buried action, unless you wish it, for the telling can do no good now,” burst out Katherine, who could not bear to see the pain in her father’s face.

“A wrong is never dead and buried while the man lives who did it,” Duke Radford answered with a wan smile, “for his conscience has a trick of rounding on him when he least expects it, and then there is trouble, at least that is how it has been with me. One day a complaint was lodged with our business chiefs that one of the clerks had been gambling, was an habitual gambler in fact. I was not the

one, and I was not suspected, but I knew very well which one it was; but when suspicion fell on Selincourt, I just kept silent. For some reason he could not clear himself, was dismissed, and I was promoted. But the promotion did me little good; the firm went bankrupt in the following year, and I was adrift myself.”

“What became of Selincourt?” asked Katherine, and was instantly sorry she had spoken, because of the pain in her father’s face.

“I don’t know. I never heard of him from the day he left the counting-house until Astor M’Kree read his name from that letter, but I thought of him a good bit. It is hard enough for a man to do well with an unblemished character, but to be thrown out of a situation branded as a gambler is ruin, and nothing short of it.”

“What became of the other man—the one who was a gambler?” asked Katherine.

“I don’t know. He remained with the firm until the crash came. I fancy Selincourt’s fate made a great impression on him, for I never heard of his gambling after Selincourt’s dismissal,” answered her father.

“How strange that he could not clear himself! Do you expect he had been gambling really, as well as the other one?” Katherine said quickly.

“I am sure he had not,” replied ’Duke Radford. “He was not that sort at all. But the thing that bowled him over was that he was known to have money in his possession, a considerable amount, for which he could not or would not account.”

“Still, I don’t see that you were so much to blame,” said Katherine soothingly. “If the man was accused and could not clear himself, then plainly there was something wrong somewhere: and after all you simply held your tongue; it was not as if you had stolen anything, letting the blame fall on him, or had falsely accused him in any way.”

“Just the arguments with which I comforted myself when I kept silent and profited by the downfall of a man who was blameless,” ’Duke Radford replied. “But though there may be a sort of truth in them, it is not real truth, and I have been paying the price ever since of that guilty silence of mine.”

“Father, why do you tell me all this now?” cried Katherine protestingly. Never in her heart would she have quite so much admiration for her father again, and the knowledge brought keen suffering with it.

He drew a long breath that was like a sobbing sigh; only too well did he understand what he had done, but he had counted the cost, and was not going to shirk the consequences.

“Because I’ve got the feeling that you will be able in some way to make the wrong right. I don’t know how, and I can’t see what can be done, only somehow the conviction has grown to a certainty in my mind, and now I can rest about it,” he replied slowly.

“Has this trouble made you so restless and ill?” she asked, thinking that his burden of mental suffering had grown beyond his powers of endurance since he

had been keeping his bed.

“I suppose it may have helped. I have suffered horribly, but since I made up my mind to tell you, things have seemed easier, and I have been able to sleep,” he answered with a heavy sigh.

“Will you tell me just what you want me to do, if—if——?” she began, but broke off abruptly, for she could not put in words the dread which had come into her heart that her father might be dead before the summer, when Mr. Selincourt was expected in Keewatin.

“If I am alive and well when the summer comes there will be no need for you to do anything; I shall be able to face the consequences of my own wrong-doing. But if not, I leave it to you to do the very best you can. You can’t make up for all the man may have had to suffer, but at least you can tell him that I was sorry.”

Katherine shuddered. It was bad enough to be compelled to hear that her father had been guilty of such meanness as to keep silent, in order that he might profit by the downfall of an innocent man; but when, in addition to this, she was expected to tell that man of how her father had acted, and, as it were, ask pardon for it, the ordeal appeared beyond her strength to face. Not a word of this did she say, however, for it was quite plain to her that the invalid had already over-excited himself, and she rather dreaded what Mrs. Burton would say presently.

“You must go to sleep, Father, and we will talk about this again another day,” she said firmly.

“No, we will not speak of it again, for it is not a pleasant subject for discussion,” he replied. “Only tell me that you will take my burden and bear it for me as best you can, if I am not able to bear it myself, and then I can be at peace.”

Katherine bent over him, gathering his feeble hands in a close clasp, and the steadfast light in her eyes was beautiful to see. “Dear Father, I will do my very best to make the wrong as right as it can be made. Now try to rest, and get better as fast as you can.”

He smiled, shook his head a little at her talk of getting better speedily, then to her great relief he shut his eyes and went to sleep. The burden had fallen from him upon her, and it had fallen so heavily that just at first she was stunned by the blow. There was no sound in the quiet room except the regular breathing of the sleeper. Outside the brief winter day merged into the long northern night; the stars came out, shining with frosty brilliancy, but Katherine sat by the bedside, and never once did her gaze wander to the window. Mrs. Burton came in presently, bringing a lamp, and scolding softly because the room was in darkness. But when she saw how quietly her father was sleeping, her gentle complaining turned into murmurs of pleased satisfaction.

“Really, Katherine, you are a better nurse than I thought. I was so afraid of the restlessness coming on again, as it has done about this time every day since his accident. But now he is sleeping most beautifully, so I feel sure he has taken a

turn, and that we shall pull him through.”

“Yes,” said Katherine, as she followed Mrs. Burton into the store to look after the fire. “I think he will get better now,” but her tone was so dull and lacking in spirit that her sister faced round upon her in quick consternation.

“What is the matter? Do you feel ill? Why, you are white as chalk, and you look as if you had seen a ghost!”

“I don’t think there are any ghosts to see in this part of the world,” Katherine replied, with a brave attempt at a laugh, “unless, indeed, the unquiet spirit of some Hudson’s Bay Company’s agent, done to death by treacherous Indians, haunts these shores.”

“Or some poor sealer caught in the ice and frozen to death,” murmured Mrs. Burton, with a sobbing catch in her breath.

Katherine, who was putting wood in the stove, turned suddenly, catching her sister in a warm, impulsive hug. “There are no ghosts nor unquiet spirits among those brave men who meet death while doing their daily work, darling!” she said earnestly. “But I fancy some of those old H.B.C. agents were fearful rogues, and well deserved the fate they met at the hands of the outraged red men.”

“Perhaps so; I don’t know. But I don’t like seeing you look so pale, Katherine. Come and have your tea, and I will send one of the boys to look after Father for a little while.”

Katherine followed her sister from the store into the kitchen, wondering as she went if tea, however hot, would have the power to drive away the creeping chill at her heart. Miles went off to take charge of the sickroom, while Phil set tea, chattering all the time concerning the gossip of the store which had come to his ears during the last few days.

“The men are saying that most likely, if Mr. Selincourt is such a rich man, he will be sure to have a steamer run up through the Strait two or three times during the summer with provisions, and so it will be bad for Father and the store,” he said, carefully setting the cracked cup for Miles, although by rights it was his own turn to have it.

“What nonsense people talk!” exclaimed Mrs. Burton, with a scornful laugh. “Mr. Selincourt will have his hands full with managing the fishing fleet, and if he is so unwise as to turn general trader, I dare say we can find some way of underselling him or enticing his customers away.”

Katherine put down her cup of tea with an unsteady movement which spilled some of the contents over the tablecloth. Here was a view of the situation which she had not thought to be compelled to face. If Mr. Selincourt did anything which took their trade away, and left them face to face with starvation, would it be their duty to sit down meekly and bear such an injustice, without attempting a blow in self-defence, and all because of that evil from the past which, although so long buried, had suddenly come to life again?

“Katherine, how frightened you look! You surely are not worrying about a bit of store gossip, which has probably not the slightest foundation in fact?” Mrs. Burton said in remonstrance.

“It is of no use to worry about anything so remote as Mr. Selincourt and the fishing fleet,” Katherine answered languidly. “But I am so tired that bed for a few hours seems the most desirable thing on earth.”

“Then go, dear, and get a good rest,” said her sister.

But, although Katherine lay down and covered herself with the bedclothes, sleep was long in coming, while the burden she had taken made her heart heavy as lead.

CHAPTER VI

Business Bothers

For a few days 'Duke Radford appeared to get better with astonishing rapidity. He left his bed, and crept across the store, to sit in the rocking-chair by the kitchen stove, and said he was now quite well. But when he had pulled up thus far towards strength again, he stopped short, unable to get any farther. In vain Mrs. Burton plied him with every nourishing food she could think of: an invalid he remained, weak and depressed, all his old energy and enterprise under a cloud, and with a settled melancholy which nothing could lift.

It was then that the burden of life descended with such crushing force on Katherine. The work of the store must go on, and it was harder in winter than in summer. She spent long hours burrowing among the piles of merchandise in the underground chamber beneath the store, where were kept the goods bought and brought to Roaring Water Portage when the waters were open. Or, with Miles for a companion, she went long distances across the snowy wastes, delivering stores by dog team and sledge. This was all very well on the still days, when the sun shone with cloudless brilliancy in a clear sky, and the dogs tore along like mad creatures, and the whole of the expedition would seem like a frolic; but there were other days when things were very different. Sometimes a raging wind would sweep in from the bay, laden with a terrible stinging damp, which kind of cold pierced like daggers. Or a roaring north wind would howl through the forests, snapping off big trees from their roots as if they were only twigs, while earth, air, and sky were a confusion of whirling snowflakes. These were the dangerous days, and they never ventured far from home when such blizzards were raging, unless it was for the three miles' run down to Seal Cove, where the trail had been dug out, and the snow banked, at the beginning of winter.

There were a large number of sealing and walrus boats laid up in ice between Roaring Water Portage and Seal Cove. Most of these had men living on board, who passed the days in loafing, in setting traps for wolves, or in boring holes through the ice for fishing. Many of them spent a great portion of their time in the little house at the bend of the river, where Oily Dave dispensed bad whisky and played poker with his customers from morning to night, or, taking a rough average, for sixteen hours out of the twenty-four. These were the men whom Katherine most dreaded to encounter. They looked bold admiration, and roared out compliments at the top of husky voices, but they ventured nothing further; her manner was too repressive, and the big dogs which always accompanied her were much too fierce to be trifled with. Mrs. Burton had left off lamenting the chances

of damage to her sister's complexion from exposure, for she realized that Katherine must be breadwinner now, and the stern necessities of life had to be first consideration for them all.

One day Katherine found to her surprise that some tin buckets of lard were missing from the store. It was only the day before that, rummaging in the far corner of the cellar, she had unearthed six of these buckets, which had apparently been forgotten, as the date chalked on them was eighteen months old. With much hard work she hauled four of them to the store above, ripped the cover from one, so that the contents might be retailed at so much per pound, and left the other three standing in a row on a shelf which was remote from the stove. But now two were gone, and looking at the one which had been opened she saw that it was only half full. For a moment she supposed that there must have been a considerable run on lard during the previous evening, while she was teaching night school, with Miles on duty in the store. It had been such a fine clear evening that many people were abroad who would otherwise have been in bed, or at any rate shut up in the stuffy little cabins of the snow-banked sealers.

A minute of thought, however, showed her that such a demand for lard would have been so much out of the common as to have elicited some comment from Miles at closing time. Each bucket would contain something over thirty pounds in weight, so the sale of over sixty pounds' weight of lard in one evening would have been something of a record for Roaring Water Portage. Miles was busy at the wood pile; she could not leave the store to go and question him then, so had to wait with what patience she could muster until he came indoors again. Her father had not left his bed yet; indeed he rarely did leave it now until noon or later, when he dressed himself, walked across the kitchen, and sat in the rocking-chair until it was time for bed again.

The life would have seemed dreary and monotonous enough if it had not been for the hard and constant work, which made the days of that winter fly faster for Katherine than any winter had ever flown before. She did not mind the work. Young, strong, and with plenty of energy, the daily toil seemed rather pleasant than otherwise. It was business bothers like this about the missing lard which tried her patience and temper. Presently Miles came in, his face red and warm from hard work in the open air, but puckered into a look of worry, which found a reflection on the countenance of Katherine.

"We are running out of fish for the dogs, Katherine. Have we been using it too fast, do you think?" he asked.

"Surely not. The poor creatures cannot work unless they are well fed, and they have never had more than they could eat. How much longer will it last?"

"Three days perhaps, not more," Miles answered. "It has seemed to go all at once."

"Just so. I should fancy the fish has suffered in the same way as the lard. You

had better keep the door of the fish-house locked in future. I wonder where we can get some more fish? People's stocks of dried fish will be getting low now, I expect," Katherine said, wrinkling her brows and trying to think of a likely place where the want could be supplied.

"I know where we could get fresh fish, pretty nearly any amount of it, if you didn't mind the bother of catching it. We could freeze it and keep it so. But what about the lard? You meant it to be sold, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course; but how much did you sell?" asked Katherine, with a hope that he really had sold it all and merely forgotten to mention it.

"Sixteen pounds, all told. Oily Dave seemed uncommonly pleased with it; though, of course, he wanted to beat me down two cents a pound, and when he found I would not put up with that, he tried to palm some bad money off on to me. I'm not so sure that he would not have had me there, for I'm not half so sharp about money as I ought to be, but Stee Jenkin called out to me to keep my eyes open, and then I soon found out there was something on hand, so I made the old rascal pay up in honest coin."

There was an air of modest swagger about Miles as he spoke, for he rather prided himself on his business acumen and general smartness, so Katherine's next words were a terrible blow to his pride.

"My dear boy, you had better have let him have his two cents twice over, and then winked at the money, than have given him such a chance as he must have made for himself last night," she said bitterly.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, with the offended air he always displayed when his pride was wounded.

"I mean that Oily Dave or some of his precious companions walked off with two whole buckets of that lard from under your nose last night, unless indeed you took the trouble to carry it into the cellar again."

"It would not have been possible for anyone to do that, for I was here all the time," he answered stiffly.

"Quite all the time, or did you have to leave for anything; some silly little thing, perhaps?" she said in a coaxing tone, anxious to win him from his show of bad temper, and at the same time get some clue to the disappearance of the stuff.

"I don't think I went away at all," Miles began, then caught himself up in a sudden recollection. "Oh yes, I did! I remember I took a ten-dollar bill, that Jean Doulais brought, indoors for Father to give me change."

"Then while you were indoors the thief stepped into the store and walked off with our two pails of lard. Well, I hope the stuff will make him very sick indeed!" exclaimed Katherine, in a tone of disgust.

"I wonder who it was? It couldn't possibly have been Jean," said Miles, "for he was sitting on the counter and banging his heels. When I went into the kitchen I heard him thumping away all the time I was there, and he was sitting and banging

when I came back.”

“Was it Jean Doulais who made all that noise?” said Katherine. “I was demonstrating on the blackboard, and had to write my explanations, because I could not make myself heard. One of the boys volunteered to go and punch the noisy one’s head, but this I forbade for prudent reasons.”

“Pity you didn’t let the fellow come. He might have happened on the thief,” growled Miles. “If Jean didn’t take the things, he must know pretty well who did. Will you tackle him about it?”

“I think not,” replied Katherine, after a pause for consideration. “He might think we suspected him, which would be bad from a business point of view. Then he would be certain to tell the thief, and that would lessen our chances of detecting him.”

“What a desperately light-fingered lot they are here this winter!” Miles exclaimed in a petulant tone. “Just see what a rush we had to save the stores from your cache the night Father had his accident.”

“But we did save them,” replied Katherine with a ripple of laughter. “And incidentally we also saved the lives of a noble pair of men.”

Miles gave a grunt of disgust. “A regular pity they didn’t get killed, I think; and I shouldn’t wonder if they are at the bottom of this piece of thieving also.”

Katherine shook her head. “Oily Dave may be, for pilfering seems to be second nature with him. But Stee Jenkin is made of better stuff, and I believe he is really grateful because we saved him that night. Then remember how kind he and his wife were to us when Father was so ill. Oh, I’ve got a better opinion of Stee than to think he would steal our things now!”

Miles grunted again in a disbelieving fashion, but he did not attempt to upset Katherine’s convictions by argument; only they agreed that for the future a more vigilant watch should be kept both indoors and out. A padlock and chain were put on the door of the fish-house, everything that could be locked up was carefully made fast; then Katherine and Miles set themselves to the task of keeping their eyes open to find out who had stolen the lard.

Later in that same day a miserable-looking Indian came in with a lot of dried fish which he wanted to trade off for provisions, and, after a good deal of bargaining, Katherine took the lot in exchange for a small barrel of flour and a packet of tobacco.

“No need for us to go fishing to-morrow, Miles. I have got enough fish to last the dogs for a fortnight, if we are careful,” she said to her brother, when he came back from a journey down to Seal Cove.

“Where did you get it from?” he asked.

“From an Indian who called himself Waywassimo, so I think he must have been reading Longfellow’s Hiawatha, for you know Waywassimo was the lightning, and Annemeekee the thunder,” Katherine replied. “Only there was

nothing grand nor terrible about this Waywassimo. He was simply a miserable-looking Indian with a most dreadful cough.”

Miles began to laugh in a hugely delighted fashion, but it was some time before Katherine could get from him the cause of his mirth. At length, with many chuckles, he commenced to explain.

“There has been a wretched-looking Indian hanging about Seal Cove for the last two or three days, stealing pretty nearly everything he could lay his hands on, and Mrs. Jenkin told me that last night he broke into Oily Dave’s fish-house and cleared off with every bit of dried fish there was.”

“So I have been buying stolen goods. How horrid!” exclaimed Katherine with a frown. “Now I suppose it is my duty to hand at least a part of that fish back to Oily Dave. Oh dear, I would rather it had been anyone else, for I do dislike him so much!”

“Don’t fret yourself; wait until you hear the end of my story, and then you will see that for once the biter has been bitten,” answered Miles, with so much chuckling and gurgling that he seemed to be in a fair way to choke himself. “Mrs. Jenkin says she is quite positive that Oily Dave stole that fish, because his fish-house was quite empty a week ago, as she saw with her own eyes, but yesterday, when she was cleaning his house for him, she saw that he had a lot of fish. He told her then that he had bought it to sell again. She knew how much of that to believe, however, and asked me if we had missed any of our fish.”

“What did you say?” asked Katherine, who then began to wonder if their fish had really wasted through being stolen, instead of having merely been used too fast.

“Oh, I didn’t commit myself! Mrs. Jenkin has a good heart, but her head is as soft as blubber, so I was pretty careful not to say much,” Miles answered, with a wag of his own head, which he thumped with his fist to show that at least he was not topped with blubber.

“It is maddening whichever way one looks at it!” cried Katherine. “If Oily Dave stole our fish, and Waywassimo stole it from him again, then I have been buying our own property, and paying for it at a rather stiff price. I simply could not beat that poor wretch down, he looked so sad and hungry. Oh, Miles, what shall we do? If this business leaks out we shall just be the laughing-stock of the whole place.”

“It is not going to leak out; I’ll take good care of that,” retorted the boy, squaring his jaws. “If we say nothing about it, who is to be any the wiser? Was there anyone here when you bought the fish?”

“Not a soul. How very fortunate!” cried Katherine, beginning to smile again. “It is quite bad enough to be taken in by such a trick, but it would be simply intolerable to have other people knowing about it and laughing at our misfortunes.”

Miles nodded. This was just his own opinion, and he would have suffered tortures if the wits of Seal Cove had been able to taunt him about his clever sister having bought her own fish. Then he said slowly, as if he had been giving the matter profound consideration; “There isn’t a scrap of doubt in my mind that if Oily Dave took the fish he took the lard as well.”

“Then I wish Waywassimo would steal that too!” said Katherine with a laugh.

CHAPTER VII

Another Clue

It was fully a fortnight after this before Katherine and Miles found any opportunity for going fishing. Then there came a day when they had to take a load of stores up beyond the second portage, to the house of Astor M'Kree, and they decided to bring a load of fish back with them if possible, as the store which Katherine had bought from Waywassimo was beginning to run low. Their father seemed better that day, and was able to look after the store with the help of Phil.

Katherine too was bright and lively this morning, as if there were no dark shadow of trouble in her life. Sometimes she was fearfully sick at heart with the remembrance of her father's confidence, and a dread of what the summer might bring; but at other times, on days like this, she took comfort in the ice, the snow, and the searching cold. Winter was not nearly over yet, a hundred things might happen before the summer came, and so her high spirits pushed the dark shadow to one side and for a brief space forgot all about it. She was especially blithe of heart to-day, and so had donned a skirt of scarlet blanket cloth, which matched in hue the woollen cloud she wrapped about her head. On other days, when her mood was more sombre, she wore a dark-blue skirt, like the thick, fur-lined coat which was put on every time she left the house.

"How gay you look, Katherine!" exclaimed Mrs. Burton, as her sister came dancing into the kitchen, where she was making bread. "But what a pity to put on that scarlet skirt if you are going to bring fish home!"

"I shan't spoil it, or if I do I will wear it spoiled until it drops into rags," replied Katherine. "I call it my happiness skirt, and I wear it only when I feel happy. To-day the winter has somehow got into my bones or up in my head, and I feel as light-hearted and reckless as if I had been having oxygen pumped into me by a special contrivance; so plainly this is the proper time for my scarlet skirt."

"It is so funny that scarlet suits you so well, for you are certainly not a brunette," Mrs. Burton said, looking at Katherine in warm sisterly admiration. "But indeed you would look charming in anything."

Katherine swept her a curtsy. "Now that is a compliment most flatteringly paid. Really, Nellie, I don't see how you can expect me to be properly humble-minded if you say things of that sort, for you are such a dear, sincere little person that every word you speak carries conviction with it. But Miles is waiting and I must be off. Don't worry if we are rather late back, for we must bring as much fish as we can."

Mrs. Burton left the bread to take care of itself for a while, and, throwing a

thick shawl round her shoulders, came out to see the start. There was only one sledge to-day, but that was piled high with stores of various descriptions, from a barrel of flour to a roll of scarlet flannel, and from canned pineapple to a tin of kerosene. This last was the light *de luxe* in that part of the world, fish oil serving for all ordinary purposes of illumination. Miles looked after the dogs, while Katherine sped on in front, an ice saw and two fish spears carried across her shoulder. It was just the sort of morning when work was absolute joy, and toil became nothing but the zest of endeavour. Fresh snow had fallen during the night, but the sun was so bright and warm that the cold had no chance against it. The winter was advancing, as was evidenced by longer hours of daylight and hotter sunshine; but when night came the frost was more severe than ever, as if loath to loose its grip on the lakes and streams of that wide white land.

Roaring Water Portage had lost all claim to its name for the present. The river which rushed in summer with a roar over the rocks in rapids was absolutely silent now, and the rocks were merely snow-covered hummocks. The river above was frozen, there was no water to run down, and all the resonant echoes were dumb. The silence and the brightness suited Katherine's mood. She hurried on in front, so that even the shouts of Miles to the dogs became faint in the distance. Then her pace decreased as she swung along with a gentle swaying motion, the big frame of her snowshoe never quite lifted from the ground. When the boatbuilder's house came in sight she hesitated, wondering if it would not be pleasanter to remain outside in the pure fresh air until Miles came, instead of sitting in the hot, stuffy kitchen talking to Mrs. M'Kree. Then, remembering how solitary was the life of the poor little woman, shut up from month's end to month's end with her babies, Katherine decided to get on as quickly as she could and give Mrs. M'Kree the benefit of her society.

Mrs. M'Kree received her literally with open arms, and gave her a hug which nearly took her breath away. "Oh, I am glad you've come yourself! If the weather had been bad I should have been quite sure of seeing you; but as it was so fine I was desperately afraid you'd send the boys. But where is the sledge?"

"Miles is coming on with the dogs, but I came forward at a tremendous pace just because the morning was so beautiful, and I wanted to be alone," Katherine answered, subsiding into a rocking-chair and picking up the M'Kree baby which happened to be nearest.

"Wanted to be alone? My dear, that doesn't sound natural in a young girl. Oh, I hope you are not getting melancholy from all the trouble you've had this winter!"

"How can you even think of melancholy and me in the same connection!" protested Katherine with a merry laugh. "Why, I am a most cheerful person always, and Nellie complains that I live in a perfect whirlwind of high spirits."

"So you may. But if you want to go mooning off alone, it is a sure sign that

something is wrong, unless indeed you are in love," and Mrs. M'Kree nodded her head in delight at her own shrewdness.

But Katherine only laughed as she asked: "Pray, whom do you think I should be likely to fall in love with? There are so few eligible men in this part of the world."

"How was I to know but what you left your heart in Montreal last winter? At least there are men enough there," Mrs. M'Kree said. Then she asked anxiously: "My dear, what is the matter? You look quite ill."

Katherine had started to her feet with a look of profound amazement on her face, for at that moment the door of the next room had opened, and another small M'Kree appeared, dragging after him a tin bucket, on which he was raining a shower of resounding blows.

"Where did you get that thing?" she asked with a gasp, instantly recognizing the bucket as identical with the two filled with lard which had been stolen.

Mrs. M'Kree appeared slightly confused, and tried to hide her embarrassment by scolding her offspring.

"Jamie, Jamie, why will you make such a fearful riot? Miss Radford will run away and never come back if you are not quiet."

"I don't care if she does," replied the juvenile. He had not yet reached the age when pretty girls become interesting, and the noise he was producing filled him with tremendous satisfaction, so he banged away with renewed ardour.

Katherine crossed the room with a quick step, and, seizing Jamie, swung him up to the window. "See, here comes Miles," she said, "and he has some toffee in the sledge. Run out and ask him to give you some."

One look of beaming satisfaction Jamie flung her, then, wriggling from her grasp, he tore away to the door and was seen no more for some time. Then Katherine turned to Mrs. M'Kree and said imploringly: "Please tell me where you got that bucket from, and how long you have had it?"

"I'll tell you, of course, seeing that you make such a point of it, but I'm not specially proud of the business, I can assure you," Mrs. M'Kree said, with a touch of irritability very unusual with her. "Oily Dave was up here about a week ago, and he said that he had some buckets of rough fat that would do for greasing sledge runners, or to mix with caulking pitch. He told us he bought the stuff from one of the American whalers that were fishing in the bay last summer, and he offered to sell us a bucket at such a ridiculously low price that Astor bought one off-hand."

"What happened then?" demanded Katherine, her lips twitching with amusement; for she knew quite enough of Oily Dave and his methods to be sure that Astor M'Kree had been rather badly duped.

"The stuff was more than half sawdust, but it had been worked in so carefully that you could not tell that until you came to rub the grease on to runners and that

sort of thing; then of course it gritted up directly. But the worst of it was that Astor had mixed some of it with a lot of caulking pitch, which of course is quite spoiled, and he was about the maddest man in Keewatin on the day that he found it out."

Katherine was laughing; she really could not help it. But Mrs. M'Kree, not understanding where the joke came in, said in a reproachful tone: "My dear, it was not a laughing matter to me, either then or now; for when one is married what affects one's husband affects one's self also, and that sometimes in a very disagreeable fashion."

"Please forgive me for laughing!" cried Katherine. "But Oily Dave is such a slippery old rogue, and sometimes he overreaches even himself." Then she told Mrs. M'Kree about the disappearance of the lard, and how she had recognized the bucket upon which Jamie had been drumming so vigorously.

"What will you do?" asked Mrs. M'Kree.

"I don't see what we can do, except keep a sharper lookout in future. There is not enough evidence to go and boldly accuse him of having walked off with two buckets of lard for which he had not paid. There may be a hundred buckets like that in the district, every one of which has contained grease of some description, from best dairy butter down to train oil mixed with sawdust," Katherine replied with a laugh, in which the other now joined.

"It is a good thing you can laugh about it; but I am afraid that I shouldn't have felt like laughing if I had been in your case," said Mrs. M'Kree. Then she cried out in protest: "Must you go so soon, really? Why, you have been here no time at all, and there are heaps of things I wanted to say to you."

"Yes, we must go. We are going to Ochre Lake for fish. Miles says there are heaps there to be had for the catching, and the dogs are getting short of food. We have worked them very hard this winter, so they have needed more to eat, I suppose," Katherine replied. Then she went out to help her brother to bring the stores in, and Mrs. M'Kree came to assist also.

"Ochre Lake is a good long way off, so I mustn't keep you if you are going there. A good six miles from here it must be, if you follow the river," said Mrs. M'Kree; then made a grab at the packet of toffee in Jamie's chubby hand, for he was evidently intent on eating it all himself, and so leaving none for the others.

"We shall not follow the river, but take the short cut through the woods; and we shall go fast too, for the dogs will travel light, you see," Katherine said. Then picking up the fish spears and the ice saw she glided on ahead, while Miles and the dogs went racing after her.

At first, when they left the boatbuilder's house behind, it was wilderness without a sign of life, but after they had gone two or three miles, footprints of various sizes appeared on the snow. There were marks of wolf, of wolverine, of fox, with smaller prints which could only have been made by little creatures like the mink, ermine, and such tiny fry, that, clad in fur white like the snow, scurried

hither and thither through the silent wastes hunting for food, yet finding in many cases swift death through the skill of the trapper. At length the lake was reached. In summer it was a sheet of muddy yellow water abounding in fish, and many acres in extent. Now it was a wide snowfield, except at one end, where for some unexplained reason it was open water still. This was the part at which they arrived, and Katherine halted on the bank with an exclamation of surprise. "Why, we shan't need the saw at all; it is open water!"

"The ice at the edge is too thin to stand upon, and we mustn't take risks here, for Father says there is a whirlpool at this end, and it is the constant motion of the water that keeps it from freezing," Miles answered; and taking the saw from Katherine he commenced making a hole in the ice a few yards from the open water.

The dogs were lying panting on the bank as if quite exhausted, but their ears were perked up, and their eyes were very wide open, for they quite understood what was going on, and the prospect of fish freshly caught was very welcome after their months of living on the dried article. When a hole had been cut in the ice, Katherine went to stand by it and spear the fish which immediately crowded to the surface as if anxious to be caught. Miles went to a little distance, where he cut another hole for himself, and for the next hour the two worked as hard as they could at spearing fish, then throwing them on the snow, where they quickly froze stiff. The water seemed entirely alive with fish, which could only be accounted for by the fact that the main part of the lake, which was shallow, was frozen solid, so that all the fish had been forced to the end where the moving water did not freeze.

[Illustration: Katherine and Miles spearing for fish.]

"I guess we have got a load now, so we might as well stop," said Katherine, whose arms were beginning to ache, having already had more than enough of slaughter for that day at least.

"You load while I jab at a few more of these big fellows, for they seem as if they are just yearning to be caught," Miles cried excitedly. "I never had such fishing as this; it is prime!"

"It isn't fishing at all; it is nothing but killing. Horrid work, I call it," Katherine cried with a shudder, as, gathering up the frozen fish, she proceeded to stack them on the sledge in much the same fashion as she might have stacked billets of firewood.

The dogs had eaten a good meal, and were in fine feather for work; so, although the load was heavy, they made very good pace, and Katherine, gliding along now by the side of Miles, told him of how she had found Jamie M'Kree banging away on one of their stolen lard buckets. Miles was furiously angry, and wanted to go straight off to Seal Cove, denouncing Oily Dave as a thief; but Katherine would not hear of it.

"By precipitating matters we may do a great deal more harm than good," she

said. “We have had to buy our wisdom in rather an expensive school, but it ought to make us wiser in future. So far we have only suspicions to go upon, not facts, and it is very likely that if we accused Oily Dave of stealing our stuff he would be clever enough to turn the tables on us, and have us prosecuted for libel, or something of that sort, which would not be pleasant—nor profitable.”

“I can’t sit meekly down under things of that sort,” retorted the boy, with the sullen look dropping over his face which Katherine hated to see there.

“It isn’t easy, I know, but very often it pays best in the long run,” she answered earnestly. “Whatever we do, or don’t do, we must take especial care that Father isn’t worried just now. He must be our chief thought for the present, and if our business pride gets wounded, we must just take the hurt lying down for his sake.”

“Katherine, are you afraid that Father is going to die?” Miles asked, turning his head quickly to look at her; and there was the same terrified expression on his face which had been there when he asked the same question a few weeks before.

“I think his recovery will depend very largely on whether we can keep him from anxiety for the next two or three months,” she answered; and there was a stab of pain at her heart as she thought of the gnawing apprehension and worry which were secretly sapping his strength.

“Then Oily Dave mustn’t be meddled with just now, I suppose,” Miles said, with a sigh of renunciation; “but sooner or later he has got to pay for it, or I will know the reason why.”

CHAPTER VIII

The First Rain

The weary weeks of winter passed slowly away. April came in with long bright days and abundant sunshine, but still the frost-king held sway, and all the earth was snowbound, the rivers were mute, and the waterfalls existed only in name. The men in the store were saying one night that some Indians had got through from Thunder Bay by way of the Albany River with mails; but as this meant about four hundred miles on snowshoes, Katherine regarded it only as a piece of winter fiction, and thought no more about it. There were fifty miles of hill and valley between Roaring Water Portage and the Albany River at its nearest point; but this was undoubtedly the nearest trail to civilization and the railway, and when the waters were open it was easier than any other route.

Two days later Katherine was in the cellar overhauling the stores, which were getting so shrunken that she was wondering how they could possibly be made to hold out, when she heard Phil calling, and, going up the ladder, found a tired-looking Indian standing there, who had a bag of mails strapped on to his back.

“Have you really come from Thunder Bay?” she asked in a surprised tone.

“Yah,” he responded promptly, and, dislodging the burden from his back, showed her the name Maxokama on the official seals of the bag.

Her father being too unwell to leave his bed that day, Katherine received the mail as his deputy, and, giving the Indian a receipt for it, proceeded to open the bag and sort the letters it contained. There were only a few, and as they were mostly directed to those in authority in the fishing fleet, and to Astor M’Kree, Katherine was quick in coming to the conclusion that it was Mr. Selincourt who had arranged with the post office for the forwarding of this particular mail. A shiver of fear shook her as she thought of him. As a rule she preferred to keep him out of her remembrance as much as possible; but there were times when the fact of his coming was forced upon her. The broad glare of sunlight streaming in through the open door of the store was another reminder that spring was coming with giant strides, and from spring to summer in that land of fervid sunshine was a period so brief as to be almost breathless.

The Indian made some purchases of food and tobacco, but as his conversational powers did not seem to go beyond a sepulchral “Yah”, which he used indifferently for yes and no, neither Katherine nor Phil could get much information out of him. When he had gone, Miles came back from wood-cutting on the slopes above the portage, and was immediately started off to deliver the letters at Seal Cove.

A mail that arrives only once in five months or so is bound to be treated as a thing of moment, even when, as in this case, it was limited to half a dozen letters and three or four newspapers. To Katherine's great delight one of the papers was addressed to The Postmaster, Roaring Water Portage, and she carried it in to her father in the dreary little room which was walled off from the store.

"What have you got: a letter?" he asked, turning towards her, his face looking even more thin and drawn than usual.

"No, there were no letters for any of us; ours usually come by way of Montreal and Lake Temiskaming, you know; but this is a sort of special mail, which has been brought by Indians from Maxokama. But there is a newspaper for you, which shows it is a good thing to be postmaster even of a place so remote as this," she said with a laugh.

"A newspaper will be a treat indeed. I think I will get up, Katherine, and sit by the stove in the store; one can't read a newspaper comfortably in bed. Besides, you will be wanting to go out delivering the mail."

"Miles has taken the Seal Cove letters, but there is one for Astor M'Kree that Phil and I will take up this afternoon; the dogs will be glad of a run," she answered, bringing his garments and arranging them near the bed so that he could slip into them easily.

"Fancy a team of four dogs, a sledge, and two people to carry one letter!" he exclaimed.

"Not quite that," she responded with a laugh, glad to see that his mood was so cheerful. "There is a newspaper to go too, and we shall take up a small barrel of flour, with some bacon and sugar."

"That sounds better at any rate, and I shall be delighted for you to have a run in the sunshine," Duke Radford said, with that thoughtful consideration for others which made his children love him with such an ardent affection.

Katherine had not gone many yards from the door that afternoon before she noticed a difference in the temperature; it was a soft, clinging warmth, which made her glad to unfasten her scarlet cloud, while the glare of the sunshine was becoming paler, as if a mist were rising.

"Phil, the rain is coming; I can smell it, and the dogs can smell it too. We are in for weather of sorts, I fancy, but Astor M'Kree must get his letter first, even if we have to race for it!" she cried.

"Let's race, then; the dogs are willing, and so am I," replied Phil, who was seated in the sledge among the packages, while Katherine travelled ahead on snowshoes,

And race they did; but already the snow was getting wet and soft on the surface, so that the going was heavy, the sledge cut in deeply, and it was a very tired team of dogs which dropped to the ground in front of the boatbuilder's house. Phil set to work hauling out the stores, but Katherine as usual went in to

chat with Mrs. M’Kree, who looked upon her visits with the utmost pleasure.

“I expect it is the last time we shall come up by sledge this season,” said Katherine. “But in case the ice is troublesome, and we can’t get a canoe through for a week or two, we have brought you double stores.”

“That is a good thing, for we are all blessed with healthy appetites up here, and it isn’t pleasant to even think of going on short commons,” replied Mrs. M’Kree. “But do wait until I’ve read this letter, for there may be news in it, and there is so little of that sort of thing here that we ought to share any tidings from outside that may happen to get through.”

“Perhaps Mr. M’Kree would rather read his letter first himself,” suggested Katherine, who would have preferred not to hear about anything that letter might contain. She guessed it was from Mr. Selincourt, and for that reason shunned anything to do with it.

“Astor has gone across to Fort Garry to-day; he started at dawn, and a pretty stiff journey he’ll have before he gets back: but I warned him not to go, for I smelled the rain coming when I put my head outside this morning; my nose is worth two of his, for he can’t smell weather, and never could,” Mrs. M’Kree answered, pulling a hairpin from her head and preparing to slit open the envelope in her hand.

“Still, he might rather that his letter waited for him unopened,” murmured Katherine; but Mrs. M’Kree was already deep in her husband’s correspondence, and paid no heed at all.

“Oh! oh! what do you think!” she cried a moment later, giving an excited jump, which so startled Katherine that she jumped too.

“How should I know what to think?” she said; then was angry to find that she was trembling violently.

“Mr. Selincourt hopes to arrive in June, and he is going to bring his daughter with him,” announced Mrs. M’Kree with a shout, waving the letter in a jubilant fashion.

“Impossible!” remarked Katherine scornfully, the colour dying out of her face. “The first steamers can’t get through Hudson Strait until the first week in July.”

“They are not coming that way, but straight from Montreal by way of Lake Temiskaming. My word! the young lady will have a chance of roughing it, for the portages on that route are a caution, so Astor says,” Mrs. M’Kree answered, then fairly danced round the room. “Just fancy how gay we shall be this summer with a young lady fresh out from England among us! And her father must be just the right sort of moneyed gentleman, for he wants Astor to get a little hut ready for him by the middle of June.”

“A what?” Katherine had risen to go, and was buttoning her coat, but faced round upon the little woman with blank surprise in her face, as if she failed to understand what the other was saying.

“A hut. They will want some sort of a place to live in. There is no hotel here, you see, and they are going to stay all summer. What a pity it is you haven’t got room to board them at the store!”

“We don’t want them,” retorted Katherine quickly. “We have quite enough to do without having to wait on a lot of idle boarders.”

“Oh! I don’t fancy they will be very idle, for Mr. Selincourt says that he and his daughter intend being out a great deal among the fishers,” said Mrs. M’Kree, who still kept dipping into the letter, and besought her visitor to stay until she had read it all.

But Katherine would not wait; she was in a hurry to start on the return journey, for every hour now would make the snow surface more wet and rotten to travel over. She was sick at heart, too, and suffering from the keenest disappointment. Six months ago how she would have rejoiced at the prospect of having Miss Selincourt at Roaring Water Portage for the weeks of the short, busy summer. An educated girl to talk to would make all the difference in the isolation in which they were forced to live. Katherine felt herself thrill and flutter with delight, even while she trembled with dread at the thought of her father having to meet Mr. Selincourt face to face. She wondered if the rich man who was coming would remember her father, and if he knew of the wrong that the latter had done in keeping silent, so that he might prosper by the other’s downfall.

Bitter tears smarted in her eyes as she toiled through the melting snow; then a dash of wet struck her in the face, and she realized that the rain had begun, and the long winter was coming to an end at last. The last mile was very hard to traverse, and when at length they went down the hill between the high rocks of the portage trail, Katherine heard a faint rippling sound which warned her that the waters were beginning to flow. The store was crowded with men, as was often the case in the late afternoon, and Katherine’s hope of being able to tell her father the news quietly was doomed to disappointment. Her first glance at him told her that he knew all there was to be known, and the look of suffering on his face hurt her all the more because she knew there was no balm for his pain. Miles was doing what was necessary in the store under his father’s direction, and, because there seemed no need for her assistance just then, Katherine went on indoors to get a little rest before it was time for evening school.

“Oh, Katherine, have you heard the news?” cried Mrs. Burton, who was knitting stockings and reciting “Old Mother Hubbard” between whiles to the twins.

“Yes; at least, I have heard about Mr. Selincourt coming, if that is what you mean,” Katherine answered, as she unfastened her outer garments.

“That is not the best part of the news by any means,” returned Mrs. Burton, giving Lotta a little shake to silence the demand for more of “Mother Hubbard”. “What delights me so much is to think that Miss Selincourt is coming too. Just

imagine what it will be to have cultured society here at Roaring Water Portage!"

"She will despise us, most likely, and consider us about on a level with Peter M'Crawney's wife, or that poor little Mrs. Jenkin," said Katherine.

"Nonsense!" Mrs. Burton's tone was energetic; her manner one of mild surprise. "No one would despise you. They might look down upon me a little, but you are quite a different matter."

"Perhaps I am," replied Katherine. "But somehow I have got the feeling in my bones that Miss Selincourt and I shall not fall in love with each other."

"I expect that what you have really got in your bones is a touch of rheumatism from wading through wet snow," Mrs. Burton said anxiously. "Dear, you must take care of yourself, for what would become of us all if you were to fall ill?"

Katherine laughed, only there was not much mirth in the sound. "There is nothing the matter with me, nor likely to be, for I am tough as shoe leather; only sometimes my temper gets knobby, because all the children I can find to teach are grown-up babies of thirty and forty, who prefer flirting to arithmetic, and have to be continually snubbed in order to keep them in their places. The stupid creatures make me so angry!"

"Poor Katherine! It is hard on you, for you are certainly much too good-looking to teach a night school; but, on the other hand, what a good thing it has been for the men to have the school to occupy their evenings," said Mrs. Burton. "Mrs. Jenkin was saying only yesterday that there has not been half so much drinking and gambling at Seal Cove this winter as there was last year, because the men would rather come here and listen to your lectures on history and geography."

"They are willing enough to listen, and will sit looking as stupid as a school of white whales, caught in a stake trap," replied Katherine. "But see what dunces some of them are when I try to knock a little arithmetic into their thick heads."

"Yes, I will admit they are rather dense; and you are very much more patient with them than I should be, I'm afraid," Mrs. Burton said with a sigh. The night school had privately been a very great trial to her, for since 'Duke Radford's indifferent health had caused him to lie in bed so much, it had been impossible to use the room off the store as schoolroom, and so for two hours every evening the family living-room had been invaded by a swarm of more or less unwashed men, whose habits were not always of the most refined description.

"The need for patience will soon be over now," Katherine said, understanding the cause of the sigh, although Mrs. Burton had uttered no spoken complaint. "Miles says the men were beginning to break the boats out yesterday, and it is raining now, which will help matters on a great deal, unless, indeed, it rains too long, and then we may have floods."

"Oh dear, I hope not!" replied Mrs. Burton with a shiver, for spring floods were no joke in that part of the world. "By the way, has Miles told you that he saw

the Englishman to-day?"

"What Englishman?" demanded Katherine, with dismay in her tone, for her thoughts immediately flew to Mr. Selincourt; only, of course, it was not possible that he could arrive before June.

"Didn't you hear that an Englishman came through from Maxokama with the Indians who brought up the mail?" said Mrs. Burton in surprise.

"Not a word. But certainly he must be a plucky sort of person to have ventured a journey of four hundred miles on snowshoes. Do you know who he is?" Katherine asked with quickened interest.

"Someone to do with the fishing, I think; a sort of master of the fleet very likely," replied Mrs. Burton, who had dropped her knitting and gathered both the little girls on to her lap, as the surest means of keeping them quiet while she talked to her sister.

"How will Oily Dave like that, I wonder?" Katherine said in a musing tone, and then her thoughts went wandering off to the pails of stolen lard. She had kept up an unremitting watchfulness ever since the time when the theft occurred, and had missed nothing more of importance; but her mistrust of Oily Dave was as great as ever.

"I don't suppose he will like it at all," Mrs. Burton answered. "But it is quite time that a more responsible man was put in charge."

CHAPTER IX

The Flood

Twenty-four hours of a hard, continuous downpour, accompanied by a warm south wind, worked a mighty difference in the aspect of things at Roaring Water Portage. By night on the day following the arrival of the mail from Maxokama, the water was coming down the rapids with a roar, bringing great lumps of ice with it, which crashed to fragments on the rocks, or were washed down with the current to be a menace to the shipping anchored in the river below. All day long, heedless of the pouring rain, the men had worked at getting the boats free from their winter coating of ice and snow. So when night came, everyone was too thoroughly wet and tired to think of night school, which gave Katherine a welcome holiday from teaching.

She spent the time in sewing, and in making herself so generally entertaining that even her father was more than once beguiled into laughter. He was better and more hopeful than for a long time past. He was even led into thinking and talking of the future, and the work which would have to be done directly the fast-melting snow made it possible to get about once more. Before daylight faded he had helped Miles to get the big boat out, and carefully inspected the seams to make sure that no caulking was required. They used birchbark canoes a great deal at Roaring Water Portage in the summer-time, but there was too much ice about for birchbarks to be safe yet.

“We will knock up a little shed for the boat above the portage this summer, then when next winter comes we can lay her up there, instead of having to bring her down here,” he said to Miles, as the two discussed the probability of being able to get the boat up the portage within a week.

“Oh, don’t talk of next winter, Father; we have not got rid of this one yet!” exclaimed Mrs. Burton, who was entirely happy and contented to-night, because of the omission of night school.

“It is going very fast anyhow, and I guess we shall see bare ground in places to-morrow,” Miles put in, talking in a sleepy tone; for he too had been breaking out ice that day, and was desperately tired.

“Yes, it is going, and I’m glad of it, for it has been the hardest winter to live through that I can remember, and I’m thankful to see the last of it,” Duke Radford answered; and something in his look and tone made Katherine ask quickly:

“Don’t you feel well to-night, Father?”

“Yes, I feel better than I have done for many a week past,” he replied promptly; adding, in a tone too low for any but her to hear, “and happier too.”

“I believe you will feel better now, and get strong quickly,” said Mrs. Burton hopefully. “The winter had thoroughly gripped your system, and that was why you could not get better before.”

All night long the roar of the water seemed to grow louder and louder, while the ice crashed, and the wild wind howled through the leafless trees. But the morning broke fine, and the sun came out to warm up a wet world. Such a very wet world it was, with the river swollen to twice its ordinary width! But as Miles had predicted, there was bare ground visible, and to eyes which had looked on snow-covered earth for six long months the sight was welcome indeed.

When breakfast was over, Katherine and Miles ran the boat down to the water’s edge, and floated it, getting in and paddling up and down to see that there was no leakage, and to enjoy the novel sensation after the long abstention from boating. But there was work to be done, and they could not afford to spend even a part of the day in rowing for their own amusement. Stores had to be taken down to Seal Cove, and there was some bargaining to be done for some tusks of narwhal ivory which Duke Radford had been commissioned to obtain if possible. Narwhal ivory was getting scarcer every year, and the storekeeper at Roaring Water Portage was prepared to pay a very good price indeed for all that he could obtain.

The journey down to Seal Cove was performed with ease and swiftness, the only trouble necessary being the steering, which called for the utmost care in that racing current.

“It will be stiff work coming back,” commented Miles, thinking how hard they would have to pull to make any sort of headway.

“Yes, I think we had better come home round by the off-creek; the water won’t run so fast down there,” replied Katherine: and Miles, being of the same opinion, assented with a nod.

At Seal Cove a curious state of things existed. The barrier of ice at the mouth of the river had not yet given way, and the racing current, penned in by the barrier, was mounting higher and higher, and threatened to flood the whole neighbourhood.

Katherine and Miles delivered as many of their stores as they could. But it was not possible to go bargaining for narwhal ivory, as the flood made their destination inaccessible, so they turned back instead, and started to row up a little backwater called the off-creek, which in summer was too tiny to admit of the passage of even a small boat, but was swollen now to the size of a river. This waterway led straight past the unwholesome habitation of Oily Dave, which faced the main river, while the creek ran at the back door, or where the back door would have been had the tumbledown house possessed one. The water was all round the house now, and must have been creeping in under the edge of the door, only from the back of the house they could not see this.

The two rested on their oars watching the scene, wondering whether the house

would be swept away, and where Oily Dave would build himself a new residence, when they heard shouts, and from the distant bank of the river saw a woman standing waving her arms in a frantic manner.

“It is Mrs. Jenkin. But what can she want, for certainly her house won’t be in any danger yet awhile?” said Miles, looking across the wide waste of waters to where a little brown hut was pitched high up on the bank.

“Hush! What is she saying?” cried Katherine, and put her hand to her ear to show that she was listening.

Mrs. Jenkin saw the motion, and lifted her voice afresh. “There is a man—danger—house—Oily Dave!”

That was all they could hear, for the wind carried the words away, and a great block of ice crashed against the front of Oily Dave’s abode, making the wooden hut shiver with the force of the blow.

“Oily Dave is shut up in his house, and Mrs. Jenkin wants us to save him,” said Katherine, waving her arms to show the woman on the bank that she heard and understood.

“The old baggage isn’t worth saving, but I suppose we shall have to try what we can do,” Miles answered, then shouted to Katherine to look out.

The warning came only just in time, for at that moment the huge block of ice which had struck the house before came swirling round in their direction, and they had to dodge it as best they could.

“We must get round to the front, if we can,” said Katherine, when they had got the boat safely away from the danger of collision with the ice.

“Not possible; look there!” shouted Miles excitedly, as a great sheet of ice came gaily floating on the swift current, caught against the corner of the house, and stuck there, banging, grinding, and jarring with the movements of the swirling water, and threatening to beat the house down like a battering ram. At the same moment they heard a cry for help from inside the house, and the woman on the far bank shouted and gesticulated more wildly than before, while the whole structure groaned and shivered like a creature in pain.

Katherine turned pale, but seized the oars resolutely. “There is only one thing to do, Miles, and I am going to do it. Can you hold the boat at the edge of the ice for five or ten minutes?”

“You are not going to get on to the ice?” he protested, his voice sharp with dismay, as he looked at the bowing, bobbing fragment many square yards in extent, which was grinding against the side of the house, but which might split into fragments at any moment.

“Yes, I am. Then I shall creep round to the front, so that Oily Dave can see me, and then, perhaps, his courage will be equal to coming outside,” she said, standing up and throwing off her thick coat, for it would not do to be encumbered with much clothing when any moment might plunge her into the water.

“Katherine, don’t go. It is an awful risk, and the old man isn’t worth it!” pleaded Miles, and, despite the fact of his being a boy, there were actual tears in his eyes as he urged her not to go.

But she would not listen, calling out sharply: “Bump her against the ice and then I’ll spring.”

Putting out his strength, Miles brought the boat with a bang against the floating ice island, and at the same moment Katherine sprang lightly from the boat. But, despite her care, she landed on all-fours, and, as the ice was awash, got rather wet in the process. Rising to an erect position after a few preliminary staggers, she walked cautiously out towards the middle of the ice island, which would bring her within sight of the prisoner in the hut, and would, she hoped, inspire him with sufficient courage to help him in the task of getting him into the boat.

By this time the woman on the bank understood what she was doing, and ceased shouting. It was Katherine’s turn to make a noise now, and she did it with all her might. “Oily Dave, come out! We’ve got a boat at the back, and we will save you if you will be quick.”

She was making so much noise herself, and picking her way with such extreme care over the rotten ice, that she failed to hear the first response to her calling, and the next pulled her up with a jerk.

“Oily Dave isn’t here, but if you will take me I shall be very thankful.”

The voice was a strange one, and had an unmistakable ring of refinement and culture. Katherine faced round with such a start of surprise as to nearly send her sprawling again, for the ice was full of pitfalls. A young man was leaning out through the small square opening which did duty for a window, and her first impression of him was of someone extremely tired, and that gave her the clue to his identity. He must be the Englishman who had come from Maxokama with the Indians who had brought the mail.

“Open the door and come out that way,” she said in a tone of sharp authority. “You will never be able to squeeze through that small window unless your shoulders are very narrow indeed.”

“Which they are not,” he replied, and disappeared from view.

She heard him banging and tugging at the door, but never a jot did it stir, and after about five minutes of this futile work he appeared again at the window. The water was nearly on a level with the opening now, and rising moment by moment, while there were ominous ripping and rending sounds in Katherine’s ice island, which warned her that the rescue must take place in the next few minutes if it was to be effected at all.

“The door is jammed. What am I to do?” the unknown asked in a calm tone, with no flurry or fuss. Indeed, Katherine wondered if he realized how great was his peril and her own.

“Break it down, smash it, anything; only be quick, please,” she said sharply, marvelling a little at his unconcern in the face of such grave danger.

Again he disappeared, and Katherine heard a rain of heavy blows beginning to fall upon the door; then with a cracking, splitting noise the panel gave way, the man inside wrenched off the broken part, and stood revealed up to his waist in water. But there was a space of fully three yards between himself and Katherine’s island of ice, and, as the ground dropped away sharply in front of the house, she knew he must not venture to attempt wading.

“Get a plank or Oily Dave’s long table,” she said, her manner more dictatorial than before, for the unknown was so terribly slow in his movements, and the water was still rising.

Mrs. Jenkin had commenced shouting again, but Katherine paid no heed to her, for the unknown had appeared with a long, narrow trestle table, which, resting one set of legs on the doorstep, reached to the ice. But it was a perilous bridge, and Katherine knew it; only there was no other way, so the peril had to be faced.

“Now run, only be ready to spring,” she cried, trying to encourage him.

“Easier said than done,” he answered. “I can scarcely walk, much less run.”

“Then you must crawl; only please make haste. The ice is so rotten that every minute I am fearing it will give way,” she said. Then dropping on her knees on the ice, regardless of the water which washed over its surface, she tried to hold the edge of the table steady for him to cross.

On he came, crawling slowly and painfully. He was so near to her now that Katherine could hear his panting breath and see the look of grim endurance on his drawn face. Mrs. Jenkin was shrieking in a frantic manner, and then Katherine heard a shrill cry from Miles, who was out of sight round the corner of the house. But the noise conveyed no meaning to her. She had just stretched out her hand to grasp that of the unknown, when there came a tremendous crash which shot her off the ice and into the water. The shock which sent her into the water, however, steadied the rickety bridge over which the stranger was crawling by jamming the ice closer under it, and the man, catching her as she took her plunge, held her fast, then dragged her up beside him by sheer strength of arm.

[Illustration: The rescue of Jarvis Ferrars.]

“I am afraid you are rather wet,” the stranger said in a tone of rueful apology, keeping his clutch on Katherine as she struggled to a kneeling posture.

Dashing the wet hair from her eyes, Katherine looked anxiously round, fearing that their one way of escape had been cut off. A huge fragment of ice had cannoned into her island and split off a great portion. Plainly that was why Mrs. Jenkin had screamed so shrilly, for she had seen what was coming and had tried to warn her. There were other ice fragments about; huge blocks like miniature bergs were bobbing and bowing to the racing current, while they flashed back the rays of the sun with dazzling brilliancy. But there was still time to get round the corner

of the house to the boat, if only they made haste; and, scrambling from her knees to her feet, Katherine cried urgently: "Come, come, we have just time; there is a boat round the corner of the house. If we can get there before the next crash comes we are safe, if not we may drown!"

"Save yourself. It is no use, I can't hurry; every step is torture," the unknown said, with a groan, as she fairly dragged him on to his feet, which were swathed in towels.

But she would not leave him. "Lean on me as heavily as you please. I am tremendously strong, and I would try carrying you if you were not so big," she said, with bustling cheerfulness, as, slipping her arm round him, she hurried him forward.

What a walk it was over that cracking, splitting ice! Mrs. Jenkin had begun screaming again; and although Katherine was wet through with ice-cold water, she could feel the perspiration start as she faced their chances of escape. An oncoming fragment at that moment fouled with a similar piece swirling round from another direction, and the moment thus gained proved their salvation. With quiet obstinacy the stranger made Katherine enter the boat first; then, as he stumbled in himself, the two fragments dashed into the island, which smashed into a thousand pieces.

CHAPTER X

The Stranger Proves a Friend in Need

“Just in time!” exclaimed Miles with a sob of relief. He would have been most horribly ashamed of tears at any other time, but Katherine’s danger had been so imminent that even his natural desire for manliness was forgotten for the moment.

Katherine drew a long breath and set her teeth firmly. She was trembling violently now the strain was over, and it was all she could do to keep from bursting into noisy crying. But the stranger was shivering too, and in her care for him she forgot her own foolish desire for tears.

“You are as wet as I am, and as cold. Can you row?” she asked, remembering the strength of arm he had displayed in dragging her out of the water.

“Yes, and shall be glad to do it. You will be safer rowing too,” he answered, then motioned to Miles to give place.

“I’ll steer; then we can go ahead,” said the boy jerkily. He had not got over his fright yet, and was trembling almost as badly as the others.

Slipping into their places, Katherine and the stranger took the oars. Miles edged them out of the crowding ice dangers, and, keeping well to the bank, they began their progress up river.

“Mrs. Jenkin is beckoning. Will you go across?” asked Miles.

“No,” Katherine answered with prompt decision. “The force of the current is fearful, and we have faced enough risks for one day. Besides, it is of no use; we want dry garments. Mrs. Jenkin has barely enough clothes for herself, so I am certain she could not supply my needs; and no garments of Stee’s would be big enough for this—this gentleman.”

“My name is Jervis Ferrars,” put in the stranger, seeing her embarrassment and hastening to relieve it.

“Thank you!” murmured Katherine, a flush coming into her cheeks which made her charming despite her bedraggled condition. Then she went on: “I think it will be better for you to come with us right up to Roaring Water Portage, because then we can lend you some of Father’s clothes: he is tall, and they will about fit you, I should think; and it is so very difficult to get what one wants at Seal Cove.”

“That I have already proved. But it was very kind of you to come and rescue me. I owe my life to you,” the stranger said, with a sudden thrill of feeling in his voice.

Katherine flushed more brightly than before. “We thought it was Oily Dave whom we were trying to save,” she said, with a faint ripple of laughter. “And Miles said he wasn’t worth it, only of course we had to do the best we could. Are

you the Englishman who came through from Maxokama two days ago?"

"Yes," he answered. "And it was the four hundred miles on snowshoes that made my feet so bad, though I am rather proud of having done it."

"I am sure you have a right to be proud of such a feat," Katherine answered; and then they did not say much more, for the work was getting harder every minute, and she wondered what would have happened if there had been only Miles and herself to manage the boat, for certainly the arms of Jervis Ferrars had a strength which Miles did not possess, yet in spite of this it was as much as they could do to make headway against the streaming current.

The danger came when they had to creep past the fishing boats, some of which were anchored so close in to the banks that they had to get out in the open river to pass them. Katherine had left off shivering, but she was trembling still from excitement and exhaustion; moreover, she was miserably self-conscious, because of the stranger who was sitting behind. It was horrible to be wet, dirty, and thoroughly bedraggled, but it was still more horrible to be compelled to sit in such a condition right under the eyes of a strange man, whose every tone and gesture proclaimed him a gentleman. But they were very nearly at the end of the journey. The roar of the rapids was in their ears, and Katherine was thinking with a sigh of relief that she would soon be able to rest her aching arms.

Suddenly Miles leant forward and spoke. "I'm afraid there is something wrong at home. Phil has just dashed out of the store door, looking as white as chalk. He beckoned to us to hurry, and now he has rushed back again."

"Father! Perhaps he is not so well," exclaimed Katherine, with a quick terror gripping at her heart. Then she thought with a swift compunction of the stranger they were bringing home, and wondered if her father would resent the intrusion.

But Phil had run out again just as the boat grounded against the bank, and now he began shouting: "Oh, do come quick; Father is dreadfully ill, and Nellie does not know what to do with him."

"You go first; the boy will help me," said Jervis Ferrars, hurrying Katherine out of the boat.

She landed with a bound and tried to run, but her water-logged garments clung so closely about her that she could only walk, and the few steps to the door seemed like a mile.

"Nellie says it is a stroke, and she is afraid Father is dying," sobbed Phil, who was running to and fro in a distracted fashion.

A faint cry broke from Katherine, and she caught at the doorpost to save herself. Yet even in that moment she realized that this was only what she had been expecting every time that she had returned from an absence all the winter through. But to-day found her so shaken and unfit for strain that it was not wonderful she broke down, feeling that this last disaster was too great to be borne. A moment she clung there sick and faint, while the ground under her feet seemed to rise up like

the waves of the sea; then the frightened wailing of Beth and Lotta reached her ears, and steadied her nerves to meet the demands upon her.

“Poor mites, how frightened they must be!” she murmured to herself, then stumbled forward again, crossing the store and entering the kitchen.

’Duke Radford lay on the floor. Doubtless he had fallen so, and Mrs. Burton had been unable to lift him; but there was a pillow under his head and a rug laid over him. He was breathing still, otherwise Katherine would have believed him already dead.

“Oh, Nellie, this is dreadful! Whatever shall we do?” she cried, her voice sharp with pain.

“If only we could get a doctor I wouldn’t mind so much,” sobbed Mrs. Burton. “But that is an impossibility.”

“I am afraid it is,” Katherine answered, lightly touching her father’s face with her finger, and wondering if he were as unconscious as he looked.

Then she felt herself gently thrust to one side, and the voice of Jervis Ferrars said quietly: “Go and get into dry clothes as quickly as you can, Miss Radford. You can do your Father no immediate good, but you may easily catch pneumonia if you stop in this condition long. I am not really a doctor, but I have had a medical training, and I can do all that can be done in this case.”

“Oh, how thankful we are to have you here!” said Mrs. Burton, who felt as if the wet unknown, who was shedding pools of dirty water on to her clean floor, was an angel sent straight from heaven to help her in her time of need.

But Katherine said nothing at all; she only stumbled to her feet in blind haste and hurried away, knowing that collapse into undignified babyish crying was inevitable, and anxious to get away to some place where she might be hidden from the eyes of the others. In that crowded little house there was not much chance of privacy, however, and when Katherine entered the bedroom, to change her wet garments and cry in peace, she was immediately set upon by the twins, who had been shut in there by their mother to be out of the way. The poor mites were so frightened and unhappy that Katherine had to put aside her own miseries in order to comfort them. Then by the time she was clad in dry garments she felt better and braver, so she went back to the other room with the tears unshed.

’Duke Radford still lay on the floor in blank unconsciousness, while Mrs. Burton was busy mopping up the dirty water which had run from the wet garments of the others.

“Mr. Ferrars has gone to get into dry clothes, and then he will see about putting poor Father to bed,” Mrs. Burton explained. Then she burst into agitated thanksgiving: “Oh, Katherine, how fortunate that you brought him home with you, and how wonderful it is that there is always someone to help when most it is needed! Whatever should we have done to-day if we had had no one but the fisher people to help us?”

Katherine was silent, and before the eyes of her mind there arose the picture of that moment before the two big fragments of ice collided, the moment which enabled Jervis Ferrars and herself to get into the boat. But for that pause in the destruction of the ice island it was more than probable that neither she nor the stranger would have been there at all. Of this she said nothing. Nellie had quite enough to bear without being frightened by tragedies which had not happened.

“I am afraid we brought you in a fearful lot of water,” Katherine said.

“It will soon be wiped up, and the floor none the worse. That poor Mr. Ferrars had no boots or stockings on; his feet were merely swathed in towels. I have sent Miles with warm water to help him put them comfortable; and now there is someone in the store. Dear, can you go? I don’t know where Phil is.”

“I will go. But what about Father?” Katherine asked, lingering.

“You can do nothing for him, and he is as comfortable as it is possible to make him at present,” Mrs. Burton replied. Then Katherine hurried away, for business must be attended to whatever disasters menaced the family peace and happiness.

The customer was a man from one of the fishing boats, which was preparing to leave the river directly the barrier of ice at the mouth gave way. He wanted more stores than could be immediately supplied, and promised to come back for them later.

“I saw you’d got the Englishman in your boat when you came up river; I thought he looked pretty sick,” remarked the fisher, who was a Yankee from Long Island Sound.

“His feet are bad, which is not wonderful when one remembers his journey from Maxokama,” Katherine answered, wishing that the man would go, so that she might go back to her father.

But this he seemed in no hurry to do, and with a cautious look round to make sure no one was within earshot, he leaned over the counter and asked in a confidential tone: “Can you keep a secret, Miss?”

“I think so, but I am not very fond of them,” she answered, drawing back with a repressive air, for the man’s manner was more familiar than she cared for.

“Well, it’s this then; the Englishman is likely to go on getting sicker still if he keeps lodging at Oily Dave’s hotel. Do you twig my meaning?”

“No, certainly not,” Katherine answered; then a shiver crept over her, because of the sinister interpretation which might be put to the words.

“I don’t want to be hauled up in a libel case,” said the Yankee. “Are there any witnesses within hearing?”

“No, not if you keep your voice down,” she answered, dropping her own, and feeling that here was something she ought to know, however unpleasant or burdensome the knowledge might prove.

“Well, they are saying that the new fleet-owner, Mr. Selincourt, ain’t satisfied with things going on as they used to do, and so he has sent this young man up to

spy round a bit, report the catch, keep expenses down, and that sort of thing. Oily Dave has always reckoned to make a good picking out of the fishing, you know, and it ain't likely he'd approve of being spied upon."

"Why have you told me this?" demanded Katherine. Her eyes were dilated with fear, and there was a sickening apprehension in her heart. In that wild place, so far from law and order, a dozen dreadful things might happen, and the world would be none the wiser.

The Yankee laughed and stuffed a plug of tobacco into his left cheek. Then he replied: "They all say on the river that you are a powerful smart girl, and can do most things you set your mind to. Possession is nine points of the law, you know. You have got the Englishman here; keep him somehow—unless you want him to leave Oily Dave's hotel feet foremost, that is."

Katherine gasped, and the words she would have uttered stuck fast in her throat. A man's life had been thrust into her keeping, and she must guard it as best she might.

"I wish you would tell——" she began falteringly, then a door creaked at the far end of the store, and the Yankee straightened himself with great promptitude, ready for instant departure.

"Well, good morning, Miss! Beautiful thaw, ain't it now? I should think the mouth of the river must go bust before to-morrow;" and with a flourish of his very seedy old hat the citizen of the United States walked out of the store. He did not often lift his hat to anyone; for, believing that all men were equal, such observance struck him as servile. But Katherine had a way with her that compelled respect; moreover, she was a downright gritty girl, as he expressed it: so the hat-flourish was really a tribute to her strength of character.

As he went out of the door, Jervis Ferrars came hobbling out from the bedroom leaning on Miles. Dressed in 'Duke Radford's working clothes, he looked like an ordinary working man, except for that indefinable air of culture which clung to him.

"I am going to see to your father now, Miss Radford. Miles and I have got the bed ready, and the sooner we get the poor man undressed and comfortable, the better it will be for him."

"Thank you!" said Katherine, then shivered again as she recalled the Yankee's words about keeping the stranger from the power of Oily Dave.

Jervis Ferrars looked at her keenly, noting the shiver and the trouble in her eyes; then he said abruptly: "What is the matter? Do you feel ill, or is it something fresh?"

For a moment Katherine hesitated, but he would have to be told, she knew, so she said hastily: "It is something that—that you must know. I will tell you presently when I get a chance."

"Very well," he replied briefly, then hobbled on into the kitchen, and for the

next hour was occupied in doing his utmost for the sick man.

Katherine was left a moment alone with Mrs. Burton, after 'Duke Radford had been carried to his bed, and she said hastily: "Nellie, would you mind if Mr. Ferrars stayed here for a few days until his feet are better? We are crowded, I know; but either he or the boys could sleep in the loft now it is warmer, and Oily Dave's house is impossible until the flood is down."

"I should say it is impossible at any time," replied Mrs. Burton, "and I shall be only too thankful if he will stay for a while because of poor father. Oh, Katherine, I am afraid this long terrible winter has killed him," she said, with a quiver of breakdown in her voice.

"It is not the winter. Why, he has scarcely been out at all, so he cannot have suffered from that," Katherine answered sadly. She knew only too well why her father had broken down again, only the worst of it was she could not tell anyone, but must hide the knowledge within her own heart, because it involved her father's honour.

"I have seen him failing for so long, only yesterday and to-day he seemed better," Mrs. Burton went on; "and he was sitting quite comfortably by the stove, not talking very much, but looking thoroughly contented, when he suddenly pitched out of his chair and lay like a log on the floor."

"Will you ask Mr. Ferrars to stay with us, or shall I?" said Katherine.

"I will if you like. I will put it so that he shall think he is doing us a favour, then he will be more comfortable about accepting; and really, as things are, I don't see where else there is for him to go."

"Nor I," replied Katherine, and was thankful to leave the matter in her sister's hands for the present.

CHAPTER XI

A Woman of Business

“What is the trouble, Miss Radford?”

Katherine started. She had been so busy in packing baking powder, tobacco, currants, and things of that description into a box for the fisher from Long Island Sound that she had not heard the approach of Jervis Ferrars, who wore list slippers, and so made but little noise in walking. The long hard day which had held so many momentous happenings was wearing to a close, and so far she had found no chance at all to speak to the stranger about what he had to fear. Mrs. Burton had begged him with tears in her eyes to stay a few days to help them in looking after their father, and Jervis Ferrars had accepted with such evident pleasure at the prospect that Katherine had troubled no further then, and had devoted herself to the many things which called for her attention.

Her father still lay in the condition of absolute unconsciousness into which he had fallen at first, and Mr. Ferrars did not think there would be much change for a few days. He also did not apprehend any immediate danger, and they all took courage from this. Sickness and incapacity did not daunt them; but it was death the separator of whom they were all so much afraid.

“I did not hear you come,” Katherine said.

“No, my footgear is not noisy, as befits a sickroom; but then my steps are not sprightly either, so you might have heard me slouching across the floor if you had not been so absorbed in the matter in hand. What is it you want to tell me?” he asked, with a quick change of tone.

“You had better not go back to the house of Oily Dave again,” she began in a rather breathless style.

“Very much better not, I should say,” he answered. “But why?”

“You have come to watch the fishing in the interest of Mr. Selincourt, have you not?” she asked.

“Yes, the old company complained of considerable leakage in profits, you see; indeed it was on this account that they decided the fleet was an unworkable scheme for a company, and were willing to sell to Mr. Selincourt.”

Katherine nodded, then said in a low tone: “But your position will make you enemies, and I have been warned to-day that it is positively dangerous for you to remain in the house with that man.”

“Did this warning reach you before you came to rescue me this morning, or since?” he asked quickly.

“Since. We did not even know that you were there.”

“Well, it is a comfort to know that, although I have enemies, I have friends too; for such a warning could have come only from a friend,” Jervis Ferrars remarked, frowning heavily.

“It was certainly meant in a friendly spirit, and, now you know, you will be careful,” she said, and there was more entreaty in her tone than she guessed at, for she was remembering how indifferent to danger he had seemed when she was trying to rescue him from the flood that morning.

“Yes, I shall be careful. And, since to be forewarned is to be forearmed, thank you for telling me. I suppose this accounts for the old rascal going off this morning with the key of the hotel in his pocket.”

“Did he do that?” she asked in a startled tone.

“Yes, I had been awake all night with the pain in my feet and in my limbs, and I was disposed to lie and sleep when morning came,” Jervis Ferrars replied. “I heard him getting up very early, and asked him what was amiss, for I could hear a great row outside with the ice. He said there was nothing to be afraid of, for his house stood too high ever to be caught in a flood; but he had left a boat in an awkward place and must go and look after it. Then he went out. I heard him lock the door when he was outside. After that I went to sleep, and did not wake again until I heard you shouting, and found the water was nearly on a level with my bed.”

Katherine shuddered. “It is too horrible even to think of! We should not have known that anyone was in the house who needed saving, if it had not been for Mrs. Jenkin screaming so loudly from the other bank.”

“Then that is another friend; so apparently I have more friends than enemies after all, in which case I am not to be pitied,” he said lightly; then asked: “Is that all the trouble—I mean so far as it concerns me?”

“It is all that I know, but I beg you to be careful, for Oily Dave is such a cowardly foe, who only strikes in the dark,” she said earnestly.

“In which case I shall be safest when I keep in the light,” the Englishman answered with a laugh. “By the way, how did the old fellow earn his title? Was it given to him because he practically lives on lard?”

“I think it was given to him because he was known to help himself so largely to the fish oils which should have been the property of the fleet,” she replied. “I did not even know that he was fond of lard, although I have suspected him nearly all winter of having stolen two pails of it from the store one night, when Miles had his back turned for a minute.”

“That accounts for the bill of fare at his hotel then,” Mr. Ferrars said with a laugh. “I have had nothing but lard and bread, sour heavy bread too, or lard and biscuit, or biscuit without the lard, since I arrived at Seal Cove. But I think he need not have charged such high prices for the stuff if he stole it!”

“No indeed!” exclaimed Katherine, with a thrill of indignation in her tone.

“But why did you go to such a place? You would surely have been better off on one of the boats, or Mrs. Jenkin would have made room for you somehow, although her house is very small and fearfully crowded.”

“It was part of the programme, don’t you see? I came to be on the spot to stop the leakage, and, having given a pretty good guess as to where the leaky spot was, Mr. Selincourt told me to lodge, if possible, in the abode of Oily Dave.”

“But you will not go back? Mr. Selincourt would not expect it of you,” she said, a swift terror leaping into her eyes.

“No, I shall not reside under the roof of Oily Dave any longer,” he answered. “But I shall remind him of that locked door, and various other things, some day when it suits me.”

“What are you doing? Are you going to put it down in a book?” Katherine asked in surprise, as he drew out a pocket-book and began to write.

“Certainly! You are a woman of business, and must know that it is best to have facts down in black and white,” he answered. Then, having finished with Oily Dave, he turned to the other side of the same book, and began questioning her about her father’s condition before his seizure, and entering the answers in the same way.

“You think that Father will really rally again?” she asked, with a fear lest his former hopefulness about his patient was merely assumed to cheer Mrs. Burton, who had been plunged in dreadful grief all day.

“I am inclined to believe that he may recover to a certain extent, but I should have a much better idea of his chances if I knew more of his condition beforehand, especially his state of mind. Your sister says that he had no particular worries, nor anything to induce apprehension or acute anxiety. Is that your opinion also?”

The question found Katherine unprepared; she winced, then hesitated, not knowing what to say. He saw the trouble in her eyes, and paused with the pencil held between two fingers. “I am not asking from any desire to know the nature of the worry, if there was one; that would be quite immaterial in its effect on the issues. The thing that counts is to know if he were suffering from acute mental torture. If this be so, then it probably accounts for the seizure, and leaves him with a fair hope of recovery to a limited extent. If, on the other hand, his mind was perfectly placid and peaceful, then I am afraid you must expect the end in a few days, or a week at the furthest, for that would mean that nature is completely worn out, instead of just broken down by worry.”

Katherine was white to the lips, and her voice sank to a whisper as she faltered: “Yes, he had acute anxiety, and a worry which wore him all the more because he hid it so carefully; but none of the others knew about it, only myself.”

“Thank you! that sets matters on a more satisfactory basis,” he said, “and I feel sure we shall see improvement in a few days.”

“Will you please not mind telling the others what you have told me about the

causes of his condition?" Katherine asked hurriedly. "Miles and Phil are so young, while Mrs. Burton has had too many troubles of her own. That was why Father talked more freely to me."

"There is no need to speak of it any more," he answered, with reassuring kindness. "Now I want to know what arrangements we can make about the sickroom. Do you think the boys can sleep in the loft? Or, if that is too cold, shall we give them a shakedown here in the store?"

"I don't think the loft will be cold now the frost has gone," Katherine answered. "But Mrs. Burton meant that for you, because it is really the only quiet place we have."

"I am going to sit up with your father for the next few nights, but I can get a nap in the loft during the day. When my feet are better I shall have to be away in the boats a great deal, but until then I can be nurse in chief, and so free Mrs. Burton's hands for her other work," he said, gripping the needs of the situation as plainly as if he had known them all for months instead of hours.

"I had meant to stay with Father to-night," said Katherine, flushing a little, and not feeling quite certain whether she entirely approved of having matters taken out of her hands in this fashion.

"That would not do at all. You will have to be business head of the establishment now for a permanency, and the sooner you get your shoulders fitted to the burden the better," he said decidedly.

"But I have practically been the business head all the winter, so the burden is familiar already," she protested, with a wan smile and a sinking at her heart, for she did not like business, and always shrank from the bother of bargaining, which afforded such keen zest to some people's buying and selling.

"That was quite different from what lies before you now," he replied. "You may have had the work to do, but you had always your father's judgment to rely upon. In future you will have to stand alone and judge for yourself."

Katherine bowed her head in token that she understood, then turned away too crushed to utter a word. Jervis Ferrars went back to the sickroom, wincing at the pain he had been compelled to inflict as if the blow had fallen on himself. There were no tears in Katherine's eyes, only the terrible black misery in her heart. She had filled in all the blanks in what, the Englishman had said, and she understood perfectly well that henceforth her father would be only as a child who needed guarding and shielding, instead of a man whose judgment could be relied upon. She had no deception in her mind concerning what would be required of her; the family living must depend on her in the future, and it would rest upon her skill and industry whether the living she earned were merely subsistence, or the decent comfort in which they had all been reared.

"God helping me, they shall want for nothing—nothing!" she exclaimed vehemently, and the very energy with which she spoke seemed to give her back

her courage.

It had been a momentous day in her life, a day calling for rare courage and endurance, and the demands on her strength had left her so tired that the other hard days looming in the near distance seemed all the more terrible because of the present exhaustion of body and mind. It was nearly time for shutting up the store, but it was twilight still, for in those northern latitudes the afterglow on clear nights lasts for hours. Katherine was busy at her father's desk in the corner doing the necessary writing which comes to every storekeeper at the close of the day, and she was just wondering when Miles was coming to lock the door and fold the shutter over the one small window, when she heard a slouching step outside, and, glancing up, saw Oily Dave entering at the door. He looked more shifty and slippery than usual, but his manner was bland, even deferential, when he spoke.

"Good evening, Miss Radford! Nice thaw, ain't it? but a bit rapid. How's 'Dook?"

Katherine winced. Of course every man at Roaring Water Portage and Seal Cove called every other man by his Christian name, and she had always been used to hearing " 'Duke", but nevertheless it grated horribly, so her manner was a trifle more haughty than usual when she announced that her father was not so well, although she did not choose to inform this man that he was very ill.

"Well, well, poor chap, he don't seem to get on fast, no, that he don't. It's downright lucky for him that he's got sech a bright gal as you to look after things. He is a smart sight better off than I should have been under the circumstances;" and Oily Dave struck an attitude of respectful admiration, leering at Katherine from his half-closed eyes.

"What do you wish, for to-night?" she asked coldly.

"A good many things, my supper most of all, for I've had nothing but a mouthful of biscuit all day. But I shall have to wait for that till I get back to Seal Cove, and then I shall have to cook it myself, for that swell lodger of mine ain't no good about a house," said Oily Dave, with a shake of his head.

Katherine put her hand to her throat with a quick movement, to check a hysterical desire for laughter. She and Mrs. Burton had both marvelled that day at the exceeding handiness displayed by Jervis Ferrars. He had made the bed for the stricken head of the house as deftly as a woman might have done, and had helped in the kitchen at supper time as if he had been getting meals regularly for the last two or three years; but of this she was not disposed to speak, and waited in silence for Oily Dave to state his requirements.

"I want some canned tomatoes. Have you got any?"

"We have plenty of two-pound tins, but we are sold out of the smaller ones," she answered, then made a mental note that in future she would buy all small tins, because they sold so much more easily.

"That's a nuisance, but I suppose I'll have to put up with it," he said, with a

sigh and another shake of his head. "Fact is, I want to take home a relish for supper. My lodger don't take to simple food such as we are used to in these parts. It is a downright swell tuck-in he looks to get, same as you might expect to have in one of the Montreal hotels."

Again Katherine wanted to laugh, but checked the impulse resolutely, and asked: "Is the flood at Seal Cove as bad as ever, or has the barrier given way at the mouth of the river?"

"I didn't know there was a flood!" announced Oily Dave, with an air of innocence which sat awkwardly upon him, it was so palpably put on for the occasion. "Fact is, I've been off all day on the cliffs along the bay shore, looking for signs of walrus and seal on the ice floes. Then when it got near sunset I just struck inland, so as to call here on my way home. Who told you there was a flood?"

"I saw it," she answered quietly.

"I hope my lodger is all right," said the old hypocrite, with an air of concern. "That house of mine ain't well situated for floods, as most folks know. If I'd got the time and the money I'd move it up beside Stee Jenkin's hut, which is really in a bootiful situation."

"I wonder you have not done it before," said Katherine, as she went up the steps and fetched the tin of tomatoes from the top shelf.

"Ah, there are a good many things that get left undone for want of time and money!" remarked Oily Dave. "But I'm afraid Mr. Selincourt has made a big mistake in sending that languid swell of a Mr. Ferrars here to boss the fishing. A reg'lar drawing-room party he is and no mistake. Gives himself as many airs as a turkey-cock in springtime, and seems to think all the rest of the world was created on purpose to black his boots."

"We don't sell much boot blacking here. Most of the people grease their boots with fish oil," Katherine said, laughing in spite of herself, only now her amusement was because she knew Jervis Ferrars to be in her father's room, where he could hear every word which was spoken in the store.

"Best thing, too. There is nothing like grease for making leather wear well. Well, I must be going, though I'm that tired. However I'll manage the walk is more than I can say;" and Oily Dave heaved a sigh which this time was not lacking in sincerity.

"Would you like to have one of our boats? Miles will help you to run it down," Katherine said. It was such a usual thing to lend a customer a boat that one or two were always handy, and the customer always understood that the loan was to be returned at his earliest convenience.

"Thank you, I should be glad! The current will carry me down while I smoke my pipe. Then I shall be rested enough to cook supper when I get there," he answered. Then, bidding her good night, he went out of the store, meeting Miles

in the doorway, who went back to help him to run the boat down into the water.

“Miles, I hope you didn’t tell that old fraud that Mr. Ferrars was staying here?” said Katherine, when the boy came in and locked the door for the night.

“Of course I didn’t. I never said a word good, bad, nor indifferent to the old fellow. I haven’t got over this morning,” Miles said, in a tone which sounded sullen, but which was only a cloak for feelings deeply stirred.

“Very well then, for this one night at least he will have the satisfaction of believing that he was successful in drowning Mr. Ferrars,” Katherine replied.

“Don’t worry yourself, Mrs. Jenkin will tell him,” said Miles. “Or some of the men will chaff him, because he has been outwitted by a girl.”

“It wasn’t a girl this time; it was Mrs. Jenkin,” objected Katherine, letting a box go down with a bang, for she did not want the listener in the other room to hear what Miles was saying.

“Mrs. Jenkin might have called out that there was someone in Oily Dave’s house that wanted saving, but I guess the poor man would have had time to drown twice over if it hadn’t been for you getting on the ice and going to fetch him out,” Miles said, sticking to his own opinion with the obstinacy he was rather fond of displaying.

Katherine took refuge in silence, going out of the store as soon as she could, and hurrying away to bed, because of the needs of the next day. Neither she nor Mrs. Burton slept very well, however. To both of them it was a grief beyond the power of words to describe to leave their father to the care of a stranger, and they were both thankful when morning came and the day’s routine had to begin again.

There was no change in the stricken man’s condition, but Katherine, who stayed with him while the others had breakfast, thought that he looked more comfortable than on the previous evening. When Miles came in to take her place, she went back to the kitchen, to hear Mrs. Burton and Jervis Ferrars talking of the Selincourts.

“I suppose Mr. Selincourt is very rich,” said Mrs. Burton with a little wistful sigh, as if she thought that riches might detract from his niceness.

“Yes, I expect he is very rich, but he is so thoroughly pleasant, and so free from side, that one is apt to forget all about his riches,” Jervis said, then rose to set a chair for Katherine, and bring her bowl of porridge from the stove, where it was keeping warm for her.

“Is Miss Selincourt nice too, and is she pretty?” asked Mrs. Burton, who to Katherine’s secret disquiet was always asking questions concerning the expected arrivals.

Jervis laughed. “I have never stopped to consider whether she is pretty, but she is certainly very charming in her manners,” he said, with so much earnestness that Katherine instantly made up her mind that Miss Selincourt was the kind of person she did not care for and did not want to know.

Phil came in from the store at this moment, with a pucker of amusement on his face.

“Stee Jenkin has brought our boat back,” he said. “Oily Dave paid him half a dollar to come, because he didn’t feel like showing his face up here just yet.”

“Why not?” demanded Jervis Ferrars.

“Stee said the ice at the river mouth didn’t give way until after midnight, when it burst with a roar like cannon. When Oily Dave got to Seal Cove last night, the water reached to the shingles of his house; so the old fellow rowed across to Stee’s hut and asked to be taken in for the night, because he was flooded out and the Englishman was drowned.”

“But didn’t Stee tell him that Mr. Ferrars was safe here with us?” asked Mrs. Burton.

“Not a bit of it,” replied Phil. “That would have spoiled sport, don’t you see? because Oily Dave was what Stee called most uncommon resigned, and talked such a lot about going to find the body in the morning, that they just made up their minds to let him go. He was up by daybreak and went over to look; but when he saw the door broken down he guessed there had been a rescue, and he was just mad because no one had told him anything about it.”

“It was rather too bad to leave him in suspense all night, poor man,” said Mrs. Burton gently.

CHAPTER XII

The First of the Fishing

For a whole week the thaw went merrily on. One by one the fishing boats left their winter anchorage in the river, and sailed out into the stormy waters of the bay. By the end of the week Jervis Ferrars had so far recovered the comfortable use of his feet that he could wear boots again and go about like other men. Directly he was able to do this he went down to Seal Cove every day, where he inspected every boat that was ready to put to sea, overhauled the store shed, and quietly took command, setting Oily Dave on one side with as little ceremony as if that worthy had never been master of the fleet.

Oily Dave took the change in government with very bad grace indeed, and it is probable that the life of Jervis Ferrars would have been in very grave danger many times during the next few weeks if it had not been for the fact that the Englishman had made a host of friends among the fishers, who would protect him at all risks in an open attack, while Jervis wisely so far avoided Oily Dave as to give no chance for the secret, cowardly thrusts in which the deposed man delighted.

Astor M'Kree personally conducted the new boats, one by one, over the rapids, bringing them down when the river was in flood and anchoring them in front of the store until their crews were ready; and when they had cleared for the bay the fishing was in full swing.

Eight hundred miles away, in the north of the great inland sea, the whalers and sealers were still fast bound in ice and snow, longing for freedom, yet forced to wait while the tardy spring crept northward. But down in the more sheltered waters of James Bay there was abundance of work for everyone. Hundreds of seals gambolled on the ice floes and on the shores of the little uncharted islands which make those waters such a serious menace to the mariner. Sometimes the boats were away for a week. Sometimes two days found them headed back for Seal Cove, laden with seals, walrus, and narwhal. Many of them succeeded in getting a good catch of white whales, for which those waters are so noted; but these were caught at the mouths of the tidal rivers, for the whales go up the rivers every day with the tide, and it was when the tide was ebbing that the whales were most easily caught. It was only the biggest and strongest boats that ventured so far as the tidal rivers, however, and with these Jervis Ferrars never went. Indeed, but from choice he need never have gone to sea at all, for his work lay more particularly on land, where he had to keep toll of the catch and take care that the various products of the sea harvest were properly secured and stored, until the opening of Hudson Strait enabled vessels to get through.

Astor M'Kree had made a queer addition to the side of Stee Jenkin's house by building against one end of it part of an old fishing boat which had been wrecked in the floodtime, and stranded on the bluff upon which the little house was perched. In this peculiar abode Jervis took his residence, while Mrs. Jenkin looked after his comfort and kept his room clean with a slavish industry which she had certainly never bestowed on her own house.

On most days when he was ashore Jervis contrived to get up to Roaring Water Portage, his ostensible errand being to see 'Duke Radford, who was slowly creeping back to physical convalescence. That is, the bodily part of him was resuming its functions, only the mental part was at a standstill; and although the sick man seemed to know and love them all, he had no more understanding for the serious things of life than an average child of six or seven might have possessed. It was well for the family that their father's illness in the previous winter had in a measure prepared them for doing without him, or they must have felt even more keenly the heavy work and heavier responsibilities which had fallen upon them. As it was, they faced their difficulties with a quiet courage which left no one with a chance to pity them, although there were plenty to admire "the pluck of 'Duke Radford's young 'uns".

It was Katherine who took the lead, the boy Miles being a good second, and proving the more valuable aid because of his habit of unquestioning obedience. Mrs. Burton was willing for any drudgery, and toiled at housework and nursing with a devotion as beautiful as it was uncomplaining. But she had no talent for leadership and no faculty for organization, and, what is more, she was perfectly aware of the lack.

Night school was of course at an end. Indeed, no one had any time for thinking about education or books. Katherine made valorous attempts to carry on the studies of Miles and Phil, but had to give them up as useless, lacking strength and opportunity for the endeavour. But the long winter would make up for the neglect of the short summer, and she left off worrying over their lapse into ignorance, contenting herself with reading to them on Sundays, and, what was more important still, making them read to her.

It was delightful to be abroad in those days of early spring, and Katherine especially enjoyed the journeys to Fort Garry, when she rowed across the corner of the bay and felt the sweep of the breeze coming in from the wider waters beyond. Phil was her companion always now, because when she was absent Miles must be at home to look after the store. There were other journeys to be taken also, which, but for the portages, might have been regarded as pleasure trips pure and simple. But the portage work was hard, and by the time Katherine and Phil had tramped three times over a mile and a half of portage, laden with sugar, bacon, and flour, returning the fourth time for the birchbark, they were mostly too tired to regard the journey as anything but very hard work indeed.

Yet in spite of this it was lovely to be out in the fresh air and the sunshine. When Katherine heard the long, laughing chuckle of the ptarmigan, or saw the trailing flights of geese headed northward, she could have shouted and sung from sheer lighthearted joy at the coming of spring. But, however high her spirits rose as the weather grew better and finer, there was always the cold dread in her heart because of what the summer must bring. Of course, if her father remained in his present condition he would feel and understand nothing of the embarrassment which must fall alone upon her in meeting Mr. Selincourt. It was the dread and shrinking at the thought of this meeting which robbed the spring days of their keenest joy, and although she would be happy sometimes, the happiness was certain to be followed by fits of black depression, especially after the doing of a long portage.

There was a long, low shed at Seal Cove, where all the fish oil, whalebone, blubber, ivory, skins, and other produce of the sea harvest were stored pending ocean shipment. Jervis Ferrars had a small office railed off from one end of this unsavoury shed, and he was sitting in it writing, one afternoon in early May, when he saw Katherine's boat coming across from Fort Garry. He had been looking for it any time within the last hour, and had begun to wonder that it was so long delayed. But it was coming at last, and putting on his cap he locked his office and went out to hail the boat. This was no birchbark journey broken by weary toiling to and fro on a portage trail, but Katherine and Phil were seated in one of the good, solid boats turned out by Astor M'Kree, and both of them looked even brighter than usual.

"Are you coming home with us?" Katherine asked, as she came within speaking distance and saw that Jervis had his birchbark by a towrope.

"That is my desire, if you will have me," he said.

"With pleasure. You shall be company, and sit in the place of honour," Katherine said with a laugh, feeling that the occasion had somehow become festive, even though two miles of rowing against the current lay in front of her. "Phil, move that bundle from the seat and let Mr. Ferrars sit there; he will be more comfortable."

"Thank you, I don't want to sit there, and if I can't do as I like I shall get into the birchbark and paddle you up river on a towrope, which will jerk you horribly, and probably capsize me," said Jervis, with an obstinate air.

"What do you wish to do?" she asked demurely.

"I wish to sit where you are sitting now," he answered. "Then I will row you up river and give you a necessary lesson in steering; for don't you remember how nearly you upset us into the bank the last time but one that I rowed you up?"

Katherine flushed, but there was a laughing light in her eyes as she replied: "Oh yes! I remember perfectly well, but that was quite as much your fault as mine, for you were telling us of your experiences in that Nantucket whaler, and they

were quite thrilling enough to make anyone forget to steer.”

“There shall be no such temptation to forgetfulness to-day; that I can safely promise you,” he answered, holding the boat steady while Katherine moved to the other seat. Then, tying his birchbark on behind, he stepped into the vacant place and commenced to pull up stream with long, steady strokes.

“You were a long time at the Fort to-day,” he remarked presently.

“Yes, Mrs. M’Crawney is ill, and it was only common humanity to do what I could for her,” Katherine answered gravely, for poor Mrs. M’Crawney had made her heart ache that day, because of the terrible discomfort in which the poor woman was lying, and the homesickness for old Ireland which seemed to oppress her.

“I thought she looked ill the other day when I was over there, but she would not admit it. I wanted to tell her that less hot pastry and more fresh air would work a cure perhaps; but it does not do to thrust one’s opinion unasked upon people, especially when one is only a doctor in intention and not in reality,” Jervis said, with a tug at the oars which expressed a good many things.

“It is a good thing for us that you are not really a doctor, or else you would not be looking after Mr. Selincourt’s fishing interests, and then you would not have been here to take care of Father,” Phil said.

Katherine laughed as she remarked: “For pure, unadulterated selfishness that would surely beat the record, Phil. I expect Mr. Ferrars hates Seal Cove nearly as much as he did the Nantucket whaler.”

“No, he does not,” Jervis broke in. “Sometimes of course Seal Cove smells rather strongly of fish oil, warm blubber, and putrid seal meat; but, taken as a whole, there are many worse places to live in. I found a bank gorgeous with anemones in blue and red yesterday, and that within ten minutes’ walk of the fish shed.”

“I know it,” said Katherine. “That bank is always a beautiful sight; but wait until you have seen the rhododendrons on the long portage.”

“Where is that—at Astor M’Kree’s?” asked the young man, whose time was too much occupied to admit of much exploration of the neighbourhood.

“No, four miles farther up the river, and the portage is a mile and a half long. Phil and I call it the backache portage,” replied Katherine.

“Why, do you deliver goods so far out? With no competition to be afraid of, I should have thought you might have made your customers come to buy from you,” he said, frowning, for he knew very well what kind of work was involved in a portage, and it did not seem to him a fit and proper employment for a girl.

“But there is competition,” laughed Katherine. “There is Peter M’Crawney, with all the great Hudson’s Bay Company behind him. That is our most formidable rival, while up on Marble Island there has been started a sort of United States General Stores and Canned Food Depot. Of course, that is eight hundred

miles away, and should not be dangerous, but it makes more difference than anyone might suppose.”

“Well, it isn’t round the corner of the next block at any rate,” Jervis replied, laughing to think that trade could suffer from a rival establishment so far away.

“Yes it is, only the block is a big one, you see,” she answered, and they all laughed merrily. When one is young, and the sun is shining, it is so easy to be gay, even though grim care stalks in the background.

“I thought that you and M’Crawney were rather in the position of business partners than trade rivals,” Jervis said, as, passing the last bend of the river, he swung the boat along the stretch of straight water to the store.

“In a sense we are partners; that is, we agree to work together, and to supply each other’s shortages in stores so far as we can. But the rivalry is there all the same. Peter M’Crawney knows he would sell three times the stuff that he does now if it were not for us; while of course our hands would be freer but for him, only we are tied to him, because half of our customers are able to pay us only in skins, and then Peter M’Crawney is our Bank of Exchange.”

Katherine could not forbear a grimace as she spoke, for peltry can be a very odorous currency, and she had to examine every skin closely before deciding what it was worth in flour, bacon, or tobacco, because the red man is a past master in the art of outwitting the white man, when it comes to a question of trade.

“The plan of bartering skins for stores is not a good one, and the man who buys the skins ought not to be the one who sells the sugar and tea,” Jervis remarked in a dictatorial tone; but Katherine only laughed at him, and said that he knew nothing whatever about the red man of the Keewatin wilds, or he would never suggest cash dealings.

“Still it will come, and the red man will be educated to a proper appreciation of his privileges,” Jervis maintained, with the quiet obstinacy that Katherine had sometimes noticed in him before.

“I hope I shall be out of the trade before that time comes,” she said, as she guided the boat in to the landing place. “As soon as Miles is able to take control of the store I shall return to my proper avocation of school teaching—that is, always providing there are children to be taught.”

’Duke Radford sat in a cushioned chair at a sun-shiny window of the kitchen. He looked up with a smile when his daughter entered the room, and when she bent over him to kiss him he murmured: “Pretty Katherine”, and stroked her face caressingly; then he turned with the pleased eagerness of a child to greet Jervis, whom he regarded as a very good friend indeed.

Katherine sighed as she went back to help with the unlading of the boat. It was a great comfort to feel that her father suffered nothing either in body or mind, but sometimes she would have been very thankful if she could have gone to him with her business worries, and got his advice on things which perplexed her so much.

However, it was something to be thankful for that his burden of apprehension was lifted so completely, and the thought of this banished her tendency to sighing, bringing the smiles back instead. Life might be hard, but while there was hope in it, it could not be unbearable.

CHAPTER XIII

Mary

“Are you ready, Mary?”

“In one minute, Father. Let me see: three bags, a valise, a hold-all, a portmanteau, two hatboxes, a camping sack, a case of books, and a handbag. Oh dear, what a collection of things to look after! How I wish we were like the dogs, dear creatures, which grow their own clothes and have only their tails to hold up, or to wag in sign of amity!”

The speaker was a girl of perhaps twenty, although she had one of those quiet reserved faces which render difficult a correct guessing of the age. She was standing in the porch of the Bellevue Hotel, Temiskaming, and was garbed as if for rough travel, in coat and skirt of heather-brown cloth, faced with brown leather, with a brown hat on her head, and brown boots on her feet which reached well above the ankle. Indeed her attire was so trim, and so exceedingly suitable for rough work, that everyone at the first glance decided she must be English.

“I fancy you would not care to wear the same coat always, nor yet to wag the same tail,” laughed her father, a genial-looking man of fifty, who was dressed with equal fitness for rough travel, and was just now intent on hurrying his daughter to the lake boat, which was getting up steam at a little distance.

“Like it or not, I expect it is what I shall be reduced to by the end of the summer,” laughed Mary Selincourt, as she watched the various bags and bundles being piled on to a barrow by the hotel porter.

“Well, look your last on civilization and come along, for that boat won’t wait much longer,” said Mr. Selincourt, adding with a laugh: “unless indeed you are beginning to repent, in which case it is not too late to change your mind and go back to Miss Griffith.”

“Thank you! I never change my mind unless it is about the weather, and I wouldn’t turn back on this journey on any account whatever.”

“Not if I turned back myself?” he enquired, as they went on board the boat.

“No; unless, of course, you were ill, in which case, I suppose, my sense of duty would oblige me to stop, even while my inclination was dragging me, with both hands, as near to the North Pole as a woman may hope to get,” she said, with a nervous catching of her breath which showed some agitation behind.

“But James Bay isn’t the North Pole,” objected Mr. Selincourt.

“It is nearer though than this, I suppose. And this is better than Montreal,” she answered, then turned to talk to a gentleman who had come on board before them, and was bound for a fishing camp higher up the lake.

Lake Temiskaming is thirty miles long, and they reached its end in the evening. But, as Mr. Selincourt had made arrangements to keep the boat for use as a floating hotel until the next morning, their first night in the wilds was a very comfortable one.

At dawn next morning everyone was astir. Three river boats were landed; these were made light enough for portage work, and strong enough for weight carrying. With them were landed some men engaged at a point farther down the lake, who had undertaken to work the boats up the Abbittibi River to Hannah Bay. The men, although there were plenty of them, looked askance at the luggage which had to be unladen from the steamer and packed into the boats. They were thinking of the portages, and the numberless times those bags, bales, bundles, and boxes would have to be carried over miles of portages on their shoulders. But the pay was good, quite twice what they could have earned in any other direction, and as they were too wise to quarrel with their daily bread, which in this case was only biscuit, they accepted the burdens in silence.

Mr. Selincourt and Mary travelled always in the second boat with the personal luggage which had surrounded Mary in the hotel porch, while the boat which went in front and the one which came after were laden with the heavier luggage. For many days after this their journey went on. Sometimes they would make not more than seven or eight miles in a day when the portages were bad, and on one record day the total distance covered was only four miles. The weather was well-behaved as a whole, although occasionally the rain came down at a pour. Being so early in the summer, the rivers were very full, so there was never any danger of running aground, although they had to face many risks in going down the rapids, when they had crossed the height of land on a ten-mile portage, and began to descend the Mattagami River. The longest journey must come to an end at last, however, and one hot afternoon late on in June the three boats skirted the last headland of James Bay, and caught sight of the flag flying from the staff above the fish shed.

“Father, look, there is my flag!” cried Mary, in great excitement. “Don’t you remember I made an especial flag for the fleet, and sent it up by Mr. Ferrars? Why, how nice it looks, and somehow I feel just as if I were coming home.”

“That is how I feel,” responded Mr. Selincourt. “It is pretty country too, but it makes me feel downright bad to think of all these square miles of territory going to waste, so to speak, with no one but a few Indians for population, and then to remember the land hunger in England and——”

But Mary had put her hands over her ears, and cried: “Oh, if you love me, spare me hearing any more about that land hunger just now! I am very sorry for all the poor people who want to own three acres and a cow, but can’t afford the luxury; only just for a little while I want to forget them, and to enjoy all this beauty without any drawbacks if I can.”

“I am afraid you will find the drawbacks, though, in spite of your eagerness to

escape them,” said Mr. Selincourt, who had been quietly examining Seal Cove through a glass. Then he handed the glass to Mary, and said in a tone too low for the boatmen to hear: “If I mistake not, the first drawback is there on the shore, mending a net.”

Mary took the glass and looked through it for a couple of minutes without speaking; then she gave it back, saying, with a shudder: “What a horrid-looking man!”

“Rather a low type by the look of him. But you must not judge all the population by your first glimpse of it. Because one man is a rogue does not prevent all the rest being honest,” Mr. Selincourt said, putting the glass to his eye to get another look at the place they were approaching.

“Will our hut be down here on the shore?” asked Mary, who was straining her eyes for a first glimpse of the house they were to live in.

“No; Graham, who was one of the directors of the old company, you know, told me I should be wise to have it built farther up the river, at Roaring Water Portage, as it is so much more sheltered there than down here on the coast.”

“Ah! that was real wisdom, for if we make up our minds to stay the winter, a sheltered position may make a great difference in our comfort,” she said quickly, then stretched out her hand for the glass to have another look.

“You still think you want to spend next winter so far north?” said her father, in a questioning tone.

“Why not?” she replied, with a weary note coming into her voice. “One place is as good as another, only this would be better than some, if only there is work of some sort to do.”

“We shall see how we like it,” he answered, then was silent, gazing at the scene before him, which was looking its fairest on this June afternoon.

The man mending nets on the shore, who was no other than Oily Dave, had by this time become aware of the approaching boats, and was rushing to and fro in a great state of bustle and excitement. They could hear him calling to someone out of sight, and the sound of his raucous voice only served to deepen the unpleasant impression given by his appearance.

“Father, don’t say much to that man, I don’t like him,” Mary said in a low tone; and Mr. Selincourt nodded in reply, as the boats drew in to the landing by the fish shed, and Oily Dave came hurrying forward to greet them.

“Where is Mr. Ferrars?” asked Mr. Selincourt, and for all that he was a genial, kindly man, thinking evil of none, he could not keep a hard note out of his voice as he gazed at the mean, shifty face of Oily Dave.

“He’s away somewhere, over to Fort Garry, or perhaps he’s crossed to Akimiski Island. The fleet have been mostly round that way this week past. Shall I show you round a bit, sir? I’m the acting manager, formerly sole manager.” Oily Dave contrived to throw a withering emphasis on the latter adjective, and rolled

up his eyes in a manner meant to imply injured innocence, which, however, only expressed low-down meanness and cunning.

“Ah, yes, I remember Mr. Graham spoke of you!” replied the new owner, in a strictly non-committal tone. “But why did you say you are acting manager? I only appointed Mr. Ferrars.”

Oily Dave contracted his features into an unpleasant grin. “It takes them as knows these waters to understand the fishing of them, sir, and your grand drawing-room, bandbox manager would have been pretty hard put to it many a time to know what to do for the best, if it hadn’t been for Oily Dave, which is me.”

“I see,” remarked Mr. Selincourt in a calm and casual tone, then continued with quiet authority: “Please tell Mr. Ferrars when he comes back that I have arrived, and ask him if he will come up to Roaring Water Portage as soon as it is convenient for him to do so.”

“Wouldn’t you like me to come and guide you up the river?” demanded Oily Dave, his jaw dropping in a crestfallen manner, for he had thought what a fine chance he would have of getting ahead of Jervis Ferrars.

“No, thank you, we have travelled too many strange waters these last few days to need guidance up the last two miles of our journey. It is two miles, is it not?”

“Nearer three, sir, but we mostly call it two, because it sounds better,” said Oily Dave. Then he took his greasy old hat off with a flourish to Mary, and the boats started on again up the main channel of the river.

There was plenty to interest the travellers now on the left bank of the river; the fish shed showed a weather-beaten front to the broad waters of the bay, while beyond it, perched on a high bluff, was a funny brown house, with a strange-looking wing built out at the side.

“Father, look at that house, and the queer building at the side; what is it?” cried Mary, who was flushed and eager; for to her this entrance to Roaring Water River was like coming into her kingdom, although it was not land her father owned in these parts, but water, or at least the privilege to fish in the water, and the right to cut the timber needed for the making of his boats.

“It looks uncommonly like part of an old boat. Well, if it is Astor M’Kree’s work, it would seem as if I have got a man who will make the best use of the materials at hand,” Mr. Selincourt replied, in a tone of satisfaction.

“Here comes a woman; oh, please, we must stop and speak to her!” said Mary, as a slatternly figure emerged from the house on the bluff, and came running down the steep path to the water’s edge, gesticulating and shouting.

“Welcome, sir, and welcome, Miss, to Seal Cove!” cried Mrs. Jenkin in a breathless tone. “We are all most dreadfully delighted to have you here, and you will be sure to come and have tea with me on your first spare afternoon,” she panted, in hospitable haste, the sun shining down on her dusty, unkempt hair, and

revealing the rags in her dress.

Mr. Selincourt looked at his daughter in quiet amusement; but Mary rose to the occasion in a manner worthy of the country in which she was living, and answered with sweet graciousness:

“Oh! I will be sure to come; thank you so much for asking me: but I have got to get my house straight, you know, and that may take me a few days, so perhaps I will drop down the river some morning while it is cool, and let you know how I am getting on. Then you must promise to come and see me.”

“Oh, I’ll come! I shall be just delighted! You won’t mind if I bring the babies, will you? There are only three of them, and the oldest isn’t five yet; so when I go out I’m forced to take them with me, don’t you see,” Mrs. Jenkin said, smiling at the young lady from England, and serenely oblivious of the defects in her own toilet.

“I shall be charmed to entertain the babies, and I will be sure to come and see you very soon,” called Mary, as the boat moved on, leaving Mrs. Jenkin smiling and waving from the bank.

“What a nice little woman, and how friendly and kind in her manner!” exclaimed Mary, whereat Mr. Selincourt laughed.

“Has Canada bewitched you already? What is to become of class distinctions if you are just going to hobnob with anyone who may happen along?” he asked, his eyes twinkling with fun, for he was quoting from her own past utterances.

Mary reddened, but she laughed too, then said apologetically: “It sounds the most fearful snobbery to even mention class distinctions in these wilds, where the only aristocracy that counts is nobility of endeavour. But I could not reckon myself that woman’s superior, Father, because under the same circumstances I might have been even more untidy and down-at-heel than she is.”

“It is hard to realize that you could be untidy under any conditions, but perhaps you might be if you had all the work of a house and the care of three babies on your hands,” Mr. Selincourt replied with a shake of his head. Then he applied himself to a careful study of the river banks, which were mostly solitary, although at intervals rough loghouses showed among the trees.

“Listen to that noise; we are getting near to some rapids,” Mary said, putting up her hand.

“Near to the end of our journey as well, for we stop below the portage,” Mr. Selincourt said, and then the boat swept round the bend, and they saw before them a long, straight stretch of river, with houses visible at the far end where the milky hue of the water showed the river boiling over the rocks.

“So that is Roaring Water Portage! Well, the place is as pretty as the name is musical. I am very glad,” Mary said with a deep sigh of content, and then she sat in silence while the boats swept up the last stretch of river, and the long, long journey was done.

The boatmen drew to the left bank, leaving the store and its outbuildings on the right. Oily Dave had told them that their house stood to the left of the falls, and although they did not see it at the first moment of landing, the well-trodden path up from the water's edge showed that it must be near at hand.

"There it is. But it does not look a bit new. Oh, I am glad!" exclaimed Mary, as a long, low hut came in sight, with glass windows and an unpainted front door, which just now stood wide open, while two small girls occupied the doorstep, and were making dolls' bonnets from leaves and plaited grass.

"I'm afraid that is not our house; someone is living there," said Mr. Selincourt: and the two small girls, becoming at this moment aware of the approach of strangers, sprang to their feet and fled into the house, casting the millinery away as they went.

"I'm afraid so too; but at least we can go and enquire where our house is to be found," Mary answered.

Then they walked up to the door and knocked, and immediately a slight, girlish figure came into view, with a small girl clinging to either hand.

"Can you tell us where Mr. Selincourt's house is to be found?" asked Mary, wondering why the girl had such sad eyes, and what relation she could be to the two little ones.

"This is Mr. Selincourt's house. I came over this afternoon to see that everything was in right order, that is all," the sad-eyed girl—or was she a woman?—explained, drawing back for Mary to enter.

Miss Selincourt entered, put her bag on the table, and gazed round with a deep sigh of satisfaction.

"What a charming room! I think I should have been ready to weep if this had not been our house. Are you Mrs. M'Kree?" she asked doubtfully, for, although the girl looked so young, she had just heard one of the children whisper, "Mummy."

"No, I am Mrs. Burton, and I come from the store across the river. Mrs. M'Kree lives farther up the river, above the second portage, so it is not easy for her to come down every day, and I have kept the house open for her."

"It is very kind of you!" exclaimed Mary gratefully, realizing that here was a very different specimen of womanhood, from the good-natured slattern who had greeted her at Seal Cove.

"We have to be kind to each other in these wilds, or we should be badly off sometimes," Mrs. Burton rejoined. Then she said timidly: "We are very glad to welcome you, and we all feel that you have conferred a great favour on us by coming to stay here this summer."

Something like an awkward lump got into Mary's throat then. She had come the long, toilsome journey solely for her own pleasure, and to be near her father, yet here was one thanking her for the privilege her coming conferred on these lone

dwellers in the solitudes. She was rarely a creature of impulse, and always prided herself on the way she kept her head; but the sweet friendliness of the sad-eyed little woman touched her mightily, and stooping forward she kissed Mrs. Burton warmly, then promptly apologized, being properly ashamed of her forwardness.

“Oh, please forgive me! I really could not help it, and you—you looked so kind!” she said ruefully.

Mrs. Burton laughed, although she looked rather embarrassed, then she said gently: “I am afraid you must be very tired. If you will sit down I will quickly get you some tea.”

“Please don’t trouble. Father and I are quite used to doing things for ourselves, and I can make a kettle boil over my spirit lamp while the men are bringing the luggage up from the boats,” Mary said hastily, feeling that she simply could not have this gentle, refined woman waiting upon her,

But for all her gentleness Mrs. Burton could be firm when she chose, and she replied quietly: “I should not think of going away until I had seen you with a meal ready prepared. The fire is all ready for lighting in the stove, and that will save your spirit lamp, and you are in the wilderness now, remember, where spirit is difficult to obtain.”

The two little girls trotted after their mother. Mary tried to make friends with them, but they were not used to strangers, so showed her only averted faces and pouting red lips, which made her understand that their friendship must be left to time.

When the luggage had been brought up from the boat, Mrs. Burton had the kettle boiling, and then she sent one of the men across with a boat to the store, giving him a message for Miles, which resulted in a basket of fresh fish coming over at once. These, delicately broiled over a fire of spruce chips, and served piping hot, made, as Mr. Selincourt observed, a supper fit for a king.

Mrs. Burton stayed with her small daughters to share the meal, and if she thought ruefully of the family over the river, who would have to cook their own supper, and also go without the fish which had been intended for them, she said nothing about it. One must always suffer something in the give-and-take of life, and there were plenty of canned goods at the store which might serve at a pinch.

“Now I must go,” she said, when the supper dishes had been washed. “It is time that Beth and Lotta went to bed, while my father will be wearying for me if I am too long away.”

“Your father?” broke from Mary in surprise, then she stopped abruptly, realizing that her acquaintance with Mrs. Burton was too short for over-much curiosity.

“I am a widow,” the little woman answered, with the simple dignity which became her so well. “I live with my father, or did; but now, strictly speaking, it is he, poor man, who lives with us, and Katherine earns the living for us all.”

“Katherine is your sister?” asked Mary, and now there was tender sympathy in her tone, and she was understanding why Mrs. Burton’s eyes were so sad.

“Katherine is my younger sister, and she is just wonderful,” the little woman said, with love and admiration thrilling her tones. “She has done a man’s work all the winter, and she is keeping the business together as well as poor Father could have done.”

CHAPTER XIV

Would They Be Friends?

When Mrs. Burton had gone, Mary set to work to inspect the little loghouse, and make things comfortable for the night. But there was not very much that needed doing, and their weeks of river travel had shorn away so many habits which are the outcome of too much civilization, that they had come down to a primitive simplicity of living. The hut contained two small bedrooms, scarcely bigger than cabins on board ship, one sitting-room, and a lean-to kitchen in the rear. There was not an atom of paint about the place; it was all bare, brown wood, restful to the eyes, and in perfect harmony with the surrounding wilderness.

The boatmen had pitched their tent at the down-river side of the house, and were sitting round a fire on the ground smoking their pipes in great comfort and content. Mary had finished her survey of the inside of her new home, and now wandered outside the house to see what manner of country lay in the immediate neighbourhood of Roaring Water Portage. Her father was sitting on a bench by the hut door, drowsily comfortable with a cigar, and busy with numberless plans for the future. He was not in a mood for talking just then, and Mary was glad to be alone for a while.

It was broad daylight still, although the evening was getting on; but the trees grew so thickly all about the hut that she could see little beyond trunks and foliage, so, finding a little path which led upward, she commenced to climb. Great boulders strewed the ground here between the trees, and although by the sound she knew herself to be near the river, she could not see it until after a stiff climb of twenty minutes or so she emerged on an open space above the falls. Here indeed was beauty enough to satisfy even her desire for it. The undulating ground all about and below her was mostly forest-clad, the larches showed in their vivid green against the sombre hue of the pines, while giant cedars stood out black against the evening sky. On one side, right away in the distance, the waters of the bay reached to the horizon, but for to-night Mary turned her back on the sea; it was the land that charmed her most.

Presently, just where the glory of the sunset reflected itself in the river, she saw a boat coming skimming down the current. It was just the touch of life that was necessary to lift the weird solemnity from those silent forest reaches. From where she stood, leaning against the trunk of a tree on the hilltop, Mary could see without being seen; for she still wore the travelling dress which so nearly matched the tree stem in colour, and a brown veil was over her face, a necessary precaution against the mosquitoes which swarmed everywhere.

There was a girl in the boat, with soft, wavy hair, pretty and feminine in appearance, but with strength and decision in every movement, which made Mary whisper to herself: "That must be Katherine; and how graceful she is! I had quite expected her to be a great, clumping creature, because Mrs. Burton said she did a man's work."

There was a boy in the boat as well, but it was the girl who claimed Mary's attention now. The boat drew in at a point above the falls where a little shed served as boathouse, and then the boy and the girl rapidly unloaded various packages and bundles, which were dumped in a heap on the bank, while the boat was drawn in and secured under the shed.

"Phil, we shall have to make two journeys—we can never do it in one," the girl said, and her voice had a tired ring which made the unseen listener on the hilltop pity her exceedingly.

"Just you sit down for five minutes while I whistle for the dogs," said the boy. "They will hear if Miles doesn't, and there will be such a clamour that everyone will know we are close home."

As he spoke he hooked two fingers between his lips, and the resultant whistles were so piercing and shrill that Mary would have been glad to thrust her fingers in her ears, only now she would not move through fear of drawing attention to herself.

The whistles had scarcely ceased to vibrate through the quiet air when in the distance there arose a mighty clamour of barking. Mary caught her breath and waited now to see what was coming, and in less than five minutes two huge dogs came bounding down the portage path to the shed where the girl and boy were waiting.

"I must make friends with those dogs before I am many hours older, or I shall be afraid to stir away from the house," Mary said to herself, with a little shiver, as she watched the big brutes careering round.

But they were wanted for work, not play, so their gambols came to a speedy end. The boy loaded each one with packages, and, picking up a couple of bundles himself, started up the portage path, closely followed by the dogs, which perfectly understood the work that was required of them.

Then the girl rose to her feet, and stood for a moment gazing at the golden glories of the setting sun. She stretched her arms out with a quick, eager movement, as if asking for something she yearned to possess, then dropped them to her side again, and turning, proceeded to load the remainder of the packages and bundles on to her own shoulders.

If only the river had not flowed between, Mary might have gone to her assistance. As it was, she stood watching the bowed figure go slowly up the portage path to disappear among the bushes, then she also turned to retrace her steps to the hut. But the tired girl was very much in Mary's thoughts that evening.

Why had she stretched out her arms to the glowing west with such a gesture of entreaty? Of course it might have been just girlish dissatisfaction with a toilsome, colourless life, or it might be that there were ambitions and desires which had to be sternly repressed.

“I wonder if we shall be friends?” she said presently, speaking aloud because she had entirely forgotten that she was not alone.

“Friends with whom?” asked her father sleepily. He was still sitting on the bench by the hut door, and Mary was leaning against the doorpost. She had been standing so ever since she came down the hill, and her thoughts were still busy with the girl who had looked so tired and carried such heavy burdens.

“I have seen a girl this evening, such a pretty girl, and so graceful in her movements, but she was doing a portage as if she were a man, and I felt that I should like to know her,” Mary answered, her voice and manner more dreamy than usual. Indeed, it seemed as if the place had laid a spell upon her already.

“Probably you will have what you want, and then you will find yourself disappointed. You must not expect to find much refinement and culture in a wild place like this,” Mr. Selincourt said.

“I do not look for it. But however rough or illiterate this girl may be, I think she has a soul, a longing for something she does not possess,” went on Mary, who was weaving fancies and theories together in quite a remarkable fashion for her.

“Most women long for what they don’t possess, and some men do the same,” replied Mr. Selincourt, laughing a little. Then he rose and stretched himself, saying: “I believe I will go to bed, for I am so tired that I can hardly keep my eyes open. It is so late that Jervis Ferrars will hardly come to-night now, although I should have been glad to see him, for I am really anxious to know how the fishing is going.”

“Well, you won’t have to wait long, for here he comes, I fancy—although it seems funny that I should remember his step after so many months,” said Mary, as a firm tread sounded on the path coming up through the bushes from the water’s edge.

“Is that you, Ferrars?” asked Mr. Selincourt eagerly, his sleepiness vanishing as if by magic.

“Yes, sir,” responded a voice, and the next moment Jervis Ferrars appeared in sight.

“I’m sorry that I was not on hand to welcome you when you arrived,” he said.

“No matter, no matter at all!” exclaimed Mr. Selincourt, shaking hands with him; but Mary only vouchsafed a nod in response to the young man’s courteous salutation.

“My welcome is only a little belated, but it could not be more sincere. You have come just at the right time, I think,” Jervis went on; and at the suggestion of Mr. Selincourt the two sat down on the bench side by side, while Mary remained

leaning against the doorpost as before.

“How is the fishing?” asked Mr. Selincourt.

“It is going very well indeed, and you will get a very good return for your money this year, and a much better one next season. I have been away on Akimiski all day, and I have been simply amazed at the amount of fish which could be caught, cured, and marketed if only we had the necessary plant.”

“What sort of fish? Everyone is saying that Hudson Bay is played out for seal and walrus, while whales are getting scarcer every year,” said Mr. Selincourt, who had bought out the old company cheaply because of this growing scarcity.

“That may be,” replied Jervis, “although, being a stranger to these waters, I’m not in a position to give a reliable opinion. But of lesser fish, such as cod, halibut, lobster, salmon, and that sort of thing, there is enough going to waste to feed a nation.”

“I tell you what we will do!” exclaimed Mr. Selincourt. “We will order the necessary plant, and we will start a curing factory. Of course we are out of the world for nine months in every year, but that won’t make much difference in the end; and we got our fishing rights cheaply enough to enable us to make a very good thing indeed out of our venture before we have done.”

“Don’t you think it is rather grasping of you to want to make more money, Daddy, when you have got so much already?” broke in Mary, in a playful tone, yet with some underlying seriousness of purpose.

“Not a bit of it, my dear. Because I have got some money should be no barrier to my getting more, if I get it honestly,” her father answered with soothing toleration; for Mary had ideas, and was apt to air them in rather unmeasured language when she was roused.

“It seems so ignoble to spend all one’s time and energy in making money when there are so many wrongs which need righting, and so many people who need helping,” she said, with a note of pathos in her tone.

“The most effectual way of helping people is to assist them in helping themselves,” broke in Jervis. “If Mr. Selincourt develops this fishing as it is capable of being developed, he will do more real good than if he spent hundreds of pounds in charity.”

“If you were really a Canadian you would have said dollars, not pounds,” she interrupted, with mock gravity, just as if she were making fun of him to his face.

“I am an Englishman,” he said quietly, too much in earnest just then to resent her levity, “so it is most natural to me to speak of pounds. But that makes no difference to the question at issue. When your father gets his factory going he will employ twenty men where he now employs one. They in turn will be able to support wives and families, which will mean employment for storekeepers, school teachers——”

“Oh, spare me any more, I beg!” she implored penitently, “and I promise

never, never to object to money-making schemes again. I know you were going to add that the twenty men's wives would want twenty new hats, and so there would be an opening for a first-class millinery establishment at Roaring Water Portage."

"I had not thought of that, but of course it is quite true," he said, adding with a laugh: "and there would be an opening for a dressmaker also, don't you see?"

"I don't want to see. I don't want to hear anything more about it at all. It is all too much in the future, too practical and commonplace altogether to fit such a twilight as this," she said, with a touch of petulance. "I want to know about the people here. What sort of a man is Oily Dave? He looks a veritable old rascal."

"And for once appearances are not deceptive," replied Jervis. "Since I have been here he has tried to quietly do for me about once a week upon an average. He so nearly succeeded the first time that it has encouraged him to persevere."

"How truly horrid!" she cried with a shiver. "But there are nicer people to compensate for him, I hope. Who is that delightfully hospitable woman who lives in the house on the bluff, with a boatlike projection at one end?"

"That is Mrs. Jenkin, my landlady, and the boat-like projection is my abode. It is very comfortable, too," he answered.

"Then who is the very pretty girl who moves with as much grace as if she had been brought up in drawing-rooms all her life, yet has to carry heavy burdens over a portage like a man?" asked Mary eagerly, her other questions having been intended only to lead up to this.

Jervis Ferrars stood up with a quick movement, and a feeling that the questioning had become suddenly intolerable; but his voice was quiet and steady as he answered: "That would be Miss Radford, whose father has the store over the river. But he has been ill for a long time, poor man, and with little hope of recovery, so his daughter has a very hard life. I am going over to see him now, if you will excuse me. There is no doctor here, of course, so I have done what I could for him."

"It was another daughter, a dear, delightful little person named Mrs. Burton, who was here when we came," said Mary. "I am glad to find there are such nice people here, and I hope we shall be friends."

Jervis flung up his head with a haughty movement, almost as if he resented the kindly overture, but he replied civilly enough; only the thought in his mind as he went down to the river was that poor Katherine, with her hard, drudging life for the good of others, was so much more noble than this girl, who lived only to please herself, that it would be a condescension on Katherine's part to be friendly with her. When he reached the store it was to find no one about but Mrs. Burton and the invalid.

"Ah, I am late to-night!" he said apologetically, and with a feeling of sharp disappointment. "But Mr. Selincourt has come, and I had to go over to report progress to him."

“What very nice people they are!” exclaimed Mrs. Burton with enthusiasm. “I was charmed with Miss Selincourt. She will be a great acquisition here this summer.”

“Yes,” Jervis remarked in an abstracted fashion, but not paying much heed to what was being said, for he was in perplexity as to why Katherine was not visible; and seeing no prospect of finding out without a direct question, he made the plunge and asked: “Where is your sister? Isn’t she well?”

“Katherine has gone to bed, because she is so tired to-night. She and Phil have done the backache portage, as they call it, and it always wears her so much, poor girl,” Mrs. Burton answered with a sigh. Then she said, with an involuntary lowering of her voice as she glanced at her father: “Katherine does not like the idea of our telling Father that Mr. Selincourt has come. She says it may excite him, and be very harmful. What do you think about it?”

Jervis glanced at the invalid, who sat in a chair by the open door, gazing out at the evening sky, where the twilight still lingered. Duke Radford was sitting with his head stooped a little forward, and smiling placidly as if his thoughts pleased him.

“I don’t think it would hurt him; he takes so little notice,” the young man answered slowly. Then he added: “But Miss Radford would know better about that than I do, and if she is afraid of the effect upon him, it would be well to be careful.”

“I don’t think Katherine knows more about Father than I do, because you see she is not much with him, and I don’t think he understands the difference between one person and another,” said Mrs. Burton. “He seems to find as much pleasure in talking to Oily Dave as to Astor M’Kree, and that is certainly different from what he used to be. But it will be very hard if we have to shut nice people like the Selincourts out of the house just because it may upset Father, who probably won’t even realize that they are strangers at all.”

“Well, we can but try him. Let us see if the name brings any worry to him,” said Jervis, and going across to the door he began to talk to the invalid. “Mr. Selincourt and his daughter have come to spend the summer here; they live in the hut across the river that Astor M’Kree has done up so nicely. Would you like them to come and see you?”

Duke Radford looked at him curiously, as if not understanding what he was talking about; then he said slowly: “Oh yes, I like to see people, nice people; where do they come from?”

“England,” replied the young man.

The invalid shivered, then said more haltingly than before: “I don’t like to think of England, it makes me sad; but Selincourt is a pretty name—a very pretty name indeed!”

CHAPTER XV

Mr. Selincourt is Indiscreet

When Katherine reached home that night after doing the "backache portage" it seemed to be the last straw to her burden of endurance to be told that Mr. Selincourt had arrived. The loss of the supper fish did not trouble her, for she and Phil had brought home a fine salmon, which they had taken from an Indian woman in exchange for a couple of small packets of hairpins, which in England might have fetched perhaps a halfpenny each, but in that remote district were priced at a quarter of a dollar. It was the news of the arrival which upset her so badly. She suffered tortures while she listened to Mrs. Burton's eager talk about the Selincourts, of Mr. Selincourt's kindly manner, and Miss Selincourt's graceful charm.

"Hush, hush!" she kept saying. "You will excite and worry Father with all this talk of new people."

"I don't think so," Mrs. Burton replied. "See how peaceful he is, and how little notice he takes of anything outside. He will not remark any difference between Mr. Selincourt and Stee Jenkin, except that he may find the former more interesting to talk to."

But Katherine shook her head, stealing many a glance at her father while she ate her supper, and worrying lest the name of the man he had wronged should stir some dim memory in his clouded mind, and bring up some ghost from the hidden past, to turn his peaceful days into a nightmare of unrest once more. The salmon might have been sawdust for all the taste it had for her that night, and when supper was done she hurried through the work which could not be left, then, pleading weariness, went off to bed quite an hour before her usual time.

Although she went to bed she could not sleep. She heard Jervis come in and stay talking to Mrs. Burton. She also heard him say that he was going to take Mr. and Miss Selincourt across to Akimiski on the following day. Then Jervis left, her father went with slow, faltering steps to his bed, and Nellie came in, but, thinking her sister asleep, moved softly and did not speak, for which Katherine was mutely grateful.

It was very early on the following morning when she saw the boat with Mr. Selincourt and Mary slipping down the river, rowed by some of the men who had brought them up from the lakes. So it would be a day of respite, for the Selincourts would not be back until evening, too late to go visiting among their neighbours, and Katherine's spirits rose immediately, because there was one more day to be happy in.

She had to go to Fort Garry that day, and started an hour before noon, taking Phil with her as usual, and having her boat piled high with skins taken in barter, bags of feathers, and other marketable products. There was a short outlet to the bay from the river, a weedy channel leading through flat meadows of vivid green; only, to use an Irishism, they were not meadows at all, but stretches of swamp, in Canadian parlance a muskeg; and the unwary creature, human or animal, that set foot thereon was speedily engulfed. Very beautiful these stretches of rich green looked on a bright summer's day, and Katherine exclaimed in delight as she forced the boat through the weedy channel, which became every week more difficult to pass.

"Oh, Phil, isn't it lovely!" she cried.

"Can't say I admire it," the boy answered grumpily. "The air down here always seems to choke me, and it is twice as much trouble to drive the boat through this narrow, weedy channel as it is to go the longer way round."

"I know we shall have to cease coming this way soon, but it is pretty, and I like it," Katherine answered, and would not admit even to herself that her chief reason in choosing those weedy byways, was the desire to avoid all danger of an encounter with the Selincourts.

The voyage to Fort Garry was without incident, and the interview with the M'Crawneys was of the usual type. Mrs. M'Crawney was low-spirited and homesick, yearning for Ireland, for the smell of the peat reek and the society of her neighbours.

"I shall die if I stay here much longer. It is stagnation, not life at all; indeed, I'd sooner be dead," moaned the poor discontented woman.

"But you have books," said Katherine, pointing to a well-filled shelf in one corner of the room. "And if you are so lonely, why not take some girl from an orphanage for a companion? It would be good for the child and good for you too."

"Books are not satisfying, and I think it a great waste of time to be always reading," Mrs. M'Crawney replied with a touch of asperity. Her husband's love of books and willingness to spend money upon them was always a sore point with her, only Katherine did not know that. "And I wouldn't have a strange girl about the house, not whatever. I never could abide having to do with other people's children."

"Then I am afraid you will have to go lonely," Katherine answered, feeling that it was quite beyond her powers to make any more useful suggestion to the poor unhappy woman, whose ailment consisted more in a discontented mind than a diseased body.

The M'Crawneys were such an ill-matched pair that it always gave her a feeling of irritation to go there, while Peter M'Crawney himself was too much addicted to fulsome compliments to make her willing to face him oftener than need be. There was a cool breeze creeping over the water as they turned back

towards home, and this tempered the heat, making rowing a pure pleasure.

“Let us go the longer way,” pleaded Phil, who did not care for the solemn stretches of green swamp on either side of the backwater.

But Katherine had been resting on her oars and looking round, catching sight as she did so of a fishing boat, with its brown sails set, making for the river mouth. With a fluttering of her pulses she told herself that this was most likely the fleet boat which had taken the new owner out to Akimiski, and was now bringing him back. If this were the case, her little row boat and the fisher would enter the river channel by the fish sheds side by side. She would be hot and untidy with the vigorous exercise of rowing, while Miss Selincourt, cool and calm, would gaze at her with lofty disdain, regarding her merely as a rough working girl. This was not to be endured for a moment, and, setting her hands with a tighter grip on the oars, Katherine said decidedly: “We will go through the swamps to-day. I want to get home as quickly as I can, for there are so many things to see to, and a lot of booking to do.”

Phil resigned himself to the inevitable with a rather dour face, and there was silence between them for quite ten minutes, as Katherine, forced by the narrowness of the way, ceased rowing, and, shipping her oars, picked up a paddle which formed part of the boat’s equipment, and commenced to paddle her way through the short cut.

“What’s that?” asked Phil sharply, jerking up his head to listen again for a sound which would not have caught his ear at all if he had not been so silent just then.

“I heard nothing,” said Katherine, pausing in her work, but holding the boat steady by planting her paddle in a group of rushes and holding it fast. “What kind of sound was it, Phil?”

“Something like a fox makes when it is caught in a trap,” replied Phil. Then he cried eagerly: “There it is, and I believe it is a man! Ahoy there! where are you, and what is wrong?”

“Help, help!” cried a voice from somewhere, only the trouble was to know where to locate it.

“Yes, we will help you, only we can’t think where you are; can’t you let us know?” called Katherine, sending her voice in a reassuring shout over the reaches of treacherous green.

“I am here, holding on to some rushes,” the voice said, and Katherine fairly gasped with amazement to find the submerged one so close at hand; for the patch of rushes to which she was holding the boat was the only one anywhere near, and a little ridge of solid ground connected it with the river bank, which was perhaps forty yards away.

“Be careful to keep calling out now,” she said, preparing to force the boat out of its channel and into the liquid mud of the fatal green meadow.

“Here, here, here!” said the voice, sounding now so thick and hoarse that Katherine at once decided it must be one of the fishermen who had risked his life on the treacherous green of the swamp, although she wondered that anyone could have lived at Seal Cove for a week and not known of the danger that lay in the swamps.

“Phil, where can he be?” she cried, her voice sharp now with the terror of having a man in peril of his life at her side, and yet being unable to help him.

“There he is; I saw the rushes move,” yelled Phil. “No, not that clump—you are looking wrong; it is the one that has got a lupin blooming in it. Ah, I saw it move again! Keep your spirits up, old fellow, and we will have you out in no time!”

“But how?” groaned Katherine under her breath, for no effort of hers would move the boat a foot farther through that awful slime, and if she got wedged she would be forced to stay there until someone came in search. Then, remembering the horrible danger of the man, she called out: “Please don’t struggle at all, only just keep still, and I think we can save you, for we have got rope with us.”

“So we have! My word, how fortunate!” exclaimed Phil, tugging a big bundle of stout hempen cord from under the other things of their miscellaneous lading.

“Get the other bundle too; I must have both,” said Katherine, and, taking the first, she made a slip knot and a loop which would tighten to a certain extent.

“What are you going to do? You can’t throw it over him from here,” said the boy.

“Phil, can you be very brave, darling, and walk across on the oars?” Katherine asked, a sob catching in her throat. “I will slip this other rope round you; then, if you slip in, I can drag you out.”

“I’ll go,” said Phil, alert and ready. Then he kicked off his boots, which were stout—and every ounce mattered when one took to walking on muskegs; but as his clothing consisted of only a flannel shirt and serge knickerbockers there were no clothes for him to shed.

Katherine slipped one loop of rope over his shoulders, put the other looped rope into his hand, then laid an oar on the mud. “Now, go; the rushes will hold you when you get there,” she said sharply.

With light, cautious movements Phil stepped out on to the oar, balancing himself like a tightrope dancer, and because he was so small and light he passed in safety where a heavier person would have been quickly submerged.

Katherine stood up in the boat paying out both coils of rope. Her face was ghastly white, and her heart was beating to suffocation. She had not felt like this that day when she ventured her life on the ice to save Jervis Ferrars in the flood. But that had been her own danger, this was her brother’s, and therein lay the difference.

“Landed!” cried Phil, in a quavering tone of triumph, as he planted his bare

feet firmly in the rushes, which, happily, were so matted together that they would not let him through. Then he stooped, and Katherine heard him talking to the poor wretch caught in the mud beyond. "Now, let me slip this over your arm. That's right; we've got you safe enough, and they are English ropes, strong enough to pull a carthorse out of a bear pit. You mustn't struggle, though, however much you feel like it."

"Phil, can you reach the oar?" Katherine cried, her voice hoarse, for she could hardly endure the strain of the waiting.

"Yes," said the boy, stooping now and touching the perilous bridge which had carried him to the comparative safety of the clump of rushes.

"Then lay it across the clump, and well under the man's hands; keep it as firm as you can for him, while I haul on the rope. Now then——!"

With all her strength Katherine hauled at the rope. She was sitting now with her feet braced against the thwarts, and with every muscle tense she strained and strained until the perspiration streamed down her face, and the hot air of the swamp as it rose up seemed to choke her.

[Illustration: With all her strength Katherine hauled at the rope.]

"Hooray, he's coming!" yelled Phil, and Katherine, who had been almost fainting, gathered her courage for yet another effort.

Phil was helping now, but, best of all, the poor victim of the muskeg was doing his share also, and at the end of a quarter of an hour of pulling, tugging, and straining he was on his knees in the clump of rushes beside Phil, and Katherine was able to rest her bleeding hands and plan the next stage of that perilous journey. But a few moments of rest that poor mud-coated wretch must have before taking any more risks, so she said cheerfully: "Now, stay as you are for five or ten minutes, just to get your strength back a little, and I will shift my cargo to accommodate you, for you will need a reserved seat, I fancy. Phil, take your handkerchief and wipe the poor man's face. I'm afraid it is rather a dirty one. Your handkerchiefs are never fit to be seen, but it is better than nothing."

Phil took a grimy blue-and-yellow cotton rag from the pocket of his serge nether garments, and proceeded to wipe the rescued man's face with as much force and energy as if he had been polishing tin pans with a view to making them shine.

"Softly, softly! How would you like to have your own face rubbed in that fashion?" admonished Katherine; and then, finishing her preparations, she stood up in the boat in readiness to help the poor man through his last stage to safety. "Please throw me that oar," she said.

Phil took up the oar, and pitched it with great dexterity, so that it fell close to the boat.

Katherine picked it up, making a little grimace of disgust at its filthiness; then, wiping the worst of the mud off on the nearest clump of rushes, she proceeded to

lash both oars together with the other end of the rope that was tied to Phil.

“Are you ready?” she asked sharply, for the man still knelt gasping and panting, and seemed to have no power to help himself.

Aided by Phil he rose slowly to his feet, then said in a hoarse voice: “I don’t think I can walk that bridge.”

“You will have to do it, or stay where you are until we can row round to Seal Cove to bring assistance for you. Even then it may be hours before help can reach you, for the fishermen are all out to-day, and Mr. Ferrars is away also, as he has had to go to Akimiski to-day with Mr. Selincourt and his daughter.”

There was contempt in Katherine’s tone now, and she meant it to be so. If the man had a scrap of courage in him, she must fan it into active life, but if he were a poltroon, pure and simple, then she must do the best she could and leave the result.

To her delight, however, he lifted his head with an angry jerk. “I will come, of course, but I shall sink in and you will have to pull me out again,” he said.

“Oh, you won’t sink very far, and I have you well roped!” she said cheerfully. “But if you are able to spare him, let Phil dance across first, then he will be here to help me to pull if need be.”

“Go along, boy, I will follow,” said the man, and Katherine saw him breathing deep and hard as Phil bounded lightly across, reaching the boat without any mishap.

“Now is your turn; be quick!” she cried authoritatively, but her heart seemed to fairly stop beating as the poor man took his first step forward and reeled on the sinking oars. “Quick!” she screamed, giving a sharp tug at the cord, which seemed to rouse him, for then he came on sharply enough.

Katherine, standing up in the boat, put out her hands to steady him when he came within reaching distance, and tried not to show how she shrank from his exceeding filthiness.

“There,” she said soothingly, as he sank in a limp heap in the seat she had cleared for him, “you are safe now, and you will soon get over the fright.”

“Thank you!” he murmured, but seemed incapable of further speech, and sat silent while they dragged up the bridge of oars, which had sunk out of sight.

“It was lucky you tied them together,” said Phil, when the oars were dragged up and the handles cleansed on the rushes.

“Yes, if I had not thought of doing that we might have whistled for our oars,” said Katherine, with a laugh that had a nervous ring. The man sitting in the boat was, so far as she could see, a stranger, although he was so liberally coated with mud that it was exceedingly difficult to make any guesses about his identity, so there was nothing to account for the trembling which seized upon her as she looked at him. It was a hard struggle getting the boat back into the channel, and her hands were so sore with hauling on the rope that it was positive torture to use

the paddle. The sun was pouring down with scorching brilliancy, and the flies gathered in black swarms about her face and head as she worked her way into the main channel again. Arriving there, she leaned forward and spoke to the man, who sat silent and apparently dazed in the stern of the boat.

“Are you staying at Seal Cove, and at whose house?” she asked gently, feeling exceedingly pitiful for the poor fellow, who must have lost his life if she had not chosen to bring her boat through the weedy back channel that afternoon.

“No, I have a house at Roaring Water Portage; my name is Selincourt,” he answered.

The paddle which Katherine was stowing in the boat dropped from her hands with a clatter, and there was positive terror in her eyes as she gasped: “You are Mr. Selincourt, *the* Mr. Selincourt?”

“I suppose so; I certainly don’t know any other,” he said, smiling a little, which had a grotesque effect, for the mud with which his face was so liberally smeared had dried stiff in the sunshine, and the smiling made it crack like a painted mask which has been doubled up.

“But I thought you had gone to Akimiski?” Katherine said, her astonishment still so great that she would hardly have believed even now that the stranger was telling the truth, had it not been for the trembling which was upon her now that she found herself face to face with the man whom her father had so seriously wronged away back in the past.

“I should have been much wiser if I had gone,” said Mr. Selincourt. “But at the last moment I decided to stay and survey the land on both sides of the river. I am sending back some of the boatmen with mails to-morrow, and it seemed essential that I should be able to write definitely to my agent in Montreal about land which I might wish to purchase. Then I got Stee Jenkin to put me across the river, and I wandered along the shore, then back along the river bank until I reached these beautiful green meadows, as I thought them. But when I started to walk across I began to sink, so slowly at first that I hardly realized what was wrong.”

“That is because the mud is firmer near the bank,” said Katherine. “Right out in the centre it will not bear a duck.”

“I should have been under long before, only when I saw what was coming I sat down, so sank more slowly. But it was horrible, horrible!” he exclaimed, with a violent shudder.

“Don’t think about it more than you can help, and we shall not be long in getting you home,” she said; then bent to her oars and tried to forget how sorely her blistered hands were hurting her.

CHAPTER XVI

“We Must be Friends!”

When her father decided not to go to Akimiski, Mary spent a long morning in roaming about Seal Cove, visiting the various little houses dotted near the fish shed, and making herself thoroughly acquainted with the neighbourhood. But when her father got into Stee Jenkin’s boat, and was rowed across the river to survey the land on the farther side, Mary had herself rowed up the river, with the intention of spending the afternoon in arranging the little brown house to suit her own fancy. The afternoon proved so warm that she decided on leaving the arranging to the next day, and sat down to write letters instead. Even this proved a task beyond her powers, for she was more exhausted than she realized by the long journey over river and trail, and the hot day was making the fatigue felt.

One letter, short and scrappy, got itself written, and then weariness had its way. Mary went into her little bedroom, and, lying down, went fast asleep. It was three hours later when she awoke, and, feeling fearfully ashamed of her laziness, she went out to the little kitchen to light a fire for getting a cup of tea ready for her father.

No matter how well-to-do in money and gear people may be, if they leave the beaten tracks of civilization and immerse themselves in the wilderness they will have to learn to help themselves or else suffer hardship. So Mary Selincourt, whose father’s yearly income was a good way advanced in a four-figured total, found herself compelled to the necessity of lighting her own fire, or going without the tea. There was plenty of kindling wood close to her hand, so the task presented no especial difficulty, but she laughed softly to herself as she watched the leaping flames, and thought how astonished some of her aristocratic friends would be if they could see her doing domestic work amid such humble surroundings.

When the kettle began to sing she went into the little sitting-room to set the table for tea, and was enjoying the work as if it were play and she a child again, when a sound of voices and footsteps brought her in haste to the open door. Two of the boatmen were coming up the path from the river leading a mud-coated figure whom at first Mary did not recognise. But a second glance showed her that it was really her father. With a cry of alarm she met him at the door, full of concern for his uncomfortable plight, yet not for a moment realizing how terrible his danger had been.

“Dear Father, where have you been?” she cried.

“Within a hand-grip of death,” he answered, with a quaver of breakdown in his voice, for it had shaken him fearfully, that long, slow torture of being sucked into

the green ooze of the muskeg.

“Don’t talk about it!” she said hastily. “I will put your clean things ready. There is happily a kettle on the boil; the men will help you to bath, and when you are in bed I will bring you tea.”

“Yes,” he answered languidly, while she flew to get things ready, and called one of the men to assist her in putting water into the big tin pan which was the only bath the house afforded.

She was going to put the pan in the bedroom, when the man who was helping stopped her with a suggestion. “You had better leave the pan here in front of the fire, Miss; the poor gentleman is so exhausted, you see, and the fire will be a comfort to him.”

“I had not thought of that, but I am quite sure you are right,” she said; then got the water to a comfortable temperature, and left the men to do their best.

They were prompt and speedy. In half an hour Mr. Selincourt was lying in bed, spent and faint it is true, but as clean as soap and water could make him. Mary hovered about him with a world of tenderness in face and manner, but she would not let him talk, would not even let him tell her how or where he had come so near to finding his death on that sunny June afternoon. It was not until he was asleep that she ventured to go back to the kitchen. The men had removed all traces of their work by cleaning the splashed floor, and were busy now in the open space behind the house washing the mud-caked clothes which they had stripped from Mr. Selincourt, for those men who go on portage work must have at least an elementary knowledge of washing, or be content to go without clean shirts most of their time.

Mary beckoned for one of them to come to her.

“What happened to my father?” she asked. “I would not let him tell me, he is too thoroughly upset.”

“We don’t know, Miss,” replied the man who had made the timely suggestion about the bath. “We were down on the bank, getting the boat ready that is to start for the south to-morrow, when a boat rowed by a girl came up the river. She was dripping with perspiration, and looked as if she had been rowing for a wager. Mr. Selincourt was sitting in the stern, and there was a small boy covered with mud too. The girl bade us take Mr. Selincourt and get him to bed, and said that she would send down river for Mr. Ferrars.”

“How truly good of her!” cried Mary, with a mist of tears coming into her eyes. “It must have been Miss Radford from the store over the river. I was going to ask one of you to go to Seal Cove for Mr. Ferrars, but if he has been already sent for he may soon be here. So will you please go over to the store instead, give my love to Miss Radford, and ask her to tell you what was wrong?”

The man dried his soapy hands by the simple process of rubbing them on his trousers, and started on his errand, while Mary entered the house again and peeped

in at the open door of her father's room, to make sure that he was still sleeping.

There was a good fire in the kitchen, and the kettle was boiling again. Mary had not had her cup of tea yet, although she had made one for her father. But she had forgotten all about that —forgotten, indeed, that she had taken no food, except two hard biscuits, since her early breakfast. It seemed such a long time before the man came back. His comrade was still busy out at the rear of the house, rubbing, pounding, and punching at the mud-stained clothes to get them clean, and as he worked he whistled softly over and over again two or three bars of "The Maple Leaf for Ever". For years afterwards Mary never heard the song without recalling that afternoon, with its keen anxiety, the glorious sunshine, and the steamy, soapy atmosphere of the little kitchen.

From front door to back door she paced, always treading softly through fear of disturbing the sleeper in the room beyond; then paced from back door to front door again, and paused to wait for the messenger whose coming was so delayed. Presently she heard the sound of oars, then a boat grounded, and a moment later the man came up the path, carefully carrying something in a basket which he presented to Mary.

"It is a bottle of ginger posset which Mrs. Burton has sent over for Mr. Selincourt. She says you must give him a teacupful as soon as he wakes, and you ought to make him swallow it even if he objects, as there is quinine in it, which may ward off swamp fever," the man said, with the air of one repeating a lesson.

"Mrs. Burton is very kind," said Mary, as she took basket and bottle. "But did you see Miss Radford, and why should there be danger of swamp fever for my father?"

"Miss Radford had got a party of Indians in the store that were taking all her time to manage," replied the man. "Indeed, I had to chip in and help her a bit myself, for while she showed one lot scarlet flannel and coloured calicoes, the other lot were trying to help themselves to beans, tobacco, and that sort of thing. But by the time I had punched the heads of three men, and slapped two squaws in the face, they seemed to sort of understand that good manners paid best, and acted according; then matters began to move quicker."

Mary clasped her hands in an agony of impatience. Would the man ever tell her, or would she be compelled to shake the information out of him?

"Did Miss Radford tell you what had happened?" she asked, with an emphatic stamp of her foot on the floor.

"Yes, Miss. Mr. Selincourt, not knowing, ventured out on a muskeg, and was being slowly sucked in, when she and her brother came along the back creek in their boat. It was a touch-and-go business then, for she had no planks or hurdles, though luckily she had ropes; but by sending her little brother, who weighs next to nothing at all, to slip a noose of rope under Mr. Selincourt's shoulders, she was able to haul on the rope, and so drag him out by sheer force of arm. She sent her

love to you, and hopes he will soon be better," the man said, with a little flourish of his hands. In point of fact Katherine had done nothing of the kind, but it sounded better so, he thought, and gave a consolatory touch to the whole.

Mary turned abruptly away. Her father's misadventure was so much worse than she had expected that the horror of it broke down her self-control completely; the solid ground seemed to crumble under her feet, and if she had not sunk into the nearest chair she must have fallen. Sitting crouched in a corner, with her hands pressed tightly against her face, striving for the mastery over those unruly emotions of hers, she failed to hear sounds of another arrival, and did not even look up when Jervis Ferrars entered, without any ceremony of knocking.

A moment he stood in silence before her, not liking to disturb her, nor even to be a witness of her breakdown, for he knew how proud she was, and the humiliation it would be to her to be watched under such conditions. Then, seeing the door of the bedroom half-open, he passed silently and softly into the room, closing the door behind him, and Mary was alone again. It might have been ten minutes later before he reappeared, and then the anxious look had left his face; he still looked concerned, but that was chiefly on Mary's account.

"Miss Selincourt, I am fearfully disappointed in you," he announced gravely, and Mary's head came up with a jerk.

"I—I did not know that you had come," she faltered.

"All the more reason why you should have been brave and courageous, until there was someone on whom to shift the responsibility," he said quietly.

Mary reddened, and her tears disappeared as if by magic. "Is it possible that you do not know the terrible danger my father has been in?" she asked frigidly.

"Yes, I know. But in a wild country like this one must always be expected to face a certain amount of risk; and it is never worth while to weep over the might-have-beens, or how could one be happy at all?" he said lightly.

"I know it was foolish, but the horror of it broke me down; and then I was wondering whatever I should do if Father were to be ill, so far away from doctors, nurses, and comforts of any sort," she replied, with a shiver.

"I don't think he will be ill. He is sleeping as peacefully as an infant, his pulse is steady, and his heart quiet. He may be a little languid when he wakes, in which case we will keep him in bed for a day or two. Remember, I am three parts a doctor, and you can be wholly a nurse."

"I have had no experience," she faltered.

"That is only gained by practice," he answered. Then, looking at the partly-set meal on the table, he asked: "What have you had to eat to-day?"

"Not much," she answered in a dreary tone. "There were cold fish and coffee for breakfast. I had two biscuits for luncheon, but that was all."

"You are within seeing distance of starving, I should say, and that is why your courage has turned to water," he said; and, going out to the kitchen, he roused the

fire again, refilled the kettle, which had boiled itself dry, and when it boiled again made her a good cup of tea, at the same time insisting on her making a solid meal.

“Oh, I feel pounds better now!” she exclaimed, when he came back from another visit to Mr. Selincourt, who still lay peacefully sleeping.

“Let it be a warning to you in future not to neglect yourself at critical moments,” he replied; then asked: “What would you like me to do for you? Shall I stay with Mr. Selincourt to-night? I do not think he needs watching in the least, but if this will be a comfort to you, I will remain with pleasure.”

“It is very kind of you, and I accept thankfully,” she said, with such bounding relief at her heart that the whole of her outlook changed at once. It was the responsibility she dreaded so much, and when that was lifted from her shoulders she could be happy again. “Can you remain now, or must you go back to Seal Cove first?” she asked.

“I will stay now if you like, only I must trouble you to let me send one of your boatmen down to Seal Cove, with a letter of instruction for any of the boats which may arrive in with a cargo before I can be there to have the shed opened,” he said.

“One of the men shall go, certainly. But while you are writing your letter may I take the boat and go over to the store to say ‘Thank you’ to Miss Radford and her brother for their goodness to my father? I would not have left him if you had not been here, but now I can go easily enough, and I do want them to know how really grateful I am.”

“Go, by all means. I will take care of Mr. Selincourt and write my letter at the same time,” Jervis answered, taking a fountain pen and a notebook from his pocket, and beginning to write forthwith.

Mary walked out of the house and down to the river just as she was, for the sun had gone down sufficiently to render a hat unnecessary. The two men were busy with their boat still, but one of them left his work and put Mary across the river in one of the other boats which lay drawn up on the bank.

The Indians, who had been crowding the store half an hour before, were encamped on the bank now, a little lower down, and were busy cooking fish for their supper. There were no other customers visible either inside the store or out. Now that the fishing was in full swing the fishermen had little time for lounging about the store; so, although the work of delivering goods was greater, there were compensating circumstances in not having the store always crowded up with men and lads, who had come more for the sake of talking than buying.

Mary walked up the steep bank and across the open space to the store door with a sense of the strangest unreality all about her. It was herself who walked and moved, yet all the time she seemed to stand aside and let another self think and feel and act. A composite odour of groceries, bacon, tobacco, and cheap clothes met her as she entered the rough, homely shed, which was a typical emporium of the backwoods; but she had no time to analyse the odours, being at once attracted

by Katherine, who stood at a tall desk by the window, entering items in a ledger. At the same time Katherine glanced up and saw the visitor entering the door. She flushed at the sight, and became suddenly nervous, acutely conscious, too, of her poor, shabby clothes, old-fashioned and ill cut, as contrasted with the picturesque house gown in which Mary was garbed, a soft grey woollen, which, though simple enough to have been worn upon any occasion, yet suggested London or Paris in every line.

“You are Miss Radford, I think,” said Mary in that quiet, cultured voice which somehow matched, or at least harmonized, with her gown, “and I have come to say ‘Thank you’ for your goodness to my dear father.”

“Oh, but really it was not I who saved him, but Phil! I should have been too heavy to walk three steps across that muskeg without sticking fast,” Katherine answered, with a low, nervous laugh.

But Mary was not to be put off in this fashion, and she went on, her voice fluttering a little because of the emotion she was keeping down with a resolute hand: “I know it was your brother who went out on the swamp and put the rope round my father, but I also know that it was really you who planned the rescue and pulled my father out. I cannot speak of it all as I would wish, and words are too faint and poor to express all I feel; but from my heart I am grateful, and all my life I shall be in your debt.”

A sob came up in Katherine’s throat, and her heart fluttered wildly, for she was thinking of that dark secret from the past which her father had told her about, and she was wondering if the work of to-day would in any sense help to wipe off that old score of wrongdoing which stood to her father’s account.

“It is only one’s duty to help those who are in difficulties,” she said, when she could manage her voice, and still that curious fluttering in her throat. “I hope Mr. Selincourt is not much the worse for his accident. I was afraid that he was terribly shaken. He must have suffered such fearful agony of mind during the time he was being sucked down.”

“He is sleeping now, peacefully as an infant. Mr. Ferrars, who is with him, says that his pulse is steady and his heart quiet, so it really looks as if the after effects may not be very bad,” Mary answered. Then she said impulsively: “I was on the hill last night when you were waiting for the dogs to help you to make the portage. My heart went out to you then, and I wondered should we ever be friends; but to-day has settled that question so far as I am concerned, and now we must be friends.”

Katherine crimsoned right up to the roots of her hair. A year ago how happy such words would have made her! And how glad she would have been of the friendship of Mary Selincourt! But now all the pleasure in such intercourse was checked and clouded, because she was perforce obliged to sail under false colours.

The rosy flush faded from cheeks, neck, and brow, and her face was white and

wearily as she answered coldly: "It is very kind of you to talk of friendship, but I fancy there is too much difference in our lives to admit of much intercourse. I have to work very hard just now, and I have little or no leisure."

Mary winced as if Katherine had struck her a blow. She was not used to having her offers of friendship flouted in this fashion; but she was too much indebted to this girl in the shabby frock to even dream of resenting the treatment of which poor Katherine was already secretly ashamed.

"I know that you have to work very hard," Mary said gently. "But if you knew how much I honour you for your unselfish courage, I think you would not refuse to let me see as much of you as your work will allow."

Katherine had to come down from her poor little pedestal then, but she made her descent gracefully enough. "If you care to see me at my work, we may even find time for friendship," she said, smiling bravely, although her face was still very pale; "but work and I are such close comrades that only Sunday finds us apart."

"Then I will have you and your work all the week, and you without your work on Sundays," laughed Mary, afterwards saying good night and going back across the river to her father again.

CHAPTER XVII

'Duke Radford's New Friend

Mr. Selincourt suffered but little ill effects from his accident. He stayed in bed two days to ward off any danger of swamp fever, but on the third morning got up at his usual hour, and after breakfast had himself rowed across the river, and paid a visit to the store. Early as it was, Katherine and Phil had already started for an Indian encampment on Ochre Lake, so Mr. Selincourt found only Miles in the store, and he was busy sweeping dead flies from the molasses traps, and spreading fresh molasses for the catching of another batch.

"Hullo, young man! is it you who pulled me out of the mud the other day?" he asked.

"No, sir," replied Miles promptly; "I'm as heavy as Katherine, so not adapted for walking on soft spots. It was Phil who put the rope round you, but Katherine pulled you out."

"A plucky pair they were too, for it must have been difficult work. Are they at home?" Mr. Selincourt asked, as he gazed round the store, and thought what a bare-looking place it was.

"No, they started for Ochre Lake a good time ago. Where there is portage work it is easiest to get it done in the morning this hot weather. Can I have the pleasure of showing you anything this morning, sir?" Miles asked, with his very best business manner, which always had its due effect on the Seal Cove people.

Mr. Selincourt laughed. "I am afraid my wants would have to be moderate, there is so little left to buy," he said, wondering if it were poverty on the part of the Radfords which kept the stock so low.

"We are not so nearly cleared out as you would think," Miles answered, in a confidential tone. "We always like the shelves to look thin at this time of the year; then when the first shipment comes to hand we bring all our surplus stock out of the cellar, and it sells nearly as fast as we can serve it out."

"Well, that is one way of doing business; a shrewd way too," remarked Mr. Selincourt, nodding his head. "I shouldn't wonder if you make a pile some day of your own; you look wideawake enough. What are you going to be when you grow up?"

"A storekeeper; this store keeper, if Katherine can keep the business going until I'm old enough to take the work over," Miles answered, with the same promptness as had arrested Mr. Selincourt's attention at the first.

"It is a hard life for a girl, I should think," he said, as he sat down on a sugar barrel and watched Miles finishing with the traps.

“Yes, it is very hard. You see, there is so much tramping over portages, rowing up and down river, and all that sort of thing. I could manage most of it with Phil’s help, only there is pricing the skins, the feathers, and the fish which we take in barter from the Indians. They wouldn’t accept my prices, but would declare they were being cheated by the papoose;” and the boy threw so much scorn into his tone that Mr. Selincourt laughed aloud.

“How do you manage when the Indians come here to buy and your sister is away?” he asked.

“Oh, I just call Nellie, that is Mrs. Burton, you know! She doesn’t know a thing about business, and is ignorant as a baby about the value of skins, but she is grown-up, so they believe what she says, only I have to tell her first.”

“Your father can’t attend to anything, then?” Mr. Selincourt enquired pitifully. He had heard a little of ’Duke Radford’s affliction, and sympathized keenly with the children who had such a heavy weight of responsibility to carry.

Miles shook his head. “Since his stroke, Father has not been able to do anything at all. His memory is entirely gone, yet he is so pleased to see people, and he always seems happy and content. Have you time to go and talk to him for a little while, sir? He would like to see you, I know.”

Mr. Selincourt rose from his barrel with alacrity. “Oh, yes! I will pay him a little visit; in fact, I have nothing else to do for the next hour, for I promised Mary that I would not go wandering round in soft spots to-day.”

Miles opened the door of the kitchen and ushered the visitor in. Mrs. Burton was making a batch of bread, and had to limit her welcome to cheery words and smiles; but the twins immediately claimed him as an old friend, rushing upon him with a freedom from shyness which was surprising, until one knew that they were never troubled with that complaint at home.

“Father, Mr. Selincourt has come to see you. He is the new owner of the fleet, you know,” Mrs. Burton said, speaking in raised tones to a tall, worn man who sat in the sunshine by the open door, and smiled serenely at the pleasant world outside.

’Duke Radford was not deaf, but they always raised their voices when speaking to him, in order to attract his attention. He seemed to live in a world apart, and it was only by touching him or shouting that he could be brought back to the realities of life. At the sound of his daughter’s voice he looked round, and, seeing a stranger in the room, at once rose and came forward with outstretched hand. “I am very glad to see you, sir,” he said, in courteous greeting.

Mr. Selincourt was so surprised that he could not hide it. He had expected to see a miserable-looking invalid, with imbecile writ large all over him; instead of whom he was confronted by a dignified, courteous gentleman, whose infirmity was only hinted at by a certain languor of movement and wistfulness of expression.

“I am glad to see you looking so much better than I expected to find you,” Mr. Selincourt said, taking the proffered hand and shaking it warmly.

“Yes, I am getting stronger. I have been ill, you know, and it has upset me in many ways; my mind is not what it was, and I cannot remember a great many things which it is very awkward to forget. For instance, I cannot remember, sir, whether I have heard your name or seen your face before;” and as he spoke, ’Duke Radford looked up with wistful uncertainty into the face of the man whom years ago he had wronged so heavily.

“My name you have heard, I dare say, but I do not suppose you have seen me before, because I am an Englishman, and I have only been in Canada for a year,” Mr. Selincourt answered gently.

Mrs. Burton had left the room momentarily, or she might have said that her father was an Englishman also. ’Duke Radford had probably forgotten the fact himself, and after a moment of silence, in which he seemed to be gathering up his scattered faculties, he asked:

“Do you think you are going to like Canada, sir?”

“I like it immensely. I intend settling in the country permanently. I have nothing to hold me in England, nor anything which interests me enough to make me want to stay there. But here there is so much to be done; the country is crying out for development, and I—well, I think I want to have a hand in the doing of it,” Mr. Selincourt answered.

’Duke Radford nodded his head in complete understanding; something of his old vigour seemed to have returned to him, and for the moment the clouds were swept from his brain.

“Canada is a fine country;” he said. “Even her waste places possess untold sources of wealth. Take this place, for instance: there are fish enough in the rivers and the bay to feed a multitude; there is timber enough to build a dozen towns, and construct a navy as well; yet it continues almost as solitary as when I came here, I can’t remember how many years ago.”

“It is a great pity; but that may be altered with time. We shall see,” replied Mr. Selincourt, then plunged into talk about the resources of the immediate neighbourhood, the possibilities of vast coalfields underlying the forest lands, of minerals lurking in barren hillsides, and many other things.

’Duke Radford came out of his absorption and talked as he had not done for many months, and when the visitor rose to go, after a couple of hours’ sitting in the pleasant, homely kitchen, with the appetizing smell of new-baked bread perfuming the air, the invalid begged him to come again very soon.

“Indeed I will, if Mrs. Burton will let me; but if I have tired you with such a long talk she may refuse to allow me in,” Mr. Selincourt replied.

“Nellie won’t do that. My children are very good to me, although it is very hard on them that I should be left a log on their hands like this. But I hope you

will come soon, for you have given me a very happy morning," the invalid said; and rising to his feet he walked slowly into the sunshine, supporting himself on a stout stick, to watch his visitor get into the waiting boat and be rowed away to the opposite bank of the river.

When Katherine and Phil came down from Ochre Lake three hours later, the invalid was still out-of-doors, only now he was seated on a bank in the shade of a spreading spruce, while the twins played round him, building houses of fir cones, and laying out gardens in patterns of pine needles.

"Why, Father, it is pleasant to see you out-of-doors again, and I am sure the air will do you good!" Katherine exclaimed in pleased surprise, as she came down the portage path, laden with a great reed basket filled with ptarmigan eggs.

"Katherine, I have had such a nice morning!" he said with childish eagerness. "Mr. Selincourt has been to see me, and I like him so very much."

Katherine nearly dropped her basket of eggs, being so much astonished; then, pulling herself together with an effort, she managed to say in a natural tone, although her face was rather white: "I am glad you liked him. Did he stay long?"

"Yes, ever so long, and he is coming again soon. He thinks of settling here, and building a house. I am so glad, for I think I never met a man whom I liked better," he replied.

"Then it is lucky that I pulled him out of the mud," put in Phil, who was very much disposed to swagger about his share in rescuing Mr. Selincourt. "But if he'd been a disagreeable animal, I might have been sorry that I had not left him there."

Katherine stood in a dumb amazement at the miracle which had been wrought. All these months she had been dreading the coming of Mr. Selincourt, because of its effect upon her father, and behold, it was the one thing which had brought him happiness!

"Did you pull him out of the mud? What mud?" asked 'Duke Radford in an interested tone, whereupon Phil promptly dropped the bundle he was carrying and launched into a detailed account of the rescue of Mr. Selincourt from the muskeg.

But Katherine went on to the store with her head in a whirl; almost she was disposed to believe that dark story from her father's past to be only a dream, or some conjured-up vision of a diseased fancy—almost, but not quite. Only too well she knew that it was the dread of Mr. Selincourt's coming which had induced her father's stroke, and now—well, it was just the irony of fate, that what had been so terrible in perspective should bring such pleasure in reality.

Jervis Ferrars came in quite early that evening, and suggested that Katherine should go with him to Ochre Lake, as he had some business at the Indian encampment, and wanted a companion.

"But I have been to Ochre Lake once to-day; Phil and I went this morning. I brought home a hundred eggs in one basket, and had to carry them over both portages myself," she said, laughing.

“Never mind; another journey in the same direction won’t hurt you, because I will do the work,” he answered. “I want to borrow your boat, don’t you see? and of course it lessens a little my burden of indebtedness if you are there too.”

“I shall also be useful in getting the boat over the portage,” laughed Katherine, then ran away to get ready. There was really nothing to keep her at the store this evening, and so few pleasures came her way that it would have been foolish to refuse.

“Nellie, I am going to Ochre Lake with Mr. Ferrars. Do you mind?” she asked, as she hurriedly shed her working frock and clothed herself anew.

“No, dear, of course I don’t. Good-bye! I hope you will have a pleasant time,” said Mrs. Burton, then kissed her sister affectionately.

Katherine was a little surprised. Mrs. Burton was not given to over-much demonstration of feeling, and so the kiss was out of the ordinary. But then the evening was out of the ordinary too. As a rule she hurried along the portage path, laden with burdens as heavy as she could carry. To-night she sauntered at a leisurely pace with no burdens at all; even the cares of the day were thrust into the background for the moment, and she was genuinely lighthearted and happy. It was pleasant, too, to sit at ease while Jervis pulled the boat up river with long, swinging strokes that never suggested tired arms in even the remotest connection; and if they did not talk much, it was only because the river and the sunset seemed suggestive of silence. They had passed the second portage, and waved a greeting to Mrs. M’Kree, who was sitting at ease in her garden while Astor lounged beside her. Then Jervis began to talk about himself, which was unusual, the subject apparently having but little interest for him in a general way.

“I have been writing to my mother to-day. It seems strange to think we shall have a post out from here once a month all the summer,” he remarked, rowing slower now, as if he were tired of violent exercise, and desired to take things easy.

“How glad your mother will be to get the letters!” exclaimed Katherine, wondering how the poor woman had borne the weary waiting of the past weeks.

“It has been hard on her, poor little Mother!” he said softly, then went on with a hardness in his tone that grated on the ears of the listener: “Few women have had to know greater contrasts in life than my mother. She was brought up in the purple, a maid to brush her hair and tie her shoestrings, but for the last six years she has lived in a four-roomed cottage, and has done the family washing.”

“Oh, how hard for her!” exclaimed Katherine.

“It was hard, poor Mother!” Jervis said, and his voice grew so tender that the listener understood the previous hardness must have been meant for someone else. He was silent for some time after that, and, pulling slowly up the river, kept his eyes fixed on the water which was gliding past.

Katherine sat with her gaze fixed on the treetops, whilst her fancies were busy with the poor lady who had fallen from the luxury of having a lady’s maid to

doing the work of a washerwoman.

“I was to have been a doctor,” Jervis said abruptly, taking up the talk just where he had dropped it. “We were very poor, so I had worked my way on scholarships and that sort of thing. I was very keen on study, for I meant to make a name for myself. I believe I should have done too, but——”

He broke off suddenly, and, after a pause, Katherine ventured gently: “Don’t you think it is the ‘buts’ which really make us live to some purpose?”

“At least they make a mighty difference in our outlook,” he admitted with a smile. “The particular ‘but’ which stopped my medical studies, and drove me into the first situation where I could earn money was the death of my father, and the consequent cessation of the income which had been his allowance under his grandfather’s will. We had been poor before; after that we were destitute.”

Katherine nodded sympathetically. Her life had been hard, and there was plenty of rough work in it, but she had never been within seeing distance of destitution, and she had plenty of pity for those whose lives had been fuller of care than her own.

“I tried keeping near home first,” went on Jervis; “but it was of no use. There was no room for me anywhere; the only thing I could get to do was a miserable clerkship at twelve shillings a week. Just think of it! Twelve shillings a week, and there were four of us to live! I bore it for six months, and then I cleared out. My next brother, who is four years younger, got work which brought in enough to buy his food, and I have managed to send home something to help to keep my mother and the youngest boy, who is still at school.”

“Perhaps the necessity to do your utmost has been very good for you,” Katherine ventured demurely.

“I think it has,” he answered with emphasis. “At any rate, I don’t feel disposed to quarrel now with the destiny which has knocked me about the world, and brought me eventually to an anchorage like this.”

Katherine’s face flamed scarlet, to her intense mortification. What would this man think of her, what must he think of her, if she changed colour at every word he said?

But Jervis did not appear to notice her confusion, for which she was devoutly thankful, and in a moment he went on talking: “It is going to make a very great difference to me if Mr. Selincourt decides to spend money in developing this place. The fisheries, properly worked, will yield a cent-per-cent interest on the outlay, and that is going to make a big difference to me, because I am not manager merely, but I have a share in the profits also.”

“A working partner,” suggested Katherine.

“Something of the kind,” he replied. Then turning his head he saw that they were close to the Indian encampment, for long lines of fish were stretched in all directions, drying in the sun.

“The end of our journey,” he said lightly. “Do you sit here in the boat and I will have my business finished in about ten minutes.”

Katherine’s gaze went to the treetops again, only now it was not trees and sky that she saw, but a rose-hued future of happiness stretching out before her.

CHAPTER XVIII

Standing Aside

Mrs. Burton was perplexed, and a good bit troubled in her mind. She was honestly proud of Katherine's beauty, and longed that her sister should have an easier life than she had had herself. So that when Jervis Ferrars had begun to show rather a decided inclination to cultivate Katherine's society, the elder sister had felt both glad and sorry because of it. She was glad, because any girl might have felt honoured by the notice of a man like Jervis Ferrars: But she was sorry because he was so poor, and marriage with him must mean for Katherine a life of hard work and much drudgery; for in remote places and pioneer settlements it was on the women, the wives and the mothers, that the real hardships of life fell.

Her own husband had been a poor man, a bright young Canadian, as good-looking as Jervis Ferrars, but without his culture. Ted Burton had commanded one of the boats of the fishing fleet, and was holder of a good many shares in the company as well; but one day his vessel came home without him, and Mrs. Burton had to return a widow to her father's house. No wonder she dreaded Katherine wedding after the same fashion. History has a trick of repeating itself, and she could not bear to think of sunny-hearted Katherine having to live always in the shadows, as she herself had done.

But the worry oppressing her just now was concerned also with Mary Selincourt. Mary spent a great deal of time at the store, and when she was there she made herself useful like other people. She had even served an Indian squaw with coloured calico of an astonishing pattern, had clicked off the proper number of yards in the most business-like fashion, and then had demanded: "What next, if you please?" in a manner as collected as if she had served an apprenticeship behind a counter. A most delightful companion was Mary, and Mrs. Burton fairly revelled in her society: but Mary had one strange habit which puzzled her, she always avoided Jervis Ferrars when it was possible to do so, and she had a trick of blushing when his name was mentioned. These symptoms were proof positive to Mrs. Burton that Mary cared for Jervis, and she was sorely troubled about it.

Katherine, on the other hand, seemed to be absolutely heart-whole; she went about her daily work with a zest which was refreshing to behold. She always seemed to be happy and content, while she treated Jervis in much the same fashion as she did Miles, and teased him whenever the occasion seemed to demand it, which was very often.

It was the middle of July, and the great event of the year had taken place, that is, the first steamer had come through Hudson Strait, and was anchored off Seal

Cove. 'Duke Radford had heavy shipments in this vessel, and for a few days Katherine left the outside customers to their own devices, spending busy hours in checking invoices and helping to stow away the merchandise which Stee Jenkin and Miles brought up river in boatloads from the steamer. These goods had been ordered in October of the year before, but that was how things had to be done in that awkward corner of the world, where ice blocked the ocean road for eight months out of the twelve.

The steamer which brought groceries and dry goods for the store was to take away sealskins, walrus-skins, narwhal ivory, whalebone, and blubber of various sorts, which had been accumulating in the fish shed since the fishing began. This made Jervis as busy in his way as Katherine was in hers. Indeed, the press of work was so great that Mary went down day after day to do the writing in the office at Seal Cove, while Mr. Selincourt, with his shirt sleeves rolled above his elbows, helped Jervis to pack skins and weigh blubber.

It was easy for Mary to get away, as most of her housework and a good deal of the cooking was done for her by the portage men who happened to be in residence at Roaring Water Portage. When Mr. Selincourt hired men and boats at Temiskaming, he hired them for the whole summer, and planned their work to suit his own convenience. There were two men to each boat, and after the first journey with luggage-laden boats the men found that they could manage the journey each way in a little over a fortnight. So two pairs of them were always en route, while the third pair rested and did housework at the hut at Roaring Water Portage, taking their departure with mails when another pair of their companions returned from the lake.

When Mrs. Burton was troubled about anything it was sure to come out sooner or later, and one night during that week of bustle and hard work she spoke of the matter that was on her mind. The sisters were brushing their hair before going to bed. Somehow hair-brushing lends itself to confidential talk, especially when, as in this case, awkward things have to be put into speech, because a veil of hair will hide a good many emotions.

"Do you know, I believe that Mary cares for Mr. Ferrars," Mrs. Burton blurted out, with considerable nervous trepidation, turning her back on Katherine, and wielding her brush as if her life depended on her accomplishing a given number of strokes per minute.

"What put such an idea into your head, you delightful old matchmaker?" demanded Katherine, with a ripple of amused laughter, while her brush went slower as she waited for the answer.

"A good many things," Mrs. Burton said, warming to her subject, and feeling relieved already by the careless ease of Katherine's manner. "Mary always avoids Mr. Ferrars when it is possible to do so, and I have never once seen her touch his hand, though she shakes hands with every other person she meets. I have even

seen her shake hands with Oily Dave, a thing I would not do myself.”

“Am I to understand, then, that if one person will not shake hands with another it is a sign of being in love?” asked Katherine in a teasing tone. “Because, if so, what about your own refusal to touch the hand of Oily Dave?”

Mrs. Burton laughed, and her heart felt lighter than for many days past; for if Katherine could laugh and make jokes in this fashion, it was plain there was no harm done. So she drew a long breath and went on: “I wish you would try to be serious for a few minutes and listen to me. What is only fun to you may be grim earnest to poor Mary, and I like her so well that I do not care to think of her missing the best thing that life can give her.”

“Which is——?” queried Katherine mischievously.

“Which is the love she longs for,” Mrs. Burton answered, with a sentimental sigh.

Katherine broke into irrepressible laughter. Then, when her mirth had subsided a little, she said: “Just fancy speaking of a girl as ‘Poor Mary’ whose father has an income of five or six thousand pounds a year!”

“Still, she is poor in spite of her money if she can’t get what she wants,” Mrs. Burton said, sticking to her point. “Money isn’t everything by a long way, and you can’t satisfy heart-hunger with dollars, or pounds either.”

“Did Mary take you into her confidence concerning this want which money can’t satisfy?” demanded Katherine, a touch of scorn in her tone and a chill feeling at her heart, as if someone had laid an icy finger upon it.

“Dear me, no! Mary is not the sort of girl to go round howling about what she wants but can’t get,” Mrs. Burton replied. “But I have eyes in my head, and I think a married woman sees more, and has a larger understanding of affairs of the heart, than a girl who has had no experience at all.”

“That is very probable,” Katherine said quietly, while the chill feeling grew and intensified, despite her efforts to make light of the matter. “But what has all this to do with me? Do you want me to approach Mr. Ferrars on the subject, and say to him that he had better make haste and satisfy the heart-hunger of the rich Miss Selincourt?”

Mrs. Burton looked absolutely shocked. “Dear Katherine, do be serious for once if you can!” she pleaded. “If I thought that you cared for Mr. Ferrars yourself I should never have mentioned this to you at all; but you are so plainly fancy-free that surely it won’t hurt you to stand aside and let Mary have her chance.”

“Stand aside? How?” Katherine kept her voice steady by an effort, while her thoughts flew back to that evening when Jervis Ferrars had taken her up to Ochre Lake, and had talked to her of the struggles and hardships of his life. She had been so happy that evening, and every day since had been like a festival. There had been no need to put things into words: she had known that night that Jervis Ferrars cared for her; she had been equally well assured that she cared for him, and the

knowledge brought with it a rest and contentment such as she had never known before. But if what her sister said was correct, then it might be that she was wrong, something worse than selfish even, to take this good thing which was offered to her; and the standing-aside idea would have to be very carefully considered.

Mrs. Burton rolled up her abundant hair, and poked in half a dozen hairpins to keep it in place. Then she said: "You are so much better-looking than Mary, and you have so much more charm of manner! It is easy to see that Mr. Ferrars is attracted by you, because his eyes always follow you every time you move. Then you saved his life at considerable risk, which, of course, is tremendously in your favour, or would be, if you cared about him. But if you don't really want to marry him it would be kind to stand back and let Mary have a chance. Of course it would be an immense advantage to Mr. Ferrars to marry Mr. Selincourt's daughter, for I fancy he is very poor, although he is such a cultured gentleman; and money does make a great deal of difference in the comfort of one's daily life."

"Indeed it does, my wise, practical sister. Really, your argument is not half bad, and is well worth my best consideration, which it shall have," said Katherine; then giving her sister a good-night kiss, she dived into bed and promptly went to sleep, or at least pretended to do so, which was the same thing in its effect on Mrs. Burton, who soon went to sleep herself.

In reality there was little rest for Katherine that night, for she was faced by a problem that had never even occurred to her before. If she followed the desire of her own heart, she stood in the way of two people. True, she might make Jervis Ferrars happy with her love, more especially as she was quite sure that he cared for her. But would there ever come a time when he might be tempted to wish for more worldly advantages, and to long for the power that money brings? Lying there in the twilight of the northern summer night, which was never in that month quite dark, Katherine faced the future with a steady, single-hearted desire to do the right thing at all costs. She felt herself doubly bound. Her own love for Jervis made her hesitate about allowing him to bind himself to a life of poverty, or at least a life of continuous struggle, such as marriage with a portionless wife must bring.

But Jervis was only one consideration. There was Mary also to be thought of. And then it flashed upon Katherine that Mary had even more claim upon her than Jervis. Ever since 'Duke Radford had been stricken down, robbed of memory, of understanding, and the power to think and act for himself, Katherine had carried her father's sin as if it were a wrongdoing of her own. He had implored her to expiate it if she could. But how could she? Even the saving grace of confession was denied to her, for she could not go to Mr. Selincourt and say: "My father did you a bitter wrong many years ago; please forgive him, and say no more about it!"

It was true that she and Phil had saved the rich man's life by pulling him out of the muskeg, but there had been little personal risk for herself in the matter,

although it had been very hard work, and there were scars on her hands still where the ropes had cut into the skin. Hard work was not self-sacrifice, however, and as Katherine understood things it was only by self-sacrifice that she could expiate her father's sin, if indeed it ever could be expiated.

Could she do it? Lying there in the mean little room, with the grey twilight showing outside the open window, she told herself 'No': she could not do it, she could not stand aside and give up to another what she wanted so badly for herself. But, as the slow hours stole by, a different mood crept over her. She thought of the Saviour of the world, and the sacrifices he had made for man; then prayed for grace to tread the thorny path of self-immolation, if such action should be required of her.

She dared not rise to kneel and pray, the little bedroom was too crowded for privacy; and although she often yearned for a room, however small, to have for her sole use, this was not possible. Folding her hands on her breast, she prayed for strength to do what was right, for guidance in the way she had to go, and wisdom to see the true from the false. Then, because her day's work had made her so very tired, she fell asleep, and presently began to dream that she was at the marriage of Mary Selincourt with Jervis Ferrars, and that it was her place to give away the bride. She was doing her part, as she believed, faithfully and well, although the dragging pain at her heart was almost more than she could endure, and the part of the marriage service had been reached where the ring should have been put on Mary's hand, when, to her amazement, she found it was on her own finger.

"Katherine, Katherine, how soundly you sleep, dear! Wake up, we are quite late this morning!" said Mrs. Burton, and Katherine opened her tired, heavy eyes to find that Beth and Lotta were enjoying a lively pillow fight on the other bed, and that their mother was already half-dressed.

For one moment she lay weakly wishing that she had not to rise to work, to struggle, and to endure; but the next minute found her out of bed and thrusting her face into a basin of cold water, which is, after all, the very best way of gathering up a little courage.

When she was dressed and out in the fresh air things did not look so bad. Mrs. Burton might have been quite mistaken in thinking that Mary cared for Jervis Ferrars. In the broad light of the sunshiny morning the very idea seemed absurd. The rich man's daughter had a wide circle to choose from; it was scarcely likely that her choice would fall on a poor man, whose position was little removed from that of a Hudson Bay fisherman.

Of course it was absurd! Mrs. Burton must have had a sentimental streak on last night, and she herself was uncommonly foolish to have been made so miserable for nothing at all.

When Katherine reached this point in her musings her laughter rang out again, the future brightened up, and she was ready to face anything the day might bring.

Happiness is such a great factor in one's life; and when that is secured it is easy to make light of the ordinary ills, troubles, cares, and vexations which are sure to crop up even in the smoothest kind of existence. But she meant to watch very closely for some sign which might guide her in gaining an insight into Mary's heart. She must make absolutely certain that Mrs. Burton was wrong. It was not easy to see just how she would be able to do this; but it must be done, of course it must be done!

The day passed in a feverish round of incessant work. One hour Katherine was happy as of old, the next hour she was horribly heartsick and oppressed. But it never once occurred to her that the reason for this was her exhausted condition from loss of rest on the previous night.

In the evening Jervis came up from Seal Cove, sat and talked with 'Duke Radford for half an hour, then asked Katherine to come and walk with him in the woods to see if the wild strawberries were getting ripe. But she refused, declaring that her head ached, which, although true, was not the real reason by any means.

"I am afraid you have been working too hard this week," he said kindly. "I have been very much in the same plight myself, or I would have come up to help you. Can you save things back for a few days? As soon as the steamer has gone I shall be quite at leisure, and will put in a day or two at helping you to get your stores stowed away."

"It has been hard work, and of course we are to a certain extent novices at it," Katherine answered. "But the worst is over now until the next boat comes, when I suppose the confusion will begin all over again, only of course by then we shall be more used to managing things."

"You had better go to bed early and get a good night's rest, or I shall be having you for a patient next, and I am very much afraid you would not prove a tractable one," he said, more troubled by her pale cheeks and weary looks than he cared to confess.

"I have never been ill in my life, so I have no idea how the role of invalid would suit me," she answered with a mirthless laugh, thinking how very pleasant a stroll in the woods would have been after her long, hard day of work in the stockrooms.

"I don't think it would suit you at all," he replied. Then he said, as he rose to go: "As you are not inclined for a walk, I will go and have a talk with Mr. Selincourt about the plans for the fish-curing sheds."

Standing aside was dismal work, Katherine told herself; and there were tears on her pillow when she went to sleep that night.

CHAPTER XIX

An Awkward Fix

Mr. Selincourt was not the man to let the grass grow under his feet when he had any sort of project in hand. He was so rich, too, that his schemes never had to suffer delay from want of means to carry them through. Directly he had made up his mind that he meant to have a fish-curing establishment at Seal Cove, he had the plans drawn for the buildings, work which fell to Jervis and Mary; then, when these were ready, Astor M'Kree was set to work, with as many helpers as could handle a hammer or a saw with any degree of dexterity.

Never had there been such a summer of work at Seal Cove; everyone who could do anything was pressed into service. Some of the Indians, tempted by wages, were set to work, and although they were no good at carpentry, or things of that sort, they did very well at cod-splitting, or, as it was termed, "flaking", and spreading the fish to dry on the flakes, as the structures were called which had been erected on a sunny headland, after the fashion of the fish-flakes at St. John's, Newfoundland, whence the idea was taken.

Already Mr. Selincourt was in treaty for the purchase of land on both sides of the river. He wanted to possess the river frontage on each bank of the water, from the bay up to the first portage; but the drawback to this was that 'Duke Radford owned nearly three quarters of a mile of frontage close to the store, so it was not likely that the owner of the fishing fleet would get all the ground into his own hands.

Mary had a fancy for geology, and when her father had no need of her help in forwarding his schemes she spent long days in tramping about the woods and the shore, armed with a hammer and a specimen bag, and accompanied by one or two of the big dogs from the store. True to her resolve, she had lost no time in making friends with the great, fierce creatures, which roamed as they pleased in summer, as a sort of holiday compensation for the hard work they had to do in winter, when stores had to be transported by sledges. She had done her work so thoroughly that the dogs became, not merely her friends, but her abject slaves, and were ready at any time to swim the river at her call.

The coast of the bay to the northward was flat and swampy, but southward from Seal Cove it stretched in bold headlands and precipitous rocks for mile on mile, until the mouth of the next river spread acres of swamp 'twixt land and sea. Beyond the headland on which Mr. Selincourt had erected his fish-flakes there extended miles of broken ground, with split rocks and riven cliffs which might have been the result of volcanic upheaval, but were probably only the product of

the intense frost of centuries. This was Mary's happy hunting ground, a place full of scientific surprises, and full of dangers too. For the rocks were slippery, the heights tremendous, and a fall in many places must have meant certain death.

Jervis Ferrars had been in his boat one morning along the coast to a certain bay or inlet much beloved of the black-headed gulls. These birds were valuable either for their plucked feathers, or for their skins with the feathers left on. They frequented the inlet in their tens of thousands, and it had occurred to him that it might be good business to secure a couple of thousand skins, and get them dry for packing by the time the next boat arrived, probably in the middle of August.

He had beached his boat, and spent an hour or more wandering round the crags, and planning the campaign against the luckless gulls, which dozed in sleepy content on the sunny slopes of the inlet. Then, taking to his boat again, he pulled himself back towards Seal Cove, maturing his plans on the way. He was passing a rocky promontory just before reaching the fish-flakes, when he heard a yelping noise, and, looking up, saw a big dog running to and fro on the rocks in evident distress. But there were so many big dogs running loose in the woods and the wilds at this time of the year, and as they were mostly in distress over something or other, he took very little notice of the creature, and, working steadily on, arrived in due course at the fish shed.

Jervis was tired, having pulled many miles through a choppy sea with the wind against him, and he was thinking that it would be really pleasant to sit writing for an hour or two somewhere out of the roaring of the wind. Entering his office, he took off his jacket and sat down on the rough stool before the equally rough desk where his clerical work was principally done.

But he had not entered two items in his book of takings when Mr. Selincourt came in hastily, with a worried look on his face.

"Have you seen Mary in your travels?" he asked.

"No; I didn't even know that Miss Selincourt was at Seal Cove this morning," Jervis answered, looking up from his writing.

"She came down a good two hours before I did; said she wanted to go over the rocks to test some ironstone formation which she discovered the other day. She promised to be back here to meet me when I arrived, but that is three hours ago, and she has not come yet."

Jervis sat looking at him in an abstracted fashion, as if trying to settle some clue which threatened to escape him; then, with a start, he asked: "Had she a dog with her?"

"Most likely; she never moves very far without one or two of those great brutes from the store to keep her company, and a good thing too. I always feel more comfortable about her then, than if she were alone."

Jervis jumped up and began to pull on his jacket with nervous haste. He was remembering the dog he had seen on the rocks an hour or two ago, and the

creature's evident distress, which probably meant that Miss Selincourt was in trouble also.

"What is the matter?" demanded Mr. Selincourt.

"Nothing, I hope. But as I came home a while ago from the inlet I noticed a dog on the rocks, a big creature that seemed in trouble. I didn't think much of it then, but of course it must have been the animal that was with Miss Selincourt, so I am going to see if she is all right," Jervis answered.

"I will come with you," said Mr. Selincourt.

"Please, no; I can go faster alone. And if she is not really in difficulties we might both miss her, and have a long, anxious hunt for no purpose at all. If you will walk over beyond the fish-flakes, and come to the rocks from that direction, you will either meet her or meet me," Jervis said, then hurried off to his boat, which was drawn up on the shore at a little distance from the fish shed.

It must have been two miles away, perhaps three, that he had seen the dog, and now he blamed himself because he had not taken more notice of its trouble. The worst of it was, he was not quite sure as to where he had seen the creature. The sky was overcast, and the weather looked so threatening that, unless he could find Miss Selincourt soon, and hurry her home, she would scarcely escape a very bad wetting.

Resting on his oars, he sent out a mighty shout, then waited with every sense on the alert. One minute passed—two—and when five minutes had gone he shouted again, following this up with a whistle so piercing that it fetched a distant echo from the rocks.

But was it an echo?

The sound had scarcely died away when it was repeated again. A moment later Jervis heard it yet again, and knew for a certainty that it was no echo, but someone whistling back to him.

The breeze had freshened to a gale that roared in his ears like thunder, as he drew his boat high up beyond reach of the tide that was running in strongly; and when the boat was safe he set out to climb the rocks. Up, and up, a dizzy height he went, finding foothold with difficulty, for what looked like solid rock had a trick of crumbling when stepped upon, just as if it were rotten mortar.

But he reached the top at last, and paused to look about him, holding fast with both hands, for the force of the wind at this height was so great that he feared lest he should be blown away.

On one side was the bay, with great waves, foam-crested, rolling in, to break with a thunderous roar on the beach. Spread out on the other hand was the wild, rocky waste, full of dangers now, for in the deep valleys between great rock boulders the incoming tide was rising and making deep pools where a little before had been dry ground.

It was these pools that Jervis feared. If Mary had slipped into one of these deep

places she might easily be caught by the rising flood, and drowned before help could reach her.

The mere thought turned him sick, and he whistled shrilly as before.

The answering whistle came so promptly, and sounded so close, that he started in surprise, then shouted: "Where are you?"

"Here," replied a voice that sounded so close, so audibly that he looked round in mystification. Then he saw a deep gulch yawning below him, and caught the flutter of a handkerchief on the far side. But how could he reach there? Down he plunged with reckless haste, having little or no regard for his own safety—and, indeed, he who hesitated here was lost, for at every step the rock crumbled and slid under his weight.

"It will be queer work getting back!" he said to himself, then pressed onward to reach the side of the gulch, where now he could see Mary Selincourt crouched on a narrow ledge or shelf against a perpendicular cliff, while the water was rising higher and higher, creeping nearer and nearer to where she sat.

How could he rescue her from there? One hope he had, that her shelf might be above high-water mark, in which case patient endurance would be all that was needed until the tide ran out again. A glance at the wall of cliff behind Mary proved this hope to be futile, for the mark of the water showed above her head, and if she were not rescued speedily, he could only stand by and see her drown.

"Are you hurt?" he called out when he had scrambled low enough to talk to her.

"I have twisted my foot rather badly," she said in an exhausted tone, "and I seem to have been shouting and whistling for help for so long. I had great difficulty to make the dog leave me and go for help, but I think it understood at last, because it went off at such a pace."

"Well, we must get you out of this as soon as possible, for the tide is coming up fast. Do you mind a wetting!" he asked, creeping down to the edge of the dividing water, and wondering whether he could wade or if he must swim.

"Mind or not mind, I shall get one, I expect," she answered, with a nervous laugh. "Be careful, Mr. Ferrars, there is a very deep place just below this shelf, and the water showed there before anywhere else; it seemed to ooze up from the bottom."

"I must swim for it, then, I suppose," he said, pulling off his jacket and his boots; then, slipping into the water, he struck out and crossed the strip of rising tide, which lay like a river along the bottom of the gulch.

But when he reached the shelf it was above him, and the cliff was too steep for climbing.

"You must roll off that shelf and drop into the water," he said in a sharp, decided tone.

"Oh, I dare not! I cannot swim, and I might be drowned!" cried Mary, her face

turning ashen white.

“You won’t drown—I will catch you. But make haste, this water is so cold that I am afraid of cramp,” Jervis said, feeling his teeth chatter. Although it was July, there was so much ice in the bay in the shape of floating bergs that the water was of course fearfully chill.

“I can’t do it; I simply can’t!” she cried, with a shudder. “Mr. Ferrars, I would rather lie here and drown than have to roll off into that dreadful water. All my life I have been a coward, and it is of no use expecting me to be brave now.”

“You must do as you choose, of course, as you are too high up for me to be able to reach you,” he said, keeping his voice as steady as he could, although his teeth were chattering still; “but all the time you stay there you keep me here, so in compassing your own death you compass mine also.”

“Go away, Mr. Ferrars, go away, and save yourself,” she groaned. “I cannot, I dare not, plunge into that dreadful water!”

“You must; there is no other way to safety. Come, be a brave girl, and take the plunge,” he urged, a note of entreaty coming into his tone, for life was sweet to him, sweeter than it had ever been before, and it was dreadful to think that he must throw it away because this wilful girl refused to allow herself to be saved. But she only covered her face with her hands, moaning and crying because of the panic that had her in its grip.

Then Jervis felt himself lifted higher; the water was rising fast, and now, by straining upward and reaching as far as he could, he managed just to touch the shelf whereon Mary was crouched.

“Here I am. Now, take my hand and come,” he said urgently.

She only covered her face with her hands and moaned, but would not stir nor look up.

In that narrow gulch they were sheltered from the wind, but the rain was beginning to pour down in torrents, and Jervis thought grimly that she would soon be as wet as if she had taken the plunge.

He was kicking vigorously in the water, and was thankful to find that, now he had got over the first chill, his teeth were not chattering so miserably.

Another ten minutes, he reckoned, would put him high enough in the water to scramble on to the ledge, and then it would have to be a tussle of physical strength, if necessary, for he meant to save Mary somehow, whether she would let him or not.

The minutes dragged slowly on, the rain beat down with tempestuous violence, and in that dreary gulch it was dark, almost like night. But the water was rising still, and putting out all his strength Jervis dragged himself up on to the shelf of rock. Mary saw him coming. Then she scrambled to her feet with a cry of fear, and, before he could stretch out an arm to save her, reeled and toppled over into the water.

CHAPTER XX

Katherine Makes a Discovery

Katherine was having a thorough turn-out of the store. Everything was off the shelves, the cobwebs had all been swept from the ceiling, and now, armed with a scrubbing-brush, she was cleaning all the shelves with soap and water. To use her own expression, it was “horridly” dirty work. But it had to be done, so the sooner it was got through and finished the better. She had done the top shelves all round, and, changing the water in her pail, had started on the next lot and was scrubbing vigorously, when she heard a long-drawn, mournful howl from the other side of the river.

“That is Hero,” she said to herself in surprise; and then, remembering that Mary Selincourt had called for the dog that morning on her way down river, she came down the ladder, and, going to the door, looked out.

There was Hero plainly enough, a big black-and-white dog, which, while looking like a Newfoundland, had such a marked aversion to water that it would never swim if it could avoid doing so. Katherine would have turned back to her work, and left the dog to remain where it was until someone came along with a boat, but she remembered that Mary had wanted the dog to accompany her in a ramble, and so it was rather disquieting to find the creature had wandered home again.

Sitting on its haunches, the dog was flinging up its head for another howl, but, chancing to catch sight of Katherine, it broke into eager barking instead, pleading so plainly for a dry journey across the river that, with a laugh at her own weak yielding, she ran down to the bank, and, getting into the boat which was moored there ready for anyone who might want it, rowed across to the other side, where the dog awaited her in a perfect ecstasy of welcome.

She had no hat on, the sleeves of her cotton blouse were rolled up over her elbow, and she wore still the big rough apron she had donned for scrubbing. It struck her, as she crossed the river, that the wind was very cold, and that the day was grey and cheerless, now the clouds had hidden the sun.

Hero jumped into the boat, and, crouching at Katherine’s feet, fawned upon her with great affection and delight.

“Oh, yes, you are very glad to see me, I have no doubt, but really you are a fearful fraud to bring me away from my work on a busy day like this, by pretending you cannot swim, when it is plain you have been in the water, for you are dripping with wet!” Katherine said, seeing the water which ran from the dog’s thick coat as it sat in the boat thumping a grateful tail in thanksgiving. Then she

noticed that the dog had something tied round its neck which looked like a silk waist-belt, and that a handkerchief was knotted to the belt.

“Something is wrong!” she muttered to herself; then, reaching the other side, she moored her boat and proceeded to investigate the message wrapped about the dog’s neck.

A scrap of paper with writing upon it was crumpled up in the handkerchief, and spreading this out she read:

“Please come and help me, for I have had a tumble down a steep rock and twisted my foot. I can’t walk, and I am on a ledge deep down a gulch near the sea, on the rocks beyond the fish-flakes.

MARY SELINCOURT.”

“Deep down in a gulch near the sea,” quoth Katherine to herself with a puzzled frown; then she jumped up with a cry. “I know where it is; that gulch is one of the tideholes, and she will be drowned if I don’t make haste!”

Out of the boat she bounded, and rushed up the slope to the store. Springing over the confusion of canisters and boxes, she hurried into the house, where Mrs. Burton was sitting at work making new frocks for the twins.

“Nellie, will you look after the store for an hour? I should lock the door if I were you, and refuse to serve anyone who comes, for it is confusion thrice confounded in there, and I don’t think you would be able to find things if you tried.”

“What is the matter, dear?” asked Mrs. Burton, looking up and seeing how frightened her sister seemed.

“Hero has just come home, and I have found tied to his neck a note from Mary, saying that she has sprained her ankle and is lying in one of the tide-holes beyond the fish-flakes. I must hurry down to Seal Cove as hard as I can row, for the tide is coming in now, and she may be in danger.”

“Are there none of the portage men who could go with you to help you?” asked Mrs. Burton.

“I may find one at Seal Cove, but there are none here. One went down river early with Mary, the other rowed Mr. Selincourt down an hour or more ago. I will be back as soon as I can, dear; or it may be that Miles and Phil will get in first: but keep the store locked until someone comes.”

“Indeed I will; trust me for that!” said Mrs. Burton, dropping her work and following Katherine to the door to see her start.

As Katherine turned back to say something, two steps from the threshold, a coil of strong cord hung on the house wall caught her attention, and after a moment’s hesitation she reached up and took it down. It was the identical coil of rope that she and Phil had had in the boat that day when they came home from

Fort Garry and found Mr. Selincourt in the muskeg. It had slipped aside and been forgotten until a day or two ago, when Katherine had found it, scrubbed it clean of muskeg mire, and hung it up to dry in the sunshine, and again forgotten it. She had flung on a coat, because her blouse showed signs of the hard, dirty work she had been doing, and had crammed a woollen cap on her head to hide the roughness of her hair.

“Are you going to take the dog? He will only make you more work,” said Mrs. Burton, as Hero leaped into the boat and took his place as a complacent passenger, looking on at the work being done.

“Yes, I must. The old dog is very wise; he will guide us quickly to where Mary is lying,” Katherine said. Then she threw off the mooring rope, rowed out to midstream, where she could get the full advantage of the current, and then began to row down river as fast as she could pull.

The sky was still overcast, the wind howled through the trees, and it was so chill that she was glad of her coat, despite the vigorous exercise which she was getting in rowing. Never had it taken so long to get to Seal Cove, or so it seemed in her impatient haste; and after the first half-mile the current did not help her, for the tide was coming in fast and making itself felt.

Seal Cove appeared to be deserted when she got there. Neither of the portage men was to be seen, although both the Selincourt boats were drawn up side by side on the beach near the fish shed. The office was locked and the key gone. Katherine looked round in despair and shouted at the top of her voice for help. Surely someone must be within hearing distance, although the place looked entirely devoid of life, except for some fishing boats a mile or two out from shore, and beating into harbour against the strong wind, which was blowing half a gale, perhaps more.

The shouts brought Mrs. Jenkin to the door of her house, with an ailing babe tucked under her arm and two small children clinging to her ragged skirt.

“Dear, dear, Miss Radford, what is the matter? Why, you look just awful!” exclaimed the good woman, jogging the wailing babe up and down, to still its fretful complaining.

“I can’t find anyone, Mrs. Jenkin, and I want help so badly. Where are all the men? Miss Selincourt has hurt her foot out on the rocks beyond the fish-flakes, and I am afraid she may be caught by the tide before she can be rescued,” Katherine said anxiously.

“Dear, dear, what is to be done? I don’t believe there is a man about the place, unless it is Oily Dave. Mr. Ferrars went away in his boat at dawn, and I don’t know that he is back yet. I’d go with you myself, dear, but I can’t leave the babies,” Mrs. Jenkin said, with so much concern and sympathy that Katherine gulped down something closely related to a sob before replying.

“Will you find Oily Dave and tell him to come on after me as fast as he can?”

Tell him there is money in the job, then perhaps he will hurry. If any more men come, send them on after me. And do have a kettle of water boiling, so that we can give Miss Selincourt a cup of coffee or something when we get her back here," said Katherine, then hurried away, the coil of rope flung over her arm, the dog following close at her heels.

It was a long way over a rough track to the rocks. The easier and shorter process would have been to go round by boat, if only there had been quieter water and less wind; but she knew very well that it would take more strength than her one pair of arms possessed to row a boat through such a sea, so she was forced to take the landward route.

When she reached the fish-flakes it was as much as she could do to stand against the wind, and in crossing the headland her pace was of the slowest. She had expected to find someone up here, the portage men perhaps, or some Indians attending to the hundreds and thousands of fish which were spread out drying in the sun and wind; but there was no one. She did not know, of course, that Mr. Selincourt had passed that way half an hour before, and had summoned the portage men to help him to search for Mary among the rocks. Looking back, she could see Oily Dave coming along at a shuffling pace behind her, and with an imperious wave of the hand to hurry his movements she sped onward now at a quicker pace, because the ground was descending, and the hill behind her broke the force of the wind. At the bottom of the hill there were two tracks, both of which led round among the gulches or tideholes, only by different ways and to different points, and it was here that Katherine knew she would be at fault.

Hero still trotted contentedly just behind, as if perfectly satisfied that she should take the lead. But a mistake now might be disastrous and waste hours of time; so, calling the dog forward, she began to talk to him in an eager, caressing fashion: "Good old Hero, clever old dog, go and find Mary! Mary wants you ever so badly; hurry up, old chappy, hurry up!"

The dog threw up its head with an eager whine, and looked round as if to make certain where Mary was to be found.

"Mary, Mary, find her, go along!" cried Katherine; then with a short bark Hero turned to the track leading seawards, and set off at a trot, looking neither to the right hand nor to the left.

Katherine groaned. The tideholes nearest the sea naturally filled first, and it could not be very far from high tide already. Looking back, she saw Oily Dave gaining upon her, and waved to him again to make haste. It was of no use to shout, because the wind was blowing from him to her, and so her voice would not carry. Then a dash of cold rain struck her from behind, and thankful she was that it was behind, for if it had struck her in the face she could hardly have stood against it. Right in front of her Hero was trotting forward with head carried well in the air, and an eager alertness in every limb. It was clear the creature felt no uncertainty

about its movements, and the feeling that she was going right was an unspeakable comfort to Katherine, who toiled along in the rear.

Suddenly the dog stopped dead short, flung up its head with a weird, dismal howl, then bounded forward at a headlong pace.

What had it heard?

Katherine tried to run too, but the track was uphill now, and the force of the wind caught her the higher she got. Panting, breathless, her heart beating with fierce, irregular thumps, she toiled up the rocky track, and, crossing the summit, began to descend on the other side.

The gulch was before her now. When she had seen it last it was a rocky valley, deep in the cliffs, and floored with boulders. Now it was a long pool, for the tide was in, and the sea, working through the porous, frost-riven rocks, had half-filled it with water. Katherine, approaching the gulch from the landward side, was coming to the place from an opposite direction to that by which Jervis Ferrars had reached it, and her path downwards was much easier than his had been.

She was hesitating whether it was of any use to go in, thinking the dog must have led her wrong after all, when she caught sight of something bobbing up and down in the water—something that looked like a man's head, and at which Hero was barking furiously.

She ran then with flying, reckless feet, jumping from boulder to boulder, slipping and sliding, but, as she said afterwards, going too fast to fall. The person in the water had put up a wet hand, crying hoarsely for help, and the leaping, suffocating bound which her heart gave told her that it was Jervis Ferrars who needed her.

"Can you catch the rope if I throw it?" she cried, flinging the coil on the ground so that it might unwind easily.

"Yes," he said in an exhausted tone, which showed her that she had come only just in time.

As she threw the line she wondered with sick fear in her heart where Mary could be, then saw, to her surprise, that Jervis was holding something up in the water, and understood why he had been unable to land his burden on the steep, shelving bank.

Directly he had caught the rope with his one free hand, she rushed a few steps back up the hill to wind the other end round a tall, upstanding boulder; then hurrying back she began to pull gently on the rope, which Jervis had managed to twist round his arm.

She had forgotten all about Oily Dave, and was fairly startled when his voice sounded close to her, saying: "I've got the rope; see if you can ketch 'old of the gal quick, for he's got cramp, sure as blazes!"

Katherine made a dash forward, entered the water nearly to her waist, and, seizing Mary with one hand, clutched at Jervis with the other, holding both until

Oily Dave came to her aid and dragged Mary's unconscious form out of the water, while she stood clinging to Jervis, unable to lift him, and fearing that he would slip from her arms back into the water.

Then Oily Dave came back, and, with much puffing and snorting, assisted her in dragging Jervis out of the water also, while Hero barked like a wild thing, and capered round in mad delight because the rescue had been effected. The barking did good, too, for it brought Mr. Selincourt and the two portage men hurrying to the spot, where they found Katherine doing what she could for Mary, who still lay in limp unconsciousness, while Oily Dave worked with perspiring energy at rubbing the cramped limbs of Jervis.

"Miss Selincourt is not drowned, she has not been under water long enough," Jervis said faintly. "I think she has just swooned from sheer terror."

"That is what it looks like," said Mr. Selincourt, with a sudden great relief coming into his tone. Then he stripped off his jacket to wrap his daughter in: the other men stripped off their jackets also, the drenching rain wetting them to the skin in about two minutes; but Mary must be wrapped as warmly as possible, and some kind of a litter had to be improvised in which to carry her.

She stirred slightly, put up her hand, and showed signs of returning life, and then her father determined to wait no longer, but to carry her off to Seal Cove as quickly as possible, sending the men back afterwards to bring Jervis. But by this time, with the help of Oily Dave, Ferrars had managed to struggle to his feet, and declared that he would walk back to Seal Cove, if someone would help him.

Katherine came round to him then, saying simply: "If you will lean on me, the men can carry Miss Selincourt, and if you cannot get all the way I can stay with you until the men come back for you."

"Thank you, my dear, you are a brave, good girl," said Mr. Selincourt, and then he hurried away to help the two portage men and Oily Dave to carry Mary across the hills to Seal Cove.

The only litter they had was formed by spreading their jackets under her, then lifting her so and carrying her as best they could—no easy task, for she was well grown and well nourished, and in her present condition of collapse she lay a dead weight on their arms.

The progress of Jervis was at first but a feeble crawl, while the bitter wind seemed to go through him and the driving rain took his breath away. It was the middle of summer, but when the sun hid its face, and the wind blew from the north, it was hard to remember how hot it had been only yesterday.

"Can you bear it?" asked Katherine anxiously, as he shivered and shook, clinging to her because he had so little strength to stand against the blast.

"I must bear it," he answered; "at least it is safer than sitting still. Does the wind often come as chilly as this at midsummer?"

"There are occasional days like this, but the cold don't last long, and then the

sun shines again. Do you think you would be a little warmer if I walked in front of you?" she asked wistfully, for his evident suffering, and her own impotence to relieve it, hurt her dreadfully.

"I don't think the gain of having you for a wind buffer would make up for losing you as a crutch," he said, as he hobbled slowly along in his stockinged feet. He had kicked off his shoes when he went to the aid of Mary, and the rising tide had floated them away.

"I am glad that I am so useful," she said, with a nervous little laugh. She was wet through herself, and shivering with cold and fright, yet despite these drawbacks the occasion was like a festival, and her heart was singing for joy.

"How did you know?" he asked, trying to understand how she chanced to be on hand at the critical moment with a rope.

"Mary had written a note and tied it round the dog's neck, then sent the creature for help. I found it howling on the other bank of the river, and went over to fetch the poor thing home; then I found the note, and came as quickly as I could," she answered.

"You came just in time for me," he said in a shaken voice. "I don't think that I could possibly have held out five minutes longer, because of cramp, and I could not lift Miss Selincourt out of the water."

"I don't think I could have done it either if it had not been for Oily Dave," Katherine answered, a quiver of mirth stirring her tones. "Fancy Oily Dave as a rescuer of people in direful straits! We shall have him posing as a public benefactor soon!"

"He has long been a private benefactor, or at least I have regarded him as such," Jervis said slowly.

"What do you mean?" she asked, looking at him in surprise, and wondering if he had forgotten the grim incident of the flood.

"I feel grateful to him, and always shall, because he left me in the lurch that day when the water came in. I had to owe my life to you that day; and but for you and your rope I must have perished to-day, Katherine. I am really very much in your debt. Do you think I shall ever be able to repay you?"

"Of course; if not me, then someone else. Such things are always passed on," she said lightly.

"Of choice I would rather pay my debt in this case, if indeed it can be paid, to the person to whom I owe it," he said, with a slow emphasis which made her heart beat tumultuously. Then she remembered that it was her duty to stand aside for Mary's sake, and that she must not let this man love her if Mary had set her own affections upon him, as Nellie had more than hinted.

A cold shiver shook Katherine then, for now the chill came from within as well as without, and the dreary day wrapped her exhausted body in its dismal discomfort.

“Don’t talk,” she said with a touch of authority in her tone. “Save your strength for enduring. See, here comes a man running down from the fish-flakes; he has come to help us, and now we shall get on faster, you will find.”

CHAPTER XXI

Matter for Heartache

Three days had passed away, and life had dropped into its accustomed monotony again. Mrs. Burton said there never was anything to vary the sameness of existence at Roaring Water Portage unless someone was in danger of his or her life, and really events had a way of proving her to be right. When Katherine had rushed off in such a hurry that day, to help Mary Selincourt out of her fix, Mrs. Burton had left her sewing, and, taking her sister's work in hand, had finished cleaning the shelves, then restored to them the various canisters and boxes according to her own ideas of neatness, instead of with any remembrance as to how they had been arranged previously.

On reaching home that afternoon, wet, cold, weary, and with chill foreboding in her heart, Katherine's first sensation was one of lively gratitude to Nellie for having dispersed the confusion she had left behind when she departed so hurriedly. But when a customer came in a little later for a quarter of a pound of mustard, and it took half an hour of hard searching to find it, Katherine began to wonder whether after all it would not have been easier to have been left to deal singlehanded with the confusion on the floor, for at least she had known where to find things.

Then someone wanted corn-flour, which entailed a still longer search; but the culminating point came when Mrs. M'Kree sent down in hot haste for carbonate of soda and dried mint, to make some remedy for an unexpected attack of dyspepsia. It took exactly one hour and ten minutes by the clock to find the carbonate of soda, followed by ten minutes' active search for the mint. After this experience Katherine decided that tidiness might be too dearly bought, and set to work to re-arrange matters after a more practical pattern.

But all this took time, and, with her other work added on, effectually prevented her having time for moping, which was of course a very good thing. She had not seen Jervis since the slow walk from the rocks to Seal Cove; but she knew that he had spent the next day in bed with a bad chill and some fever. Mary was at Seal Cove for two days, but had been brought up river on the previous evening, and was now being looked after by Mrs. Burton, who was never quite so happy as when she had some invalid to care for.

Miles and Phil had gone over to Fort Garry that morning. Katherine ought to have gone, but in view of the confusion which still existed on the shelves it hardly seemed safe to leave Miles in charge, because he had a habit, when he could not find the right thing, of supplying something else which looked almost like it. So

when Katherine found him tying up an ounce of caustic soda, in place of the tartaric acid which had been ordered, it seemed high time to interfere, and she had sent him off with Phil to do her work, while she remained at home sorting out the contents of the shelves.

Mrs. Burton had been over the river to look after Mary, and had come back again, leaving Hero as a sort of deputy nurse and caretaker, in addition to the portage man who was on duty that day. Mr. Selincourt had been down to Seal Cove, and had returned; then Katherine, at work on her knees in the far corner of the store, heard someone enter, and, coming out of her corner, found that one of the portage men had brought her a note from Mary. It ran:—

“Dear Katherine,

Can you come over and spend an hour with me this evening when the store is closed? I feel that I want to see you more than anyone else in the world. Please come.

MARY.”

“Miss Selincourt said that a message would do for answer,” said the man who had brought the note.

Katherine hesitated about what that answer should be. In her heart of hearts she knew very well that she did not want to go away that evening. Jervis had not been up the river for three days, so he would be almost sure to come that evening, and she wanted to be at home when he came, to see for herself that he was none the worse for the long immersion in the water, and the painful barefooted walk to Seal Cove.

But the hesitancy did not last long, and, setting her face in sterner lines than usual, Katherine told the man that she would certainly pay Miss Selincourt a visit that evening when her work was done.

If the work dragged a little after that, and the day lost something of the zest which had marked it before, no one guessed it but herself. She was bright and cheerful, teasing Miles, when he came home, about some fancied indignity which he had received at the hands of the Indians, and rallying Mrs. Burton on the awful confusion wrought by her reforms in the store.

Not even to herself would Katherine admit how much she dreaded the simple friendly visit she had promised to pay that evening. She was afraid that she would see some look or sign of what she feared most to know. Mary Selincourt was a reserved, self-controlled girl, but it is her sort of nature which sometimes betrays itself most completely in moments of emotional strain, and Katherine at this time was very much like an ostrich, being disposed to believe that the thing she could not see did not exist.

‘Duke Radford spent most of his days sitting in the sunshine. He talked

cheerfully, withal a trifle incoherently, to all of his friends and neighbours who came to gossip with him; but he was always at his best when Mr. Selincourt or Jervis Ferrars was there to talk to him, for they spoke of things right away from the ordinary course of daily life, and his mind was clearest about the matters which in other days had concerned him least. But neither Mr. Selincourt nor Jervis Ferrars had been near for three days, and the invalid plainly moped, missing the companionship that cheered him most.

"I am so glad you are going over to sit with Mary to-night, because that will probably mean that Mr. Selincourt will come here, and he will be sure to cheer Father up," Mrs. Burton said, when Katherine came in for a hurried cup of tea before finishing her work in the store.

"He does look tired and sad to-day," Katherine answered wistfully. She could bear her father's condition better when he was cheerful and at ease, but when, as to-day, life seemed a burden to him, then her heart ached at the sight of his suffering.

The last half-hour in the store that evening was harder than the whole of the day which had gone before. The heat was intense, the flies swarmed black in every direction, and, failing other food, appeared anxious to make a meal from Katherine's face; while the customers who thronged the store in unusual numbers seemed all to require the articles most awkward and uncomfortable to serve. There was a run on pickled pork, on brawn canned in Cincinnati, on soap, molasses, and lard; while at least four customers demanded rock brimstone, flour of sulphur, or some other variety of that valuable but homely remedy common to every back-country store.

They were all disposed of at last, however, and then, bidding Miles shut the door quickly before anyone else came, Katherine went away to change her dress and get ready for her visit to Mary. Her best frock went on to-night. She had so few frocks, and these few had to be chosen with so much regard to utility, that there was a uniformity about them which might well pall upon a girl who loved pretty things. The best frock was a severely plain garment of dark-blue woollen stuff, but it was relieved by a shirt of soft white muslin, and, because a pretty girl always looks charming in a plain frock, Katherine in her dark blue was simply bewitching.

Phil rowed her over the river, bragging all the way of the manner in which he was beginning to handle the oars. And then, at Katherine's suggestion, he waited to see if Mr. Selincourt would go over and visit the store for an hour or so.

Katherine found Mary lying on a couch under the open window, looking pale and worn, with a very tired expression. Mr. Selincourt was reading to her, but when Katherine suggested the waiting boat, and 'Duke Radford's loneliness, she at once declared her father ought to go over and pay the invalid a visit.

"You have been shut up with a fractious convalescent nearly the whole day,

dear Daddy, and I am sure it will be a pleasant change to go and chat with Mr. Radford, who is always serene,” she said urgently; and so, more to please her than himself, her father said he would go.

“Come down and see me into the boat, Miss Katherine; it won’t hurt Mary to be alone, and I want to say thank you for coming to the rescue so promptly the other day,” he said.

“I don’t want to be thanked, but I will show you the way to the boat with pleasure, if you are afraid of getting lost *en route*,” Katherine said with a laugh, but falling into his mood, because she saw he wished to say something to her alone.

When they were beyond earshot of the open window, he said anxiously: “Don’t you think Mary looks very badly?”

“She looks fearfully tired,” Katherine answered.

“Yes, that is it. And the tiredness comes from mental strain. Poor Mary! It seems so hard for her to be happy, yet in all her life she has never lacked anything she wanted save one, and even that I am in hopes she will get yet, if only she has the patience to wait for it.”

Katherine’s heart gave a painful bound. What was this one thing that Mary Selincourt wanted but could not have—yet? But she could not answer the question with any satisfaction to herself, and she stood silently watching while Mr. Selincourt took his place in the boat. Then she turned and went back up the path again: but her feet dragged in spite of herself; it was as if some instinct told her she was going to meet a heartache.

Mary welcomed her back with a smile, and, reaching out her arm, dragged a comfortable chair nearer the couch. “Come and sit here, you poor, tired Katherine. What a shame that you should have had to toil all day, until your very feet ache with tiredness, while I have lain here and sighed because the hours crept along so slowly!”

“But that is only because you could not use your foot; you don’t find time drag when you are able to get about,” Katherine remarked, setting her head back against the cushions with a sigh of content, for the chair was of a restful pattern, and she was tired enough to feel the cushions a welcome luxury.

“No, indeed, I can always make sure of interest and amusement when I have two feet available for service, but I was not cut out for the peaceful avocation of the couch invalid, and I just loathe inaction. I would rather have had your day,” Mary said with a sigh.

“Are you sure? To begin with, you don’t know what sort of a day I have had, and to continue, you have never had to work for your living, and don’t know how it feels,” Katherine rejoined, thinking of the stuffy heat of the store, the flies, the pickled pork, and the molasses, which had all tried her patience so sorely in the latter part of the day.

Mary's face took on an injured expression. "Do you think it is quite kind of you to taunt me with never having tasted the sweets of independence?" she asked.

"But you are independent of the necessity to toil," said Katherine.

"That is not true independence. Riches might take to themselves wings, banks might break, investments fail, then where should I be? I am only independent because fate has given me the use of money I have never earned. But you are different; you can carve your own destiny, and are master of yourself."

"Am I? Don't indulge in any such mistaken ideas, I beg of you," broke in Katherine, with a little grimace as in fancy she smelled again the soap and the brimstone which had offended her so much in the store. "I set out to be a school teacher, and came home from Montreal with my head packed full of theories concerning how teaching ought to be done, and how I meant to do it. The first disappointment came when I found there were no children of school age obtainable, except Miles and Phil; for it is very hard to theorize upon one's own kith and kin, at least I found it so. Night school, also, is not an easy practice-ground for new methods, which was disappointment number two; and then came Father's illness, which has settled once and for all the question of my teaching, and has caged me up to the business of the store, whether I would or no. So how can I carve my own destiny, pray?"

Mary clapped her hands. "Why, can't you see that is what you are doing all the time? In spite of adverse circumstances you have done your very utmost, and consequently your very best. You have been brave, patient, cheerful, and always you have spent yourself for others until——"

"Oh, spare me any more, and let us talk about something else!" cried Katherine impatiently; her cheeks were getting hot, and her memory was pointing to many a time when she had been neither brave, nor patient, nor cheerful.

"Yes, of course we will talk of something else, and now you shall have the reverse of the picture, for I want to talk about myself," Mary said, with a quick flush which made the heart of the other turn chill and cold, with dread of what might be coming next.

"Self is a sorry subject for over-much meditation, don't you think? And introspection is very bad for invalids," Katherine said nervously.

"I'm not an invalid, not in that sense at least; I am only incapacitated through having twisted my ankle. But I simply must confide in somebody, or I don't know what will happen to me. I can't open my heart to my daddy; he has had cares enough concerning me already; while if I tried to tell Mrs. Burton she would be so shocked that she would refuse to come and look after me any more; then whatever would become of me until I can get about and look after myself again?"

Katherine laughed, although her heart was heavy as lead. It was plain she would have to be taken into confidence whether she would or no. It was equally plain that she would have to face the consequences afterwards, for she was not the

sort of girl who would be untrue to herself.

“So you have no scruples about shocking me? Or is it that you think I am not easily shocked?”

“A little of both, I think,” Mary replied with a sigh of relief. “The fact is, you are so strong and brave that you inspire confidence.”

“Is that meant for a compliment, and do I have to feel grateful?” asked Katherine.

“That is as you please. But tell someone I must, or I think the miserable business will wear me out, for I cannot sleep. Katherine, I was nearly suicide and murderer too on that awful morning in the tide-hole.”

“What nonsense! What will you be saying next?” cried Katherine with forced cheerfulness; but the colour faded from her cheeks.

“I am not talking nonsense, but unvarnished truth. I might have been saved easily enough, and Mr. Ferrars need have suffered no inconvenience save a wetting, but for my own fault; for he was there long before the water reached the place where I had fallen.”

“But why——?” began Katherine, then stopped short, remembering that she did not want to ask questions, nor to seek information.

“But why wasn’t I saved before, were you going to say?” said Mary. “Because I would not let myself be. The fact is, down at the bottom I am a coward, just that and nothing more. My life has been so sheltered and easy, too, that there has been nothing to stir into activity any latent bravery that I might have had. Mr. Ferrars could not reach me, or it is probable he would have pulled me from the ledge where I was lying by sheer force. As it was, he waited in the water for a long time, until the tide rose high enough for him to reach me. It was almost high enough; I realized that in another moment I should be dragged into the water, whether I would or no, and I just felt that I could not bear it: so I sprang up with a wild impulse to rush somewhere, anywhere—but I had forgotten my twisted ankle, the pain from which was so intense that I reeled, lost my balance, and was into the water all in a moment.”

“Anyone might have felt like that, and acted just the same under the circumstances,” said Katherine, pitifully. This confession was so utterly different from anything she had expected to hear that her heart grew lighter in spite of herself.

Mary laughed in a dreary, mirthless fashion. “Do you know it is a bitter humiliation to me to owe my life to Jervis Ferrars?” she said brusquely.

“Why?” demanded Katherine, the question dragged from her in spite of herself.

A wave of hot colour surged over Mary’s face; it was not often she blushed, but now she was crimson. “I don’t think I can tell you that,” she replied unsteadily. “In any case it is immaterial to the story, except that he once asked me

a boon I would not grant; and for that I have been sorry ever since, which shows the contrary-mindedness of women, don't you think?"

Katherine nodded; speak she could not. This was worse than anything she had expected. Mrs. Burton had suggested that Mary was in love with Jervis, but here was Mary herself plainly intimating that Jervis had once asked for her love, but that she had refused him, only to regret her refusal ever since.

"He is such a good fellow," went on Mary, with a yearning note in her voice which stabbed Katherine like actual pain. "When Father asked him about the affair in the tidehole, he never once said anything about my fearful panic, which so nearly cost him his life; and the very fact of his reticence has made me feel the meanest creature on the face of the earth. I can scarcely look my father in the face, and when he pities me for having been in such sore straits I feel like sinking through the couch from very shame."

"Why don't you tell Mr. Selincourt then?" asked Katherine bluntly. "He would understand how panic had unnerved you, and certainly he would not judge you harshly."

"I can't tell him; I am not brave enough. I told you I was a coward, and so I am, especially in matters of that sort. It is an awful thing to me to lose anyone's good opinion. My pride, I suppose; but really I can't help it," Mary answered with a shrug.

"Yet you have told me," said Katherine, forcing a smile. "Were you not afraid of losing my good opinion, or was it that you did not care?"

"I was just desperate; I had to own up to someone, and so, from love of contrast I suppose, I turned to you, who are always brave," Mary said.

Katherine shook her head: "You make a great mistake; I am a horrible coward underneath. I think all girls are; it is one of the weaknesses of our nature which neither training nor hardship will overcome."

"Do you expect me to believe you when you talk like that?" asked Mary. "What about that time when you got on to the ice to get Jervis Ferrars out of Oily Dave's flooded house? Do you think a girl who was a coward could have done that?"

"I could not have done it if I had stayed to think about it," replied Katherine, a soft flush stealing into her cheeks. "But there was no time to think about oneself, the thing had to be done quickly, so it was easy enough. If I had set out from home that morning, knowing what was in front of me, I could not possibly have faced it, of that I am quite sure."

"In other words, what it really amounts to is this: we are all cowards by nature, but it is possible, by cultivating the grace of self-sacrifice, so to forget ourselves in our care for others that we can rise above our natural cowardice, and become as brave or braver than men," said Mary.

"It sounds like a sermon put that way," Katherine replied with a laugh. "Why

don't you take to writing books, if you can express yourself so much to the point?"

"Because, before writing books successfully, one must have lived, not merely existed, as I have done," Mary answered a little sadly. Then she said in a different tone; "You have done me a lot of good, and I shall sleep to-night like a top—the first real rest I have had since that miserable morning on the rocks."

"I shall sleep too, I hope, for I have a big day's work to-morrow," Katherine said, rising to go.

"Give me a kiss, dear, just to show me that you don't despise me for being a coward, or rather for remaining a coward," Mary said, drawing Katherine's head down.

There was a wild desire in Katherine's heart to push off those caressing hands, and rush away in all haste: but she did not yield to it, realizing that this also was a time for self-forgetting; so, stooping, she kissed Mary on both cheeks.

CHAPTER XXII

A Business Offer

A fortnight slipped away. August had come in, with lengthening nights, which sometimes had a touch of Arctic cold in them. But it was glorious summer still, and although in those uncultivated wastes there was little harvest from the land, the harvest of the sea went merrily on. Mary Selincourt was out and about again, limping a little at first, and leaning on a stick, but soon gaining strength enough to go about as usual; only now, made wise by experience, she took good care to avoid places of danger like the tideholes.

Since that evening of confidential talk with Katherine, Mary had honestly striven for the grace of self-forgetfulness; but the virtue is not learned in one lesson, nor yet in two, and she would probably have given up striving, through disgust at her own failures, if her pride had not been deeply stirred, and the obstinate part of her nature brought into full play.

Pleading hard work as an excuse, Katherine avoided her after that evening, from a secret dread of any more confidences. This was easier than it otherwise would have been, owing to Mrs. Burton having taken the twins over to Fort Garry to spend a week with Mrs. M'Crawney, which left Katherine with the burden of housekeeping on her shoulders in addition to the business of the store.

Jervis Ferrars came up sometimes in the evening to sit and talk with the invalid on every subject under the sun, from lunar rainbows to earthquakes, but he got little chance of speech with Katherine, who was always feverishly busy over some task which absorbed her whole attention.

The day after Mrs. Burton came back from Fort Garry another vessel arrived from Liverpool to anchor off Seal Cove. Only one more boat would be likely to get in before winter came again, and when an occasion is so rare it is likely to be made much of. The captain held a sort of reception on board, to which everyone in Seal Cove was invited. The M'Krees came down from the second portage with all their babies; Mrs. Jenkin appeared in finery which no one even dreamed she possessed; and Oily Dave was magnificent in a frock-coat of shiny black cloth, worn over a football sweater of outrageous pattern.

Katherine and her father were the only stay-at-homes, but 'Duke Radford was not fit for excursions of that sort, and if Katherine had gone Miles must have stayed at home, which would have been rather hard on a boy as fond of ships as he was. But although everyone went to the reception, some of them did not stay long, and one of the first to leave was Mr. Selincourt, who had himself rowed up river and landed at the store to ask Katherine if she would give him a cup of tea.

“With great pleasure. Please go in and talk to Father; I shall be free in a few minutes, and then I will come and make tea for you both,” Katherine answered, holding open the door between house and store, while she smiled upon the visitor, who was more welcome than he knew. She was serving an Indian squaw, who demanded bright calico, ’bacco, and as much of anything else as she could get, for fourteen beaver skins partly dressed, and as soft as velvet.

Beaver, even in that district, was becoming very scarce. Indeed, Katherine was sure that these skins must have come a long distance, probably seventy or eighty miles, from some part of unknown Keewatin, where no foot of white man ever trod, and where even the red man only went at trapping time. She bought the skins, of course, adding to the purchase price a box of chocolates with a picture on the lid, a treasure which set the red woman in a state of the most complacent satisfaction.

When the squaw had departed, Katherine carefully locked away the skins before going in to make tea, for the Indians were adepts at roguery, and if by any means the woman could have stolen them, she would probably have returned to the store to offer them in barter again within the next hour. Katherine had been caught like that often enough to have become exceedingly careful. She was talking about the exceeding beauty of the skins as she watched the kettle beginning to boil, and Mr. Selincourt immediately said that he should like to see them.

“Will you wait until to-morrow or the next day? Then I will show you all that we have got. But it is rather dirty work pulling them out and unrolling them, and I have just put on a clean frock,” Katherine said, laughing at the idea of putting a possible customer off in such a fashion.

“I will wait certainly, and if the day after tomorrow will suit you, I will come then and see if you have anything which Mary might like me to buy for her. By the way, my men are behind with the mail this time, a week late, and I am still uncertain whether or no we shall have to go down to Montreal for the winter,” Mr. Selincourt said, as he helped Katherine to put cups and saucers on the table.

“If they had come in time, would you have left by this boat?” Katherine asked. The question of winter quarters had been constantly talked of during the last week or two, but nothing had as yet been decided upon, owing to the delay in the coming of the two men with the expected mail.

“No, this boat will go straight to Liverpool. The next will come round from Quebec, and return there before going to England; and that must be our way south, I think, unless we decide to return as we came, by river and trail.”

“We shall all miss you very much,” Katherine said regretfully; for the pleasant, kindly man whom she had feared so greatly at first had been such a good neighbour that his absence would be keenly felt.

“I should not like it if I were not missed; but I am not going for long, remember. With the opening of the waters I shall be back again, to settle for good,

I hope. England is a fine country to be born in, but Canada is the land of my choice, and I have never yet seen a part of it that I like better than these Keewatin wilds; it is unspoiled nature here," Mr. Selincourt said, rubbing his hands with great enthusiasm.

"Wait until you have tried a winter here, before speaking too positively about it; you may find the isolation too dreadful to be borne. We who are used to it do not mind so much, but a person accustomed to daily papers and frequent posts would seem entirely out of the world," she said, thinking of the long, long nights, when the wolves howled in the woods, and the silent weeks when the falls were frozen; and she wondered how this man, who had been brought up in cities, could bear to think of such a life.

He laughed in a cheery, unconvinced fashion. "I have thought of all that: but I can live without daily papers, or letters either, if need be; although, if Roaring Water Portage develops as I believe it is going to do, without doubt we shall get a regular postal service of a sort. If it can't be done any other way, I will do it myself. Only I must have a bigger house, for in winter we should be very much cramped in that little hut over the river."

Katherine nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, you would want a big room for giving parties and entertainments. Mary would make a lovely hostess, and the fisher folk would feel as if they were living in a new world. Oily Dave's dreadful whisky would have no chance at all against the attractions offered by your big house."

Mr. Selincourt frowned. "That drink-selling of his is the thorn among my roses of content, and I don't see how to put it down just at present. I can't, from sheer decency, send the man packing, just after he has helped to save my daughter from a dreadful death. Of course I know that he only helped, and that you could and would have done it without him if he had not been there, still, he was there, and I must remember it in his favour, although he has charged pretty heavily for his services."

"That is my fault, I fear," Katherine said in laughing apology. "But I know what Oily Dave is, and that the one thing to move him is money; so when Mrs. Jenkin told me he was the only man about, I told her to say to him he must come at once, for there was money in the work."

"You were quite right, and if you had promised him a hundred dollars I would cheerfully have paid it," Mr. Selincourt replied; and then he turned to talk to 'Duke Radford, who had been sitting all this time with his head resting on his hand, and taking no notice at all of what the others were talking about.

But when the tea-things were cleared away, and Katherine had gone back to the store again, Mr. Selincourt followed her and commenced talking afresh of what he meant and hoped to make of that particular part of the world in the course of the next two or three years. He had a special purpose in coming up river that afternoon, for he wanted to consult Katherine on a business point, and did not feel

very sure of his ground.

Being a straightforward man in all things, however, he stated bluntly what he had to say. "I want to buy your land, if I can, Miss Katherine, and I am prepared to pay you any price in reason that you like to ask me for it. I understand that your father owns the river frontage for about a mile on this side of the water, which is practically from here to the swamps, and it is land that I should very much like to possess."

"But it is not mine to sell," she said blankly, too much taken by surprise to know whether she felt pleased or offended by the suggestion.

"I know it is not. But your father cannot be approached on any question of buying or selling, so I had to come to you to see how you felt about it, and I want you to think the matter over," Mr. Selincourt replied.

"All the thinking in the world cannot alter the position so far as I am concerned," said Katherine, with a little gesture of weariness. "Our father is apparently a hopeless invalid, afflicted more in mind than in body, yet no really qualified doctor has seen him, to certify his unfitness for managing his own affairs. We, his children, are all under age, except Nellie. By the way, why did you not go to her?—she is the eldest. Though, even if you had, she could only have spoken as I have done."

"I came to you because you stand in your father's place, carrying on business in his name," Mr. Selincourt said quietly. "And if you felt that it would be for the good of yourself and the others to have some easier life than this, it would be very much my pleasure to help you in realizing your wishes."

"But how?" asked Katherine, who failed to see how her father's property could be disposed of without consulting him, while he was in life, and they, his children, were all under age save one.

Mr. Selincourt smiled. "Things can mostly be managed when one wants them to be done. If you and the others believed it would be for the good of the family to sell your father's property, we could bring a doctor up here to certify to his unfitness for business. Your sister would have to be made acting trustee for the rest of you, and so the thing would be done."

Katherine shook her head in a dubious fashion, saying: "I will talk to the others about it if you wish, but I do not think it will make any difference; we must just go on as we are doing, and make the best of things as they are. Of course I don't know much about business, except what I have picked up anyhow, for my profession is teaching; but we have done very well since the work has been dumped into our hands, and our profits this year are in excess of any preceding one's."

"That is very encouraging. But then you would succeed in anything you undertook, because you put your whole heart into it, and that is the secret of success," Mr. Selincourt said warmly. After a momentary hesitation he went on:

“Mind you, this is a business offer that I am making you, and even though I might give you double or treble what your land would fetch in the open market at the present time, I should still look to get a fifty-per-cent return on my invested capital, although I suppose it is very unbusinesslike of me to tell you so.”

“But how would you do it?” demanded Katherine.

“My dear young lady, I believe there is a fortune in every acre of ground on either side of the river,” said Mr. Selincourt excitedly. “Mary is keen on geology, as you know, and I have studied minerals pretty closely. We have found abundant traces of iron, of copper, and of coal. Now, the last is more important than the other two, for without it they would be practically useless, so far from civilization; but with it they may be worked to immense advantage.”

“Would not the working be rather costly at the first?” Katherine asked, with a sensation as if her breath were being taken away.

“Doubtless! It has already been proved, over and over again, that if you want to get a fortune from under the earth you must first put a fortune in it,” he replied.

“But suppose, after you had put it in, you found yourself disappointed in your returns—discovered, perhaps, that there was no fortune awaiting you in the ground after all? What would you do then?—for of course you could not get back what you had spent,” said Katherine, with an air of amusement, for to her the statement of there being a fortune in every acre of that barren ground sounded like fiction pure and simple.

“In that case I should probably have to take off my coat, roll up my sleeves, and go to work to earn a living for myself and Mary; but I am not afraid of having to do it just yet,” he answered, laughing. Then as a customer entered the store he went off to talk to 'Duke Radford, who was sitting outside in the sun, and Katherine did not see him again that evening.

As in duty bound, she decided to take counsel with the others, although her own mind was fully made up with regard to Mr. Selincourt's offer. Life in some other more civilized place would probably be easier and pleasanter for herself. Such work as she had to do now was labour for men, and by no means suitable for women or girls. But it was not herself she had to think of first in this case; Miles and Phil were the ones to be considered here, and she determined that the light in which Miles regarded the question should be the standpoint from which she would view it too. By this time she was quite satisfied in her own mind of her ability to keep the business working in a profitable manner; but if she were to venture upon earning a living for the six who were dependent upon her efforts in some other way, she would not be so sure of herself, and to doubt might be to fail.

It was not easy to get time to confer all together in that busy household, but by good fortune a chance occurred that very evening, and Katherine took it thankfully enough, knowing that it might be long before such an opportunity came again. Her father had gone to bed, tired out with his day of sitting and walking in the

sunshine, and was sleeping peacefully. The twins had also been put to rest, and were droning themselves to sleep in a drowsy sing-song duet with which they always filled the house before subsiding into their nightly slumber.

“Don’t go to bed for a few minutes, Phil; I want to talk to you. We have got to have a family conclave,” said Katherine, as Phil, with a mighty yawn, was turning his steps to the ladder which led to the loft.

“What’s a conclave? And it is no use going on at me about that bucket of water I tilted over down the ladder on to Nick Jones; it stood so handy, and wanted such a little push, that I just could not help doing it,” the boy answered in a sullen tone. He had been in mischief on board the steamer, escaping with a warning from the captain and a lecture from Mrs. Burton; but he was by no means repentant yet, although perhaps a trifle apprehensive of the form of reprisal which Nick Jones might choose to take.

Katherine laughed. She had been in mischief herself too often when at Phil’s age not to feel sympathy with him on the score of the prank he had played that afternoon. It was this same sympathetic understanding of their moods and actions which gave her so much influence with the boys, enabling her to twist them round her little finger, as Miles expressed it.

“A conclave is a talk, discussion, or argument, but it has nothing to do with your getting into mischief, Phil. It was a great temptation, as you say, and I expect that in your place I should have longed to do the same. Only there is another side from which to view the business, and that is the side of Nick Jones. No doubt he feels a bit ruffled, and if he thrashes you for your impudence, or ducks you in the river, why, you will just have to take it lying down.”

“He has got to catch me first,” said Phil, with that disposition to swagger in which he delighted to indulge. Then he burst out eagerly, as he slid his arm round her waist and leaned his head back against her arm: “It was truly lovely, Katherine, and you would have laughed until you choked if you had been there. Nick was just setting his foot on the bottom of the ladder, and his face was all smuts and smudges, so that he looked as if he had not washed for a fortnight; he had got his mouth open too, wide open, and I guess that was the first mouthful of clean water that he has swallowed for a good long while past.”

“You are really a shocking boy, and if you get a ducking it will be only what you deserve,” said Katherine, who was laughing at this picture of the discomfiture of Nick Jones. “But sit down here and let us get our business settled, because we are all tired and longing for bed.”

“I’m not tired,” said Miles, shutting the book he had been reading with a sigh. It always seemed to be time to go to bed when he wanted to sit up, just as it was always morning and time to get up when he was in the full enjoyment of being in bed.

“But you will be tired to-morrow, and no one who is weary can do the best

that is in him,” said Katherine gently.

CHAPTER XXIII

The Majority Decides

To the surprise of Katherine, Mrs. Burton was very anxious that Mr. Selincourt's offer should be accepted, and she urged that point very strongly.

"If you were a boy, Katherine, I would not say one word to influence you either way. Even now it is for your sake, not mine, that I should like to take the chance of getting away from this place. For myself, I would rather be here than at any other place in the wide world; but I do know that you are hopelessly buried alive, and the work you have to do is unsuitable for any girl."

Katherine put up her hand with a pleading gesture, and there was distress in her eyes as she said hurriedly: "That is not fair to the boys, Nellie. I asked that you should all speak for yourselves, not for each other; that can be done afterwards: the main thing is to know how we each feel about the matter personally. Now, Miles, let us know what you think?"

Miles fidgeted, looked supremely uncomfortable, and finally burst out: "I think it is just horrid to go settling things like this about Father, as if he were dead, while he is still alive!"

"Just what I feel myself," broke in Katherine, giving Miles an affectionate squeeze. "Still, dear, the necessity has arisen to discuss the business, and we must just face it as other disagreeables have to be met and overcome. So, putting Father entirely out of the question for the moment, tell us what you think you would like best."

"That can be done in a very few words," he said gruffly. "I dare say it sounds beastly selfish, but I'd rather stay here than go anywhere else on the face of the earth. The land is our own; why should we not keep it? We have got a good paying business together; why should we give it up? If we could pull through last winter and make a profit, we certainly ought to do better still this year, for we are all wiser, older, and stronger. It is fearfully hard on Katherine to be obliged to do the journeys, I know, but that can stop when I am a bit older, and more of a dab at valuing pelts."

"Now, Phil, it is your turn," said Katherine quickly; she had seen that Mrs. Burton was about to speak, and was anxious that Phil should have first chance.

But the boy was half-asleep, and had to be well shaken up by Miles before they could bring him to a full understanding of what was required of him. Then he asked drowsily: "If we went to live anywhere else should I have to go to school in summer as well as in winter?"

"Of course you would," retorted Mrs. Burton promptly; adding, with a touch

of quite unusual severity: "and it would be a very good thing for you, because in that case you would have no time to play such monkey tricks as that which you indulged in to-day."

"Then I'd rather stop here. School in winter is quite tiring enough, but school all the year round would about wear me out. Store work is just play compared with the fag of simple equations and that sort of thing."

Katherine and Miles laughed merrily, while even Mrs. Burton had to smile. Phil's attitude towards book-learning had always been one of utter distaste, although in other things he was a good, hard-working boy, never disposed to shirk nor to waste his time, even if the matter in hand was not entirely to his mind.

"Now you have all said what you think and feel about it," said Katherine, "I can have my say on the matter, and I might begin by putting the most conclusive argument first, which is that I am quite certain we have no legal or moral right to lay a finger on Father's business affairs at present; I mean, in the way of upsetting them. If things were different, and the business was not prospering, we might have some excuse for meddling and changing; as it is, we have none."

"Then what did you make all this bother about?" demanded Phil, who had been roused from his sleepiness by having a wet dishcloth tucked firmly round his neck by Miles.

"Because it is a privilege we all share equally to do our very best for our father, and no one of us ought to decide anything momentous concerning him without taking counsel with the others," Katherine answered, leaning forward and catching the dishcloth, which Phil had aimed at Miles.

"It is all very well for Mr. Selincourt to offer us a fancy price for our land, but if there is a fortune in every acre why shouldn't we have it? I shouldn't in the least mind being a millionaire," said Miles.

"Of course you would not; neither should I: but the secret of the whole matter turns, according to Mr. Selincourt, on first of all having a fortune to put into the ground before we can get out the one that is there waiting for us," laughed Katherine.

"Very well, we'll stick at the store until we have made our pile, then we can do as we like about throwing it away in order to get another. Meanwhile we will keep the land, while Mr. Selincourt amuses himself by digging holes and flinging away money on the other side of the river," said Miles, getting up from his chair and yawning widely.

"Hear, hear!" echoed Phil, clapping his hands.

"Nellie, dear, it is the majority that decides, and you have lost," Katherine said, as she hustled the boys off to bed, and prepared to retire herself.

"For my own part, as I said before, I'm not sorry to lose, and I do feel as you do, that we have no right to dispose of Father's property," Mrs. Burton said. Then she went on, her voice shaken by real feeling: "But, Katherine, the life you have to

lead just about breaks my heart. You are the brightest and cleverest of us all, and should have the best chance, instead of which you just have no chance at all. Take to-day, for instance; we have all been out enjoying ourselves, whilst you have been grubbing at home at work.”

“It had to be either Miles or me,” Katherine reminded her gently; “and think how he enjoyed it. There are so many pleasures which come my way that would not interest him at all, and that makes me so thankful for a chance of giving him a treat like that of to-day.”

“I don’t mind going out with Miles, because his manners are decent, and he is so quiet,” said Mrs. Burton, “but I did not know where to put my head for very shame when Phil threw that pail of water on to Nick Jones.”

“It was very foolish and silly, of course, and I expect Phil will have to pay pretty dearly for his mischief. If only Nick will pay him back in a manly fashion, without being cruel, I shan’t care. Boys learn wisdom quicker through having to bear the consequences of their own actions, and it does not do for them to be too much shielded. Did you have a pleasant time?”

“Yes; it was lovely. The captain and the officers were so polite and nice, and the tea was very prettily done. Mary was there, of course, and Mr. Ferrars. I heard a good bit of talk about them too,” Mrs. Burton said, with a happy little wag of her head. Her own hope and joy in life having become so much a thing of the past, made her much more interested in the concerns of others.

“What sort of talk?” asked Katherine. Of course she knew very well what the answer would be, and that it would make her heart ache worse than ever; but the situation had got to be faced, so the sooner she became hardened to the pain the better for her peace of mind.

“Oh, the usual things! Mrs. M’Kree said she thought they would make a lovely pair: for though Mary isn’t pretty, she is very distinguished; and Mr. Ferrars has a way of carrying himself which makes me think he must come from a very good family indeed. I noticed that Mary’s manner was very different to him to-day, and from the way he treated her it looked almost as if they had come to an understanding.” Mrs. Burton’s air was one of beaming satisfaction now, for she liked Jervis Ferrars quite well enough to be glad there was a chance of his marrying a rich wife, and so being lifted out of the fierce struggle with narrow means.

Katherine’s heart felt sick and cold within her. She remembered what Mary had said about the boon asked by Jervis, which had been denied, and the denial regretted ever since. Probably that rescue from the tidehole had given Jervis the courage and the right to ask his boon again, and this time Mary would know her own heart too well to refuse happiness, even though it came to her at the hands of a poor man.

She was glad to turn out early next morning and go with Phil to do the “back-

ache” portage, because it took her away from any likelihood of an encounter with Mary, who would probably be brimming over with happiness.

“It is quite natural that she should feel like that, and I am very glad for her,” Katherine announced to herself in a defiant tone, as she loaded packages of groceries and bundles of dry goods on to the dogs in the morning, for them to carry over the portage to the boathouse above the falls.

It never once occurred to her that she could have made a mistake, or that she had jumped to wrong conclusions in the matter. She was so used to making up her mind on all sorts of subjects without any waste of time, that naturally she decided she was right in this thing also. The dogs trotted up the portage path with a hearty goodwill, for they had the sense to know that the journey was not a long one and that their work would soon be over. There were only three of them this morning, for Hero was at the house over the river.

Katherine and Phil followed the dogs. They also carried burdens, and, as the portage path was steep, they were glad not to waste their breath in talking while they toiled up the hill. The last dog, which walked just in front of Katherine, carried two wooden boxes, filled with marmalade for Mrs. M’Kree, and it was funny to see how careful the creature was to keep right in the middle of the path, so that its burden did not bump against the rocks which projected on either side of the narrow trail.

“Good dog! You shall have a smear of marmalade on your biscuit for supper to-night, if I don’t forget it,” Katherine said, when the boathouse was reached without any danger to the consignment of marmalade.

“Pity to waste good stuff like that on a creature which can’t appreciate it. Now, I am very gone on marmalade,” remarked Phil, as he put the two boxes into the boat.

“You shall have some for supper too; but you must not begrudge the poor dog just a little taste,” Katherine said, as with a brief word of command she sent two of the dogs hurrying back to the store for some bundles of meal and flannel that had been left behind for a second journey.

While the dogs were gone, she and Phil stowed into the boat all the goods which had been brought over, then they sat down to wait for the remainder of the load, and Phil’s tongue began to be busy on the events of yesterday.

“I’m downright glad we’ve got to do the backache portage to-day, because, as we can’t be in two places at once, I shan’t be found at the store if anyone comes to see me special,” he said, winking up at a bluebird which sat on a bough above his head. The bird gave a little chirp, whisked its tail, and then stayed motionless, as if much interested in the talk.

“Who would be likely to make a special visit to you to-day?” asked Katherine, momentarily forgetting Phil’s prank of yesterday.

“Nick Jones, of course. I guess if I had been minding store to-day, and had

seen him coming in at the door, my heart would have about gone down into my boots," admitted Phil, with great candour.

"But he may come to-morrow, you know," suggested Katherine.

"No, he won't, for a lot of them start the next morning in the *Mary* for a week's fishing off the Twins; and Mr. Ferrars is going too, I know, because I heard him say so," replied Phil.

"The Twins are those two islands east of Akimiski, are they not?" asked Katherine.

"I suppose so; they are out in the Bay somewhere, I know, and they are very dangerous, because there are such strong currents all round them and no end of hidden rocks," Phil said in a cheerful tone, as if he were rather pleased than otherwise that his enemy had to face so much danger in the near future.

"That must be the place where a boat was wrecked two years ago and all the people were drowned. I wonder they are taking the *Mary*," said Katherine, for that was the biggest and best of the new boats, built by Astor M'Kree in the previous winter.

"They are taking her because she is such a good boat; no use having a leaky old tub for such work. Here come the dogs!" and Phil jumped up in such a hurry that the bluebird flew away in alarm.

The dogs were unloaded, the things they had brought being packed into the boat; then Katherine and Phil took their up-river way, and the dogs went back to the store to spend the morning as they thought fit.

Phil's news, had puzzled Katherine a great deal. It seemed so strange to her that Jervis Ferrars should go off to the rough, dangerous work of fishing off the shores of the inhospitable Twins if he were really engaged to Mary. His absence from Seal Cove would mean that someone would have to do his work there, as the boats coming in had to have their cargoes totalled and entered, while the drying, sorting, and packing needed constant supervision. Perhaps some little ghost of a hope crept into her heart that morning; at any rate, the pull up river seemed easier, and it was not such hard work as usual doing the second portage, even though she had to carry the wooden boxes, with the jars of marmalade for Mrs. M'Kree, swung across her own shoulders, a heavy, uncomfortable burden to be carried through the hot sunshine.

Backwards and forwards they went along the portage path, but they did not have to carry the boat, fortunately, as a birchbark belonging to Astor M'Kree was always available for their use on the long portage—a great convenience this, as Katherine and Phil would hardly have managed the burden of the boat between them. Mrs. M'Kree as usual received Katherine literally with open arms, and pressed her to remain on her way back for tea. This invitation Katherine would have promptly refused, but for an appealing look from Phil, whose courage regarding a meeting with his enemy was fast evaporating.

“You are very kind. We ought to be back about four o’clock, then perhaps we can stay for an hour,” Katherine said, accepting on Phil’s behalf, although her own desires were solely and entirely for getting home as fast as she could.

“A regular brick you are, Katherine!” exclaimed Phil, as they settled themselves in the birchbark for the journey up to the long portage. “I just wish to be as late home as possible this evening, and then most likely I shall be tired enough to want to go to bed directly I get there.”

“It strikes me that it is not your strength which is likely to give out, but your nerve,” Katherine answered with a laugh; then went on in a graver tone: “I don’t scold you when you play monkey tricks, as you did yesterday, but it is hard work not to despise you when I see you trying to escape the consequences of what you have done by sneaking off to bed, pretending you are tired, when in reality you are only afraid.”

Phil reddened, looked dreadfully ashamed of himself for about two minutes, then said in a cheerful tone: “It is rather nice of me to be willing to play round with those sticky M’Kree babies, as if I were a kid myself.”

“I suppose it is; yet down underneath I dare say you rather like the playing round, as you call it,” laughed Katherine, and then she worked on in silence up the solitary reaches of the river, with the glaring sunshine on her unsheltered back, and swarms of flies tormenting her unprotected face and neck. These last became such an intolerable nuisance after a time, that she was forced to swathe herself in a hot and cumbering veil.

The “back-ache” portage was worthy of its name that day, and it was considerably past noon before they arrived at the Indian village to which they were bound. At first they could not find anyone at home, the whole community being away in the forest peeling bark from the birch trees for the making of canoes. But the same kind of thing had happened before, so Katherine was not at a loss. Picking up a tin pan, she commenced beating a military tattoo upon it with a thick stick; while Phil, with a trumpet improvised from a roll of birchbark, produced an ear-splitting din which must have carried far through the quiet woods. It was not long before their customers arrived on the scene, and then the business of barter began. A very long business it proved to-day, for, the weather being warm and comfortable, the red men and women seemed to thoroughly enjoy sitting round at their ease and taking time to consider whether they wished to be purchasers or not.

[Illustration: Bartering with the Indians]

But Katherine was patient and tactful too. After all, the training of a teacher is not lost in the buying and selling of a backwoods store. The same gifts of persuasion are needful in both cases, and the same gentle firmness is useful in settling the bargain which has come to completion. It was four o’clock before Katherine was able to turn her back on the Indian village, but by then she had sold

every article which had been brought up river, and was laden with a currency of valuable furs and some specimens of narwhal ivory, very beautiful, but apparently of great age. The same kind of thing had happened before, and she could never quite make out where it had come from, for the narwhal was so rarely met with in the Hudson Bay waters now, and was a creature so fierce, that it was puzzling to know how people in birchbark canoes, armed only with spears, could ever manage to secure it. A theory held by her father in his days of health was, that in places along those little-known shores the tusks of narwhals dead centuries before might be found by the Indians buried in the sands, and it was finds of this sort which they dug up and offered for sale.

Their stay at Mrs. M'Kree's house was very short after all, though Katherine was thankful indeed for the cup of tea awaiting her there, and much too grateful for the kindness to be fastidious about its overdrawn condition. As a matter of fact, the tea had been gently on the boil for more than two hours, but this was a minor detail in the comfort of people who had an outdoor life and worked hard from dawn to dark.

It was pleasant to slip down on the swift current of the river when the cool of the evening came on. Katherine was almost sorry when the home portage was reached, for it was like taking up the burden of life again, and she was tired enough to feel that rest was a luxury indeed. The dogs were soon over at the boathouse to help with the parcels, and then Katherine and Phil, both heavily laden, passed up the portage path, and night came down.

There were lights twinkling in and about the store when they reached it, and Katherine laughed to see how Phil crept past the door of the store, making for the entrance to the house instead.

But she did not call him back, being quite willing to shield his retreat so far as she could possibly do so, for a ducking at that time in the evening would not be pleasant; moreover, Mrs. Burton would have his clothes to dry, which was another consideration of importance just then.

Nick Jones was not in the store when she entered, and she noticed at once that the crowd of evening loungers was less than usual. They were busily talking, too, and although they all bade her a civil good evening, went on with their talk where they had dropped it.

"Mr. Ferrars came up to see you this evening," Miles whispered, when she went to help him with some boxes which were beyond his reach.

"To see me?" Katherine asked in surprise.

"Yes, he even went over the portage to see if you were coming, but he could not wait, because the *Mary* sailed with the evening tide," answered Miles.

CHAPTER XXIV

Mr. Selincourt is Confidential

The hot colour flamed in Katherine's cheeks; but no one saw it, for her back was to the group of men talking by the store door, and Miles had turned round to put on the counter the box which she had reached down for him.

"Why did Mr. Ferrars wish to see me?" she asked, striving successfully to make her voice steady. Of course it might have been that Jervis wanted to see her on some matter of business connected with the store; but in any case, and whatever his errand, it was pleasant to think that he had come up the river on purpose to see her.

"I don't know, he didn't say; but he carried himself with as much swaggering importance as if it were he, and not Mr. Selincourt, who intended buying up as much of Roaring Water Portage as he could lay hands upon," Miles answered, in a grumpy tone. The group of men at the door had moved outside, where it was cooler, so brother and sister were for the moment alone.

"I don't think Mr. Ferrars ever put on much side," protested Katherine, taking up the cudgels in defence of the absent one, although there was an increased heaviness in her heart as she reflected that perhaps, after all, he was betrothed to Mary Selincourt, and hence the inward elation resulting in the outward swagger.

"Oh, he could, sometimes!" went on Miles, who appeared to be in rather a bad temper just then. "I suppose he is going to marry Miss Selincourt, and that is why he puts on such a fearful lot of cheek. Downright horrid money-grubbing, I call it, for before she came he was always——"

"Always what?" demanded Katherine sharply. Her voice sounded a trifle muffled, because for some reason or other she had stuffed her head and shoulders in a bean bin, and was measuring beans in a desperate hurry, which seemed a rather unnecessary task, as she had no orders to fill.

But Miles, who had stumbled perilously near to an indiscretion, plainly thought better of it, and ventured on no more speech concerning the matter, calling instead to one of the men standing outside the door to ask some question about goods which had been ordered for the next day, and had to be sent down to Seal Cove.

Katherine went to bed in a very mixed frame of mind that night. At one moment she was sorry that she had not been at home when Mr. Ferrars came to see her; then, with a quick revulsion of feeling, she was heartily glad that she had been away, and shrank with very real reluctance from the thought of the next time she would have to see him. But that would not be for another week; a good many

things might happen before then, though she did not even guess how many were going to happen.

In the morning Mary came over to the store very early indeed, and her face was in a pucker of dissatisfaction and discontent.

“It is so truly horrid of things to fall out like this,” she began vehemently, bursting into the store, where Katherine and Miles were busy weighing and packing goods which had to be delivered that day.

“How have they fallen out?” asked Katherine with a smile. She was used to Mary’s excitable outbursts, which were usually about trifles too small for notice; but this was a bigger matter.

“The men came up with the mail yesterday; the delay was owing to a breakdown on one of the portages, and they had to camp for a whole week whilst they were repairing their boat. It is very vexing, coming as it does just now, because we should have known our fate so much earlier. We have to go back to Montreal for the winter, and it is so tiresome!” sighed Mary.

“I’m afraid you won’t get much pity for your hard fate,” laughed Katherine, with a lightening of heart which made her secretly ashamed of herself. “I found Montreal very pleasant for winter quarters, and I only wish it were possible for us to spare Miles to go for this next winter.”

“I don’t want to go!” interposed Miles hastily.

“Neither do I, Miles,” said Mary; “so we are both in the same boat. Only the worst of it is I have got to go, whether I like it or not, because my father will not leave me here without him. Such nonsense! As if I were not old enough to take care of myself!”

“Which you are not. Remember the tidehole,” Katherine remarked, in a tone of mock solemnity.

“Once bitten, twice shy! No more tideholes for me,” Mary answered, with a shake of her head. Then she went on: “I have brought over some newspapers for Mr. Radford, but there was no public mail matter in this lot except some English letters for Mr. Ferrars which had come directed to our agent in Montreal; so we sent them straight down to Seal Cove yesterday afternoon without troubling the post office at all.”

“That was very kind of you. If they had been sent here I should have had to deliver them last night after I got back from the long portage,” Katherine answered, as she took the bundle of papers which Mary put into her hand.

“Which would have been a great shame, for I am sure that you must have been tired out. Besides, you would have been too late, for Mr. Ferrars sailed for the Twins last night with the evening tide; and I have got to be clerk and overseer whilst he is away, so I must be off. Don’t you wish me joy of my work?”

“I certainly hope that you will enjoy it,” Katherine replied, and Mary went off in a bustle, calling for Hero, who was her constant companion morning, noon, and

night, a sort of hairy shadow, and devotion itself.

When she had gone, Katherine sighed a little, then said to Miles, who still looked a trifle sullen: "I do wish it had been possible for you to go to the city this autumn. I know Father wished it so much, and here would have been a good opportunity for your journey, because you could have gone with the Selincourts, then you would not have felt so lonely. I know that I nearly broke my heart when I went, because of feeling so solitary."

"I am very glad that I can't be spared, because I simply don't want to go, and should not value the chance if I had it," Miles answered. "I will settle to work at books again directly winter comes, and will put as much time in as I can spare at them, especially at book-keeping. Education is not much good to people who don't want it; and I would rather work with my hands any day than work with my head. But of course there are some things I must know to be a good man of business, and these I can learn at home, I am thankful to say."

Katherine dropped the sugar scoop with which she had been shovelling out brown sugar, and, crossing over to where Miles was standing, gave him a hearty hug and a resounding kiss.

"What is that for?" he asked, with a wriggle of pretended disgust, although there was a lifting of the sullen look in his face.

"Because you are such a thoroughly good sort," she answered. "You have been such a comfort, Miles, ever since Father was taken ill; it was just as if you went to bed a boy and woke up a man."

When the boys had been started off to Seal Cove with a boatload of goods, and Katherine had tidied away the litter in the store, she went into the stockroom at the back to spread out the furs in readiness for the coming of Mr. Selincourt. In an ordinary way she would have taken them over to Fort Garry to-day, but with the prospect of a customer they could wait for a more convenient time.

She was still busy spreading out and arranging pelts of black fox, white fox, silver fox, beaver, skunk, and racoon (there were wolfskins in plenty, too, but these she did not produce, as they were commoner, and so would doubtless not appeal to the rich man's fancy); then she heard a noise of knocking in the store, and, running out, found that Mr. Selincourt and an Indian had arrived together.

Neither of them was in the slightest hurry. But Katherine attended to the red man first, being desirous of getting rid of him, then watched him down the bank and waited until he had embarked in his frail canoe before attending to her other and more important customer.

"Please pardon me for keeping you waiting," she said, turning with smiling apology to Mr. Selincourt; "but that is Wise Eye from Ochre Lake, and he is the wildest thief on the river. Ah, I thought so! He is coming back again. Quick! stand back in that corner behind the stove, and you will see some fun."

Mr. Selincourt promptly flattened himself into a small space between a bag of

meal and a barrel of molasses, while Katherine dived into a recess by the bean bin, and then they waited, holding their breath as children do when playing hide-and-seek.

It was a good long wait, for Wise Eye was a shrewd rogue. Then Mr. Selincourt from his corner saw a figure on all-fours coming over the doorstep. At first he thought it was a dog, because of the peculiar sniffing sound it made, but a second glance showed it to be Wise Eye in search of plunder. Gradually, gradually he edged himself inside, creeping so silently that there was no sound at all, and a thievish hand had just shot out to annex a bag of rice that stood within reaching distance, when Katherine emerged into view and said quietly: "You can't have that rice unless you pay for it, Wise Eye; we don't give things away."

The red man erected himself with a shocked look, as if insulted by the bare mention of stealing, and, opening a dirty hand, showed half a dollar tucked away in his palm.

"Wise Eye not want the rice, nor anything, but what he pay for," he answered loftily; "but he drop his money here and come look for it, just to find it lying close to rice bag, and now he find it he say good morning and go."

Katherine laughed, for, angry as Wise Eye's depredations made her, it was amusing to find him bowled out once in a while.

"Had the fellow really lost his money?" asked Mr. Selincourt, coming out from his hiding-place very sticky on one side and very floury on the other.

"He has none to lose except that one bad coin, which is his greatest treasure, and which he has tendered in payment so often that I am quite sick of the sight of the thing," Katherine replied. "But he keeps the coin ready as an excuse, do you see? I guessed he would try coming back, because you said that you had come to see the furs, and he knows we do not keep those out here in the store."

"Well, he is a wily rogue! What are you going to do now?" asked Mr. Selincourt, as she moved across to the door.

"Turn the key on him; it is the only thing to do. These Indians are really a great trial; we have to keep such a sharp lookout always. It is because of them that we never dare leave things outside unless there is someone to watch."

"Your father is sitting out there in the sun," said Mr. Selincourt, who could never seem to realize the extent of 'Duke Radford's limitations.

"I know, but he would not understand, poor dear; he never notices things like that," Katherine answered, with a mournful drop in her voice, as she turned the key and led the way to the stockroom.

Mr. Selincourt followed silently, and when Katherine first began to show him the furs he looked at them with an abstracted gaze, which showed his thoughts to be far away. But his interest grew in the beautiful things after a time, and he selected with a judgment and discretion which showed that he knew very well what he was about. When he had bought all that he required he turned away from

them, and began to talk of the matter which was uppermost in his mind.

“Well, have you come to any decision about disposing of your land?” he asked.

“Yes,” answered Katherine, who was busy rearranging the pelts which Mr. Selincourt had rejected. “We had a family consultation, and the majority settled the question, and decided that we did not want to sell, and that we had not sufficient reason for selling even if we had wanted it very much indeed. Our business is paying very well, and there is no need to upset existing arrangements.”

Mr. Selincourt nodded his head thoughtfully, then he answered: “I must say I think you have done wisely; although, of course, it is against my own interest to admit it, because I wanted to buy. But it is a very hard life for a girl.”

“It will be easier in a few years, when Miles grows up; and he gets bigger and more capable every day. Oh, I shall have a very easy time, I can assure you, when my brother is a man!” she said, with a laugh.

“I trust you will, and a good time too, for I am sure that no girl ever deserved it more than you do,” he replied warmly. Then he went on: “I had a very hard time myself when I was a young man, an experience so cruelly hard and wearing that sometimes I wonder that I did not lose faith and hope entirely.”

“But don’t you think that faith and hope are given to us in proportion to our need of them?” asked Katherine, a little unsteadily. Her heart was beating with painful throbs, for she guessed only too well to what period of his life Mr. Selincourt was referring.

“Perhaps so. Yes, indeed I think it must be so, otherwise I don’t see how I could have pulled through. I have recalled a good deal about that time since I have been here at Roaring Water Portage, and have seen how you have had to work, and to sacrifice yourself for the good of others; and I have often thought that I should like to tell you the story of my struggle. Would you care to hear it?”

“Yes, very much,” Katherine answered faintly, although, much as she wished to know all about it, she dreaded hearing the story of her father’s wrong-doing told by other lips than his own.

“When I was a very young man I was clerk in a Bristol business house, taking a good salary, and, as I believed, with an unblemished character. My father was dependent on me, and two young sisters, and I was rather proud of being, as it were, the keystone of the home. Then one day an old friend of my father’s came to see me, and paid me fifty pounds, which he said he had owed to my father for twenty years—a gambling debt. He begged and implored me to say no word about it to anyone, especially to my father.”

“Why not, if it was your father’s debt?” asked Katherine, who was keenly interested.

“Because my father would not have taken it, although twenty years before he had paid the fifty pounds out of his own pocket, to save this friend of his from

exposure and ruin. At first I was disposed not to take it either; but, as the man represented to me, I had others dependent on me, and for their sakes I was in duty bound to take it, and to do the best I could for them with it.”

“I think so too,” murmured Katherine; but Mr. Selincourt continued almost as if he had not heard her speak.

“I took the money and banked it with my other savings, feeling rather proud of having such a nest-egg, and making up my mind that when the summer came I would give the girls and the old man such a holiday as they had never even dreamed of before. Then the blow fell. I was called into the room of the chief one morning, and asked if I were a gambler. Of course I said no, and that with a very clear conscience, for I had never been addicted to betting nor card playing in my life. Then I was asked to explain the lump sum of fifty pounds which I had added to my banking account in the previous week.”

“But I thought that banking accounts were very private and confidential things,” said Katherine.

“So they are supposed to be; but the private affairs of a fellow in my position would be sure to get closely overhauled, and a shrewd bank manager might deem it only his duty to enquire how anyone with my salary and responsibilities could afford to pay in big sums like that,” Mr. Selincourt replied. “Of course I could not explain how I had come by the money, and to my amazement I was curtly dismissed, and without a character.”

“How horribly cruel!” panted Katherine, whose hands were pressed against her breast, and whose face was deathly white. No one knew how terribly she suffered then, as she stood there bearing, as it were, the punishment for her father’s guilty silence, while she listened to the story of what his victim had had to endure.

“It did seem cruel, as you say, horribly cruel!” Mr. Selincourt said, a grey hardness spreading over his kindly face, as if the memory of the bitter past was more than he could bear. “The two years that followed were crammed with poverty and privation; there was almost constant sickness in the home, and I could get no work except occasional jobs of manual labour, at which any drayman or navvy could have beaten me easily, by reason of superior strength. I left Bristol and went to Cardiff, hoping that I might lose my want of a character in the crowd. But it was of no use. ‘Give a dog a bad name and hang him’, is one of the truest proverbs we’ve got. What is the matter, child?” he asked, as an involuntary sob broke from poor Katherine.

“Nothing, nothing; only I am so sorry for you!” she cried, breaking down a little, in spite of her efforts after self-control.

“You need not be, as you will hear in a moment; and, at any rate, I don’t look much like an object of pity,” he said, with a laugh. “I was on the docks one winter evening, wet, dark, and late, when I saw a man robbed of his purse. I chased the

thief, collared the purse, and took it back to its owner, who proved to be one of the richest merchants of the town. He wanted to give me money. I told him that I wanted work. I told him, too, about my damaged reputation, and my inability to clear myself.”

“Did he believe you?” she asked eagerly.

“He did; or if he didn’t then, he did afterwards. Years later he admitted that for the first twelve months of my time with him he paid to have me watched; but that was really to my advantage, as I came scatheless through the ordeal.”

“It was really good of him to take so much interest in you,” said Katherine.

“So I have always felt,” Mr. Selincourt answered. “Christopher Ray stood to me for employer and friend. In course of time he became still more, for he gave me his daughter, Mary’s mother, and when he died he left me his wealth.”

“It was not all a misfortune for you, then, that for a time you had to live under a cloud,” said Katherine eagerly.

“Rightly speaking it was not misfortune, but good fortune that came to me when I lost position and character at one blow. I have often thought that perhaps I owed my downfall to someone who either said about me what was not true, or kept silent when a word might have put me straight; but, if so, that person was my very good friend, and it is to him, or to her, that I owe the first step to the success which came after.”

Poor Katherine! One desperate effort she made after self-control, but it was of no use, and, covering her face with her hands, she burst into tears.

CHAPTER XXV

The Rift in the Clouds

“My dear child, I can never forgive myself for having made you cry like this!” exclaimed Mr. Selincourt; for Katherine was sobbing as vigorously as she did most other things, and he was genuinely distressed.

“Oh, I am glad to cry! I mean, I am so happy, because it came out all right. And oh, please do forgive me for having been so foolish! I wonder whatever you must think of me!” and, heaving a deep sigh of relief, Katherine sat up and wiped her eyes.

“I think you are a very charming and tender-hearted young lady. But I shall have to be very careful how I tell you sad things, if this is the way you are going to receive my confidences,” he said, with a rather rueful air; for she was by no means the sort of girl he would have expected to indulge in the weakness of tears.

Katherine laughed. She was desperately ashamed of having been so foolish; but those words of gratitude, spoken by Mr. Selincourt about the person who had wronged him were like balm to her sore heart. It was as if her father had confessed his fault, and had been forgiven on earth as well as in heaven.

“You must pay the penalty of your eloquence by seeing your audience drowned in tears,” she said lightly. Then, rolling up the remainder of the furs, she left the stockroom and returned to the store, whither Mr. Selincourt followed her; and as there were no customers he sat on a box and talked on, as if it were a real pleasure to have found a sympathetic listener.

“Those two years of struggle, of disappointment and bitter poverty, have had their uses,” he said, in a meditative fashion, as he sat looking out through the door, which Katherine had unlocked again. His gaze was on the river, which sparkled and gleamed in the sunshine, but his thoughts were far away.

Katherine answered only by a splitting, rending noise, as she tore a piece of calico. But that did not matter, because he was too much absorbed in his own thoughts to need other speech just then.

“Perhaps if I had not been poor myself I should not have had sympathy with other men who were in the slough and couldn’t get out,” he said, speaking as much to himself as to Katherine.

“It is fine to be able to help other people,” she replied, cutting the next piece of calico to avoid making so much noise.

“Yes, but I think no one realizes the full blessing of it who has not known in his own person what it is to be in trouble and to be helped himself,” he said, his tone still dreamy, and his gaze on the hurrying water.

“Have you helped a great many?” she asked softly.

“A few,” he answered. “Some have been disappointments, of course, and once or twice I have been robbed for my pains; but I have had my compensations, especially in Archie Raymond and Jervis Ferrars.”

“Who is Archie Raymond?” demanded Katherine, who was measuring calico as rapidly, and with as much dexterity, as if she had served an apprenticeship behind a drapery counter, instead of having been trained for teaching.

Mr. Selincourt brought his gaze from the river, jerking his head round to get a good view of Katherine; then he asked, in a surprised tone: “Hasn’t Mary told you about him? I thought girls always talked to each other about such things.”

“What things?” asked Katherine.

“Why, sweethearts, and all that sort of stuff,” he answered vaguely.

Katherine flushed, caught her breath in a little gasp, and, clenching the hand which held the calico, said rather unsteadily: “Mary and I have certainly not discussed sweethearts and that sort of stuff, as you call it.”

Mr. Selincourt laughed in great amusement, then said more gravely: “Mary has been very much spoiled, and in all her life she has never been denied anything save one, as I told you before, and I am hoping very much that it will all come right for her yet, when she has learned her lesson of patient waiting.”

Katherine dropped her calico, and, nerving herself for a great effort of endurance, said: “Won’t you tell me what you mean? I never could understand hints and vague suggestions about things.”

“It is like this,” began Mr. Selincourt, who was only too pleased to get a listener as sympathetic as Katherine: “a year ago last winter Mary fell in love with Archie Raymond, or else he fell in love with her; anyhow they became engaged, although I demurred a little, on account of his inability to support a wife. But I gave way in time, for he was a thoroughly good fellow, and one of the sort who was bound to rise when he got a chance. Mary was exacting, however—I told you she had been spoiled—and Archie wasn’t the sort to be led about on a string like a lapdog; so naturally they quarrelled.”

“Poor Mary!” exclaimed Katherine softly.

“And poor Archie too, I guess,” returned Mr. Selincourt. “It was his misfortune that he cared so much for her. I believe she would have treated him better if he had not been so much her slave; but even slaves can’t endure too much, so he revolted after a time. Jervis Ferrars, who was Archie’s friend, came to Mary and begged that she would see Archie, if only for ten minutes, because there was something to be said between them which could not be put into a letter. But my girl is made of obstinate stuff that crops up in awkward places sometimes; so she sent word by Jervis that if Archie liked to send her a letter of apology she would read it, but she would not see him until that had been done.”

“Did he do it?” asked Katherine eagerly. A white light of illumination had

suddenly flashed into her mind concerning the nature of the boon which Jervis Ferrars had begged at the hands of Mary, and been denied.

Mr. Selincourt laughed. "I told you that he was a man and not a lapdog. That sort don't go crawling round asking pardon for wrongs they have not committed. The next we heard of Archie Raymond was that he had joined Max Bohrsen's Arctic Expedition in place of a man who had fallen out through sickness, and that he had sailed for the Polar Seas on a two years' absence."

"Poor Mary!" sighed Katherine again, then immediately felt ashamed of her own secret light-heartedness.

"Yes, it was poor Mary then," replied Mr. Selincourt, a shade coming over his pleasant face. "The worst of it was that she had only herself to thank for all the trouble that had come upon her, and as it was not a thing to be talked about, it had to be borne without any outside sympathy to make it easier."

"Has she never heard from him since?" asked Katherine softly, and now there were tears in her eyes, and a whole world of pity in her heart for this girl who had deliberately flung away the love she wanted, from pure obstinacy and self-will.

"Only once. Directly she knew that he had gone beyond recall she began to repent in good earnest, and sent him a cable to the only port where his vessel would be likely to stop, something to this effect; 'It is I who apologize; will you forgive?' And after weeks and weeks of waiting this answer came back: 'Yes, in two years' time'."

Katherine drew a long breath, and her eyes were still misty. "How long the waiting time must seem to Mary, and the months can bring her no tidings of what she most wants to know."

"That is true; but I am quite sure it is good for her," Mr. Selincourt answered. "Never before has there been anything in her life which called for waiting or patience, and it is the lessons which are hardest to learn which do us most good."

"Won't Mary be displeased because you have told me all this?" asked Katherine.

"It will make no difference to her if she does not know, and you are not the sort of girl to go about bragging of the things you have been told. But it seemed to me that it might help you to an understanding of Mary's character if you knew," Mr. Selincourt replied rather awkwardly.

Katherine flushed a sudden, uncomfortable red, and began measuring calico in a great hurry; only, as she had turned her work round, and was doing it all over again, it was rather wasted labour. A thought had flashed into her mind that perhaps this good, kindly man had heard some of the talk which was coupling the names of Miss Selincourt and Jervis Ferrars, and so had told her this about Mary of set purpose.

"Thank you for telling me," she said; then went on hurriedly: "I am so glad to know. It explains why sometimes Mary does not look happy. I had thought it just

boredom and discontent.”

“Most people would think so, but that is just because they don’t understand her. She is made of fine, good stuff at the bottom, only sometimes it is rather hard to get at. This week she will be perfectly happy and charming to live with, because she will have to be at the fish sheds all the time, checking the incoming boats; and next week she will be down in the dumps, because she has nothing in the world to do.”

“That at least is a complaint that I am in no danger of suffering from,” laughed Katherine, as, realizing that she had been working twice on the calico, she folded it up and started on another length.

“And I have been wasting your time in a fearful fashion; but perhaps you will forgive me, because I like talking to you so much,” he said, rising from his seat and laughing, as he looked at his watch, to think how the morning had flown. “Now I will go and talk to your good father for a little while, and then I will whistle for Pierre to come over and row me down to Seal Cove for lunch with Mary, to round off the morning.”

Katherine rushed about the store with great vigour and much bustling energy after the visitor had betaken himself outside. Of course he had wasted her morning to a serious extent, but what mattered arrears of work compared with the peace of mind the talk had brought her? Never once since the day on which her father had confided to her the secret trouble which was weighing him down had Katherine been so light-hearted. Now, at least so far as she was concerned, that trouble, even the remembrance of it, might be put away for ever. Mr. Selincourt had said that he owed a debt of gratitude to the person who had wronged him; so plainly there was no question of making up to him for any loss that he had suffered. True, the wrong was there, and nothing could undo the sin which had been committed; but it was the sinner who had suffered, not the sinned against. Katherine looked out through the open door of the store and saw her father walking up and down beside the man he had wronged, and a sharp pang of pity for the invalid smote her heart. His punishment was very heavy; but even she, his daughter, who loved him so well, could not deny that it was just that he who did the wrong should pay the penalty thereof.

“Poor darling Father!” she murmured. “But no one need ever know. Nothing could be gained by dragging the old, bad past to light, and so it shall be buried for ever.” Then, covering her face with her hands, she prayed that the forgiveness of Heaven might rest upon the poor sinner, whose punishment had come to him on earth.

The hours of that day flew as if every one of them were holiday time, instead of being crammed to the full with even harder work than usual. The other matter of which Mr. Selincourt had spoken, Mary’s engagement to the unknown Archie Raymond, Katherine buried deep in her heart, a thing to be gloated over in secret,

a cause for happiness which she did not care to be frank over, even to herself. So the long, busy day went on to evening, and, in spite of all the work there had been to get through, Katherine found herself with half an hour of leisure before bedtime.

She was standing outside, fighting the mosquitoes, and wondering if she had sufficient energy left to go up the portage path to the high ground, to see the moon rise, when she saw the Selincourt boat shoot out from under the alder trees on the other side of the river, and make across for the store.

“It is Mary!” she whispered to herself; and Mary it was, with a weary, white face, and a fleecy white shawl wrapped about her head and shoulders.

“Will you come up the hill, Katherine, and see the moon rise?” she asked, in a tired tone.

“I was just thinking of doing so, only it seemed hardly worth the effort to go up alone; now you have come it will be pleasant,” Katherine answered, and, although she knew it not, there was more friendliness in her tone than Mary had ever found there before.

“Do you know, I tried going up the hill on my side, a better hill than yours, and with a better view, but it was so lonely! Isn’t it funny what a difference companionship makes?”

“Sometimes, and in some moods. But there are other times and other moods in which companionship is a nuisance, and solitude the only thing to be desired. At least, that is how I have felt,” said Katherine. Then she added hastily: “To-night I felt as if I wanted someone to see the moon rise with me, so I am very glad you came.”

They walked up the hill in silence, despite the desire for company which both had felt, and stood together at the top, watching the silver glory of the moon coming up over the black pine trees, with no speech at all until Mary asked with a ring of envy in her tone: “What has come to you to-night?”

Katherine flushed, answering in quick apology: “Please forgive me. It is fearfully rude of me to be so silent and abstracted.”

“It wasn’t that. Speech is only one way of expressing one’s thoughts, and very often not the most eloquent way either. But you look so light-hearted to-night; it shines from your eyes, and—and—well, it is awkward to express what I mean, but it is visible in every gesture. To put it briefly, you look like a person to be envied.”

“I believe I am to be envied,” Katherine answered, flushing again under the amused scrutiny in Mary’s glance. “Everyone who has health and vigour, with an infinite capacity for enjoyment, should surely be envied by those not equally blessed, don’t you think?”

Mary sighed. “I have health and vigour too. I am not so sure about the infinite capacity for enjoyment; but I like work, and plenty of it. Do you know, I thoroughly enjoyed myself at Seal Cove to-day. I went out on the landing wharf to

help the men to count the take, then I entered it, wrote out the tokens, and worked as hard as if I were doing it for a weekly wage.”

“Well?” There was gentle questioning in Katherine’s tone, but no curiosity; happily there was need for none. She could understand something of Mary’s moods without explanation now, and could give the sympathy, which was also better expressed without words.

“It isn’t well; that is the trouble of it,” Mary said wistfully. “The work is all very well while it lasts, but when it is done, one is tired, and there is nothing left but weariness and moods again—just these and nothing more.”

“Oh yes, there is! You are leaving out the most important thing; there is rest. And when one is rested, really rested, the world is all new again for a time,” Katherine answered brightly. She was speaking now from her own experience, for that was how she had felt when her trouble was at its blackest.

“I had forgotten rest; but then it won’t always come, sometimes sleep is impossible.” Mary sighed again, for to-night her mood verged on the morbid.

“Sometimes, but not often, when people are as healthy as we are,” Katherine replied with a laugh; then, slipping her hand through Mary’s arm, with a persuasive touch she drew her homeward. “Come! People who have to get up and work in the morning must go to bed at night, or suffer next day. I am fearfully sleepy, and to-morrow I have to go over to Fort Garry with all those furs which your father did not buy.”

“I too must be at work in good time, for I want to be at Seal Cove before ten o’clock, and that does not leave much space for one’s housekeeping duties,” Mary said, in a brighter tone, as the two came down the hill together.

“Let Mr. Selincourt keep house while you are so busy, or, better still, get Nellie to do what you want; she will be delighted,” urged Katherine, who was disposed to the belief that Mary’s morbid mood was largely the result of fatigue.

“Oh, Mrs. Burton is more than kind in making bread for me, and all that sort of thing; while, as everyone knows, my father spoils me all the time! But I like work, and just now I feel as if I could hardly have too much of it; so I don’t mind how long Mr. Ferrars stays away at the fishing at the Twins,” Mary said. Then, bidding Katherine good night at the foot of the hill, she got into her boat and was rowed across the river.

Katherine shook her head a little doubtfully as she went indoors; for in her heart she did not echo the other’s last words.

CHAPTER XXVI

Fighting the Storm

The summer had been one of such almost unvarying fine weather that the next morning's outlook came as a disagreeable surprise to Katherine. The sun shone with a pale, watery gleam, grey clouds were piled along the horizon, and a moaning wind crept through the pine trees, made the birch leaves quiver, and thinned the foliage of the alders at the foot of the rapids.

"Phil, we shall have to be quick this morning, or we shall have to come crawling home round the shore instead of rowing straight across the bay," Katherine said, as she piled bundles of pelts into the boat, and tied over them a canvas sheet, for security from any chance wave.

"Oh, we can hustle, and very likely the storm won't break before night!" Phil said easily.

"More likely that it will break before noon," retorted Miles, who was helping to bring out the pelts from the stockroom. "Don't go to-day, Katherine; it is fearful work crossing from Fort Garry when there is a strong north-east wind. I came across with Father once, when we thought we must have been swamped every minute."

"Do not worry yourself, my dear boy," laughed Katherine, "I shall not attempt to cross if the weather is very rough; I shall skirt the shore all the way. It is miles farther, of course, but it is safe, and that is the main thing."

"I wish you were not going, or that I could come with you," Miles said in a worried tone. "Look here; couldn't Phil manage the store for one day with Nellie's help, then we would take an extra pair of oars, and I would help to row?"

Katherine shook her head. "It is not to be thought of, dear. I expect some of those Indians from Nackowasset Creek will be over the portage to-day; then Wise Eye is in the neighbourhood, I know, and if he as much as caught a glimpse of both of us going down river in a boat he would fairly haunt the store until we came back, and Phil would have a tottering time of it."

"That Nackowasset lot are a horrible set of thieves," said Miles.

"Yes, and neither Phil nor Nellie would be up to all their tricks; so, you see, you will be quite indispensable. I shall get on very well; don't worry about me in any case, for if the storm should prove terrifically bad we could even stay at Fort Garry all night," Katherine replied.

The last pelt was tucked away under the canvas sheet, Phil scrambled aboard and crouched down in the most convenient place he could find, and Katherine nodded a bright farewell to Miles, who lingered on the bank with a very

dissatisfied look on his face; then the boat moved out into the current and began to slip quickly down river. At present they felt little or nothing of the wind, but when the hut of Oily Dave was in line with them they began to feel the influence of the freshening puffs of wind on their progress, and Katherine decided to take a middle course across the open water to the fort; that is, she would not venture so far out as usual, nor would she hug the shore entirely.

But although the wind came sighing and moaning over the water, it was nothing more at present than a fairly stiff breeze, and, finding it so much better than she had expected, Katherine took heart again, and was glad that she had persevered in her undertaking; for she was anxious to get the furs off her hands. Every place at the store was so crowded now, from the shipments which had recently come in, that it was really a relief to get these bundles of pelts cleared out of the way.

“Oily Dave’s hotel is closed, so I suppose the proprietor has cleared off out to the fishing,” Phil said, as the little brown hut on the left shore slid by, and they began to rock on the open water of the river’s mouth.

“I expect he has,” replied Katherine, who was pulling with long, steady strokes, the exercise and the wind between them bringing a bright glow into her face. “Do you know, I am sure he has worked harder and more honestly this summer than for many a year past; I believe he is beginning to be a reformed character.”

“How long will it take to reform him?” asked Phil, laughing; but Katherine could only shake her head and say she did not know.

The gulls were riding on the crests of the waves, or skimming so closely down on the water that it was hard to know whether they were swimming or flying; and long strings of geese overhead all headed southward showed plainly that summer was on the wane. All these things Katherine took note of as she pulled across the choppy water to Fort Garry, only now they did not sadden her as two days ago they would have done. Hope had shone into her life again, a heavy burden had been lifted, and it seemed to her that she could never again feel quite so sorrowful and worn down as she had done sometimes during the last few months.

“Hurrah! Safely arrived!” she exclaimed, as the boat grounded on the pebbly beach in front of the old blockhouse, which looked even grimmer and uglier on this grey day than when the sun shone down upon it.

“Good morning, Miss Radford! Now, I wonder who told you how badly I needed a woman of some sort to happen along this morning?” said Peter M’Crawney, coming out from the stockade on which the house was built, and advancing to meet Katherine, who was coming up from the shore with a great bundle of pelts on each shoulder, while Phil, laden in similar fashion, walked behind.

“Does that mean that Mrs. M’Crawney is ill again?” Katherine asked.

Peter shrugged his shoulders. "She is desperate uneasy in her mind, poor lass, and as hard to live with as a houseful of mosquitoes, which it is lucky I haven't got, or I should be forced to drown myself to keep from going out of my mind."

"Not so bad as that, I hope," Katherine said with a laugh, and instantly resolved that it would be her duty to stay an hour with the poor woman, who pined so much because of the solitude in which her life was cast.

"It is pretty bad anyhow," he growled, a frown coming over his face. He was a fairly patient man, all things considered, but his domestic tribulations were greater than anyone knew or even guessed at.

Katherine turned an anxious eye towards the sky before going in at the house door. If she could start back in anything under a quarter of an hour she might hope to go as she had come, with not much extra labour nor fatigue; but an hour or perhaps an hour and a half hence it would be very different. The storm was coming slowly, but when rough weather came like that it had a trick of lasting sometimes for several days. However, if the worst came to the worst, she could always skirt the shore, and, consoling herself with this thought, she entered the house, leaving M'Crawney and Phil to unload the pelts and bring them up from the boat.

The miserable, neglected look of the house struck Katherine first. Peter was not great at housework, while the half-breed, Simon, who lived with them, helped with the trapping in winter, and did a little of all sorts of work, was rather less clean and tidy in his ways than even Peter. The sight of the dusty, ill-kept room irritated Katherine. Last night's supper dishes still littered the table, and had probably served for breakfast dishes as well. What was the use of wasting her time in trying to console a woman who so neglected her home, and the privileges of home-making that came with it? For a few minutes she felt disposed to turn back with only a five minutes' civil talk. But there was one's duty to one's neighbour—and that is a more important duty in isolated places than in more crowded centres.

Then an idea flashed into her mind. If by any means she could contrive to make Mrs. M'Crawney ashamed of herself, it might be more useful than medicine, might even work a cure, in fact; and that would be something worth doing, even though it entailed skirting the shore all the way home. To think was to act. Whisking off her coat and hat, she rolled up her sleeves, and for want of an apron pinned a big towel round her; a very dirty towel it was too, but something she must have to protect her frock, and it had to be the towel or nothing.

First, with plenty of noise and clatter, she piled the dirty crockery ready for washing, and, filling the stove with wood, set a kettle of water on to get hot. This done, she flung door and window wide, and proceeded to sweep the room. By the amount of dust she raised she judged that it must have been at least a week, perhaps a fortnight, since it was swept last.

Of all the work in the world she hated sweeping most, declaring to herself that

doing a portage in blazing sunshine, with a load of furs on one's back, was play to sweeping. The dust got on her face, it walked up her nostrils and down her throat, making her feel as if she must in self-defence throw down her broom and fly outside, where the clean, strong wind was blowing. But it was not like her to give up, when once she had set her hand to anything; so she finished the sweeping, then fled outside to let the dust blow away from her face and hair while the thick atmosphere in the room she had left cleared enough to admit of the next set of operations.

Peter M'Crawney was talking to Phil on the other side of the fence, and from several inarticulate growls which reached her ears she judged that Simon must be there too. Then she heard Phil start on a description of what had taken place at the captain's reception on the ocean-going steamer, and judged herself safe for another ten minutes, for well she knew that he would not spare them full details, especially of the monkey trick he had played on Nick Jones.

In ten minutes one could do a great deal if one tried; so back again she hurried, and set to work dusting the furniture with an old cotton jacket of Peter's, because she could find no duster. The buttons got in the way sometimes, but that was a minor detail, and it did not do to be over-particular about trifles when one was in a hurry. The dusting was done, and she had started work on the dirty dishes, when the door of the inner room came open with a jerk, and Mrs. M'Crawney, very much in undress, poked her head out.

"Miss Radford, is it you?" she cried in profound astonishment. "I couldn't think what the noise was out here. If it had been night I should have settled it in my own mind that Peter and Simon had been having too much to drink, though no two men could be more sober than they are."

"A good thing they are, for there must be terrible temptations for men living in such discomfort to drown their troubles in strong drink," Katherine answered severely. Then she asked in a more kindly tone: "Do you feel better this morning?"

"Oh, I am well enough, thank you! It isn't my body; bodies don't matter unless they ache, which mine doesn't, the saints be praised!" Mrs. M'Crawney exclaimed with pious fervour, as she emerged from her bedroom and seated herself in all her squalid untidiness on the nearest chair.

"If it is not your body, what is it, then? Do you think you are going out of your mind?" demanded Katherine sharply; and turning from her dish-washing, she treated the woman to a calm appraising stare, which took in every detail, from the unbrushed hair straggling over the ragged nightdress to the unwashed, naked feet.

"Going out of my mind?" screamed Mrs. M'Crawney in furious indignation. "Indeed no! I've got my wits as well as you've got your own, Miss Katherine Radford; more so, I should say, for I have a deal too much sense to go slaving myself to death doing work that no one is likely to say 'thank you' for."

Katherine laughed merrily: "Don't be too sure of that. I expect that you will be saying 'thank you' presently, when you are washed and dressed; it makes such a difference when one's hair is tidy! If you will go into your room again I will bring you some hot water in a minute. But I can hear my brother Phil coming, and he is such a dreadful mimic that he will be taking you off for the benefit of Seal Cove to-morrow, in spite of all that I can do to stop him."

Mrs. M'Crawney vanished with all speed, the hint about being made fun of being more powerful to move her than anything else would have been.

Katherine carried in the hot water and tried not to see how badly the bedroom needed sweeping also. She had no more time for heavy housework that day, nor did she deem it a duty to waste her strength on labour which the Irishwoman was equally well able to perform. Peter had come in when she returned to the outer room, and was looking about him as if scarcely able to believe the evidence of his own eyes.

"Well, if it don't beat everything!" he exclaimed, then strode over to the shelf and examined the books, which Katherine had been careful to dust. "You've taken the dust off the books too! I expect you found it rather thick on 'em, didn't you? I don't think it has been rubbed off 'em these six months past."

"Just what I thought!" she retorted, scrubbing the table with great energy. "But I hope you don't expect me to pity you for that. A man who can read books ought to know how to dust them."

"I hadn't thought of doing it myself, that's a fact; but they look real nice now," he said admiringly. And he was wheeling round to pay Katherine a compliment from another direction, when the bedroom door opened again, and a surprised: "Hullo! what's up?" burst from him.

Even Katherine looked amazed, the transformation had been so rapid. Ten minutes ago a tousled, unclean creature, in a ragged night garment had disappeared, and now a clean-faced woman in a tidy frock, and with tidy hair, came from the inner room.

"It is like your impudence to be asking such personal questions as that," Mrs. M'Crawney retorted lightly, with a smile which showed her good-looking when she was not peevish. "But it is better I'm feeling in myself, which is sure to come to the outside sooner or later. Now, Miss Radford, dear, there's no call for you to go blacking that stove; I'll do it myself after you are gone. I'm just dreadful obliged to you for what you've done, especially for sweeping the floor. I've a soul above sweeping, I have, and I can't be always lowering myself to dirty work of that sort; it is damaging to the morals, I find."

Katherine laughed until the tears came into her eyes, then gasped out in jerky tones: "It would be very bad for my morals to live with floors unswept, and I think that is how most people feel."

"Perhaps they do, but I was never the ordinary kind of woman; my mother

always said I was sort of one by meself, and she was right. When Mrs. Burton was staying here, with them two blessed babies, I used to marvel how she could laugh and carry on as she did, while the hungry sea as drowned her husband rocked at the very door of the house. Now, if it had been me, and my husband lay somewhere out there under the grey, heaving water, I could not have sung and danced and played hop-scotch, blindman's buff, and things of that sort, the same as she did."

Katherine's lips took on a scornful curl, and there was an indignant light in her eyes as she retorted: "No, I expect if Mr. M'Crawney died you would wear crape a yard deep all round your frocks, and talk morning, noon, and night of how much you loved him. But I am quite sure that he would love you a great deal more if you took the trouble to give him tidy rooms and well-cooked meals. If I were a man I should just hate a woman who treated me as badly as you treat Mr. M'Crawney."

"Hooray, you've got it now, and no mistake, old woman!" interjected Peter, rubbing his hands in huge enjoyment of the scene. Katherine had forgotten all about him, or it is possible she would not have spoken so plainly; as it was, at the sound of his laugh, she turned with a swift apology to Mrs. M'Crawney.

"Please forgive me, I have no right to meddle in your concerns; but it just makes me feel wrathful to see you throwing away the happiness you might have, and existing in such dirt and discomfort, when everything about you might be clean, sweet, and wholesome."

Mrs. M'Crawney dropped into a rocking-chair and laughed in great amusement. "Sure, it is as good as going to a theaytre to see you a-carrying on and lecturing me with the stormlight in your eyes. You are a very pretty girl anyhow, but when you are angry it is downright lovely that you are. I'd forgive ye for a deal more than telling the truth, if you'd only come a bit oftener and row me."

"I say, Katherine, are you nearly ready to start?" asked Phil, putting his head in at the door. He had been with Simon to inspect some tame wolf cubs; but, seeing that the weather was growing more threatening, had decided that the sooner they got away from Fort Garry the better.

"Yes, I will be ready in two minutes," Katherine answered; and, receiving payment for the pelts in a written order upon the Company, which she tied in a bag round her neck for safety, she drew on her coat, tied her hat securely on her head, and declared herself ready to start.

A fine rain was beginning to blur the sea like a fog, and she realized that the journey before her might be a great deal worse than she had expected.

"Good-bye, my dear; a safe journey to you, and the best of luck always!" exclaimed Mrs. M'Crawney, following her to the door. Then, seizing her in a bearlike embrace, the Irishwoman whispered: "It is downright ashamed of myself you've made me; and if I don't do better in future, then my name is not Juliana Kathleen M'Crawney, and never has been!"

“Good-bye! We shall get home all right; don’t worry about us,” Katherine answered bravely.

“There is one comfort: we shan’t need to wash our faces any more to-day, though we may need a little drying,” remarked Phil, as they rounded an angle of the coast and caught the full force of the wind.

“It might be worse, for we are being blown along,” Katherine replied, as she tugged at her oars and faced the driving rain.

For three hours they toiled on, working their way from point to point, skirting the swamps, and keeping in close under the alders.

There was never real actual danger close inshore for anyone who understood the management of a boat, but the work was fearful, and Katherine was so near to exhaustion when she at last pulled round past the shut-up house of Oily Dave, that she was thankful to let Phil take the oars and pull up the quieter waters of the river to Roaring Water Portage.

“I wonder how Oily Dave likes being at the fishing to-day?” said Phil, swaying himself to and fro and jerking the boat fearfully with his short, uneven strokes.

But Katherine, sitting in a huddled, wet heap on the opposite seat, did not answer. She was thinking of someone else who was at the fishing, and praying that he might be kept in safety and brought back unharmed.

CHAPTER XXVII

A Bearer of Evil Tidings

In was a very tired Katherine who awoke to face the work of the next day. It was storming still, with a driving rain, so journeys of any kind were out of the question; and, yielding to the wisdom of Mrs. Burton, she remained in bed until nearly noon. Her arms ached so badly that she could scarcely move them, her body was weary in every part, and the long night had been hideous for her by reason of the nightmare dreams which broke her rest. Always it seemed when she fell asleep that she was tormented with visions of Jervis Ferrars struggling for his life in deep waters, falling from beetling cliffs on to rugged rocks below, or being pursued by enraged and vindictive walruses across slippery places, where no one on two feet could hope to stand without falling.

Even when she awoke the dreams haunted her still, and it was not until the new day came, and the rest of the household had gone to their usual avocations, that any real sleep came to her. The twins were singing when she awoke at noon; indeed, they almost always were singing; but this morning it was a lilting baby song about "The sun is always shining, somewhere, somewhere", and Katherine took heart as she listened, then rose and dressed in great haste, for it was years since she had remained in bed so late in the day, and she was wondering what the others were doing without her to help them.

Miles was standing at the store door looking out across the river when she entered by the other door from the living-room, and he was so absorbed that he did not hear her come up behind him, and only started when she put her hand on his arm to shake him into attention.

"What are you staring at?" she asked lightly.

"Someone in oilskins has just rowed up and stopped over the river at Mr. Selincourt's. It looked like Oily Dave, but Phil said last night that he was away at the fishing," Miles answered, as he turned back into the store.

"So he was," said Katherine. "There was the usual legend in his dirty windows that all drinks must wait until he came back, which is a fearful temptation to temperance people to wish that he would never come back at all."

"His sort is sure to turn up safe and sound, no matter how great the danger; it is the best and worthiest that never come back," Miles said, so gloomily that Katherine took instant alarm.

"What do you mean? Has any bad news come?" she asked, gripping at the rough deal counter for support, and wondering how she would be able to bear it if he said yes.

“Mr. Selincourt went down to Seal Cove this morning and looked in here on his way back,” said Miles. “He wanted to see you, but we told him that he could not; then he said that there was a good bit of worry about the boats. One was blown clean into the swamps last night, and will have to stick there until the weather is fine enough for her to be towed off, and another came ashore, badly damaged, at the fish sheds; and he is afraid that some of the other boats may have been driven on to the rocks.”

“The boats right out in the bay would be safe, wouldn’t they?” Katherine asked, with fear in her eyes.

“You never can say what will be safe in weather such as we had last night,” Miles answered; then he moved restlessly towards the door of the store again, and stood looking out, eager to catch the man whose boat was moored under the alders on the opposite bank of the river, and to learn from him if there was news from the sea.

Katherine sat down suddenly. It was as if someone had already been in to say that a boat was wrecked. Disasters which were expected always came, so she told herself, and sat leaning her head against a box of soap, the smell of which ever after suggested shipwreck to her.

Ten minutes went past, then twenty minutes, and nearly half an hour had gone before Miles cried out excitedly: “Here he comes down the path; Mr. Selincourt is there too, without any hat, and it is raining hard! Yes, it is Oily Dave, and there goes his hand up to his mouth, just as if he were drinking!”

Katherine was at work by this time, packing stores into boxes, bags, and bundles, which would have to be carried over the long portage next day; but she left her task now and came round to the door, where she stood behind Miles and looked over his shoulder.

“If Mr. Selincourt were not there I would go down and call to the fellow to come over,” said Miles impatiently.

“No need,” rejoined Katherine quietly, “he is coming without any calling; don’t you see that he is turning his boat across the river?”

Neither spoke after that until the boat grounded, and Oily Dave stepped out on to the bank.

“Miles, you must serve him with what he wants: don’t call me; I—I am going to be busy,” Katherine said hastily, then beat a rapid retreat from the door. But she only went to the corner where a lot of gay-coloured rugs were hanging, and stood there waiting to hear what Oily Dave might have to tell.

How slowly he walked up from the bank! She could hear his heavy seaboots squelching through the mud, then the deep, grunting noise which always accompanied any of his movements.

“Good morning!” said Miles curtly, as the squelching boots crossed the threshold.

“I don’t call it a good morning,” snarled Oily Dave.

Katherine drew yet closer into the shadow of the rugs, and clenched her hands tightly to keep from screaming; something bad had got to be told, she was sure, and she doubted her ability to bear it.

“What is wrong?” asked Miles.

“A good deal more than will ever be put right in this world, or the next either, perhaps,” replied Oily Dave. “We are afraid the *Mary* has gone down.”

“Ah!” The involuntary moan escaped the listener who was out of sight, but Oily Dave did not hear, or at any rate he did not heed, and, after a brief pause, he went on:

“We was off Akimiski yesterday after walrus, but when it came on to blow we turned home, for there is no anchorage to run to there in dirty weather, but plenty of rocks to fall foul of, which are not quite so pleasant. But we couldn’t get home for a while, being blown along the east coast of the island, with a lively chance of being wrecked at any minute. We were beating along under the lee of the island when we saw a boat drifting bottom up, and when we hooked her we found she was the *Mary*’s boat.”

“It sounds bad, but it does not spell disaster quite, because, don’t you see? they might have lost their boat on the way out,” retorted Miles, in a defiant tone, which meant that he did not intend to believe bad news until it was proved beyond a doubt.

“There was a water jar and a bag of biscuits tied to the thwarts,” replied Oily Dave. “It’s true there wasn’t nothing of the jar but the handle, and the biscuits was pap, as was to be expected, but the signs wasn’t wanting of what had been taking place, don’t you see? If we’d found the boat with nothing in it we could have hoped that it had just been washed adrift, and, though we should have been anxious, there would have been room left for hope, which in common sense and reason there ain’t now.”

“There is always room for hope until we know,” objected Miles. “Besides, Akimiski isn’t the Twins by any means; why, they must be fifty miles away, if not more.”

“Nearer seventy. But who is to say that they ever got so far as the Twins? If they’d run into any sign of walrus on Akimiski on the way out, they would stop there for certain, a bird in hand being worth two in a bush any day in the week, and though all is fish that comes to our net, it is walrus we’re keenest on, as everyone knows. I’ve been to Mr. Selincourt with the news, and it has about corked him up, poor gentleman! But the young lady was worse still; she turned on me as spiteful as if I’d gone and drowned the *Mary*’s crew myself.”

There was a deeply injured note in Oily Dave’s tone now. He evidently resented keenly the fact that his bad tidings had not received a more sympathetic hearing.

“Who was on the *Mary*?” asked Miles.

“The usual lot: Nick Jones, master, Stee Jenkin, Bobby Poole, and Mr. Ferrars. A perfect Jonah that man is, and disaster follows wherever he goes,” said Oily Dave, with a melancholy shake of his head.

“What do you mean?” demanded Miles, with a stare of surprise.

“What I say,” retorted Oily Dave. “Mr. Selincourt sent him to me as a lodger; the river came down in flood and tried to drown him, and spoiled my house something fearful. Then he gets caught in a tidehole, when out walking with his sweetheart, which Miss Selincourt is, I suppose, though it passes me why a young lady with dollars same as she has got don’t look higher than a fisherman. But the thing that strikes me is that the man must have done something pretty bad, somewhere back behind, for the waters to be following him round like this.”

“Look here! don’t you think it is a pretty low-down thing to be taking a man’s character away, directly there’s a rumour going round that he is dead?” asked Miles stormily.

“I ain’t taking away his character. I’m only saying that if he was fated to drown it is a great pity that he wasn’t left to drown in the first place, seeing that it would have saved a lot of bother, and other precious lives also,” replied Oily Dave, with the look and pose of a man who is bitterly misunderstood.

“Why, you must be stark, staring mad to talk like this!” exclaimed Miles, in doubt whether to heave the nearest article on which he could lay hands at the head of Oily Dave, or to pity him as a lunatic.

“I’m no more mad than you are, young ’un; but there’s a deal of what scholars call practical economy in me, and I can’t bear waste of no sort or kind, I can’t. Why, when customers come to my hotel and leaves any liquor in their mugs, which is but seldom, I always goes and drains ’em down my own neck, to stop waste. And so I says that if Mr. Ferrars hadn’t been saved that first time, we should have been spared trouble since.”

“What trouble have you ever taken in the matter?” demanded Miles.

“Didn’t I risk my life, and wet myself to the skin, pulling him and Miss Selincourt out of the tidehole?” asked Oily Dave. “If you misdoubt my word, ask your sister, who was there and helped as well as a gal could, which isn’t much anyhow. Well, there was three lives in danger that time, him, and me, and Miss Selincourt, and I dare say your sister got dampish at the feet. Now, this third and last time, matters is a deal more serious still. Nick Jones leaves a widow, though she don’t much count. Stee Jenkin leaves a widow, nice little woman too. Then there’s the children, poor things, orphans afore they are big enough to earn a penny for themselves. Bobby Poole hadn’t a wife certainly, but he would have had by and by, most likely. It is a bad business altogether. And now I want some tobacco.”

Oily Dave jerked out this last statement with a swift change of tone from

mournful regret to cheerful business complacency, and Miles served him in silence, too saddened by the heavy tidings from the sea to break into resentful angry speech with this man, who appeared devoid of either heart or feeling. Then the heavy boots squelched out again, going towards the river bank, where the waiting boat was tied to the mooring post. A moment of waiting to make sure he did not return, and then Katherine, pale now as a ghost, glided out from the shadow of the rugs.

“Miles, dear, can you do without me for the rest of the day if need be? I am going down river to poor Mrs. Jenkin,” she said, her voice steady though strained.

“I can manage; but look at the rain!” he exclaimed, swinging his hand towards the open door.

“All the more reason why I should go to her, poor little woman,” Katherine answered, then passed with a quick step into the house, in search of garments to keep out the weather.

Mrs. Burton was preparing the early dinner, and Katherine told her of the news Oily Dave had brought, speaking in quiet, mournful tones which yet lacked any note of personal loss. Not even to herself would she admit the sorrow at this time, or it would have broken her down completely. Her instinct of going to comfort someone else was the outcome of the strife she was having not to collapse in a miserable, selfish breakdown.

Mrs. Burton turned white and shivered. Just so had her heavy news come to her, and in her sympathy for Mrs. Jenkin her own wounds bled afresh. But Katherine could not stay to comfort her, the other poor woman needed it so much more.

“Nellie, I am going down to Seal Cove, and if Mrs. Jenkin needs me I shall stay until the morning,” she said hurriedly.

“That is good of you, dear,” sobbed the elder sister, and would have said something more, only Katherine went out of the room so hastily that there was no chance.

Poor Katherine had fled so precipitately through fear that Nellie should say some word about Jervis, with possibly some commiseration for Mary, and that just now would be a thing too hard to bear. Wrapping herself from neck to heels in a mackintosh coat, with a cap of the same, Katherine got into her boat and pulled down river through the driving rain. She rowed as fast as she could, not so much from haste to be at the end of her journey as from a desire to have no time to think.

Tying her boat up at the foot of the path leading to Mrs. Jenkin’s house, she climbed to the house door, slipping at every step. A moment she paused before knocking, expecting to hear sobs and wailing from the inside; but instead there came a burst of childish laughter and a great stamping of little feet, and then she heard Mrs. Jenkin singing in a cheerful, if not very musical, voice: “My love is a

soldier dressed in red”.

Katherine stood appalled. Was it possible that Oily Dave had not told this poor woman of the trouble which had come to her? In that case she would have to break the heavy news herself, and at the thought she turned coward, and would gladly have slipped away again by the way she had come.

Mrs. Jenkin reached the end of the verse, and shrill, childish voices took up the chorus:

“In red, in red, he’s all in red,
My love is a soldier dressed in red”.

Katherine stood listening while the chorus ended. Then Mrs. Jenkin started on afresh: “My love is a sailor clothed in blue”.

But this was too much, and Katherine, pushing the door hurriedly open, forgetting the small ceremony of knocking, crossed the threshold and stood, a dripping figure, just inside the door.

“My dear Miss Radford, what is the matter?” cried the little woman, jumping up in such a hurry that she upset the baby on to the floor, where he lay and yelled, more from consternation than because he was hurt.

Katherine hesitated. Where could she begin? But then, to her surprise, Mrs. Jenkin burst out excitedly: “You surely haven’t been putting any belief in that story that Oily Dave has been going round with this morning?”

“Isn’t it true?” faltered Katherine; then, feeling suddenly weak, she dropped into the nearest seat, and tried to keep her lips from quivering.

“Did you ever know him speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?” demanded Mrs. Jenkin scornfully, as she picked up the yelling infant and cuddled him into quiet again.

“But the others were with him, Jean Doulais, and Mickey White, and they found the boat of the *Mary*,” faltered Katherine,

“What of that?” cried Mrs. Jenkin. “The *Mary* had two boats, and one might easily have got adrift through accident. I laughed in his face when he told about the water jar and the bag of biscuit. Nick Jones and Stee always keep water and biscuit in the little boats when they are hoping for a whale, for sometimes it is a long chase, and then the men get just about worn out.”

“The fleet boats have been very safe so far,” remarked Katherine, trying to find comfort from the little woman’s cheery front, yet rather failing.

“Yes, the safest boats that go fishing in the bay, my man says, and he reckons it is because they are so small and well built,” Mrs. Jenkin went on, plainly delighted to have a visitor, and evidently not much concerned about her husband’s safety. “But slip that wet coat off, dear, and come closer to the stove; this damp makes us chilly, and reminds us that winter will soon be sneaking up at the back of the wind. You surely are not out delivering goods on a morning like this?”

“No, I came because I was so sorry for you,” Katherine answered simply.

“Now, that is the real sort of friendship, and I thank you with all my heart,” said Mrs. Jenkin, patting Katherine on the shoulder with a hand that was not too clean. Then she issued a command to her eldest daughter: “Take Percival, Gwendoline, and do you and Valerie go and play on my bed; you can have a lovely time rolling round in the blankets.”

Shrieks of delight greeted this suggestion, and the three grandly named but very dirty babies promptly retired to the next room, leaving their mother and the visitor in peace, if not in quiet. The walls of the little house were very thin, and rolling round in the blankets appeared to be a very noisy pastime.

“If I believed that the *Mary* had gone down, it is a very miserable woman I should be to-day,” said Mrs. Jenkin, who was swaying gently in a rocking-chair, “for Stee is a good husband, though perhaps he hasn’t always been as straight as he ought to have been. But that was when Oily Dave was in power here. It is like master, like man, you know, and Stee is desperate easy led, either wrong or right.”

“If only we knew that the *Mary* was safe!” moaned poor Katherine.

“I should know if it wasn’t,” Mrs. Jenkin answered confidently. Then she hesitated, turned very red in the face, and burst into impetuous speech: “I knew Stee was in danger that night last winter when he and Oily Dave went through the snow to steal goods from your cache, and the wolves set upon them. I perspired in sheer horror that night, though I knew nothing about what was afoot, and I knelt praying on the floor till Stee came home with his clothes all torn, and told me what he had been through. Ah! that was a dark and dreadful night; may I never see such another.”

“I do not think you will,” said Katherine softly. She spoke with conviction, too, for certainly Stee Jenkin had been a very different individual since that time.

Mrs. Jenkin wiped her eyes with a pinafore of Valerie’s, which happened to lie handy. “I don’t believe in that saying about love being blind,” she remarked, with considerable energy. “I know that I have been able to see Stee’s faults plain enough, and yet he is all the world to me. Yes, dear, you had better be wed to a faulty man that you really love, than be tied up to an angel that you don’t love.”

Katherine rose and began to struggle into her long wet mackintosh. “I would have stayed if you had really needed me,” she said; “but all the while you can hope you are not to be pitied.”

“Thank you, thank you, Miss Radford, good of you to come,” said the little woman. Stee isn’t dead yet, or I must have known it. I don’t believe he has been in danger even.”

“If only I could feel like that!” murmured Katherine to herself, as she went out into the driving rain once more.

CHAPTER XXVIII

The Gladness

Six days went by. The weather had cleared as if by magic, a brilliant sun shone every day in a cloudless sky, and summer had returned again to cheer the northern land. But never a word had come from across the waste of grey, heaving waters, to let the anxious watchers at Seal Cove know whether the *Mary* still lived, or whether her crew had really gone to the bottom from the little boat which Oily Dave and his mates had found floating keel upwards.

Mrs. Jenkin still preserved her attitude of determined cheerfulness, and persisted in her belief that no harm had come to the vessel or the men. But she was the only one who still hoped. Mrs. Jones, the wife of Nick Jones, a woman shunned by her neighbours, and of a disposition the reverse of friendly, had already put on black. Her mourning garments were of ancient make, for up-to-date mourning apparel was not regarded as one of the necessaries of life, and so it was not stocked by the store at Roaring Water Portage.

Mr. Selincourt said little, but it was easy to see how much he feared, while Mary went about wearing such a look of bereavement that the folk at Seal Cove were confirmed in their belief that some sort of engagement really had existed between her and the young man who managed the business of the fishing fleet.

Katherine, shielding herself behind this mistaken belief on the part of other people, carried her sore heart bravely through those days of hoping against hope and sick apprehension. The only two people who even suspected her suffering were her brother Miles and Mr. Selincourt; but neither gave any sign of understanding that there might be any personal sorrow hidden under her sympathy for Mrs. Jenkin and the unpleasant Mrs. Jones.

On the sixth day it became necessary for Katherine to do the long portage with supplies for the Indian encampment, which had about doubled in population during the last two or three weeks. There was the usual bustle of getting off—the scampering of dogs back along the portage path for fresh burdens, the shouting of Phil, and all the cheerful accompaniments of busy toil and work willingly done. But Katherine did her part with a mechanical precision, forcing herself to this task and to that, yet feeling no zest or pleasure in anything.

Although the days were so warm and sunny, the nights and early mornings showed already a touch of frostiness, a chilly reminder of the winter that was coming; and Katherine was glad to wear a coat even while she was rowing, until the second portage had been reached. Astor M’Kree met her himself this morning, his first question being the one she most dreaded to hear.

“Any news of the *Mary* yet, Miss Radford?”

“No,” she answered sadly. “Mr. Selincourt’s little flag was hanging at half-mast when we started this morning.”

“If she has gone down, it is the first boat I’ve built that has cost a human life, that I know of,” he said, “and it makes me feel as if I should never have the courage to build another. I’ve got one on the stocks, but I haven’t touched her since this news came up river.”

“But disasters at sea will come, do what you will, and the best boat ever built would go to pieces on those Akimiski rocks,” Katherine said, trying to cheer him because he seemed so sad.

“It isn’t clear to me why they were on Akimiski at all, when it was the Twins they were making for,” he replied, in a gloomy tone. “Mr. Selincourt told me the other day that he believed it would be better if I did my boatbuilding down below the portages; but I said no. There is no difficulty in taking the boats down when the river is in flood, though of course it would not be possible now; and I’ve got the feeling that I like to take the first risk in them myself. It is a queer sensation, I can tell you, to feel a boat coming to life under your feet, and when I took the *Mary* over the falls it was just as if she jumped forward in sheer glee, when she felt the swing and the rush of the water swirling round her sides.”

Katherine nodded, but did not speak. There was a rugged eloquence about the boatbuilder which always appealed to her, but this morning it was almost more than she could bear.

“Perhaps I will come in and see Mrs. M’Kree as I come back, but I must hurry now, for I am anxious to get my business done and turn my face homeward as soon as I can,” she said, after a little pause. “Father did not seem quite so well yesterday, and Nellie thinks it is the gloom of other people which has upset him.”

“Very likely: poor man, he’d be bound to be sensitive in unexpected places; afflicted people mostly are. I will tell my wife you may be in later; and look here, could you spare Phil to go to Ochre Lake swan-shooting this evening? My two lads and I are going, and it is always fun for a boy. I’ve got an old duck rifle he can use, and we’ll send him down river in time to make himself useful to-morrow morning.”

One glance at Phil’s face was sufficient to make Katherine decide she could do quite well without him when she got back over the second portage, and so it was arranged.

The journey that day was got through sooner than usual, owing chiefly to Phil’s tendency to “hustle” in order to be back in good time for the swan-shooting. He helped Katherine over the second portage, and tumbled bundles of pelts and packages of dried fish into the boat. Then, uttering a wild whoop of delight, he turned head over heels in the dried grass on the bank, and started back along the portage path to the boatbuilder’s house at a run.

Being in good time, Katherine did not trouble to row herself down river, but, pushing the boat out in midstream, let it drift on the current. It was a great luxury to be alone—to let her face take on the saddest expression it could assume, to let her hands drop idly on her lap, while for a brief space she let her grief have sway. She was thinking of the day when Jervis had come over the portage to meet her, and she had been so late that he was obliged to go back before she came. What had he come to say to her that day?

This was the question which had ceaselessly tortured Katherine through the days and nights since Oily Dave had brought the bad news about the *Mary*. Her heart whispered that he might have come that day to ask her to marry him, but she was not sure. If she could have been certain of this, then it seemed to her the worst of her suffering would have been removed, because then she would have had some shadow of a right to mourn for him.

But there was the portage looming in sight, and she could hear the water rushing round the bend in the river and over the falls. Then she turned round in the boat, and, taking up the oars, prepared to row in to the boathouse.

A figure, partly hidden by the cottonwood and the alders, stepped forward at this moment and prepared to moor the boat for her.

Was it instinct that made her turn her head then, or was she merely looking to see how much farther she had to row in? A frightened cry escaped her at what she saw, and the colour ebbed from her face, leaving it ghastly white.

“Katherine, did you take me for a ghost?” asked the voice of Jervis Ferrars.

“I think so,” she said faintly, then sent the boat with a jerk against the mooring post, where he tied it up for her.

“Did you really think we had gone down, or had you the cheerful faith of Mrs. Jenkin?”

“I—I am afraid that I had no faith at all,” she said with an effort, and never guessed how complete was her self-betrayal.

He looked at her keenly, was apparently satisfied with what he saw, then said cheerfully: “Will you row me up to Astor M’Kree’s, or, rather, permit me to row you? I want to go and assure him that the *Mary* is quite safe, and the soundest boat that ever sailed the Bay. Shall we leave this luggage here, or row it up river for the sake of having a load?”

“Rowing is quite sufficient exercise without having an unnecessary load,” replied Katherine, with a shake of her head, as she handed him the bundles to place on the bank. She was trembling so that she could hardly trust herself to speak, and was horribly afraid of breaking down like a schoolgirl, and crying from sheer joyfulness.

When the bundles were all out, Jervis got in, took the oars, and sent the boat’s head round for up river again, then pulled steadily for a few minutes without speaking.

A boat is an awkward place for a person afflicted with self-consciousness. Katherine would have been thankful for some shelter in which to hide her face just then, but, having none, she rushed into nervous speech instead.

“Were you in danger? Was the *Mary* wrecked?” she asked, miserably conscious of the unsteadiness of her voice, yet feeling altogether too nervous to remain silent.

“No,” he said. “We have had a very easy and prosperous time, though, unfortunately, we lost one of our boats on the way out—the boat picked up by Oily Dave, which has made all the trouble. We fell in with a lot of white porpoises; so the take has been a valuable one, and the men came home very well pleased with the venture: though Nick Jones felt his spirits rather dashed by meeting his wife tricked out in mourning attire, and flying a pennon of widowhood from the back of her bonnet.”

Katherine laughed: she could imagine the tragic figure Mrs. Jones must have looked, and the effect the sight would have on the susceptible nerves of a Bay fisherman. Then she said hurriedly: “I shall have great faith in Mrs. Jenkin’s judgment after this, although I have wondered how she could be so persistently hopeful in the face of such evidence as we had.”

“And you yourself—how did you feel about it? Would it have made any difference to you if I had gone under, dear?” he asked, with a caressing note in his tone that she had never heard there before.

For answer she jerked her head round, staring at the tops of the pine trees, with the blue sky behind them, but seeing nothing and heeding nothing save the world of happiness which had suddenly opened before her astonished eyes.

It seemed a long time before any sound broke the silence save the regular splash of the oars, then Jervis said quietly: “Are you quite sure that you are not afraid to marry a poor man, Katherine?”

She looked at him with only a glance, then asked, a trifle unsteadily: “What do you mean?”

“Well, you might have looked higher, of course. I have told you how miserably poor my people and I have been. Thanks to Mr. Selincourt, things are easier with me now; but there is a streak of modesty in me somewhere, and I have been afraid to ask for what I wanted,” he said, with a certain wistfulness of intonation which brought Katherine’s glance round again.

“You need not have been afraid,” she said softly.

“Because why?” he asked, in the tone of one who meant to be answered.

Katherine looked at the tops of the pine trees again, but, finding no help there, let her gaze drop to the dancing water, and finally faltered in a very low voice: “Because love is better than money, or that sort of thing.”

He bent forward until he could look into her downcast face, then said earnestly: “You mean, then, it makes no difference to you what my worldly

position may chance to be?"

"Of course not; why should it?" she asked, her glance meeting his now in surprise at his earnestness.

Their progress up river was rather slow after that, and it was something over an hour later before they reached the second portage. Astor M'Kree had started for the swan-shooting by that time, and there was only his delighted wife to scream with joyful relief at the news, that the *Mary* was riding safely at anchor in the river.

"Poor Astor! He has been that down he could scarcely take his food," said Mrs. M'Kree, wiping away the tears which sheer happiness had brought into her eyes.

"Get an extra big supper ready for him, then, for I expect you will find his appetite has come back with a bounce," said Jervis, laughing. "You can tell him from me to get on with that new boat as fast as he can, and we will name it the *Katherine*."

"Are you joking?" asked Mrs. M'Kree, who had suddenly become very serious, as she looked from Jervis to Katherine, whose face was a study in blushes.

"No, I am quite in earnest," he answered. "But we must go now, for we dumped a lot of fish out on the portage path, and I should not be surprised if half the dogs in the neighbourhood are there, sampling it, when we get back."

"I hope not, or my trouble in bringing it over the long portage will all have been thrown away," said Katherine, who could not help smiling at the bewilderment on the face of Mrs. M'Kree.

There was no need to row going down the river; they just sat side by side and let the boat drift on the current, while they talked of the present and the future. Katherine remembered her other journey down, earlier in the afternoon, and the bitter, black misery which had kept her company then.

[Illustration: Drifting down the river.]

"What a difference things make in one's outlook!" she exclaimed.

"What things?" he demanded.

"I was thinking of when I let the boat drift down this afternoon," she said. "The pine trees looked so gloomy then, and those great, black spruces yonder on the bank made me think of the decorations on funeral hearses years and years ago, the sort of thing one sees only in pictures; but now——"

"What do they let you think of now?" he asked, holding her hand in a tighter clasp, as the boat swept slowly past the funereal spruces.

"Oh! they make me think of the ornamental grounds in Montreal, or of the Swiss mountains which I see in visions when I dream I am 'doing Europe', as the Yankees say," and she laughed happily at her wild flights of fancy.

"Would you like to do Europe—after we are married?" he asked, a gravity coming into his tone that she could not understand.

“Why worry about the impossible?” she said gently. “Books are cheap, if travel is not, and we will do our European travel sitting by a winter fire.”

“It might be possible some day; one never knows quite how things may turn out,” he said gravely. Then he asked: “Did anyone tell you that I came up river to see you that afternoon before we sailed for the Twins?”

“Yes,” she answered, flushing as she remembered how much his visit and its purpose had been in her mind during those days of keen anxiety.

“I came then to ask you the question I asked just now,” he said slowly. “It has been in my heart to ask it ever since that day you helped me across the ice, saving my life at the risk of your own. But I had my mother to support then, in part, and the burden on me was too heavy for me to dare to put my personal happiness first. There was a letter for me in Mr. Selincourt’s belated mail, however, that changed my outlook pretty considerably, and left me free to do as I liked; so I came to you directly.”

“Do you mean——?” began Katherine, then stopped in some confusion.

“Do I mean that I have only myself to keep now, were you going to ask?” he said, laughing as he shifted his seat and took up the oars to bring the boat in to the mooring post under the boathouse; “because that is just what I do mean. I have only myself to keep until I have the privilege of keeping you; and there will be no more portage work for you then, I promise you.”

Katherine sprang ashore, whistled for the dogs, then turned to him with a saucy air. “Don’t be too positive about the portage work; fishermen do not exactly come under the heading of the leisured classes, and I may be glad to earn an honest dollar where I can.”

CHAPTER XXIX

Winter Again

Never had there been such excitement in Seal Cove and at Roaring Water Portage as when, following close on the safe return of the *Mary*, the tidings leaked out that Jervis Ferrars was going to marry Katherine Radford. With a very few exceptions everyone was disappointed, for common consent had given him to Mary Selincourt, and Dame Rumour does not care to make mistakes. Some there were who insisted that Mary Selincourt took the news badly, and looked pale for days afterwards; but these were the very wise ones, who always knew everything without any telling, whom nothing surprised, and who were never taken unawares.

Mr. Selincourt had himself rowed across the river directly the tidings reached him; for he was anxious to offer his congratulations, and to inform Katherine that he had expected it ever since he had been at Roaring Water Portage. Katherine's eyes grew suspiciously dim when he had gone: she was thinking of the day when he had taken her into his confidence about Mary's love affair with Archie Raymond, and she guessed that he had told her on purpose to prevent her putting any belief in the rumours flying about concerning Jervis and Mary.

The person who was most surprised was Mrs. Burton. So keenly remorseful was she, too, because of all the advice she had given her sister about standing aside, that Katherine had to turn comforter, and assure the poor little woman that the well-meant counsel had done no serious harm. But she shivered at the remembrance of how she had suffered; for the pain is always most wearing that has to be crushed down out of sight of other people's eyes.

It was the last week in September when the Selincourts sailed from Seal Cove. Mary wanted to go south by river and trail, as they had come; but the weather was so stormy that it seemed better to get to Montreal with dry feet, if they could manage to do so. They were coming back next summer to settle permanently; but before then a bigger house would have to be built, and many changes were to take place on both sides of the river from Seal Cove to Roaring Water Portage.

Jervis had begged Katherine to marry him before the winter began, so that he might take the heaviest of her burdens on his own shoulders. He was to live in Mr. Selincourt's house during the winter, and it seemed to him an ideal arrangement, if only Katherine had been willing to live there too. But she could not selfishly take her own happiness while the others needed her so much, and she steadily refused to even think of marriage until the spring came again. By that time Miles would be old enough to assume the government of affairs, and her father would not miss her presence from the house so much when the bright, long days came round again.

Finding that he could not alter her resolution, and secretly admiring her all the more because of it, Jervis set himself to pass the months of waiting as best he could. This winter it was he who taught the night school, thus relieving Katherine of what had been a heavy and sometimes very embarrassing burden. There were more scholars this year; for the river was crowded with boats, so many fishermen who had formerly wintered at Marble Island preferring to come south in order to begin work earlier in the spring.

The snow came early, shutting them in a full two weeks sooner than usual. But "early come early go" was the legend at Seal Cove, and, since the winter had to come, the sooner it was over and done with the better.

Idleness for the fishermen had been the rule in previous winters, and, as idleness is usually only another word for mischief and dissipation, the morals of the men had suffered seriously. But next summer had to be prepared for, and as there was money in plenty to pay for the work which had to be done, it seemed probable that Mr. Selincourt's plans would be pushed forward as fast as he desired.

Astor M'Kree had set up a team of dogs and a sledge painted a brilliant blue, and in this equipage, or on snowshoes, he was up and down between his house and the bay several times in most days. Some of the fishermen were fairly expert carpenters, and these found the winter brought them as much work as the summer had done, with less risk and better pay.

To Katherine the weeks of winter passed like a dream. Sometimes she contrasted them with the dark, anxious weeks of the previous winter, when the nightmare trouble about her father had first descended upon her. She was a keener business woman now than then, readier at buying and selling, quicker to see what was the right thing to do under the circumstances of the moment; but her chief aim this winter was to stand back and push Miles forward so that other people might understand who was to be business chief of the establishment in the future. Whenever Jervis could spare time to come over the river and help Phil in the store, Katherine had Miles for companion on the long journeys which were still necessary here and there.

It was pure comedy now when they went to the Indian encampment. The Indians of the bay shore could not be brought to believe that a person could have any sound, reliable judgment on any subject whatever until he had done growing; so, when Katherine appealed to Miles regarding every skin offered in barter, the red men first mocked. Then, however, they grew doubtful, and finally they veered round to a respectful attitude towards the young tradesman which Miles found very soothing.

Mr. Selincourt had arranged for an intermittent postal service between Maxohama and Seal Cove, to be carried on by Indians, during the winter. Two mails had safely reached the post office at Roaring Water Portage in this way;

then three months passed with never a word from the outside world reaching the little isolated colony on the bay shore, and the people thus cut off could not understand the reason why no tidings reached them. Then one day when Katherine and Miles had gone up to Ochre Lake, where a company of Indians had made themselves winter quarters, they came upon a clue to the mystery of the missing mails.

Ochre Lake was, as usual, frozen solid, except at one end, where an enormous quantity of fish was to be found. It was nearly the end of March, but as yet there was not the slightest prospect of the frost breaking up. The nights were getting shorter, and the days were brilliant with sunshine, but it was only a cold brilliance as yet.

The Indians had remained there all the winter, so they said, because there was such an abundance of fish for food. Their winter quarters consisted of holes, about four feet deep, dug in the earth, roofed over with spruce branches heaped with snow. Fires were kindled in these lairs, and the people rarely came out save when driven to it by the necessity to catch fish for food.

The day Katherine and Miles went to the encampment it was gloriously fine, and for the first time that year the sun had real warmth in it. This had induced some of the miserable creatures to crawl out to the daylight, who perhaps had not been outside the holes for weeks. There was quite a crowd of children visible, and Katherine, whose heart always warmed to the pitiable little objects, with their mournful black eyes, produced a packet of sweets, which speedily brought a swarm of youngsters round her.

Doling the sweets out with strict impartiality, she noticed that one child had a fragment of paper in its skinny hand. This was puzzling, for the Indians were not given to education or culture in any shape or form, and the paper looked like a fragment from a letter, for she could plainly see writing upon it.

With a sign to Miles to keep the elders busy, Katherine proceeded to bribe the child to give up his dirty fragment of paper in exchange for the bag, which still had some sweets in it.

When this was done, she told Miles to cut the business short, and then they started for home. She had thrust the fragment of paper in her glove, and did not venture to look at it until they were miles away from the lake, because she did not wish the Indians to know that her curiosity had been aroused. But when the dogs had dropped into a walk, and were coming slowly up the hill at some distance behind, she pulled off her glove and proceeded to examine the dirty fragment.

It was part of a letter, and directly she saw it she recognized the handwriting as that of Mrs. Ferrars, the mother of Jervis. He had shown her some of his mother's letters, and there was no mistaking the regular, delicate handwriting. The paper was only written on on one side, and only two lines of the writing were legible:

“—is very ill; you may be sent for now at any time.”

Katherine pondered over the dirty fragment with a very puzzled expression. There were three ways of explaining the presence of that bit of paper at the encampment on Ochre Lake: it might have been stolen from Jervis by the Indians, when they came down to the Cove; or the Indians coming up from Maxohama might have been robbed of the mails they were bringing by other Indians; or they might have perished in one of the winter storms, and the bags might have been found afterwards, and appropriated as justifiable treasure trove.

Katherine said nothing of all this to Miles; she wanted to speak to Jervis about it first, for, of course, it might be only part of an old letter that he had lost, and of no importance at all to anyone else. If this were proved to be the case she would be greatly relieved. A whole host of misgivings had arisen in her heart on reading the words: “You may be sent for now at any time”. If Jervis were to go away, what a blank it would make in her life! Of course he would come back again, but the dreary months of his absence would be very hard to live through.

She did not see Jervis that day until evening. He came in as usual when night school was over. Then all the family were gathered in the one sitting-room the house contained, which left little chance for private conversation of any kind; the boys went away to bed after a time, taking their father with them, and then Mrs. Burton went to put her little girls to bed, and the lovers were alone for the brief half-hour which was all the time they could get for uninterrupted talk on most days. Then Katherine produced the fragment, stated how she had discovered it, and asked a little shyly if it were part of an old letter, or a bit of one he had never received.

“I have never had it, of that I am quite certain,” he said, with a very grave look on his face.

“Then who is ill? Is it one of your brothers?” she asked, with a painful throb at her heart; for something in his looks and his expression made her certain that if the summons came he would have to go.

“No, George and Fred are hard as nails; nothing is likely to ail them, nor would their illness necessitate my going home. I expect it is Cousin Samuel who is ill,” Jervis answered, with a curious hesitancy of manner and a sort of constraint which made Katherine’s heart heavy as lead, although she held her head high and looked prouder than ever.

“What will you do?” she asked, and her tone was breathless, despite her efforts to make her voice have merely a casual sound.

“If Cousin Samuel dies I shall have to go to England, I suppose. He is the well-to-do member of our family, and his death would mean business affairs to look after,” Jervis answered, as he surveyed the scrap of paper, turning it over and over, as if to see if there were anything on it that might have been missed.

“Is he your cousin or your father’s?” she asked. “Neither; he is my grandfather’s first cousin, a hard, cruel old man, with not an ounce of charity, nor even ordinary kind-heartedness, in his whole composition,” Jervis answered in a hard tone. “I asked his help for my mother when she was left a widow, but he turned a deaf ear to the plea, and left her to struggle on, to sink or swim as best she could.”

“I see,” said Katherine, and now it was her voice which was constrained. Then she asked timidly: “If you go to England, when will you have to start?”

“That will depend upon you; for of course I am not going to England to leave you behind, that goes without saying,” he answered, in a masterful tone that set her heart throbbing wildly, only now it was joy, and not sorrow, that caused the emotion. “I must see what I can do about getting a minister up here to marry us,” he went on; “then we should be ready to start directly the waters are open, if need should arise.”

“Wouldn’t it be wiser to put off our wedding until you come back? It will cost you such a fearful lot to take me too,” she said, feeling that she must take a common-sense, prudent view of the situation, although the prospect of going with him set her nerves tingling with delight.

“No, no, sweetheart, I am not going to leave you behind,” he said, holding her hand in a pressure that hurt her. “If I go to England I will take my wife along with me; if that can’t be managed I will stay where I am.”

Katherine laughed. “It is all very well to be so positive, but I don’t see how it is to be managed. It is one thing for me to marry and just go over the river to live, because then I can always come to help when I am wanted,” she said, the mirth dying out of her face, and leaving it with a troubled look; “but it is quite another matter to marry and go straight away to England.”

“Nevertheless, it may have to be done,” he said; adding, with a smile: “Don’t be so conceited as to think the world can’t turn round without your help in pushing it. Here comes Mrs. Burton; let us ask her opinion.”

“Upon what?” said Nellie, who came out from the bedroom at that moment.

“Upon our getting married at the very earliest opportunity and going to England afterwards on a honeymoon trip, if we feel so inclined,” replied Jervis promptly.

Mrs. Burton looked considerably surprised, but she said quickly: “The trip would do Katherine a lot of good, if you can afford the time and the expense, and we could spare her somehow.”

“Just my own opinion,” he answered, with a laugh.

CHAPTER XXX

Preparations

The weeks slid past at a faster rate when the snow began to melt and the water came over the rapids with a roar, and a rush that threatened to sweep everything before it. Jervis went up to Ochre Lake a day or two after Katherine brought him that dirty fragment of paper, and offered to buy any more of the same kind of thing which the Indians might happen to possess, and pay for it liberally with tobacco. But no one appeared to know anything about the scrap, and no one had any more fragments to offer in barter, so he had to go away with the mystery unsolved. Then a week later, when Katherine and Miles went to the encampment with a sledge-load of provisions it was to find that the whole lot had vanished, leaving the dug-outs, in which they had existed so long, deserted. There was no chance of tracing them, for the very next day it began to snow again, and after two days of uninterrupted snowfall it began to rain, and everyone realized that spring was coming.

There had been no trouble on the score of 'Duke Radford's health in this second winter. His mind was placid, though clouded still. He was gentle and affectionate, and easily pleased, and he played with the two little girls as if he had been one of themselves.

Katherine, watching him with anxious, loving eyes, noticed that now he clung to Nellie more than he did to her. At first this raised an acute jealousy in her heart, for she was very human, and in his days of health and mental vigour her father had always clung most to her; but a very little reflection brought her to see that this change was really a matter for thankfulness, as he would not miss her so much during her absence. It was good for Mrs. Burton, too; for the more there were to love and depend upon her the easier did she find it to rise to the occasion, and be ready to meet all the demands upon her.

The great difficulty in arranging for an early marriage lay in securing a minister to perform the ceremony. Directly the waters were open, Jervis sent men with mails to Maxohama, with instructions to bring back a clergyman with them—the bishop if they could get him; but if he were not available, that is, if his spring visitation had not begun, then some other clergyman must be secured. He also sent a letter to Mr. Selincourt, urging that gentleman's speedy return, stating as his reason the necessity there might be for his own absence when the fishing commenced.

When the men had gone there were other preparations to be set afoot, and, although five weeks might possibly elapse before the men returned with the

clergyman, arrangements for the ceremony had to be set about without delay, because there was so much to be done.

A wedding in that out-of-the-way place was such an extraordinary occasion that everyone at Seal Cove and Roaring Water Portage would expect an invitation, so preparations must be made to welcome and entertain the entire population. Katherine would have much preferred to be quietly married in their sitting-room, with no one but her own people to look at her; but Mrs. Burton protested loudly at this, and even Jervis took sides with her, saying that everyone would surely be disappointed if shut out.

“But you don’t mean to ask everyone?” exclaimed Katherine.

“I expect everyone will want to come,” Jervis replied, with a shrug of his broad shoulders.

“Do you mean to ask Oily Dave, Bobby Poole, and all that lot?” she cried in dismay.

“If they will come I shall be delighted to see them,” he answered gravely.

“But Oily Dave——” she began, then stopped as if she had no words adequate to the expression of her feelings.

“Tried to kill me once, were you going to say? I know he did. But perhaps if he had not fastened me in, to drown like a rat in a hole, you would not have come to rescue me; and as that fact so much out-balances the other, why, I feel rather in Oily Dave’s debt than otherwise.”

It was the Sunday after the men had started with the mail for Maxohama, and Jervis was walking with Katherine in the woods above the first portage, while the laughing chuckle of the ptarmigan sounded on all sides.

Katherine began to smile at the figure her wedding guests might be expected to cut, then cried out in alarm: “Oh dear, whatever shall we do if the bishop comes, as you have asked? What will he think of such a mixed medley of folks?”

“I have no doubt that he will think it a fine opportunity for preaching a sermon, and, as he is really a very eloquent man, he is sure to be worth listening to,” Jervis said quietly.

“There is one thing Nellie and I can’t agree about, and I want you to settle it for me,” she said, facing round upon him with a sudden gravity which surprised him, because she had been laughing only a moment before.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Nellie wants to take French leave and borrow Mr. Selincourt’s new house for the wedding; but I should hate it!” she exclaimed vehemently.

“There is no need—besides, Mr. Selincourt will probably be here. Why not use the store? Your stocks of goods are nearly at their lowest, and the people that could not get inside could stay outside,” he said.

Katherine drew a long breath of relief; then she said softly: “Thank you; I thought you would not disappoint me. You never have; I do not think you ever

will. But Nellie said—”

“Yes, what did she say?” he asked, his voice very gentle now, as if he understood something of the trouble and diffidence which lay behind.

“Nellie said that you would not care to be married in a country store, with cheese and bacon and all that sort of thing about. She and Ted Burton were married so, but that was different,” Katherine answered jerkily.

“The store seems to me an ideal place for the ceremony, seeing that we have no church. How do you feel about it yourself?” he asked abruptly.

“I should prefer it there. Only, I wanted to be sure you would not mind,” she said, flinging her head up with a proud gesture, although the laughing light had come back to her eyes.

“I think, my dear, that the man who marries you will be so supremely fortunate that it will matter nothing whether the ceremony is performed in a cathedral or an Indian dug-out,” he said, with a gravity that showed the words to be no empty compliment, but the sincere expression of what he felt.

Katherine’s lips quivered, but it was a day for smiles, not tears; so she laughed in the nervous fashion with which she was apt to cloak all deep emotion, and said: “I suppose the store may be regarded as the middle way between the cathedral and the dug-out; anyhow, it will be cleaner than the latter by a good long way. I shall tell Nellie to-night that you are quite satisfied to be married in the store, and then perhaps her scruples will vanish.”

“We will hope so, at all events,” he answered. “The easiest way to issue invitations will be to chalk a notice on the board outside the store, inviting anyone who wishes to be present at the wedding of Miss Katherine Radford with Jervis Ferrars, date to be fixed later on. That had better be attended to to-morrow, so that the intending guests may have time to get their finery all in readiness.”

“Oh, what finery it will be!” exclaimed Katherine, with a ripple of amused laughter. “There will be the oddest assortment of garments that anyone can imagine. I believe Oily Dave possesses a ‘top’ hat, and that will be certain to appear.”

“Never mind; we shall survive, I dare say, and so will the bishop if he comes,” Jervis answered; and then the talk of the two wandered on to the golden future which they were to spend together, while the glad sunshine filtered down upon them through the pine boughs, and the world was a joyous place because of the love which made everything beautiful.

Jervis chalked the general invitation to the wedding on the board outside the store next day, and great was the satisfaction which the announcement produced. If everyone was invited, then no one felt left out in the cold; and immediately there ensued a great bustle of preparation for the function, which certainly would be the event of the year to the dwellers on the bay shore.

Katherine and Mrs. Burton were busier than anyone, for they had the store to

spring-clean, and that was a task calling for hard work and careful management. There was also the question of wedding garments; but these, in consideration of the limited stock of materials at their disposal, could not amount to much. For a bridal dress, Katherine had decided on a white embroidered muslin which had been her one extravagance when she was in Montreal, and which was made with a high neck and long sleeves. Sometimes she wondered if embroidered muslin were quite the right material for the wedding dress of a fisherman's wife; but as she had no other frock which would serve, it had to be that or nothing.

The days slipped away one by one, and at last they were watching hourly for the return of the men who had been sent to Maxohama for the clergyman. It was a glorious day early in June when Katherine, who had been over to Fort Garry with Phil, was rowing up the back creek, and came suddenly upon quite a procession of small boats which was passing up river.

"Hurrah! It is Mr. Selincourt!" yelled Phil, pulling off his cap and waving it like mad.

"And Mary!" exclaimed Katherine, who suddenly went rosy red, for in the last boat of all was an elderly man, with a kind face and a clerical air, whom she instantly recognized as the bishop from the description Jervis had given her of him.

"Katherine, Katherine, how bonny you look!" cried Mary, and then the boats came nearer together, and greetings became general.

Katherine was introduced to the bishop, who bowed and smiled in a kindly fashion, although introductions at fifteen or twenty yards apart are rather awkward affairs. Then Mary insisted on being transferred to Katherine's boat, and as unceremoniously ordered Phil to occupy the place she was leaving.

"Oh, my dear, I am glad to be back again!" she cried, as she settled herself on the seat from which she had just turned Phil.

"We are very glad to see you back," Katherine answered soberly. The sight of the bishop had set her pulses fluttering wildly, and she was hardly mistress of herself again, as yet.

"The journey has been delightful," Mary rattled on, understanding the cause of Katherine's fluctuating colour, and anxious to give her time to recover from her confusion. "We are such a large party, too, that it has been like a perpetual picnic, with only two drawbacks which really mattered."

"What were they?" asked Katherine, supposing the drawbacks to be some item of portage discomfort, or rainstorms which came at the wrong time.

"The first was a horrid little man, a Mr. Clay, who has come all the way from England to see Mr. Ferrars, and begged to be allowed to attach himself to our party. A perfect little kill-joy he is, so prim, so proper and precise, that one is tempted to believe he must have been born a grown-up, and so has had no childhood at all."

“Where is he now? I did not notice that there was another stranger beside the bishop,” said Katherine, turning her head to look at the other boats, which were leading.

“We left him behind at the fish sheds with Mr. Ferrars,” said Mary. “He has his own boat and his own men. He turns his aristocratic little nose up at everything Canadian, and loudly pities anyone who is fated to live two or three hundred miles from a railway depot. But he apparently has the most utter admiration for Mr. Ferrars, and the fright he was in the day we found the bones was, I am quite sure, entirely due to a fear he had lest it was Mr. Ferrars who had come to grief.”

“What bones, and where did you find them?” asked Katherine, with a start.

Mary shrugged her shoulders and answered: “Two days ago we did a portage on the Albany, and came, at camping time, upon the gruesome spectacle of two skeletons lying side by side under a little shelter formed of snowshoes and spruce boughs. We supposed that they must have been the Indians dispatched from Maxohama months ago with mails, only there were no mail bags, and no food bags either; so, of course, they might have been only ordinary Indians on a journey. Our portage men insisted that the remains were those of Indians, to the intense relief of Mr. Clay. The poor man was plainly in a great state of worry about the remains, and kept questioning Father as to whether there would be any likelihood of Mr. Ferrars trying to work his way down to the railroad in midwinter.”

“I should think those Indians must have been the men who were bringing the mail, and probably they were caught in a snowstorm and died in their sleep,” said Katherine.

“In that case what had become of the mail bags and the food sacks?” asked Mary.

“Stolen, doubtless, by other Indians,” replied Katherine, who then told Mary of the discovery she had made of the fragment of a letter in the hands of a child at the Ochre Lake encampment.

“So you never had that mail? Oh, you poor things, what a long time you have been without any news of the outside world!” cried Mary.

“But we have survived it, you see,” Katherine answered with a laugh. Then she asked Mary if she would not like to be rowed to the store first, before going to inspect the new house.

“Yes, please; I want to see your father and Mrs. Burton, to say nothing of the twins and Miles,” Mary answered eagerly. Then she said, with a wistful note in her voice: “You will let me be bridesmaid tomorrow?”

“To-morrow?” repeated Katherine in surprise. Then, blushing vividly, she answered: “But I am not sure that it will be to-morrow.”

“I am,” replied Mary calmly, “for the simple reason that the bishop starts the day after for Marble Island, which he hopes to reach before the whalers are all

broken out of the ice. Father is going to send him up the bay in the best available boat. You will let me be bridesmaid, won't you?"

"If you wish, certainly," said Katherine; then the boat bumped against the mooring post and was made fast, after which the two girls walked up to the store together.

'Duke Radford was sitting in the sunshine, looking dreamily out over the river, which at this time of the year was at its widest and highest. He rose with a pleased exclamation when Mary came into view, and took off his hat with a courtly air.

"I remember you quite well, and your coming always used to make me happy, but I have forgotten your name," he said, apologetically.

"Call me Mary; it is easy to remember," she answered in a gentle tone. Then she stayed in the sunshine talking to him, until Mrs. Burton and the twins rushed out to carry her off by force.

It was Miles who rowed Mary over the river, for a fit of shyness came upon Katherine, and she was not visible to many people except her own family for the remainder of that day. Jervis came over in the evening, and there was a troubled look on his face which Katherine noticed at once.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, a chill of fear creeping into her heart lest even at this eleventh hour something was coming to stand between her and her happiness.

"I have only had a few more cares and responsibilities dumped upon me than I had bargained for," he answered. "Do you feel equal to helping me to bear them?"

"Of course," she answered brightly.

"Did they tell you about Mr. Clay's arrival?" he asked, holding her hands, and looking down into her face with an expression she could by no means fathom.

"Yes; Mary told me about him. She said he was a horrid little man. Is it true?" Katherine asked, smiling at the remembrance of Mary's energetic utterances.

"I think he means to be very kind," Jervis answered; "but the journey has got on his nerves rather. However, I helped him to a hot bath, and now he has gone to bed in a happier frame of mind; and he wants to be best man to-morrow, so I have squared matters with Miles. Do you mind?"

"Of course not," she answered brightly, thrusting back the feeling of not wanting any more strangers to intrude themselves into that holy of holies which was to take place to-morrow.

"Mr. Clay is the——I mean, he is a friend of the family, and he has been good to my mother," Jervis went on, a curious air of constraint showing itself in him, which might have been due to nervousness, although he was not wont to be troubled in that fashion. "Cousin Samuel died in February, and affairs have been at sixes and sevens since, wanting my presence in England."

"You will have to go, then?" she asked quickly.

"We must start next week, I think," he answered, with an emphasis on the

pronoun that set her heart at rest. "Mr. Clay is going on to Marble Island with the bishop to-morrow. He wants to see if there is any boat there which will serve to take us round to Halifax when the Strait is open. If not, we shall have to go by river and trail to Maxohama; but I want to spare you that fatigue if I can, for you have done quite enough portage work already."

"I would just as soon face the portages as the sea-sickness which will inevitably be my portion going through the Strait," she answered, with a laugh. "But where do the troubles come in, Jervis? Did your cousin die poor?"

"Time enough to hear about the troubles when to-morrow comes. I am not going to worry you with them to-night."

CHAPTER XXXI

The Wedding

The day was as gloriously fine as the most exacting of brides could have wished for, and by noon the company were beginning to assemble.

Some of the fishing boats were away, which was disappointing for the crews, although it is a little difficult to imagine how one extra person could have been squeezed into the congregation which later on crowded the store.

Jervis came over the river very early in the morning, and, with the help of Miles and Phil, got the store ready to serve as a church for the occasion. Pails of lard with boards laid across served for seats in the centre of the floor; barrels of pork, of beans, and of flour made a sort of dais or high seat all round the walls, on which the boys and the younger men might be accommodated. Rather a precarious kind of seat this was, as barrel heads were apt to give way, and then the luckless individual would be smothered with flour or bespattered with brine.

Mary also came across early, to help to dress the bride, and her mood was so wildly hilarious that Mrs. Burton felt it necessary to gently reprove her.

“Of course it is right to be happy and cheerful at a wedding, but there is always a strain of sadness somewhere to keep our spirits even. And we can’t forget that Katherine is to go to England next week.”

“But she will be glad to go, and glad to come back; no one wants to stay in one place all her life, in these gadabout days,” Mary answered. Then she produced a box and bade Katherine admire what she had brought her.

“I felt when I bought it that it was shockingly unsuitable,” Mary said, laughing, as from the folds of soft white paper she lifted out a square of exquisite lace for a bridal veil, and flung it over Katherine’s hair. “But plainly I have the eye of a seer, and I imagined you standing up to be married in a sailor hat, or something equally unsuitable, and it was not to be endured.”

“How lovely!” sighed Mrs. Burton, in an ecstasy of admiration. But Katherine said nothing at all; her heart was too full for speech, and she was thinking of last summer, when it had seemed right that she should stand aside to let Mary have the happiness she wanted for herself. Things had changed so much since then that it seemed scarcely possible that she could have had to bear so many heartaches.

At this moment one of the twins burst into the room with the information that the bishop had arrived, and Katherine, walking like one in a dream, went out from her chamber and crossed the homely kitchen to the store.

A murmur went round the crowded place as she entered. Heretofore she had been to them a good, hard-working girl, with pleasant manners and a pretty face.

They had seen her staggering along the portage paths laden with heavy burdens; they had seen her struggling to row a boat up river against a strong current; they had met her dripping with wet, or covered with frost, like an Esquimaux: but this stately girl with the beautiful face, clad in her white bridal robe, and with Mary's veil over her shining hair, was a revelation to them, and it was Oily Dave who voiced the opinion of the assembly when he exclaimed in a very audible tone: "My word, but ain't she a stunner!"

He was sitting in the very front row, as if he were the most intimate and faithful friend the family possessed. He held his treasured "top" hat carefully in front of him, as if it were a collecting bag, and he were about to take the offertory. For the rest, his costume was something of a mixture: a football sweater with broad stripes, a Norfolk jacket, dungaree trousers, and a fisherman's long boots made him a striking figure even in that company of mixed costumes. He was as self-satisfied and complacent as if he had never planned evil deeds and tried to carry them out, while the benevolence with which he smiled upon the wedding party might have led one to suppose they had no more tried or trusted friend than he.

Katherine was conscious of the critical, appraising glances of the trim little gentleman who stood by the side of Jervis, and they made her vaguely uncomfortable, coming between her and the mellow utterances of the bishop in his opening address. But she forgot Mr. Clay and his searching looks after a time, and was sensible only of the love which wrapped her round when Miles, at a sign from the bishop, took Katherine's hand, and, placing it in that of his father, whispered to him to give it to Jervis.

'Duke Radford, standing erect, his fine figure head and shoulders taller than those around him, except the bridegroom, smiled round on the assembly, stood holding Katherine's ungloved hand, softly stroking and patting it, until Jervis reached forward to take it, when he relinquished it with a smile and a nod, quite satisfied to have it so.

The register was signed in the kitchen, and it was there that the revelation took place which came as a thunderclap of surprise to everyone concerned, except Jervis and Mr. Clay, the latter of whom, when the bishop's part of the ceremony was done, took the remainder upon himself, and proceeded to make his explanations in a voice which Mary declared made her think of musty parchments and red tape.

He addressed himself to Katherine, bowing so profoundly that it was wonderful he was able to return to a perpendicular position without catching hold of something with which to pull himself up. "I have to congratulate you on becoming the Countess of Compton, and I am quite certain the title was never worn by one more worthy to adorn it."

Katherine shrank a step nearer to her husband, and there was a look of positive

fear in her eyes, for privately she thought Mr. Clay must be mad. "I do not understand you," she said gently, and the silence in the kitchen was so profound, as they waited for Mr. Clay's reply, that the buzz of talk which had broken out in the crowded store seemed tremendously loud by contrast.

Mr. Clay cleared his throat with a dry little cough, intended to emphasize the importance of the remarks which he had to make, then he said: "Lord Compton insisted last night that no word should be spoken concerning his accession to the title until after the ceremony of to-day; but now it must be known, and I have to inform you that your husband has been seventh Earl of Compton since the 18th of February last, only it seems he did not know of his cousin's death until yesterday, when I arrived with papers for him to sign."

Katherine became very pale, and turned with a quick movement to Jervis, who stood looking down upon her with a smile. "Even now I do not understand; please tell me," she said, with a bewildered expression.

"My cousin Samuel was the sixth earl," said Jervis, taking his wife's hand and talking to her in the same quietly confidential tone that he might have used had they two been alone, instead of the centre figures of a crowded room. "My father was the son of the younger son, with three lives between him and the title. As I have told you, Samuel, old Lord Compton, was very cruel to my mother in her widowhood, and I hotly determined never to have anything to do with him. Then his son and his grandson died within a few weeks of each other, and Mr. Clay, who is the family lawyer, wrote to me telling me that I was the next heir, and Cousin Samuel wanted me to go home and take up the duties of my new position. That letter came last summer, but I would not go, and I would not accept an allowance for myself; but I asked for one for my mother, and education for my brothers. I have not deceived you, my dearest. I have only withheld from you facts which did not matter until now."

Katherine flushed and then grew pale; she knew that all eyes were upon her, but there was one thing she must know, and her voice had an anxious ring as she asked: "Did you—did you know this, I mean that you were the next heir, when you asked me to marry you?"

"Yes, I knew," he answered cheerfully, and now his voice had got back its old confident ring, for the shadow of constraint which Katherine had noticed in him last night had been owing to this knowledge which he was holding back, and which had troubled him more than he cared to confess. "But even then there was no great certainty of my succeeding. Cousin Samuel might have married again, and left another son to come after him. I was just a working man, and I looked to support my wife by the labour of my hands. You must forgive me that I did not tell you I was going to make a great lady of you, because, you see, I did not know until yesterday, though the scrap of paper you discovered at Ochre Lake warned me that the title might not be far off; so I was not greatly surprised when Mr. Clay

introduced himself to me yesterday.”

“Mr. Clay is evidently a lawyer by nature as well as by profession, since he was able to keep a secret of such magnitude through so many miles of travel,” interposed the bishop, anxious to break the strain for Katherine, whose colour was still coming and going, and whose eyes had the frightened look of a trapped wild creature.

“I was sure there must be some story of greatness behind, when it became necessary for a family lawyer to take such a journey as this,” Mary Selincourt said, with an easy laugh, doing her best to second the bishop’s efforts to draw off attention from Katherine for a time. “And now, don’t you think we might as well start feeding the multitude, Nellie? or they will not be in a proper frame of mind to appreciate the bishop’s sermon presently.”

The diversion was effectual; everyone poured outside to where tables were spread under the trees by the river. Tea, coffee, cakes, and lemonade became the concern of the moment. And in the kitchen the two who had been made husband and wife were left alone.

“Am I forgiven, your ladyship?” Jervis asked; but there was a note of anxiety in his bantering tone, for Katherine’s head was averted, and held at an angle which made him apprehensive.

“Jervis, why did you not tell me while there was time to draw back? For I—I am not fit to be a great lady!” she burst out passionately.

“I did not tell you because I was so horribly afraid you would want to draw back,” he admitted candidly, “and I wanted you so badly that I could not afford to take the risk. You are quite as fit to be a great lady as I am to be a great gentleman; that goes without saying.”

“But think of the work I have had to do?” she faltered, shrinking and shivering at the prospect before her.

“Work is no degradation,” he answered hastily, “or my days in the Nantucket whaler might easily rise up in judgment against me; for I am certain there can be no more filthy or disgusting work on the face of the earth than I did then. Perhaps it is better for us that we have had to toil so hard; we shall be better able to sympathize with other workers, and to help them.”

“I shall not know how to manage a houseful of servants,” she said, with such a comical air of distress that he had to laugh again.

“You need not have more servants than you like, and if you can’t manage them, why, we must pay someone to manage them for us,” he said gaily. Then his voice grew graver as he asked: “When are you going to tell me that I am forgiven, Katherine?”

Something in the look on his face reminded her of the day when she had risked her life to save him from the flood, and the memory broke down the rampart of offended pride which had sprung up in her heart when Mr. Clay made his

astounding revelation.

“I don’t suppose it really matters what our position is as long as we love each other,” she said unsteadily. “And so—and so you are forgiven; but don’t do it again.”

“My dear, there are no more titles in our family that I know of,” he answered, as he lifted her veil to kiss her; “so there is not the remotest chance that you will ever have higher rank than a countess’s.”

“I don’t want to have higher rank than a countess’s,” she answered soberly. “But I mean, don’t keep things back in future, Jervis, or I shall always be in fear. I want to know the bad as well as the good!”

“Do you call it bad to find yourself a countess?” he asked, with an air of mock horror.

“I find it difficult to get used to the idea,” she said, with a rather watery smile; for the greatness thrust upon her was by no means to her mind.

Later on, when she came out with her husband to drink a cup of coffee with the group under the trees, although she was the same Katherine, quick to smile, and with a pleasant word for everyone, there was already a difference, and she carried herself with an added stateliness which caused Mrs. Jenkin to remark with a sentimental air that greatness had eaten into her soul.

But it was Oily Dave who took the chief credit for the whole business, and, having succeeded in cornering the bishop and Mr. Clay, he proceeded to inform them of the manner in which he had helped the match along. “If it hadn’t been for me there wouldn’t have been no interesting occasion such as this here to-day,” he said, standing before them, the fishing boots planted wide apart, the “top” hat carefully held in his left hand: for of course he could not have his head covered in presence of a bishop; moreover, the hat, being too big for him, had a trick of coming down over his face like an extinguisher.

“Pray, what was it that you did to help the business forward?” asked the bishop, with a twinkle in his eye, whilst Mr. Clay’s stiff black hair nearly curled with horror at the thought of a low-class person like Oily Dave having anything to do with making the marriage of his client, the Earl of Compton.

“I gave the girl, I mean her ladyship, the chance to save the young man’s life, and that, I take it, was the starting-point of the whole affair.”

“Without doubt it helped the process,” replied the bishop with a laugh; and then Mr. Selincourt intervened by saying it was time for the bishop’s service to begin, so Oily Dave was promptly hustled to his proper place in the background.

The bishop was more than ordinarily eloquent that evening; but the bride, in her white robe, sitting beside her husband, heard only the words of the text: “He shall choose our inheritance for us”.

[The end of *A Countess from Canada: A Story of Life in the Backwoods* by Marchant, Bessie]