

•THE•YOUNG•
NOR'~WESTER
•



J. MACDONALD
OXLEY

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THE YOUNG NOR'-WESTER

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OF ALL BOOKSHOPS.



THE BOYS WERE ALREADY LOSING BREATH AND STRENGTH.
[See page 84.]

THE YOUNG
NOR' - WESTER

BY
J. MACDONALD OXLEY

AUTHOR OF
'NORTH OVERLAND WITH FRANKLIN' 'THE SPECIMEN HUNTERS'
ETC.

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THE YOUNG NOR'-WESTER

CHAPTER I

HIMSELF AND HIS HOME

HE was but a few months younger than the century, having first opened the big grey eyes, that were afterwards to see so many strange and stirring scenes, in the month of May of the year of Our Lord one thousand eight hundred, in the very heart of the vast northern wilderness of Canada.

A remarkable mingling of race and character was this baby boy, whose advent brought great joy to Fort Chipewyan, and upon whom, without any formal baptismal service,—for priest and parson alike were quite unknown in that far-away place,—the name of Archibald was conferred by his proud father, Mr. Donald M'Kenzie, an official of the great North-West Fur Company, in command of the fort already mentioned.

If there be anything in a name, one need have no difficulty in settling what nation little Archie's father belonged to, and you had only to take a good look at him to see that his name fitted him, for he was a Scotchman in every line of his face and turn of his body. They called him 'Big Donald' in the North-West, for he stood full six feet high, and was so stout of limb, broad of shoulder, and deep of chest, that exertion seemed to fatigue him no more than danger appalled him. He had not a handsome face, but, better than that, a transparently frank, honest one; and with his shaggy eyebrows, heavy moustache, and dense brown beard, from whose midst issued a voice of startling depth and volume, commanded universal respect among the *voyageurs*, *bois-brulées* (half-breeds), and Indians who formed the subjects of his realm.

For the factor of an important fort in those days held little short of regal sway over the men who were under him, and the Indians who came to barter their precious peltries for his beads and blankets and kettles and hatchets. He

was responsible only to the Company, whose headquarters were at Montreal, thousands of miles distant; and so long as the number of packs sent yearly from his district showed no falling off, he could do pretty much as he liked, without interference from anybody.

Donald M'Kenzie had sailed across from Scotland when just out of his teens, to make his way in the New World as best he might, with nothing but keen wits, strong hands, a brave heart, and a clear conscience to help him. Meeting in Montreal with a brother Scot, a few years his senior, who had been some time in the employ of the North-West Fur Company, or 'Nor'-Westers,' as they were generally called, and who stirred his imagination and ambition alike by graphic descriptions of life with the fur-traders, he determined to enlist in the same service. He had no difficulty in obtaining an engagement. The Company was composed mainly of Scotchmen, and so sturdy and promising a fellow-countryman did not have to go a-begging. He was accepted on sight, and that same summer despatched to Fort William, at the far end of Lake Superior, where he entered upon the life in which his career was to be one of thrilling experience and steady success, until the brown beard was plentifully streaked with grey, and he could honourably retire, rich in reputation and in purse also.

As junior clerk Donald had travelled up and down a large portion of the wilderness lying between Lake Superior and the Rocky Mountains, remaining for a time at Fort Pembina, Fort Qu'Appelle, Moose Fort, and other of the many posts scattered by the Company over this immense territory, until he had become thoroughly acquainted with the workings of the fur trade and the wiles of the Indians with whom it was carried on. Then he was appointed to a permanent position at Fort Chipewyan, on the shore of mighty Lake Athabasca, and, little more than a year before Archie arrived, had, through his sterling good qualities, reached the important and responsible position of factor of the fort, so that his ultimate promotion to a partnership in the Company was only a question of time.

When once he could consider himself settled, it might be for a score of years, he very wisely looked about him for a companion and helpmate. It need hardly be explained that he had a very limited range of choice in making his selection. There was no such thing as society in the ordinary sense of the term at the forts. The tide of settlement had not yet touched those continuous wilds which the North-West and Hudson's Bay Fur Companies sought jealously to keep for themselves as a fur preserve, but which were destined to be the home of millions. Beside the employees of the Companies, a few enterprising spirits who ventured to do a little trading and trapping on their own account, and the

Indians, whose lodges and wigwams were scattered at wide intervals over the rolling plains or hidden among the depths of the forest, there was no other human life.

But fortune favoured Donald M'Kenzie and sent him a good wife nevertheless. He had not been long on the lookout when there came to the fort a hardy *voyageur*, having with him his wife and daughter, and no sooner had the factor's eyes fallen upon the latter, than he said to himself with an exultant chuckle, 'Hech, Donald lad!—but she's a braw one. It's doing your best to get her you must be;' and with his customary promptness and resolution he set about the business forthwith.

Donald's enthusiasm was not without good cause, for Virginie Latour possessed no ordinary share of beauty. Her father, Jean Baptiste, as was very usual at that time, had taken him to wife the dusky belle of a Cree encampment, and she had borne him this one child, in whose face and form were happily united the best qualities of both parents. As fair of skin as her father, she had the regular features and lithe, graceful figure of her mother, while in her character were blended the childlike buoyancy of the *voyageur* and the grave dignity of the Indian. Arrayed in her picturesque buckskin costume, richly adorned with beads and spangles, and bearing herself as proudly as though she were a princess, Virginie would have made a marked impression in any social circle, and to the warm-hearted Donald, longing for the grace of feminine society, she seemed a veritable vision of beauty.

His wooing was short but satisfactory. Shrewd Jean Baptiste fully recognised the advantage of having the head of a fort for a son-in-law; while Virginie on her part had not to look long with her splendid brown eyes upon 'Big Donald' to make up her mind that he was immeasurably superior to any of the young *voyageurs* or *bois-brulées*, who, in the ordinary course of things, would most probably be her fate.

So they took one another for better for worse, the marriage service, after Scotch usage, in default of a minister, consisting of Donald acknowledging Virginie to be his wife in the presence of her parents and of his subordinates. The union proved very happy. Donald grew increasingly fonder of his wife; and it Virginie did at times betray the quick temper that she got from her father, or the tendency to sullen sulking that came from her mother, when she could not have her own way about something, why, the big Scotchman just thought to himself that it was the way of women-folk to 'gang agley' now and then, and, instead of giving back hot words, closed his lips firmly over his tongue, and went away. And then, so sure as he did, when perhaps he was sitting at his desk poring over his ledger, or consoling himself with a pipe in a

quiet corner, there would come a gentle step behind him, which, although his keen ears heard it well, he pretended not to notice, and presently a little brown hand would be laid upon his shoulder, and a soft voice would murmur pleadingly in a quaint patois, half French, half Indian, 'Donald, my dear, do you love me still?'

Then the answer came quick, and left no doubt as to its sincerity, and the cloud would vanish, and all would be sunshine again in the M'Kenzie household.

It was a proud and happy time for both when they entered into the dignity of parenthood, and as little Archie throve and developed, their joy in him increased, without a shadow to mar it, for the kind fairy that bestows good health was not behind the giver of good looks, and neither measles, whooping-cough, croup, mumps, nor any other of the ordeals through which the average boy has to pass nowadays, disturbed the serenity of Archie's cradle.

By the time he was twelve years old he stood full five feet in height, and was the very picture of health and heartiness. Three different races were represented in him, and he showed some of the most striking traits of each. The bright, frank face, the firm mouth, the steadfast purpose were as clearly Scotch as the merry laugh, the love of music, the fondness for dress were French, and the piercing eye, the acute ear, and the wild passion for outdoor life were Indian in their source.

In like manner did he share in some of the failings of his strangely mixed parentage, for he could be as obstinate as any Scotchman, as excitable as any Frenchman, and as jealous as any Indian, and altogether was a sort of a boy that it would have sorely puzzled the common run of parents under ordinary circumstances to deal with, but who, away up at Fort Chipewyan, in the midst of a life that was anything but ordinary, and with the firm hand of a father who brooked no disobedience controlling him, gave every promise of growing up into a worthy manhood.

It must not be forgotten to mention that ere he was quite half-way to the twelve years already mentioned, a little sister appeared upon the scene to divide the affection that he had been monopolising, or, as the saying is, to put his nose out of joint, and our young gentleman resented this intrusion so warmly that it positively was not safe to leave him alone with tiny Rose-Marie. He would attack her instantly. Once, indeed, he came very near ridding himself of his rival by tumbling her cradle over on top of her.

When he grew older, however, this childish jealousy disappeared, and he became as fond of his sister—who was just a comical little copy of her mother

—as he had been jealous of her, playing happily with her all day long, and taking such good care of the wee one as to prove a real help to Mrs. M'Kenzie.

And now it is full time to tell something about the home in which these young folks were growing up. Fort Chipewyan still exists, and to find it you must take a good map of the Dominion of Canada, and look right into the heart of the vast region called the North-West Territories. There you will notice an immense lake, bearing the Indian name of Athabasca, and at the south-western end of the lake, occupying a commanding position upon a promontory that juts out from the northern shore into the cold blue water, is the fort, which has been for nearly a hundred years one of the most important centres of the fur trade.

To the traveller approaching it after having been for weeks accustomed to nothing better than a wigwam, the fort presented a very imposing appearance. First of all, there was a palisade of huge pickets, with sharpened points, whose twenty feet of height made it impossible to scale them without ladders. This stood in the form of a square, the sides of which were not less than one hundred yards in length. At each corner frowned a bastion marked with loopholes for muskets, while above the gates, of which there were two, one facing the lake and the other the land, rose lofty lookout towers, that enabled the sentinel upon them to see anything within the radius of many miles.

Inside the square, and arranged so as to make the best of the space at hand, were the buildings which housed the factor and his family, the clerks who assisted him, the postmaster, interpreter, *voyageurs*, and other employees, and finally the store and warehouses, all built in the strongest manner of logs, and looking very rough, but very solid. In front of the factor's house stood a flag-pole, from which, on special occasions, the flag of Old England would flaunt upon the breeze.

In mid-winter, when all hands were at home, the garrison of the fort comprised some fifty men, Scotch, French, and half-breed, many of them with families; and to keep all these in good behaviour, seeing how apt they were to proceed from argument to blows, when they had nothing else to do, required no small address and determination on the part of the factor. But so firm and just a hand did he keep over them, that there was not a better ordered post in the country than Chipewyan, nor one whose chief was in better favour.

Not only because he was the factor's son, and it was therefore good policy, but because they all liked him for himself, the men made very much of Archie, and did their best to spoil him. He was always eager to be in their company, and his father, intending as he did that he should follow in his footsteps, put no restraint upon him, for the earlier he began to learn the life of a fur-trader, the more thoroughly would he master it.

The consequence was, that at an age when the ordinary city boy would be thought a wonder if he could catch a ball fairly well, or ride a pony without falling off, this child of the wilderness could swim like a duck, ride like an Indian, hit a squirrel with an arrow at thirty yards, and paddle a canoe like a *voyageur*.

Nor had his education in other ways been neglected. His father had been a fairly good scholar in his young days, and among the treasures he had gathered about him since coming into the North-West were a number of volumes of fiction, poetry, history, science, and theology, which were a source of never-failing pleasure to him, and the contents of which he took delight in imparting to Archie, who proved an apt pupil, being able to read well when but eight years old, and enjoying very much his father's enthusiastic teaching.

For this schooling there was plenty of time in the long, cold winters, when the factor spent most of his days in the bosom of his family, and when sometimes for a whole week no one who could possibly help it would think of venturing out of doors, so intense would be the cold and fierce the gales that blew about Fort Chipewyan. Then would the trappers and *voyageurs* gather about the roaring fires, and while away the hours in thrilling tales of hairbreadth escapes, and mighty exploits in which the Indian, the bear, the buffalo, and the elk always got the worst of it in the end, and which made Archie's blood bound in his veins, as he longed for the day when he could take his place among these heroes, and endure and triumph with them.

'Oh, father! when shall I be big enough to go with you?' he exclaimed longingly one day as the factor was about setting forth on one of his journeys in quest of Indian camps where furs might be found.

'When shall you be big enough, Archie? Well, let me see,' responded his father, with a smile; and then, after a pause, 'I think I might venture to take you when you are about fifteen.'

'Fifteen, father? Oh, that's ever so far off!' cried Archie dolefully. 'Won't you take me before that?'

'Not on a long trip like this one, laddie,' answered Mr. M'Kenzie in a kind but firm tone. 'You would only be in our way, you know, and that wouldn't be pleasant.'

Archie did not relish the reflection implied in his being in the way, and would have liked to argue the point at length; but his father was too busy to listen to him then, and he had to content himself with muttering—

'I'm very sure I shouldn't be in the way. Why couldn't I take care of

myself, I'd like to know?'

However, there was nothing to do but to submit; for his mother, who loved her children so passionately that she was never content to have them out of sight, would give him no support, he knew, and he must only await his father's pleasure in the matter.

But while waiting he could be preparing, and one of the most important accomplishments being the management of a canoe, he consoled himself by paddling about in his own little beauty, made especially for him by one of the Indians, who wished to find especial favour in the eyes of the factor.

It was one of the loveliest days of the all-too-short summer that comes to Athabasca, and the lake looked its best, as it stretched away from the foot of the fort, a vast expanse of dimpled blue. Archie had been but a few minutes in the canoe, and was not far from land, when who should come running down to the beach but little Rose-Marie, no hood upon her curly head, or moccasins on her chubby feet as she scampered towards Archie, calling out eagerly—

'Archie, Archie, take me with you!'

Archie's first impulse was to refuse her on the same ground as his father a little while before had refused him, namely, that she would only be in the way. But, before he spoke, his mind changed. It was against the rules for him to take Rose-Marie out in his canoe. Mrs. M'Kenzie did not consider he could yet be trusted with so precious a passenger, and hitherto her orders upon that point had been obeyed.

But this morning Archie was just in the mood to be reckless. He felt very much put out at what his father had said to him, and when Rose-Marie, with her toes touching the edge of the water, stretched out her arms beseechingly, and repeated her request to be taken in, the thought flashed into Archie's mind—

'I'll show them I can manage a canoe,' and turning towards the shore he called out—

'All right, Rose, I'll take you.'

Rose-Marie clapped her hands for joy, and eagerly awaited his approach.

'Take care now, Rose; climb in and sit right down,' cautioned Archie; and in another moment the little girl was sitting demurely in the bottom of the canoe.

With a half-reckless, half-repentant feeling, Archie paddled off, his little passenger beaming delightedly, as the canoe glided through the ripples, which

made soft music against its birchen sides. His intention was to go out to an island that lifted its head from the water about half a mile away, and to land there for a while, as it was a great place for the berry that the Indians called *tawquoy meena*, but which we know as the choke-cherry.

Rose-Marie kept as still as a mouse, although her tongue wagged merrily, and Archie's steady paddling soon brought the canoe to the island, where he ran her gently up on the beach, and they got out to hunt for choke-cherries. Their search was successful, and when they had had enough, Archie broke off a big branch laden with the red beads to take back to their mother, and they returned to the canoe.

By this time Rose-Marie was getting tired and restless, and Archie had more than once to caution sharply—

‘Be still, there, Rose, will you? You'll upset the canoe if you don't.’

But Rose was not in the humour to obey. She wriggled and squirmed about in a way that made Archie both cross and nervous.

At length, when they were not more than half-way home, the little witch caught sight of a dead fish gleaming white on the surface of the water, and exclaiming, ‘Oh, Archie, I've got a fish!’ made a sudden grasp at it. As quick as a flash Archie sprang forward to stop her, but he was too late. She had reached far over the side, and when he moved the cranky canoe was overbalanced, and the next moment they were both plunged headlong into the deep, cold water.

CHAPTER II

A BRUSH WITH THE BISON

ARCHIE'S first feeling was one of terror, and wild anxiety to save his own life. But so soon as he had risen to the surface and cleared the water from his eyes, he thought of his sister. Fortunately they had fallen close together, and at once he saw her struggling frantically not a yard away. Two eager strokes brought him to her, and catching her by the arm, he shoved her towards the canoe, crying out—

‘Take hold of the canoe, Rose, quick!’ Rose-Marie put out her little hands more by instinct than by understanding, and happily caught a good grip of the bow of the canoe, to which she clung desperately.

Archie came close beside her, and sought to cheer her by saying bravely—

‘Don’t be frightened, Rose darling; we’ll be all right soon.’

Poor little Rose, all the colour fled from her plump cheeks, her curly hair clinging lankly about her neck, and her heart beating as though it wanted to break loose, made no attempt to answer him, but clung tightly to the canoe, which just served to keep her head above water.

It was well enough for Archie to say that they would be all right soon, but there certainly did not seem much ground for his confidence. They were at least a quarter of a mile from the shore, and even could little Rose have held on so long, it was not at all possible for Archie to push the canoe to land, while to get back into it was no less out of the question. Unhappily, too, there was no one in sight at the fort, and his shrill cries for rescue got no response save from the mocking echoes.

Although it was midsummer, the water was too cold to be long endured. A few minutes more, and the M’Kenzie household would have been made desolate, when Providence, in the guise of a brown Indian, intervened.

Old Akaitchko had been paying a visit to his nets at Whitefish Point that morning, and was returning with a full fare, and in high good-humour, when his keen eyes caught sight of the overturned canoe, and the next moment Archie’s cry fell upon his ear. Instantly the old man bowed over his paddle, until it bent like a bow in his hands, and the canoe, laden as it was, leaped over

the water as though it shared its master's eagerness.

'I come, I come!' he shouted at the top of his voice, and drove the paddle still deeper into the water.

Archie heard his shout just in time, for he was fast losing strength, and could hardly have held on a moment longer. Putting his arm about Rose-Marie, he cried—

'Hurrah! Akaitchko's coming to us.'

But the girl did not answer, for she had fainted, and only his grasp prevented her from sinking. The next moment the Indian's canoe shot up to them, and bending skilfully over, the strong old man lifted poor little Rose in beside him, saying in his own tongue—

'You next, Archie.'

Relieved of his burden, Archie let go of his own canoe and caught hold of the other, into which, with the assistance of Akaitchko, he presently clambered, and dropped exhausted on the bottom.

The Indian gave a grunt of approval which spoke volumes, and then resuming his paddle, plied it with a vigour that soon brought them to the beach, where, without a word to Archie, whom he evidently deemed quite able to look after himself, he picked up the still insensible girl as though she were a little baby, and hastened to the fort, Archie following behind at a much slower pace, and already beginning to wonder what consequences his act of disobedience would entail.

As it turned out, he came off scathless, for his father, who could punish soundly enough when he thought the occasion required it, was away, and his mother was too rejoiced at the escape of her darling Rose-Marie to think of doing any more than enjoining solemnly upon Archie never to take his sister out canoeing again until he should have permission from her.

Of course, old Akaitchko came in for Mrs. M'Kenzie's warmest gratitude, receiving as reward such a supply of tea and tobacco as he had never had in his life before, and the assurance, moreover, that he need never go with empty pannikin or pipe so long as she was at hand to fill them for him. Whereat the old man felt that he had nothing more to ask for.

Little Rose-Marie was none the worse for her adventure, not even taking a cold, thanks to her vigorous constitution, developed by constant outdoor life; so that in the end there was nothing to be sorry for but the act of disobedience which might have had such dreadful consequences.

Life at the fort in midsummer was apt to be very quiet and uneventful. Mr. M'Kenzie and the majority of his men would be absent, either taking the furs as far down as Lac à la Crosse on their long journey to Montreal, or bringing back the supplies of goods and provisions which were sent up to meet them; or, when this was all over, they would be away out upon the prairies hunting the bison, moose, and deer whose juicy meat, dried in the sun, and then pounded into shreds and mixed with melted fat, would be packed into great bags of skin, and under the name of pemmican form the principal item of food during the long winter months when neither bison nor deer was to be had. So that Archie saw very little of his father at the very time when he would have liked most to be with him, and this made him all the more impatient to be permitted to accompany him on his expeditions.

His delight, then, may be imagined, when, one morning of the following summer after that in which the canoeing incident occurred, Mr. M'Kenzie, who had arranged for a trip in quest of bison over the plains of the Peace River, having received the usual petition from his son, instead of dismissing it at once, hesitated in replying, hummed and hawed, looked at the sturdy little chap from head to foot, and then, as if unable to withstand the arguments expressed in his flushed face, eager eye, and trembling lip, said in the tone of a man who thought he should not give way, but really could not help it—

‘Very well, then, laddie, you may come this time; but mind you, you must not get into any mischief.’

Preparations of quite an imposing character were made for this hunt, the Indian who had been charged to report the appearance of the bison having brought in word that two immense herds were to be found not far apart, and about one hundred miles to the south-west. This was just the opportunity the factor desired to lay in a stock of meat out of which to manufacture the indispensable pemmican, and so every man and horse that could be spared from the fort were ordered out for active service.

Everybody was in high good-humour, the Indians and half-breeds hugging themselves with delight at the prospect of unlimited gorging of juicy tongue and unctuous hump, the white men full of pleasurable anticipation of a lively hunt, and the very horses and dogs eager for the chase; while most excited of all was Archie, now a big boy of fourteen, and thinking himself equal to anything.

‘Of course I’ll take my gun, father,’ said he, bringing in an excellent little musket that the factor had procured especially for him, and which he had now cleaned and polished until it shone in his hands.

‘Do you think you can do better with that than with your bow and arrow, Archie?’ asked Mr. M’Kenzie quizzingly.

‘I don’t *think*, father; I know,’ replied Archie proudly. ‘Can’t I hit the bull’s eye two times out of three at sixty paces?’ he added, with a tone of reproach in his voice.

‘Can you indeed, my boy?’ exclaimed Mr. M’Kenzie. ‘Well, I’m sure that’s not bad shooting and you ought to secure us a good fat buffalo calf at least, if you can do as well as that. Don’t you think so?’

‘I’ll do my best, father,’ answered Archie; ‘and I shall be very much disappointed if I don’t do that much for you, at any rate.’

The following morning, bright and early, the expedition set forth from the fort, Mrs. M’Kenzie and Rose-Marie accompanying it to the gate, and then climbing up into one of the towers and watching its progress until it was lost in the distance.

There were twenty-five men all told, and nearly twice as many horses, for they hoped to bring back with them a good quantity of meat. Besides Mr. M’Kenzie, there were Ferdinand Wentzel, his right-hand man, a Norwegian, and a most trustworthy, excellent clerk, who had been in the employ of the Company almost as long as his chief; Colin Robertson, a junior clerk, a red-haired, freckle-faced, hot-tempered, but brave and energetic young Scotchman; and Alec MacGillivray, another Scotchman, though of a quite different nature, being quiet, reserved, and cool.

These men, with John Stewart, a Canadian, composed the factor’s staff of assistants at Fort Chipewyan, and the latter had been left in command of the little garrison which would hold the fort until the return of the expedition.

The remainder of the party consisted of Canadians and Indians in about equal numbers, accompanied by a wonderful collection of dogs of all sorts and sizes, that ran about among the horses, barking noisily, by way of expressing their interest in the undertaking. They were all in light marching order, for it was intended to lose no time upon the way either going or coming. The bison must be reached as soon as possible, and then, after the hunt was over, the sooner they got back to the fort with the results, the better would be the pemmican.

Archie was well mounted, his steed being a pretty piebald mustang his father had given him the year before, having first made sure that it was well broken in and of a trustworthy temper. It was a speedy, enduring animal, and while on its back Archie need not fear being left behind by any of the others.

He rode along beside his father, who was mounted upon a splendid black stallion of unusual size, whose impatient spirit he kept in check by means of a powerful Spanish curb that no horse could resist.

‘You’ll have to keep your wits well about you, Archie, when we sight the buffalo. It’ll be everyone for himself, you know,’ said the factor, smiling proudly down upon the boy at his stirrup.

‘I’m sure I don’t care, father,’ answered Archie firmly. ‘If Spot and I cannot keep out of the way, why, we’re only fit to be run over; aren’t we, Spot?’ and he patted the mustang’s neck fondly.

‘But look here now, Archie, do you seriously imagine that you are going to kill a buffalo yourself with that plaything?’ asked Mr. M’Kenzie in a bantering tone, pointing at the musket which hung from the boy’s shoulder.

The colour mounted into Archie’s face, and his eye flashed for a moment in a way that suggested a hasty answer, but, controlling himself by an effort that was not lost upon his questioner, he replied respectfully—

‘Well, father, if you had only seen how I killed that carcajou over at Beaver Creek the other day when you were away, you wouldn’t laugh at my gun. It isn’t very big, but it can shoot straight, and pretty far too; can’t it, Mr. Wentzel?’ appealing to the Norwegian, his especial friend among the employees, who happened to ride up at that moment.

‘There’s no doubt but that it can do good work in your hands, Archie,’ responded Wentzel.

‘And don’t you believe I could kill a buffalo with it?’ asked the boy eagerly.

‘Certainly you could, if you were only lucky enough to hit him in the right place,’ said Wentzel.

‘The proof of the pudding is in the eating, Archie,’ broke in Mr. M’Kenzie; ‘and all I hope is that you may have the best possible chance to show what you can do with your pop-gun.’

Archie was just ready to speak warmly in defence of his firearm, when one of the Indians rode up with a communication to make, which claimed his father’s attention, and he had to content himself with saying to the Norwegian, with a touch of indignation in his voice—

‘Pop-gun, to be sure! It’s no pop-gun, is it, Mr. Wentzel?’

To which Mr. Wentzel replied, ‘No, indeed, Archie.’

By the afternoon of the second day they had reached the locality indicated by the Indians as that where the bison were to be found, and the expedition moved forward with the greatest care, sending out scouts in all directions, lest they should come suddenly upon the herd, and stampede it before they were ready to deal with it. They made no fire in the camp that night, but stayed their hunger with cold victuals, and the following morning everybody was astir at daybreak, and impatient for the fray.

They were entering upon a beautiful country. Away before them until they seemed to touch the horizon undulated the great plains of the Peace River, covered with the bunches of rich, thick grass that forms the bison's favourite food, and intersected at wide intervals by shallow valleys, along whose bottom ran lazy little tributaries of the Peace. The weather was perfect, and there was every reason to expect a successful hunt. Before they left camp there were some black dots to be made out toward the south, which were probably outposts of the herd, and toward these the hunters directed their way, spreading out into a long line, and moving as steadily forward together as the nature of the country permitted. Far in advance of the others were old Akaitchko and another Indian, whose very appropriate name when translated was Long Legs, the two most experienced hunters in the country, and these two the others anxiously watched for the signal which would mean that the bison were in sight.

Up one slope and down another, across narrow *coulées* and broad intervals, splashing through the streams that now had shrunk to half their size, and avoiding the mud-holes in which their horses might have stuck fast, the line of attack moved steadily forward, every man holding his gun across his saddle before him, ready for instant use.

Archie, who rode at his father's left, trembled so visibly with suppressed excitement, that the factor became concerned lest his gun should go off accidentally, and give a premature alarm.

'Keep cool, my lad, keep cool,' said he. 'If your pop-gun goes off before it ought to, it will play mischief with us.'

Understanding his father's meaning at once, Archie blushed as if he had betrayed himself, and sitting up very straight in his saddle, grasped the gun firmly, saying—

'I will keep cool, father, never fear; this won't go off until it's told to. But look, father, isn't Akaitchko signalling?'

The factor glanced quickly at the old Indian. Sure enough, from the hither slope of a near hill, he was making gestures that said as plain as words—

‘The bison—I see them. Come on, but take care.’

The others soon saw the signal also, and all moved forward as quietly as possible until they were beside Akaitchko. The old man was fairly palpitating with excitement, as he said in a hoarse whisper to Mr. M’Kenzie—

‘Thousands of ’em! um—um! Fine—fat—good,’ and he rolled his tongue expressively in his mouth.

Creeping cautiously to the summit of the hill, the factor, lying at full length, looked over into the valley below, and beheld a sight that did his heart good; for there, within easy reach and utterly unsuspecting of danger, was as noble a herd of bison as he had ever seen in his life—bulls, cows, and calves, all fat and in fine condition.

Without a moment’s loss of time the order of attack was arranged. One half of the party, with Wentzel as leader, were despatched to make a wide detour, and if possible get on the other side of the herd, while those who remained would not move until this had been done. The rolling nature of the ground made this manœuvre easy of accomplishment, and twenty minutes later the signal came from the crest of the opposite slope that showed Wentzel’s division had fulfilled their mission.

The bison were feeding down towards a large pond that filled the valley at the farther end, and Mr. M’Kenzie’s scheme was to stampede them into this pond, where they would be entirely at his mercy. When all was in readiness, he called to his men to mount and see that their guns were all right; then, giving Archie an affectionate clasp on the arm, he said in a low, tender tone—

‘Look well out for yourself now, Archie. Don’t get in the way of the herd, or anybody else.’

Before Archie has time to make any reply, his father roars out at the top of his stentorian voice, ‘All together now—Charge!’ and the whole party as one man start on the gallop down the slopes, and joining line in the level valley, bear down upon the startled herd like an avalanche, the Indians giving vent to the most blood-curdling whoops as they urge their mustangs to their utmost speed.

So sudden is the onset that the hunters are right upon the bewildered bison ere they get fairly started in flight, and the sharp report of the guns tells that the work of death is begun. Each man chooses his animal, and seeks to bring it down. Archie is soon separated from his father, and, determined to show his mettle, he singles out a fine yearling bull, and sends a bullet into him behind the shoulder, as he had been told to do. But, much to his surprise, his quarry

refuses to fall, and he is just wondering whether he could manage to reload on horseback, when he discovers that he is himself in too much danger to give any more attention to the bison, for his horse, to whom this hunt is an entirely novel experience, has become frantic with fright, and is carrying him right into the heart of the herd, now fully started on its mad stampede towards the pond.

CHAPTER III

THE RIVAL ESTABLISHMENT

‘GOD help us!’ cried Wentzel, who was the first to realise Archie’s danger, ‘the boy’s caught in the stampede;’ and losing all thought of shooting bison in his anxiety for his young friend, he slung his musket over his shoulders, and concentrated his energies upon the task of forcing his horse through the terrified herd in an attempt to get to Archie’s side.

A moment later the factor also became aware of his son’s critical position, and he in like manner paid no more attention to the hunt, but made strenuous efforts to reach the imperilled boy.

In truth the situation was a very serious one. The thousands of maddened bison were thundering down the valley at a terrific pace towards the pond, to whose miry depths far more of them would fall victims than to the hunters’ bullets. The pond was hardly half a mile distant, and unless Archie were extricated from their midst before they reached it, the chances were that he would share their fate.

Both Wentzel and Mr. M’Kenzie saw this clearly, and urging their horses to the utmost, they fought their way from different directions through the surging rabble of beasts. Fortunately they were mounted upon very powerful animals, to whom a buffalo hunt was no novel experience, and, tremendous as the task seemed, did succeed in making progress towards their goal. At length, almost at the same moment, they gained their point. They came up on either side of Archie, and each grasping one rein of his horse’s bridle, they drew close together until the three horses were touching. Then came the struggle for escape. The bison, crazed with terror, their noses almost touching the ground as they lumbered furiously forward, pressed them on every side. To halt was out of the question. The utmost that could be done was to slacken speed somewhat, and thus gradually work back to the rear of the stampede. Happily they were not very deep in the herd, and when the vanguard was brought to a standstill by the deep mud of the pond’s margin, the whole mass began to slow up, until finally it was possible for the three riders, whose united strength had enabled them to hold their own much better than if they had been separate, to

edge round and force their way out into freedom, just in time to save themselves from being carried by the mob into the mire, where hundreds of unfortunate creatures were already engulfed.

Archie's face was as white as a sheet, and his eyes had a strange, half-dazed expression in them as he looked at his father without uttering a word.

'Thank God, laddie, for a very narrow escape!' exclaimed the factor in a reverent, grateful tone; and then, turning to the Norwegian, 'And thank you, Wentzel, for your timely aid. I doubt much if I could have saved the boy alone.'

Wentzel blushed, and murmured something about its being nothing, he was only too glad to be of any service. Then Archie seemed to come to himself, and laying his hand upon his father's knee, said in such a pleading way, 'Was I very much to blame, father? I really could not help it. Spot was frightened by the guns, and I could not hold him.'

Evidently he dreaded his father's saying something like this: 'There now, Archie, it is just as I told you. You're not fit to take part in a hunt yet, you see.'

But if any such idea was in Mr. M'Kenzie's mind, he took good care not to express it. On the contrary, he answered the boy's anxious question by asking another, which completely turned the current of his thoughts—

'Why, laddie, what's become of your gun?'

Archie instinctively threw his hand to his shoulder, but no gun was there. Without doubt he had dropped it.

'Let it drop, eh?' said the factor, smiling. 'Well, it'll need a new lock, stock, and barrel by this time, if I'm not mistaken. Did you fire it off before you let it go?'

'Yes, indeed, father,' replied Archie promptly, much relieved at this turn in the conversation. 'I shot a young bison right behind the shoulder, just where you told me to.'

'Oh, ho! I'm glad to hear that,' said the factor. 'Suppose now we go back a bit, and see if there is anything left of the gun.'

They accordingly rode slowly back over the turf, torn up by thousands of furious hoofs, and had not gone far before Archie exclaimed joyfully—

'There he is; I know him by that queer tuft of hair on his hump. That's the fellow I shot.'

Lying on the ground at their feet was a splendid young bison, who had

evidently died hard.

‘So that’s your prize, Archie?’ said Mr. M’Kenzie. ‘Let’s see if we can find your bullet. On which side did you shoot him?’

‘On his right side, father,’ answered Archie.

The bison was lying on his left side.

The factor scanned him carefully.

‘Right you are, laddie,’ he cried, touching with his finger a spot just behind the shoulder. ‘Here’s your mark. Your pop-gun has been good for something after all. This is as fine a piece of meat as we shall get to-day.’

While they were talking the Norwegian had gone on, keeping a sharp lookout upon the ground, and presently he called out—

‘Hurrah! I’ve got it, and I don’t think it’s injured at all.’ Jumping to the ground, he picked up the gun, and turned it over in his hand.

‘No,’ he declared, ‘not injured a bit, only some slight dents and scratches.’ And he handed it to Archie.

Greatly relieved, Archie took his gun, and patting it tenderly, said to it—

‘You’re not broken, are you? You’ll kill many a buffalo for me yet—see if you don’t.’

In the meantime the work of death had been going on fast and furious, until the factor, unwilling that there should be needless slaughter, shouted to the men to stop, an order which, being pretty well tired out, they were not loth to obey. On reckoning up the results of the hunt, they were found to be entirely satisfactory. Over one hundred bison had been killed, the majority being fat, tender young animals that would make the best of pemmican; and it now remained to cut their meat up into long strips and dry these in the sun before returning to the fort.

This work occupied several days, during which Archie, who had no relish for it, amused himself exploring the country round about, riding upon Spot and accompanied by a pack of dogs that were always getting very much excited over something, but in the end not accomplishing much. The prairie dogs afforded him some fine practice in shooting, so that he did not find the hours hang heavily upon his hands.

The homeward journey was a sort of triumphal progress, everybody feeling that the expedition had covered itself with glory, and none being better pleased than Archie himself, for he considered that he had fairly won his place among

the men, and that there would no longer be any question about his accompanying his father whenever he wanted to do so.

On his return to the fort the factor was met by Mr. Stewart, who had been left in charge, with a communication that caused him to look very grave, and to make clear the import of which it will be necessary to take a little dip into history.

The North-West Fur Company did not by any means have the field to itself in carrying on its business. It was not, indeed, the first in that field. More than a century before there was any such organisation, the 'Honourable Company of Merchant Adventurers trading into Hudson's Bay,' or, as it was called for short, 'The Hudson's Bay Company,' had been granted by royal charter very extensive and indefinite rights and privileges in the great lone land of the North-West. Until late in the eighteenth century this Company had been content with the business that came to the shores of the bay, many of their Indian customers travelling hundreds of miles and enduring great privation in order to exchange their beaver, bear, and mink skins for guns, beads, blankets, kettles, hatchets, knives, and other articles with which the Company alone could supply them.

But long before this the gay, daring, reckless *coureurs des bois* of Canada, and in their wake the shrewd, enterprising merchants of Montreal, had been pushing farther and farther into the West by way of the Great Lakes, and the Ouinipique, Assiniboine, and Saskatchewan River routes, competing eagerly in the quest for furs, and resorting to every expedient, proper and improper, to get the better of the Indians and of one another; with the result that in a little while they brought both themselves and the trade to the verge of ruin. In this extremity some of the shrewdest of the Scotchmen saw their opportunity, and, suggesting combination instead of competition, succeeded with little difficulty in uniting the clashing interests into one body which should work harmoniously for the benefit of all. Thus came into being the great North-West Fur Company, which at once set to work with immense energy and exceeding skill to make vast fortunes out of the peltry traffic. Forts and posts were established north, south, and west from Red River, and no effort was spared to secure every skin that was to be had.

Of course this could not go on very long without infringing upon the chartered privileges of the Hudson's Bay Company, and this corporation, awaking from its long sleep, manifested little less energy and enterprise in looking after its rights. Wherever the Nor'-Westers established a post or built a fort, the Hudson Bays promptly put another near by; and when the latter happened to be first on the spot, the former returned the compliment. Thus, not

half a mile distant from Fort Chipewyan stood Fort Wedderburne, the Hudson Bay establishment, a much less extensive affair, but still sufficient to show that the older Company had no idea of leaving its rival unwatched and unopposed.

For some time the rivalry between the two companies had been of quite a friendly nature. The residents were, as a rule, upon excellent terms, and frequently enjoyed one another's hospitality in the shape of balls and dinners during the long, dreary winters. But of late years a different spirit had begun to show itself. In the Red River district, where the competition was keenest, unfortunate collisions in which blood was shed had occurred, and a feeling of uneasiness and of mutual suspicion was taking the place of the old cordiality and good-fellowship.

The worst feature of this new order of things was that the rivals sought by every device to alienate the Indians from each other, bidding for their exclusive friendship by extravagant presents, and—to their shame be it said—by lavish outlay of the poor red man's deadliest curse, the firewater for which he would at any time barter his very soul.

Against both these evils Mr. M'Kenzie had, until this summer, been able to make a successful stand. So much was he respected and admired at Fort Wedderburne, that no chill had fallen upon the pleasant relations between the two establishments; and so profound was the influence his splendid courage and unwavering fair dealing had won for him among the Indians, that not one of those whom he could rightly regard as his parishioners had need to be bribed by firewater to remain faithful to him.

But early in the season the factor at Fort Wedderburne had been recalled, and his place filled by one who brought with him from Red River feelings of intense animosity against the Nor'-Westers and a burning ambition to win renown by doing them all the harm he possibly could. Mr. M'Kenzie hit the mark when he surmised that the change was no accident, but only the first steps in a carefully prepared policy, the object of which was the downfall of Fort Chipewyan.

In many respects the Hudson Bays could hardly have chosen a better agent for their purpose than Miles M'Dougal. He had been in their employ from his teens, and to him the Company meant everything. For it he lived and moved and had his being. No strategy was too mean, no use of force too brutal, provided the Company profited. The end justified the means, and not a qualm of conscience had he, so long as he succeeded. He was very different in appearance from Mr. M'Kenzie, being of middle stature and very thick-set, with absurdly bowed legs and huge flat feet. His head was square, and seemed almost to rest upon his broad shoulders, so short was his neck, and his face was

no less ugly than his figure was ungraceful, yet the one spoke as plainly of craft and cruel determination as the other did of strength and tireless endurance. Altogether he was one who at first glance made you feel that it were far better to be his friend than his enemy, and best of all to be neither the one nor the other.

On his arrival at Fort Wedderburne, Mr. M'Kenzie had at once made overtures of friendship, but they were so ungraciously received that he did not repeat them, and with much regret realised that the two forts must soon become hostile camps instead of sociable neighbours. Not only so, but that henceforth he must maintain a sleepless vigilance if he would hold his own against this new influence, accounts of whose evil work in other districts had already reached Fort Chipewyan. In a fair, open contest he had nothing to fear. He had many advantages on his side. His men outnumbered M'Dougal's two to one. His establishment was larger and better equipped. He had won the confidence and the love of the Indians by a thousand acts of kindness and long years of honest dealing. There was but one way in which M'Dougal could hope to supplant him, and that way Mr. M'Kenzie knew well enough his rival would not hesitate to adopt.

From the curse of firewater the factor of Fort Chipewyan had kept his skirts clear. He detested strong drink in every shape, and if at any time the alternative between using it in his trade and resigning his position had been presented to him, he would have resigned at once. His superiors fully understood this, and respecting his sturdy principles, made no attempt to interfere with their practice. No post sent in better returns than his, and that was all they were concerned about. But the new factor at Fort Wedderburne had not been long installed before the firewater argument was brought into play, and the news which met Mr. M'Kenzie on his return from the buffalo hunt, and which made him look so grave, was that a band of Chipewyans, whose coming with many packs of peltries he had expected, had been met by M'Dougal and his men a day's journey from the fort, and plied with liquor until, forgetting all their obligations to Mr. M'Kenzie, to whom the furs were pledged for advances made, they had parted with them to their tempter, at a price far below their real worth, and were now well on their way home again, for they would not dare to come to the fort.

Mr. M'Kenzie would not cast a cloud upon the general rejoicing caused by the success of the hunt by letting it be seen how much he was disturbed.

'M'Dougal's outwitted us this time, Stewart; there's no getting over that,' he said, assuming a cheerful expression. 'But never mind, it'll be our turn next, if we only keep our eyes open. He's taught us a lesson we mustn't forget.'

That evening he called Wentzel into his room, and they had a long and earnest talk together.

‘There’s trouble brewing, I greatly fear, Wentzel,’ said the factor, making no pretence to hide from his right-hand man and trusty confidant the gravity of the situation. ‘We must try and meet guile with guile as long as we can; but so surely as I’m sitting here, it’ll come to fighting yet. The Hudson Bays claim that we’re nothing better than trespassers, you know, and some day, when they think they’re strong enough, they’ll order us out, and then—it will be a sair day for some of us.’ And a heavy sigh welled up from the big man’s chest, for his thoughts turned to his beloved wife and darling children, who would be sure to suffer most in the event of hostilities taking place.

There was a pause, during which both men smoked their pipes in silence, and then the Norwegian, taking his from his lips, held it before him, and, as though he were addressing it, said slowly—

‘Those are our furs they got from the Chipewyans. They’ve stolen them just as much as if they’d taken them from our storehouse. Aren’t you going to make them give them up?’

The factor’s eyes flashed angrily at this reminder of the scurvy trick M’Dougal had played upon him, and the temptation was strong to accept the challenge so quietly and yet so earnestly offered, and to spring to his feet with a vow that those furs should be in Fort Chipewyan storehouse ere another sun had set. But his Scotch sagacity stood him in good stead. He knew well enough that to begin in that way would be the height of folly, and putting a strong curb upon his feelings, he replied in the same measured tones in which Wentzel had spoken.

‘No, no, Wentzel, that would not do. We must keep off the evil day as long as we can. Don’t let our men hear you talking like that, but, instead, just give them a hint to have as little to do with the Fort Wedderburne folk as possible. M’Dougal will lose no chance to be ugly. Let him be the first to quarrel. We must try to have right as well as might on our side, and, besides, there ought to be letters soon from Fort William, and I want to wait and see what news they bring before taking Mr. M’Dougal in hand.’

The question was further discussed between the two men, with the result that Wentzel agreed that Mr. M’Kenzie’s way was the best. Accordingly, no effort was made to recover the furs, but the various employees were instructed to be on their guard; and matters went on as usual until, as fate would have it, Archie had an encounter with the factor of Fort Wedderburne that came very near causing the smouldering fires to burst out into open flame, and

subsequently brought very disagreeable consequences upon himself.

CHAPTER IV

KIDNAPPED

ARCHIE had no lack of playmates at the fort. Although his father was the only one of the officials that had yet taken to himself a wife, many of the employees were married, and, as a rule, their partners were Indian women who had been purchased, not wooed. The children of these mixed marriages swarmed about the place in all stages of growth, from innocent little papooses done up tightly in their bark cradles to well-grown boys as full of mischief as eggs are full of meat.

Over these tawny companions Archie held unquestioned sway, not merely because he was the factor's son, but because he had fought his way to leadership by sheer force of fists. As already told, he was of a proud, ambitious, impetuous nature, that brooked no authority save that which he was in duty bound to recognise. Had he been asked to choose a motto for himself, and been familiar with classical literature, his choice would certainly have been, *Aut Cæsar aut nullus*, which, put into plain English, means, 'I'll be boss or nothing.'

Being gifted with more than usual powers both of mind and body, Archie, once his supremacy was clearly established, had little difficulty in maintaining it, and very proud was he of the small army of boys that obeyed his orders as implicitly as their fathers did the commands of Mr. M'Kenzie.

There was no limit to the fun they had.

In summer the noble lake was always ready for races in canoes or exciting swimming matches, while the broad level stretch at the other side of the fort made a fine ground upon which to play the game of Crosse, out of which the modern game of Lacrosse has been developed. Then in winter-time came the snow-shoeing away across the plains and back to the fort, the tobogganing down the steep shores of the lake and out upon its ice-clad bosom, and the setting of snares for the foxes, minks, martens, and other furry creatures that they were now and then lucky enough to take captive.

One fine cool autumn afternoon, the boys were having a grand time of it playing Crosse on a piece of clear ground about midway between the two forts, when a fleet-footed youngster, seeing that his side was getting much the worst

of it, picked up the ball in his crosse and ran off with it at the top of his speed in the direction of Fort Wedderburne. As soon as the others understood his trick, both sides joined in the chase, yelling with all their might, while they did their best to run him down.

On they sped towards the fort, the little rascal who was running off with the ball intending to make belief to seek refuge there, because he knew well enough it was not likely any of the others would dare to follow him. Too absorbed in their play to notice anything else, they swept round a rise in the ground, and suddenly were brought face to face with Mr. M'Dougal, who had just issued forth from the fort mounted upon a young horse whose education to the saddle had not yet been completed. The unexpected and startling appearance of this horde of yelling young savages, as might be expected, proved altogether too much for the nerves of the half-broken animal, and with a wild spring to one side, he pitched the surprised factor clean over his head, and galloped off, leaving him sprawling upon the ground.

A good deal shaken up, but not otherwise the worse for his tumble, Mr. M'Dougal scrambled to his feet and looked about him, to find a score of boys grinning from ear to ear at his discomfiture. He was furious enough because of his fall, but this adding of insult to injury, as it seemed to him, drove him frantic. He held in his hand a stout riding-whip of twisted raw hide, and brandishing this, he rushed upon the boy nearest him, roaring out—

‘You little scoundrels, I’ll teach you not to frighten my horse again!’

He looked dreadful in his raging wrath, and the boys shrank from him appalled, their merry shouts giving way to cries of terror. But happily they were all too agile for him to get within striking distance, and he would have wasted his fury upon the empty air had not one of the smallest of the lads, in his eagerness to escape, tripped and twisted his ankle, and in a moment the factor was upon him.

The poor little fellow looked up pleadingly into the big man’s face, his tawny cheeks made pallid with fright, and only one with the instincts of a brute could have struck him as he cowered on the ground. But Miles M'Dougal was a brute, and, moreover, he was beside himself with passion. With the full strength of his arm he struck the lad a blow across the back that brought out a piercing scream of anguish, and the cruel whip was again raised to strike when a clear young voice cried out indignantly—

‘You coward! you brute! Don’t strike that boy again.’

Astounded at being thus addressed, Mr. M'Dougal let his hand drop as he turned to see who had spoken. It was Archie, who, with face aflame and

blazing eyes, stood not ten yards distant, full of a wild desire to fling himself at the factor's throat, for the prostrate boy was little Sautloulai (Sunshine), the youngest son of old Akaitchko, and dear to Archie, not only for his father's sake, but because he was the brightest, best-natured boy at the fort.

On seeing who it was, the factor gave a fierce snort of contempt.

'Coward and brute, eh? Just wait until I'm done with this chap, and then I'll give you your turn,' he growled, and had once more lifted his whip when Archie's crosse, hurled with all the boy's might, and with admirable aim, struck his arm just at the elbow, and chancing to hit the funny-bone, caused the whip to drop from his paralysed grasp. Roaring out an awful oath, the factor paused for a moment to rub his injured member. Then, regaining the whip, and forgetting all about little Sautloulai in his unbounded rage at Archie, he rushed after the latter like a maddened bull.

But he might as well have chased a will-o'-the-wisp. In all his life he had never known a day when he could run as fast as Archie, and now that he was verging towards middle age, and as stout as his active mode of life would suffer him to become, Archie could have given him twenty yards in a hundred and beaten him easily. Laughing gleefully at the success of his interference in his playmate's behalf, and at the idea of Mr. M'Dougal imagining he could catch *him*, Archie bounded off lightly, his pursuer toiling laboriously after him, until they came within a hundred yards of Fort Chipewyan, when the factor, being by that time completely winded, decided to give up the chase, and, shaking his whip after the fleet-footed boy, panted out—

'You little wretch, I'll punish you well for this yet, as sure as my name's M'Dougal!'

Then, turning about, he went in search of his runaway steed.

In the meantime, the rest of the boys had fled to cover, and when Mr. M'Dougal finally disappeared, made their way back to the fort, well pleased at having got off so well. As for poor little Sunshine, who had not only a sore ankle but a bruised back to endure, he received so much sympathy and attention, particularly from Archie, that he hardly regretted his sufferings.

When Mr. M'Kenzie heard of what had occurred, he could not help enjoying a hearty laugh at the ridiculous light in which it presented his rival, and he praised Archie warmly for the manly part he had taken. But when the laugh was over, his face grew grave again as he said—

'It's all well enough to laugh, Archie, and I certainly don't blame you, my boy, for what you did. But at the same time I should be very glad if this had

not happened. M'Dougal is your enemy as well as mine now, and he won't lose a chance to do either of us an ill turn. Keep well clear of him, Archie lad, and of all belonging to him.'

The factor not only spoke the truth, but uttered a prophecy in these words. Mr. M'Dougal would not indeed lose a chance of doing either of them ill. To the animosity he felt towards Mr. M'Kenzie, just because he was his rival, had been added a sense of personal injury and indignity that filled him with a consuming thirst for revenge, which nothing but revenge, sweet and full, would ever appease. But Archie did not know this, and having promised his father to keep well out of Mr. M'Dougal's way, he thought little more about the matter as the hot summer cooled into autumn and the chill days drew near.

In spite of all the efforts at interference from the Hudson Bays, the Nor'-Westers, by dint of ceaseless vigilance and skilful bartering, secured a rich return of peltries as usual, and it was with no small sense of relief that their chief regarded the approach of winter, when the Indians would all have returned to their homes, if such they might be called, and there would be no more need of watching for them night and day lest they should fall into the hands of his rival.

He was glad, too, when it was no longer necessary for him to be in the saddle or the canoe day after day, or absent from the fort for a week at a time, for he loved his little home circle, and found his greatest happiness in gathering wife and son and daughter about him, and relating the events of his last journey, or reading to them from one of his books.

Nor was he alone in his gladness. His good wife Virginie, now showing a becoming degree of matronly plumpness, and Rose-Marie, fast growing into bewitching maidenhood, welcomed no less eagerly the season that kept the men much at home, for then the one had her Donald and the other her Archie, and neither the one nor the other had yet found more engaging society.

The getting ready for the long, dreary winter was a serious business at such a large establishment as Fort Chipewyan. Immense stocks of pemmican had to be prepared, uncounted white-fish dried and stacked away, the precious stores of flour, tea, and tobacco brought up from below, hundreds of cords of wood drawn from the forests and piled along inside the palisade, and the various buildings carefully gone over, that not a chink might be left through which the prying winter winds, always on the lookout for an opening, could make their way.

Archie had not much time for idling in these busy days. He acted as a sort of aide-de-camp to his father, and it was 'Archie, jump on Spot and ride over

to where they're cutting the wood, and tell Mr. Wentzel I want to speak to him;' or, 'Archie, just run down to the lake and see if the canoes are back from the fishing-grounds;' and so forth and so forth. Sometimes Archie felt quite proud of being so useful. Sometimes he thought it a bit of a bore, and perhaps just when he was needed most would take it into his head to make himself scarce, so that the factor would have to press one of the Indian lads into service instead.

'You are a queer chap, Archie,' his father would say to him, when the boy would return after one of these sudden disappearances. 'I'm afraid I don't half understand you yet. But I'm not going to worry about it. You're sound enough at the core, and I can trust you to come out straight enough in the end.'

It was just by putting this implicit trust in his son that the factor showed his far-seeing wisdom. A parent with less penetration would probably have sought to curb and check the boy's impetuous, wayward spirit, with the result of making him either sullen or deceitful, or both. But the shrewd Scotchman's idea, as expressed in his own words, was—

'Give the laddie his head. Don't worry him. Many a good horse has been spoiled in the breaking.'

The natural result of this method of dealing was that the most delightful understanding existed between father and son, and when under stress of temptation Archie would now and then manifest an unruly spirit, no sooner did he recover his balance than he at once sought his father's forgiveness, and that granted, promptly forgot all about the matter in his joy at being restored to favour.

While the winter preparations were still in progress, an incident occurred which, although not thought of much importance at the time, proved to have a deep significance when reviewed in the light of subsequent events.

Late one afternoon, old Akaitchko, who had been out upon the plains in quest of deer, came hurrying back to the fort, evidently in a state of considerable excitement. He would speak to nobody until he found Mr. M'Kenzie, and when he reported to him what he had seen, the latter showed that the communication interested him deeply. It was to the effect that, while about ten miles off, to the north, the old Indian had perceived the approach of a band of Indians.

Now it was not usual for Indians to visit the fort in numbers late in the autumn. They were at that time too busy securing their winter supply of buffalo meat and white-fish. Consequently, Akaitchko's suspicions were aroused by the appearance of this large body, and he had contrived to inspect

them carefully without allowing himself to be seen. His surprise was increased when he made out that they belonged to none of the tribes which came regularly to the fort, and he was of opinion that they must belong to the tribe known as the Quarrellers, whose territory lay along the far northern banks of the M'Kenzie River, and concerning whom all sorts of blood-curdling stories had circulated southward. They were known to wage unceasing war with the Eskimo of the Arctic regions, and were credited with eating their enemies as fast as they killed them. They were given to the practice of strange and horrible rites, had no respect for the law of ownership, stealing whatever they could lay their hands upon, and were altogether regarded as the blackest of black sheep by the other tribes.

What possible object they might have in venturing so far south was a question that could not be answered too soon. The factor, accordingly, although darkness was at hand, mounted his horse, and rode out to meet them. He had not gone far, however, when he was met by three of the strangers, who had evidently been sent on ahead as ambassadors, while the main body awaited their report. He then learned that Akaitchko's supposition was correct, and that they were of the Quarrellers tribe, and had come down for purposes of trade. He was enabled to hold communication with them by means of a Beaver Indian from Great Slave Lake whom they had brought along as interpreter, he being sufficiently familiar both with their dialect and with the Chipewyan, which was in use at the fort.

Being anxious to obtain the fullest possible information about these newcomers, the factor greeted them cordially, and invited all three to return to the fort with him. After some discussion amongst themselves, the Beaver Indian and one of the others accepted, the third Indian returning to his people.

A bountiful meal of the best the fort could provide was placed before the guests, and when they had eaten as only hungry Indians can eat, and filled their pipes to overflowing from their host's tobacco-pouch, the factor proceeded to inquire into the object they had in making so lengthy and unusual a journey.

The Quarreller at first did not seem inclined to be communicative, and sat puffing away with the contented air of one who had dined well; but the Beaver Indian was full of talk, and from him Mr. M'Kenzie learned that the main purpose of their coming was not barter, although they had many packs of valuable furs, but to obtain a number of muskets, accounts of whose terrible death-dealing powers had reached even their remote region. Their hereditary foes, the Eskimo, had been getting rather the better of them of late, and determining to utterly wipe them out, they sought the assistance of the white man's 'thunder-arrow,' for so they described the musket.

When they were gone, the factor had a long talk over the matter with his wife and son and Mr. Wentzel. It was as fixed a principle with him to refuse the Indians firearms as firewater.

‘My reason’s clear enough,’ he argued. ‘Let the Indians have all the guns they want, and it’ll be the story of the Kilkenny cats over again. Besides that, the beaver and buffalo will go fast enough as it is. There’s no need to hurry them with bullets. If every Indian carried a gun, they’d soon make furs so scarce that we might as well go out of the business. No, sir; so long as I can have my own way, not a pound of gunpowder nor gallon of brandy shall they ever get at Fort Chipewyan.’

Mrs. M’Kenzie looked admiringly into her husband’s face as he spoke, for she knew well what sad work both firearms and firewater had wrought among the red men in the South, and she had always strongly supported him in his views.

Archie, who had been gazing thoughtfully into the fire, as soon as the factor finished turned to him and asked—

‘But, father, won’t Mr. M’Dougal give the Indians what they want, and might we not just as well get their furs, since we have the first chance?’

To which question Mr. Wentzel, who did not altogether share his chiefs opinion, gave an approving nod.

Mr. M’Kenzie, assuming an expression of shocked surprise, exclaimed, with a dramatic gesture—

‘Would my boy Archie tempt me like that? Get thee behind me, Satan.’

Archie reddened up to the roots of his hair, and tried to stammer out something in his own defence; while his mother, seeing his confusion, hastened to his rescue.

‘I don’t think Archie means to tempt you, Donald,’ said she gently. ‘He only spoke what was in his mind, and what, I confess, was in my mind too, although of course I don’t think it’s a good argument.’

The factor laughed pleasantly, and clapped Archie on the shoulder.

‘You only spoke the wisdom of the world, laddie, and I’m not blaming you. But look here, my son: if you knew that the guns these Quarrellers want would be used to slaughter poor Eskimo, who had nothing better than arrows and spears of bone, would you take much satisfaction in supplying them?’

‘No, indeed,’ cried Archie promptly. ‘I was not thinking of that when I said

what I did.'

The end of it was that, refusing to do any business with Mr. M'Kenzie unless he would let them have the guns and ammunition, the Quarrellers took themselves and their furs over to his rival, whose emissaries had been amongst them from the first. There they remained for a fortnight, which was little better than a prolonged *boissons* or 'drinking match,' Mr. M'Dougal, for reasons which will subsequently appear, seeing fit to supply them not only with the firearms, but with as much brandy as they could drink, with the result that no less than five murders were committed, for all of which the new weapons that Mr. M'Kenzie had so wisely refused them were responsible.

Mr. M'Kenzie gave orders that none of his people should have anything to do with them, and awaited with some impatience their departure.

There had come to Athabasca the last spell of mild weather ere the stern grasp of winter finally closed upon the land, and Archie, who was passionately fond of hunting, taking little Sautloulai as his companion, went after partridge in the forest that began about a mile from the fort and stretched away interminably northward. On his way thither he encountered Mr. M'Dougal, returning to Fort Wedderburne from a similar errand, and afterwards he remembered the peculiar look which came into the factor's face, a look of vindictive triumph, which seemed to say, 'I see my chance to get even with you now.'

But he soon forgot about the meeting in the excitement of partridge-shooting, and indeed forgot about the flight of time also, so that his companion, who was acting the part of retriever for him, and consequently not enjoying the sport as much as the one that did the shooting, had to remind him more than once that the sun had set, ere he bethought himself of turning his face homeward.

He divided the birds, of which there were a round dozen, into two lots, and giving Sautloulai one, was just about to sling the other upon his shoulder, when suddenly four Indians, who had crept up unseen, flung themselves upon the boys, and before they could utter a cry or make a movement to escape, had bound and gagged them, and were bearing them off rapidly into the fast-darkening depths of the forest.

CHAPTER V

IN CAPTIVITY

SO swift and sudden was the capture that neither of the boys could make a struggle before they were so securely bound that all struggling was useless. Uttering no sound save deep ‘Ughs!’ expressive of satisfaction at their success, the Indians, seeming to find their prisoners no more impediment to speed than they would have found the partridges, hastened onward until they reached an open glade, where, by the dim light, four horses could be descried tethered to the trees. Upon these they mounted, two of them taking a boy on in front; and keeping the animals at a rapid walk, they pushed ahead, it evidently being their determination to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the forts ere daybreak.

It would not be easy to describe the thoughts that were passing through Archie’s mind while all this was happening. So harmonious were the relations between Fort Chipewyan and the Indian tribes far and near that he had always been accustomed to look upon the red men as his good friends. Indeed, he was a great favourite amongst them, and many a trick of the paddle and artifice of the snare had he learned from their deft fingers, while in turn he would give them little presents of tea, or tobacco, or beads, that were always welcome. By being much in their company, he had scraped some acquaintance with their language, and by dint of vigorous gestures could make himself fairly well understood in the Chipewyan and Beaver dialects. The tinge of Indian blood in him of course made this all the easier, and, in fact, he felt almost as much at home among his dusky cousins as among the white men.

Consequently, when he found himself carried off in this strange and startling fashion, he was not long in making up his mind as to who his captors were. Without a doubt they were some of the Quarrellers, but what reason they had for their action he could not imagine, think as hard as he might. Even though there had been no gag in his mouth, it would be useless to ask questions, for the Quarrellers’ dialect was utterly unknown to him, and it was already so dark that he could not see their faces clearly enough to read the expression upon them.

The Indians who had charge of himself and Sautloulai were in the middle

of the single file, and when the horses came close together, he could hear the poor frightened little fellow behind him crying bitterly. His own heart was beating wildly, and he knew that his face was white with anxiety, but he resolved that, come what might, he would bear himself like a man, and let those Indians, whatever might be their design, see that the son of the factor of Fort Chipewyan would not bring discredit upon himself by showing the slightest symptom of fear.

Throughout the night the journey was continued without a halt, the Indians seeming to find their way almost as readily as if it were broad daylight. In this they had much help from the moon, which rose about nine o'clock, and threw its cold beams upon their path, enabling Archie to perceive that they were following closely the left bank of the Slave River, which forms the connecting link between Lake Athabasca and the Great Slave Lake, more than two hundred miles due north; and he began to wonder how far his captors would take him if he was not rescued from them.

The gag prevented him from speaking, but it was no obstacle to thinking, and his brain busied itself with anxious speculations as to what the dear ones at the fort were doing, and whether they had yet found any clue as to his strange disappearance. He would, of course, be missed as soon as the night came without his return, and he felt sure that no time would be lost in sending searchers out after him. But, alas! it was not much they would be able to do in the darkness. The ground was as hard as iron. Not even old Akaitchko's marvellous eyes could possibly track his footsteps, and then he and Sautloulai had wandered in all directions through the woods, seeking the partridge coveys, so that even the best of dogs would be at fault. The more he thought this over, the heavier grew his heart, and it required all his self-control to keep back the tears that tried hard to make their way down his cheeks.

Soon after daylight the Indians turned off sharply to the left, and pushing through a thick bunch of timber, came into a secluded dell, where a spring of clear water bubbled up through a growing rim of ice, and the grass grew rank and dense. The leader said something that sounded like a succession of grunts, to which the others responded with approving 'Ughs!' and then they all dismounted, and hobbling their horses, let them loose to feed and rest.

As soon as he was put down, Archie turned to the Indian with whom he had ridden, and with appealing looks and gestures besought him to remove his bonds. The Indian consulted with his companions for a moment, and then, to the boys' immense relief, took off both gag and thongs, and set them free. By a common impulse the two lads threw their arms about one another's necks; and then poor Archie, wearied with the long ride, chilled to the bone by the

piercing night air, and overcome with a sense of his utter helplessness, could control himself no longer, and the sobs, hitherto so manfully kept back, shook his whole frame, as little Sautloulai's tears mingled with his own.

But it was not for long. His passion of grief presently spent itself, and drawing himself up, he said in a firm tone to his companion—

‘Crying won't make it any better, Sautloulai, so let's cheer up and see what they are going to do with us. I don't believe they'll do us any harm. Perhaps they only mean to keep us until father finds us out, and gives them guns and powder to give us up again. I do think that must be it.’

Shivering, hungry, and exhausted, Sautloulai looked like anything else rather than *sunshine*, yet he tried to smile hopefully through his tears at Archie's brave words, and the latter was encouraged to add—

‘The braver we are, the better they'll be to us, Sautloulai, so we won't let them see any more crying if we can help it, will we?’

In the meantime the Indians had started a fire, and were preparing some pemmican soup in a small kettle one of them carried on his back. There was nothing else for breakfast save this, but there was no lack of appetite, and even the boys forgot their troubles long enough to eat a hearty meal, at which the Indians seemed very well pleased. So far as could be judged, they meant no harm to their young captives beyond the carrying them off, and what possible object they could have in this, except the one he had mentioned to Sautloulai, Archie was entirely at a loss to conceive.

A couple of hours were spent in the dell, and then the horses were caught and remounted, the boys being put with different Indians this time, but left unfettered, and the little party moved off again in the direction of Great Slave Lake, the same rapid pace being maintained, and every hour meaning at least six miles' more distance between the boys and their home.

And now what was taking place at Fort Chipewyan? As the darkness approached, and Archie did not return, his mother began to worry about him, and again and again sent Rose-Marie to the gate to see if he was not coming. Mr. M'Kenzie had been down at the lake fishing, and did not get back until nightfall. The moment he appeared, his wife asked him if he had seen anything of Archie, and on his replying in the negative showed so much anxiety, that, saying reassuringly, ‘Oh, the lad's all right. He's been so eager after the partridges that he hasn't noticed the sun going down,’ he called up one of the half-breeds, and sent him off to the woods to hurry the boys home. An hour passed, during the course of which the factor himself began to share his wife's concern; and then the half-breed returned, saying that he could not find a trace

of the boys, although he had shouted, and fired off his gun, and in every way tried to attract their attention.

Now seriously alarmed, the factor ordered out every man in the fort, and, rapidly organising them into three parties, commanded respectively by Mr. Wentzel, Mr. Stewart, and himself, and well supplied with pine torches, set forth in search of the missing boys. If he had only known that the factor of Fort Wedderburne, standing at his gate, and catching the gleam of the torches as they flitted like fireflies through the trees, smiled with grim triumph, saying to himself, 'Hunting for your cub, eh? Wish you luck in finding him. It's Miles M'Dougal's turn now,' he might have tried other measures to get upon the track of his son. But he knew nothing then of his remorseless rival's part in the matter.

Sending the other two parties on ahead, with orders to search as though their lives depended upon success, Mr. M'Kenzie went over to the camp of Quarrellers to try if they could give him any hint as to the whereabouts of the boys. But his visit was fruitless. Most of the men were either still drunk, or stupid from the effects of their prolonged debauch; and any way, the Beaver Indian, by whose aid alone it would have been possible to hold communication with them, was not to be found, the truth being that, shrewdly anticipating such a step, M'Dougal had the Indian at that moment lying in a drunken sleep in one of his storerooms.

Soon seeing that there was nothing to be gained from them, Mr. M'Kenzie hastened to the woods, and joined the others in their eager search, which continued without pause the whole night through, none being more active than Akaitchko, who loved Archie but little less than he did the darling of his old age, bright little Sautloulai. Neither he nor the factor could in any way understand their sons' disappearance. It was too early in the winter for wolves or wild cats to be dangerous. There were no bears known to be in the neighbourhood, and the Indians round about were considered almost as trustworthy as the employees of the fort.

The more he turned the matter over in his mind, the more convinced Mr. M'Kenzie became that the factor of Fort Wedderburne was in some way at the bottom of the boys' disappearance. But how, in the absence of any evidence, was he to bring the thing home to him? If the Quarrellers knew anything, they could not tell it, even though they would, and none of M'Dougal's men would dare to betray their master's secret.

Wearied, worried, and perplexed, Mr. M'Kenzie returned to the fort at daybreak, to be met at the gate by his wife, who had not closed her eyes all night, and who, on seeing him without Archie, burst into a passion of tears,

and fell half-fainting into his arms. Forcing a hopeful expression, the factor sought to comfort her, although indeed his own heart was very heavy, and it was only because he knew he must eat in order to bear the fatigues of the day before him, that he could taste the food made ready for him. In twos and threes the other searchers returned, all having the same disheartening reply to make to Mrs. M'Kenzie's eager questionings; and while they were resting and eating their breakfast, Mr. M'Kenzie determined to swallow his pride, and go over to Fort Wedderburne, in the faint hope of there lighting upon some clue to his boy.

He found M'Dougal enjoying a morning pipe, and his suspicion that this man knew something about the matter was deepened by the malicious leer which marked his ugly countenance as, rising from his chair, he greeted his visitor with mock courtesy—

'I'm sure this is an unexpected honour, Mr. M'Kenzie. Pray take a seat, and fill up your pipe. There's a great deal of comfort in a smoke these cold mornings.'

Not heeding either the tone of the speaker or his invitation to smoke, Mr. M'Kenzie plunged at once into the subject which engrossed his thoughts. Still wearing that malicious leer which made his visitor long to smite him in the face, M'Dougal answered lightly—

'Do I know anything about your boy? Well, I don't just understand how I am responsible for him. He has not been in the way of informing me as to his movements.'

Mr. M'Kenzie's hand clenched, and an angry flush burned on his bronzed cheek, but restraining his rising wrath, he said in a quiet, firm tone—

'I did not imagine that Archie would have told you where he was going, but I thought that perhaps you or some of your men might, have seen him yesterday afternoon, and I would be obliged if you would kindly make inquiry amongst them.'

'Oh, certainly! very happy to do so, I am sure,' replied M'Dougal. 'Come with me, and we'll ask the men. They're all about the fort somewhere.'

So the two men went out together, the one already despairing of gaining anything by his visit, the other rejoicing in the depths of his evil heart at the father's deep concern, and the knowledge that every hour's delay decreased the chances of Archie's recovery.

The men were closely questioned by Mr. M'Kenzie without result. As a matter of fact, they were quite as much in the dark as he was himself. Except

M'Dougal, only one man at the fort possessed the secret, and that was the Beaver Indian, still safely shut up in the storehouse, and thus prevented from revealing it, even though he had been so disposed. After a fruitless hour's inquiry, Mr. M'Kenzie returned to Fort Chipewyan, and gave direction for one half of his force to make ready to set out again, this time upon their horses, and with provisions for several days.

The necessary preparations took some little time, and the sun was well up in the heavens when Mr. M'Kenzie bade good-bye to his weeping wife and daughter, and telling them to pray for his speedy return with Archie safe and sound, rode off at the head of a dozen of his best men. As Lake Athabasca lay to the southward, there was no chance of Archie having gone in that direction. He must be in the north somewhere, and accordingly the little band pressed forward rapidly towards the Slave River, and was soon lost to view in the depths of the forest.

In the meantime, the quartette of Quarrellers, with their two captives, had been making good progress in the direction of Great Slave Lake. The day was clear and cold, the ground hard with frost, and they followed as closely as they could the line of the river, occasionally making a short cut across country where its windings were too frequent. Aside from his natural anxiety, Archie found the journey intolerably wearisome. He had not a comfortable position, perched up behind a none-too-clean Indian, and compelled to cling tight to him in order to save himself from falling off. His guardian never uttered a word, and even if he had, it would not have been intelligible. Sautloulai was too far away to talk with. So he had no other resource than his own thoughts. But these were moving briskly enough. Now they were turned to Fort Chipewyan, and what was being done there to recover him. Anon they were occupied planning out schemes for escape.

He felt sure that already every man that could possibly be spared from the fort was out in search of him, and that if they could only hit upon his track, they would not rest until they had overtaken him. But would they find any traces of his capture, and of the way in which he had been carried off? Alas! he knew well enough the chances were very slight, and that only by some happy accident could they get any hint of what had happened.

The more he thought over the matter, the more clearly it came to him that his best, if not his only plan, would be in some way to delay the progress of his party, in order that his father might have as much time as possible to catch up, in case he was upon their track. To effect his own escape was out of the question. He would be run down and recaptured in a few moments, even though he should succeed in breaking away. If, then, the point was to retard the

speed of the Indians, the most natural way to gain it must be to deprive them of their horses; and, impracticable as this might seem, Archie's bright brain, during the course of that long day's ride, brought forth a scheme that was no less hopeful than daring.

At midday the little party halted for a couple of hours, the horses grazing while the Indians smoked an after-dinner pipe, and Archie had an opportunity of talking with Sautloulai, and telling him of his scheme. The little fellow was in a very miserable mood, and it did not cheer him much. It did not mean immediate escape, and he was so desperate with cold and weariness, that at a word from Archie he would have made a dash for liberty there and then, although all four of the Indians were sharply watching every movement of the two boys. But Archie was full of hope, and did his best to cheer his companion.

The afternoon was the same as the morning; up hill and down dale, through bunches of timber, and across streams already wearing their winter breastplate, keeping up a steady jog-trot most of the time, the Indians pushed on, until by sundown Fort Chipewyan lay nearly a hundred miles to the south, and their tired animals had no more go left in them. Then the halt for the night was made, and the time for the carrying out of Archie's project drew near.

Every nerve tingled with excitement, and his heart beat so wildly that he dreaded lest he should betray himself, but he managed to appear composed enough, and shortly after nightfall lay down near the fire, and apparently fell into a sound slumber.

The others soon followed his example, the Indians not thinking it necessary to keep watch, and presently all was silent save the soft crackling of the expiring fire. Half an hour passed, and then one of the sleepers stirred, lifted his head gently, looked round about him warily, and listened intently to the heavy breathing of the Indians. A moment later he rose to his feet and crept noiselessly towards the horses, that were standing in a group together not many yards away. He held a knife in his right hand, and when he reached the animals, who started at his approach, but were soon reassured by his soft cooing, he stooped down to their forefeet, and gave four cuts in quick succession. Then, straightening himself up, he crept back to his place as noiselessly as he had left it, and rolling his buffalo robe about him, seemed as though he had never stirred.

CHAPTER VI

IN THE NICK OF TIME

IN his haste to make ready and get away after his son, Mr. M'Kenzie did not notice that Akaitchko was not among his followers. But after they had gone a little distance, he bethought himself of the veteran hunter, whose rare gifts and long experience made him peculiarly valuable for just such work as that which they now had in hand, and he called a halt to inquire, with some anxiety, if anyone knew what had become of him.

'Oh, Akaitchko's all right,' said Mr. Wentzel; 'I saw him riding off to the woods on his best horse a few minutes after you went over to Fort Wedderburne. He's just gone on ahead to try and pick up the boys' trail.'

'God grant he may find it soon!' exclaimed the factor fervently. 'Every moment is precious. But hark! isn't that the sound of hoofs?'

They were approaching a glade in the forest, and distinct upon the still morning air came the hoofbeats of a galloping horse, and the next moment, as they came out into the open, they saw Akaitchko bearing down upon them at full speed. Reining up his horse with a suddenness that threw it back upon its haunches, the old Indian, with intense excitement expressed in every line of his wrinkled face, cried out—

'Me found him!—me found him!'

The factor's heart gave a wild bound of joy, and grasping the Indian's arm, he shouted to him as though he were deaf—

'Found who? My boy Archie?'

Akaitchko shook his head. 'Not Archie, but him trail, certain sure.'

The answer was disappointing, though it gave grounds for hope, and in a quieter tone the factor inquired—

'Found his trail? Where? Far from here?'

'Not much far,' replied Akaitchko. 'Come, I show you;' and wheeling his horse round, he set off in the direction he had come. After going about half a mile, he reached a sort of shallow gully, along whose bottom ran a little

stream, and there, in the newly formed ice, as plain as print, were the marks where four horses had crossed within the preceding twenty-four hours.

By the subtle, incomprehensible instinct of his race the old hunter had hit upon the truth.

‘Bad Indians with horses—pick up boys—take ’em away. But Akaitchko catch ’em, certain sure;’ and his face darkened into an expression that boded ill for the men who had carried off his son, if he should ever get his hands upon them.

‘Yes, I believe Akaitchko’s right,’ cried Mr. M’Kenzie; ‘and as sure as I’m alive, that scoundrel M’Dougal is at the bottom of this! These Indians, whoever they are, will be sure to follow the river bank. We must run them down, if we kill our horses in doing it. Go ahead, Akaitchko. You take the lead. We’ll keep you in sight, however fast you go.’

Without waiting for another word, Akaitchko obeyed, and the others, stringing out into a long Indian file, did not allow him to leave them far behind, as, at a pace possible only for perfect riders, he hurried on, making light of the many obstacles that crowded the way, and would have seriously hindered less daring horsemen.

Knowing every yard of the country by heart, Akaitchko was able to avail himself of many short cuts and helpful detours, whereby the speed of his party was made much greater than that of the men he was tracking, and every now and then he was encouraged by finding traces of the objects of his pursuit. In the excitement of the hunt both he and Mr. M’Kenzie were able, in some measure, to forget their anxiety about the boys, and through the long hours of that day they spared neither themselves nor their horses, until at length the coming of night made further progress impossible.

It was very trying to stop when perhaps they were not many miles behind the four mysterious horsemen; but the animals were exhausted, and, anyway, they were more likely to lose ground than to gain it by proceeding in the dark. So a fire was made, a frugal meal of pemmican and tea prepared, and then, leaving one to take his turn at watching, the others rolled up in their bison robes, and were soon in slumber deep.

If the fathers had known that only ten miles farther on their own dear boys were also in camp with their captors, the darkest night that ever came to Athabasca would hardly have prevented them from rushing forward to their rescue. But there was no little bird or fairy to tell them this, and, wearied with the fatigues and anxieties of the day, they slept as soundly as any of their companions.

For some time after Archie got back to his place by the camp fire, he felt too excited to compose himself to sleep, but at length he fell into a deep, dreamless slumber, from which he did not awake until broad daylight. The moment he awoke he looked eagerly about him, for his first thought was —‘Have I succeeded?’

With a delicious thrill of delight he saw that he had. Not a horse was to be seen, and three of the Indians had disappeared also, no doubt in search of the missing animals. The fourth Indian was sitting sullenly by the fire with his gun across his knees, and when he noticed Archie moving, he pointed it at him, muttering something that clearly meant—

‘If you make any attempt to escape, I’ll put a bullet through you.’

But Archie was not frightened. He felt too happy at the success of his scheme.

‘Don’t look so cross,’ he said, with a smile; ‘I’m not going to run away, I’m just going to get some breakfast.’

The kettle was still on the fire with some pemmican in it, and rousing Sautloulai, Archie proceeded, with his help, to scrape it clean. Then, feeling ready for anything, he sat down opposite his surly guardian to await developments. He was quivering with suppressed excitement, and apprehensive lest the Quarreller, observing it, would suspect him of having something to do with the disappearance of the horses. But no such notion seemed to enter the stolid savage’s brain as the minutes slipped by and the sun rose higher in the heavens.

Comfortable in the knowledge of the Indian not being able to understand a word they were saying, the two boys talked freely together.

‘Now wasn’t my plan a good one?’ asked Archie triumphantly. ‘Don’t you see, the moment the horses found themselves free, they started out for home, and the Indians have no more chance of catching them than they have of catching that bird,’ pointing up to a hawk swooping swiftly through the air above their heads.

‘But how do you know the horses belonged to the fort?’ asked Sautloulai.

‘Oh, that’s easy enough,’ replied Archie. ‘The Quarrellers hadn’t any horses with them when they came, so they must have got them at the fort. And then another thing: if father’s on our track,—and I’m perfectly sure he is,—he’ll likely as not meet those horses on their way back, and that’ll tell him we can’t be very far ahead, and he’ll hurry on just as fast as he can. You see if he

doesn't catch up to us to-day.'

'Oh, how I hope he will!' exclaimed Sautloulai. 'I want to get back! I'm afraid to be with these bad Indians;' and the poor little fellow looked as if he were ready to burst into tears.

Archie put his arm about him tenderly. 'You will get back, Sautloulai, never fear. The great God up there will take care of us both. He won't let those bad Indians do us any harm.'

His constant companionship with Archie, a companionship which extended even to his sharing the benefits of the factor's teaching in the winter-time, had given this Indian boy a comprehension far beyond that of his fellows, and the mention of God, the mysterious and all-powerful Manitou of the white men, to whom Mr. M'Kenzie prayed so often, calmed and comforted him. If Archie was sure of such help, they would certainly get out of all their troubles yet. So he set himself to wait in patience.

Two hours passed, and Archie was beginning to find the suspense intolerable, when there was a rustling in the underbrush to the right, and all three sprang to their feet, the Indian with finger upon trigger, and the boys with hearts throbbing with hope. But it proved to be the other three Indians, returning from their unsuccessful hunt after the horses. They were evidently in the worst of humours, and the boys felt cold shivers of apprehension going down their backs as the angry savages regarded them with looks whose meaning it was not difficult to make out. Archie could not help thinking that in some way they held him responsible for the loss of the horses.

As they consulted earnestly together, he thought to himself, 'Oh, what wouldn't I give to know what they're talking about!' Had he been able to understand the succession of guttural grunts and growls that did duty for a language with them, he would have found good cause for anxiety. The fact was, they were in a very serious dilemma. They had been bribed by M'Dougal to carry off the boys, their reward being a horse, a gun, and a lot of ammunition and pemmican apiece. They were all the more willing to undertake the job because they knew two such sturdy lads would be welcome additions to their tribe, and especially the white boy, whose presence would, they thought, bring them good luck, and ensure them victory over their inveterate enemies, the Eskimo. But now, without horses to carry them, what were they to do? They could not get along as fast with their prisoners as without them, and if pursuit were being made, as was most probable, they would be overtaken without fail. Then, if caught with the boys in their custody, what else could they expect than condign punishment at the hands of the enraged pursuers? The simplest way out of the difficulty seemed to be to make

away with the boys, and then to scatter into the woods, and try and meet again at the shore of Great Slave Lake, when all danger of pursuit was over.

This was the plan proposed by the oldest of the quartette, and supported by the youngest. But happily the others were either too tender or too faint of heart to agree off-hand. They thought it would be better to turn the boys adrift to shift for themselves as best they might, and to make good their own retreat thus unencumbered by their captives. The discussion waxed warm, and as the minutes dragged by, Archie, waiting with intense anxiety for the issue, kept eye and ear strained, in hope of detecting some sign of coming rescue. No Indian surpassed him in sharpness of sight or keenness of hearing, yet nothing could he see or hear.

At length the eldest Indian, getting into a passion, brought the discussion suddenly to an end by a fierce whoop, and ran to get his gun, which he had left wrapped up in his robe by the fire. Archie guessed the meaning of this action, and prepared to make a struggle for his life. At the same moment there came from the other side of the valley a sound that sent a thrill of hope to his heart. Was it an answering whoop, or was it only an echo? He did not wait to decide. Crying out, 'Now, Sautloulai—for your life!' he gave his companion a sharp push, and with the leap of a deer sprang off in the direction whence the sound had come, Sautloulai close at his heels.

So sudden was the movement that they had made nearly twenty yards before the Indians recovered sufficiently from their surprise to start after them. With a ferocious grunt, the one who had gone for his gun took quick aim at the fugitives, and pulled the trigger, but there only came the sharp snap of the cap. Dashing the gun to the ground, he darted off after the others, uttering another of his awful whoops.

It was a magnificent race. Archie and Sautloulai were as fleet a pair of boys as ever wore moccasins, and their pursuers men in the prime of life. The valley bottom was fairly level, and the grass, thick and dry, made a springy cushion for the feet. The boys were in far better condition than the Indians, the latter being much the worse of their late 'drinking match.' For a short distance the odds were decidedly with the lads. But where and how was the desperate struggle to end?

Across the level the runners sped, and up the farther slope, whose ascent caused their speed to slacken, and brought their pursuers nearer. They were already losing breath and strength, and little Sautloulai, lagging behind, was but a few yards ahead of the foremost Indian, when, from above them, the whoop that Archie's acute ear had caught a few moments before rang out again, and mingled with it a glad 'Hurrah!' that he knew at once came from his

father's throat. He looked up in joy inexpressible. Upon the edge of the slope stood his father and Akaitchko, with guns at shoulder.

'Down, Sautloulai, down!' shrieked Archie. Instantly the boys dropped to the earth, and at the same moment the two men pulled trigger. There was no empty snap of cap this time. A single report awoke the echoes of the valley, and the two foremost Indians, each with a bullet in his brain, plunged headlong to the ground, while their companions turned and fled backward in wild dismay.

Springing from their horses, the two men rushed down the slope, and clasped their boys in a passionate embrace.

'Thank God! thank God!' was all the father could say, while tears of joy streamed down his cheeks. 'You're not hurt, laddie, are you?'

'Hurt, father?' cried Archie joyfully; 'not a bit—only a little out of breath.'

As if to make sure that he was correct, Mr. M'Kenzie held him at arms' length, looked him all over, and then gave him another hug.

'Oh, Archie lad, but my heart's light again!' he cried. 'Come, now, and tell me all about it.'

If not quite so demonstrative, yet no less sincere was the old hunter's greeting of his favourite son; and Sautloulai almost forgot how much he had suffered in his enjoyment of his father's unusual exhibition of affection.

Meanwhile the two Quarrellers had been running for dear life to the cover of the forest, and by the time Mr. M'Kenzie thought of them, had vanished into its depths. Akaitchko, reloading his gun, asked if he should follow them.

'No, no,' was the answer. 'We've got our boys, and those two,' pointing at the motionless forms upon the ground, 'have paid dearly for their crime. That's enough. Let us *caché* their corpses, and get back to the fort as quick as we can.'

The two fathers had outstripped the rest of the party in their eager pursuit, and it was some little time before the other men came up. When they did, the bodies were buried in a huge pile of stones, to protect them from the wild beasts, and the guns and robes at the camp having been gathered up, the homeward journey was begun, both Archie and Sautloulai having horses to ride, their rescuers, by great good luck, having caught two out of the four of which the Quarrellers had been so cleverly deprived.

As they rode along together, Archie, with great gusto and a pleasant sense of having borne himself creditably, related all that had happened to him since

he was carried off by the Indians—how he had been suddenly seized, and bound, and hurried away—how all that night he had travelled without rest—how, during the following day, he had thought out the scheme for his own deliverance, and how successful it had proved. The factor's heart glowed with pride at the recital. Truly his was a son to boast of, and one from whom the very best things might confidently be expected. Such courage, such skill, such coolness would command success anywhere.

'You are well worth rescuing, Archie,' said he, looking fondly at his boy. 'For all the trouble you have cost me, you will repay me a hundredfold in due time.'

'I hope so, father,' responded Archie brightly; 'and this I'll promise you, that if ever anybody carries you off, I'll try and do as much for you as you have just done for me.'

'May you never get the chance, my boy!' said the factor; 'but if Providence should so will it, I have no fear but you will do your duty.'

Little did either of them dream that the future held in store for Archie the opportunity to make good his words, which were not indeed spoken in jest, but in real earnest, although the event they contemplated seemed about as remote a possibility as could well be.

They reached the fort early the following morning, to be welcomed with tears of joy by Mrs. M'Kenzie, and with smiles of gladness by Rose-Marie, both of whom showed in their pale faces the tokens of the anxious hours of waiting they had spent.

'Oh, my darling boy!' cried Mrs. M'Kenzie, folding Archie to her breast. 'What should I have done if you had never come back to me!' And Archie was not ashamed to return the embrace with interest, in proof of how deeply he felt himself.

They had a long talk together over the matter. Mr. M'Kenzie's suspicion that the factor of Fort Wedderburne was the instigator of the attempt upon Archie had grown into a conviction, and yet he could not see his way clearly to bringing the matter home to his rival. He now began to regret that he had not captured the two Quarrellers who survived, and extracted in some way from them the information which he felt sure they could give. By use of the sign language, which all Indians use more or less, they might have been made to understand what was wanted of them, and, so long as the bribe was big enough, there was not much fear of their persistently refusing to reveal the truth.

But it was no use crying over spilt milk. In his joy at recovering his son, he had for the moment forgotten everything else, and now the only witnesses against M'Dougal were utterly out of reach. Yet he could not deny himself the satisfaction of letting the scoundrel know that his part in the matter was well understood, even if it could not have been proved in a court of justice. So, taking Archie with him, and accompanied by Mr. Wentzel, he went over to Fort Wedderburne that very afternoon.

They found the factor alone in his room, having a good spell with pipe and bottle. There was not much standing upon ceremony in that primitive society, and having knocked at the door, and been ordered in a gruff voice to 'Come in,' they had entered without further ceremony. The moment his eyes fell upon Archie the factor started, and a guilty flush spread over his face. Then, recovering himself by an evident effort, he rose from his chair, and invited his visitors to take seats, and make themselves at home, while he procured some more mugs, that they might drink with him. Mr. M'Kenzie and Mr. Wentzel exchanged meaning looks as Mr. M'Dougal covered his confusion by bustling about the room; and, after he had brought the mugs, courteously declined the proffered whisky, saying that they never drank at that time of day.

Mr. M'Kenzie then inquired if the factor had lost any of his horses.

'That I have!' exclaimed he, with a great show of indignation. 'Those rascal Quarrellers ran away with four of the best of them!'

'The horses were not given them, then?' asked Mr. M'Kenzie meaningly.

'Given them?' roared M'Dougal. 'Do you think it's likely I'd waste my horses upon such miserable beggars as those?'

'Possibly not—although why not horses as well as guns?' replied Mr. M'Kenzie, looking at him very hard, and then continuing, 'But I had a reason in asking about the horses.' And without more ado he proceeded to tell the whole story of Archie's capture and rescue, and how two of the Quarrellers had lost their lives. The countenance of the baffled rascal during this recital was an amusing study. He realised clearly that his guilt was known, and that the three before him had come over for the express purpose of letting him know that it was known. He longed to rise and command them to be gone, but he was shrewd enough to understand that this would be a most impolitic proceeding. So, keeping himself under control, he heard the story out, and then got rid of his unwelcome visitors with the best grace he could muster, giving vent to his pent-up feelings the moment they had disappeared in a volley of oaths that surpassed anything even he had previously achieved in that direction.

CHAPTER VII

WINTER AT FORT CHIPEWYAN

AN Athabasca winter is no trifling matter. The frost-king is monarch of all he surveys, and even though there may be some who feel disposed to dispute his right to freeze their noses and congeal their cheeks, he receives their protests with cool indifference, and continues his mischievous work with unabated zeal.

His advance agents, the early snowstorms, first make their appearance about mid-September, but only for a flying visit. They come in the evening perhaps, stay all night, and vanish before the morning sunshine. Later on they reappear in greater force, and prolong their stay, until at last, by the end of October, the ground having been prepared for them in the meantime, they enter into full possession, and far and near, from horizon to horizon, the prairie is covered with the white robe of winter. Then the autumn blasts, upon whose bosoms the snowflakes have been borne, having done their work, sink to rest, and the long, still, cold winter is fairly begun.

Mr. M'Kenzie was not at all sorry when the snow came. During the haste and bustle of the brief summer, many things had to be left undone that the ample leisure of the winter permitted him to accomplish; and, moreover, it gave him much more time with his family, a privilege which he heartily appreciated. For the very same reason Mrs. M'Kenzie and Rose-Marie shared his views; but Archie held an entirely different opinion. He could see no fun in the much confinement the intense and incessant cold made necessary. He found it very hard to endure this patiently. There was of course a certain amount of snow-shoeing and tobogganing to be done; but even these amusements became rather monotonous when they were the only ones, and he looked forward with no little impatience to the return of spring, when with the warm days came freedom to do just what he pleased.

The programme of his day ran pretty much as follows. In the first place,—and here no doubt many another boy would heartily envy him,—he tumbled out of his warm bed into the frosty atmosphere of his room just whenever he liked. There was no nine o'clock school at Fort Chipewyan, nor anything else to make it necessary for our young hero to get up at any particular time,

especially as he knew that his fond mother would have breakfast hot for him whenever he appeared. So if his dog Edaiye (Friend), the gift of an Indian chief, and a creature of extraordinary sagacity, rubbed his cold nose against his face, and challenged him sooner than he felt inclined to respond, he could with an easy conscience say, with the sluggard of the nursery rhyme, 'You have waked me too soon, I must slumber again,' and turn over for another nap.

As the M'Kenzie household, however, was run on the sound principle 'early to bed, early to rise,' Archie did not often feel tempted to lie long abed, but, obeying Edaiye's gentle hint, would roll out of the bedclothes and plunge into his own clothes with all possible despatch, for there were no hall stoves or registers at the fort, and the only warm place was the living-room, where glorious wood fires, crackling and roaring upon a hearth that occupied one whole side of the room, waged successful battle with the cold, so long as they were faithfully attended to.

After breakfast the factor always had prayers, Mr. Wentzel, Mr. Stewart, Mr. Robertson, and Mr. MacGillivray generally joining in the service, which consisted of the singing of a few verses of a psalm, the reading of a passage from the Bible, and then a brief but fervent prayer from Mr. M'Kenzie. This over, Archie was free to do as he pleased, unless his father should, as sometimes happened, want his help in the storehouse, where there was always something to be done to the goods or furs; or in the office, where the accounts were kept.

Beside Edaiye, Archie had a follower who vied with the dog in his devotion, and that was Sautloulai. Since their adventure with the Quarrellers, the little fellow was more than ever wrapped up in his 'white brother,' and as sure as Archie went out of a morning, no matter what the weather might be, he found the Indian boy waiting for him as patiently as the immortal lamb that Mary had. He really seemed to know no happiness apart from Archie, and his absolute submission to the latter's will would have spoiled a boy less sound at heart, and led him to tyrannise over his dusky subject. But instead of playing the part of tyrant, Archie much preferred that of patron and protector, with the result of maintaining a relation that was creditable to himself and eminently satisfactory to Sautloulai.

With Sautloulai and Edaiye in willing attendance, then, Archie would sally forth, warmly wrapped in furs, to find amusement for the few hours of daylight. Sometimes gathering together the other boys about the fort, of whom there were a dozen or so, Indians and half-breeds, they all would take their toboggans, and go over to a long steep slope that ended at the edge of the lake, and offered a perfect natural slide. If the cold did not bite too keenly, this was

grand fun, for of course they had races, and trials as to who could go the farthest, and comparisons of skill in standing up, and all that sort of thing. Archie stood easily first at these sports, and longed for more serious opposition than any of his playmates could give him, so that he was very glad when now and then Mr. Wentzel or one of the other clerks would come down with his toboggan and challenge him to a contest of speed and skill. Then there would be great excitement. All other sliding would be suspended to watch the struggle. The spectators' sympathies were all with Archie, and if he won, they would split the air with joyous whoops, while if he were beaten they would disappointedly grunt 'Ugh—ugh!' and scowl at the audacious victor.

Beside the tobogganing the boys had another resource in which they took even more delight, and that was trapping. As has been already mentioned, the skirts of the great northern forest reached well-nigh to the lake, and among its mysterious mazes the bear, lynx, wolverine, marten, mink, and other animals whose ill-fortune it is to wear valuable skins, had their lairs, while the foxes swarmed everywhere, and the wolves ran about in howling packs, seeking what they might devour. Then at intervals along the course of the river were colonies of beaver, living cosily in their domed dwellings, veritable citadels for strength, and to be stormed only by well-equipped assailants.

Archie had a very tender spot in his heart for the beaver. He could not take any pleasure in killing them. They seemed such wonderfully clever, interesting animals, that he thought it nothing else than a shame to take away their lives, even if their coats were so well worth the trouble of securing.

This feeling was very much strengthened by what he saw one summer afternoon, when, with Sautloulai and Edaiye, he had been following up a little stream that fell into the lake some distance from the fort. They were much delighted at coming upon a beaver colony of whose existence they had not previously known, and creeping up very cautiously, they were able to watch the proceedings of the busy little animals for a long time without their presence being detected. Telling his mother and Rose-Marie about it on his return home, he said—

'But oh, if you could only have seen the five little baby beavers playing with one another, I'm sure you'd never want to kill a beaver again!'

'I'm sure I never want to kill a beaver at any time, Archie dear,' smiled his mother.

'Oh no, of course *you* don't; but father and the rest of them do, and it just seems to me cruel, when they are so clever and so harmless.'

'But tell us about the five little baby beavers Archie,' broke in Rose-Marie,

impatient for the story.

‘Don’t be in such a hurry, sister; I’m just going to. Well, you know, as we were hiding there, and seeing them all at work, we noticed a fat little fellow climb up on a log just on the edge of the water, and while he sat there blinking in the sun, and looking as if he thought a good deal of himself, along came another just like him, and giving him a push, sent him head foremost into the water, while he at once climbed into his place. Then the one that was pushed off came back and upset the other, and they kept this up for some time, three others presently coming along to join in the fun, and then the whole five went in for a grand time. They played with one another just like little children—and they looked like children too, mother, indeed they did,’ added Archie earnestly. ‘I’m sure they were talking to one another, and anybody could see that they were laughing just as we do.’

Mrs. M’Kenzie smiled half incredulously, but Rose-Marie, accepting every word, cried out eagerly—

‘Oh, Archie, how I’d like to see them! Won’t you take me some day? And what else did the beavers do?’

‘Why, they played about on the log for a time, pushing one another and playing chase in the water, until Edaiye gave a bark, which scared them out of their lives, and they dived into the water, and we didn’t see them any more. But I tell you what it is, I don’t see where the fun comes in of killing such creatures as those.’

‘I’m glad my boy has such a tender heart,’ said Mrs. M’Kenzie, beaming proudly upon him, ‘and I hope he will always keep it tender.’

But Archie had no such compunctions about any of the other fur-bearing animals. They were all fish when they came to his net, and there was nothing he enjoyed better than to accompany Akaitchko when he made the round of his traps. No matter how cold the weather might be, he was always ready for this, and this last winter he and Sautloulai had been running a line of traps of their own, in which they caught many a mink and marten. Akaitchko showed them how to prepare the traps and went with them on their rounds, as Mr. M’Kenzie did not think it prudent for them to go alone. Sometimes he would accompany them himself, and then, oh, how proud the boys felt if their artful snares were found to have been successful!

The traps used were of two kinds. For the larger animals it was a steel affair, much like an ordinary rat-trap, only about twice as big, and without teeth, and with two springs instead of one. To one of the springs a chain was attached, having a weight at the end, so that the animal could not drag the trap

off, and then escape. In setting this trap it was spread out flat, and just covered with snow, while upon it and around it chips of frozen meat or fish were temptingly scattered. This bait would be the only sign of the presence of the trap, and the animals never became so shrewd as to understand that a free lunch in the wilderness of the North might be no less dangerous a temptation than it is in the cities to the South. They greedily take what is given them, asking no questions for conscience' sake, and the first thing they know is, they have put their foot in it—the trap—very seriously.

The trappers prefer that while they are about the business they should put both feet in it, because then they cannot drag the trap any distance, nor can they escape the way that they do sometimes when only one foot is caught, by eating that unfortunate member off, close to the iron, and hobbling away, sadder, if not wiser, for the experience.

For the smaller animals a home-made trap was used, it being simply two logs, one of which was supported over the other by means of a small stick in such a manner that when the mink or marten crept between the two, and pulled the bait, he pulled the support away too, and down came the upper log upon his back, crushing him flat.

In order to encourage enterprise on his part, Mr. M'Kenzie kept an account with Archie, in which he was credited with every skin he brought in; and there being no opportunity at the fort to spend his earnings, he was accordingly laying up quite a snug little balance, which would some day come in very handy. Some time ago he had admitted Sautloulai into a junior partnership, and the two worked along together most harmoniously; for Archie did the thinking for both, and the little Indian was really but another pair of hands for him—and a very deft pair they were too. Going the round of the traps, a business that had to be attended to every two or three days, was a very interesting and sometimes exciting piece of work, and they both looked forward eagerly to the day when they could go off trapping on their own account, and without Akaitchko or Mr. M'Kenzie in charge.

The present winter had so far not been a good one for the young trappers. They had set and baited their traps again and again with deepest cunning, and gone back full of hope, only to find they had drawn a blank. Now the bait would all be gobbled up, and not a trap sprung. Again, the only trophy would be a fox's foot, gnawed off close to the cruel spring by Reynard, who, although he had never read the ninth chapter of Mark, knew well enough that it was better for him to 'enter halt into life' than, by keeping both feet, to lose life altogether. Or, what was most exasperating of all, they would find that the trap had done its work, and caught a good mink or marten, but that the pest and

plague of the Canadian trapper, the hateful carcajou or wolverine, had come along, and out of sheer viciousness 'made raggles' of the defenceless captive.

This latter aggravation had happened several times of late, and the boys' hearts were burning with desire for revenge upon their tormentor. With Akaitchko's aid they set trap after trap for him with nicest care, but in vain. Detecting its exact position in some mysterious way, he would burrow underneath, and steal the bait without disturbing the spring; or, waiting until some other animal had paid the penalty of venturing too near, he would coolly devour both it and the bait.

However, it's a long lane that has no turning. The boys persevered, and in the end they got their reward, although not without a struggle. They had gone out for the afternoon, under the old Indian's care, as usual. It was a very cold but perfectly still day. The sun shone down from a cloudless sky, yet seemed to have no warmth in its rays. The boys' breath, as they pressed forwards, blew back and froze upon the mufflings of their neck and ears. They had to watch their noses carefully, lest Jack Frost should turn them into marble. But they did not mind the cold, as, clad in furs from head to heel, and shod with snow-shoes, they stepped rapidly over the undulating drifts in the wake of Akaitchko. The carcajou had been growing more and more daring, and they more and more determined to catch him. Apparently the way he looked at it was that a kind providence was providing him with abundant food in the form of bait or ready caught prey, and he proposed to enjoy the situation as long as it continued. In order to deceive the wily animal, they placed the traps in a different spot each time, and had thus been gradually working away from the fort, until now the end of the line was nearly two miles distant.

In the first few traps they found nothing, but presently came to one containing the shreds of what had once been a fine mink.

'Confound that brute!' cried Archie wrathfully. 'Here's some more of his work. Oh, if I could only get my hands upon him!'

'Take care him don't get him's claws in you, Archie,' said the old Indian significantly. 'Him bite like fiend, certain sure.'

'Oh, I'll take good care of that, Akaitchko,' replied Archie. 'I know what he can do.'

They were approaching the end of the line as they talked, and when they reached it Archie stopped short, looked all around with a surprised expression, thrust the ramrod of his gun into the snow, and finally exclaimed—

'Well, what do you think of that? That carcajou has not only eaten the

mink, but I believe he's eaten my trap too! This is the very place I set it; I know by that blaze on the tree.'

Akaitchko smiled in an amused, superior way.

'Carcajou got strong teeth, but can't eat trap all the same. Most likely trap bite him. He try run away. See.'

'To be sure,' said Archie, his face radiant at the thought. 'The brute can't have gone far with that heavy trap. Let's see who'll find him first.'

There had been a slight fall of snow during the morning, so that whatever marks the wolverine might have made were comparatively hidden; but, determined to hunt him up, the three trappers went off in different directions to examine the underbrush, which was very thick thereabouts. Akaitchko took the right hand, and the boys, not far apart, took the left. It was not easy work getting through the underbrush on snow-shoes, yet the snow was too deep to permit of laying the shoes aside. They had left their guns at the foot of the blazed tree, and were armed only with a hunting-knife and small hatchet apiece.

Now stooping low to avoid a snow-laden branch, and again springing over the trunk of a fallen tree, they made their way carefully through the dense growth of young timber, not knowing at what moment they might encounter the object of their search. After a good deal of this, Archie, thinking it quite enough, called to Sautloulai—

'He couldn't drag that trap as far as this. Let's go back to the tree on another track.'

'All right,' shouted Sautloulai; and so, leaving Akaitchko to his own devices, they retraced their steps. The little Indian was alone, but Archie had Edaiye with him, and tried to keep close behind the eager animal, who seemed thoroughly to enter into the spirit of the hunt. Suddenly there was an exclamation from Sautloulai, followed quickly by a cry of alarm, the harsh growl of some furious creature, and the rattling of a chain. This was what had happened. Pushing on rather carelessly, Sautloulai had come to a fallen tree which lay not fifty yards from where the trap had been set, and, without pausing to consider whether or not there might be anything on the other side of it, he attempted to spring over it. It was not a big tree, but one cannot take much of a jump on snow-shoes, and, instead of clearing it neatly, the toe of his left shoe caught at the top, and he took a header into the deep snow on the other side. But before he fell he had time to see what called forth his cry of alarm, for lying close to the tree-trunk was a dark brown mass that could be naught else than the dreaded carcajou.

For a moment the creature seemed too startled to do any mischief. But it was only for a moment, and before Sautloulai could extricate himself from his awkward position, it sprang forward and buried its terrible teeth in his left shoulder.

‘Archie! Archie! quick! He’s killing me!’ shrieked the poor little fellow.

‘All right, I’m coming!’ Archie shouted back, and, with hunting-knife in one hand and hatchet in the other, he rushed to the rescue of his friend.

CHAPTER VIII

FIRE AND FAMINE

THE sight that met his eyes when he reached the spot was startling enough. Lying flat upon his breast, and unable to regain his feet because of the clumsy snow-shoes, little Sautloulai was completely in the power of the carcajou, which, infuriated by its sufferings, was biting at him savagely, and had already given him serious wounds, as the blood upon the snow made plain.

It would not have been easy to shoot at the animal without running the risk of injuring the boy, but Archie did not wait to get his gun. He had no fear of fighting at close quarters. His one thought was to save Sautloulai, and springing forward, he raised the hatchet, and aimed a blow with all his might at the wolverine. The wily creature saw it coming, and made a quick movement, which saved his head, but not his shoulder, into which the sharp steel bit deeply, causing him to forget the boy prostrate before him, and to turn with a horrid snarl upon his plucky assailant.

Owing to his being on snow-shoes, Archie could not entirely escape the wolverine's onrush, and one of the big forepaws, catching him just below the knee, cut through the thick legging as though it had been paper, and scored a deep gash right down to the ankle, from which the blood flowed profusely. But that was his last advantage. The keen hatchet did not miss its mark the next time. Swinging it desperately, as the brute turned to renew his attack, Archie buried it in his brain, and with a convulsive struggle the carcajou rolled over dead.

Not stopping to examine his prize, Archie hurried to lift up Sautloulai, and at the same moment Akaitchko, whose quick ear had caught the boy's cries, came rushing to his side. They found that the poor little chap had fainted through terror, pain, and loss of blood, and they placed him tenderly upon the tree-trunk, Archie holding his head in his lap, while the father bathed his face with snow, and strove to stanch the gaping wounds.

In a few moments the boy opened his eyes, and putting his hand to his shoulder, moaned piteously—

‘It hurts me—it hurts me! Oh, how it hurts me!’

Archie had no thought for his own wound, which was still bleeding freely, and the tears that came into his eyes as he bent down and softly kissed the brown face in his lap were tears of sympathy, not of pain.

‘I know it hurts you, Sautloulai dear,’ he said soothingly. ‘But it will soon be better when we get you back to the fort.’

Akaitchko’s only remark was one of his expressive ‘Ughs,’ which meant in English, ‘This is a bad business.’ But there was no doubt as to his anxiety nor as to the skill either with which he quickly bound up his son’s shoulder, and made ready to bear him to the fort. This was all done before he noticed Archie’s hurt.

‘Carcajou do that?’ he inquired, pointing to the wounded leg, and Archie nodding his head affirmatively, he added, ‘Him cruel, certain sure,’ and without another word proceeded to bind it up in the same skilful fashion. ‘Come now,’ he said, ‘home quick.’

Picking up his son as though he were a mere baby, he placed him gently upon his broad shoulder, and strode off in the direction of the fort, leaving Archie to bring the guns and follow him as best he could, the carcajou, whose undoing had cost so much, being left neglected in the trap. If all were well the next day, they might perhaps return for him, but at present they had a much more important matter in hand, the saving of Sautloulai’s life.

Archie had a hard job getting back to the fort. His leg was exceedingly sore, and only constant motion prevented it from becoming so stiff as to be useless. Happily the bleeding ceased altogether, and he had not lost enough blood to weaken him at all. Yet he sometimes felt as though he could not go a step farther, he must lie down and rest a little. Then it was that Akaitchko’s example inspired him, as the stalwart old Indian, bearing his precious burden, urged his way onward without pause, seeming to be entirely superior to the ordinary limits of human strength and endurance. Keeping close behind him, Archie plodded on with a dogged determination, until at last the welcome walls of the fort came into sight, and summoning all his energies for a final spurt, he even took the lead of the Indian, and kept it until he dropped exhausted at the gate.

The return of the trappers in so damaged a condition made quite a sensation in the fort, and they were at once surrounded by an eager crowd of questioners. But Akaitchko, thinking only of his boy, would answer nobody as he hastened to his own quarters, where Sautloulai’s mother would dress his wounds far better than he could do; and Mr. M’Kenzie hurried Archie in to have his injury attended to, so that the crowd had to wait some time before

their curiosity could be satisfied.

When the story came to be told, Archie received abundant praise for the brave part he had taken, and Sautloulai much sympathy for his sufferings, while everybody rejoiced that the carcajou had met its reward at last.

The little Indian was not able to leave his bed for some weeks, but Archie, after limping around for a week, had no further bother with his leg.

Determined that so much trouble should not be taken for nothing, Mr. Wentzel thoughtfully set off the following morning after the killing of the wolverine, and finding the body untouched, brought it to the fort on a toboggan, when one and all declared it was the largest of the kind they had ever seen. The skin, of course, went to Archie's credit in his steadily growing account with his father for furs supplied.

The weeks followed one another uneventfully as the winter dragged its slow course along. January was an intensely cold month, and marked by many snowstorms, which piled up the drifts about the walls of the fort, both inside and out, until it seemed as though the buildings must be buried if the storms continued. The paths shovelled out between them became deep cuts, whose sides rose above Archie's head, and it took no small amount of work to keep the road open to the lake, whence the water-supply was drawn. For days at a time Archie could not go outside of the fort, and he took advantage of this enforced inaction to learn from Akaitchko how to weave snow-shoes and bend toboggans, two very valuable accomplishments for one who expected to spend the greater part of his life in the Canadian wilderness.

In his own home there were books to read with Rose-Marie, and chess to play with his father, and other employments which helped the time to pass. A good portion of each day was, of course, spent with Sautloulai, who was never so happy as when Archie kept him company. The two boys presented a curious contrast. Archie, now in his sixteenth year, stood five feet seven inches in his moccasins, and weighed full one hundred and forty pounds. His hair was light and curly, his eyes dark blue and as clear as crystal, his complexion fair where it was not freckled; his countenance, if not precisely a handsome one,—for the mouth was rather large and the cheek-bones over-prominent,—was thoroughly pleasing, good-humour, courage, honesty, shrewdness, and determination being written upon it in unmistakable characters. His figure was about as good as it could be. He was broad of shoulder and hip, narrow of waist, deep of chest, and stout of limb, the leg tapering to a trim ankle, and the arm to a neat wrist that many a lady might have envied. Strength, speed, and endurance were his in no small measure; and very proud was he, naturally enough, of his superiority in all things that demanded these qualities over any of his

companions.

Sautloulai, on the other hand, was an out-and-out Indian, albeit a particularly prepossessing one. He was slight of figure, dusky of face, and his hair hung in long, straight black locks upon his neck. Speech did not flow as freely from his lips as from Archie's. He had not much to say for himself, but he seemed to think a great deal. Although a year younger, and not at all his equal in strength, he was almost a match for his 'white brother' in speed and endurance, and he had inherited from his father in large degree that subtle acuteness of eye and ear which ensured his being a successful hunter. He had a singularly bright and affectionate disposition for an Indian, and, as has been already mentioned, he held towards Archie an absorbing, unselfish affection that was really beautiful. The companionship of the factor's son was a grand thing for the young Indian. Archie insisted on his learning to read as well as speak English, and was even teaching him to write.

'You may be a postmaster some day, you know, Sautloulai,' he would say; 'and then if you can read and write, just think how much more all the people will think of you.'

And thus encouraged, little 'Sunshine' would once more attack the difficulties of pot-hooks and hangers, wishing all the time to the bottom of his heart that he was using bow and arrow instead of pen and ink.

Ever since the attempted abduction of Archie no communication had been held with Fort Wedderburne. It was reported by some of the Indians that M'Dougal spent most of his time drinking brandy, and had shown such brutality towards his employees that many of them had left early in the winter, and gone south to other establishments, leaving him with but a handful. And presently the news came that the factor had followed them, his supply of food having failed, owing to a proper stock not having been laid in during the summer.

'A mighty good riddance,' said Mr. M'Kenzie, when he heard it. 'May his ugly face never be seen in this neighbourhood again! I knew well enough he wasn't getting in enough meat to last him all winter, but it wasn't my business to tell him. Thank Providence we haven't made that mistake! We could have a *festin à tout manger* once a week, and still have plenty to last until spring.'

A *festin à tout manger*, it may be explained, is a very popular institution among the Indians. The literal meaning of the term is a feast at which everything must be eaten up, and as the host on such an occasion endeavours to provide as much as he possibly can, it generally happens that his guests go away feeling very uncomfortable about the waistband. Could Mr. M'Kenzie

have seen but a few days into the future, he would hardly have spoken so complacently about giving a *festin à tout manger* every week.

Archie's room in the factor's house was at the back, and the one window, which had a sheet of parchment in lieu of glass, faced in the direction of the storehouses, these buildings being placed between the house and the walls of the fort, and a little distance apart. There were two of them, one containing the goods for barter and the furs that had accumulated, and the other the stock of pemmican, jerked meat, dried fish, flour, salt, etc., besides the ammunition, spare guns, hatchets, and other things of corresponding value.

The end of February was approaching, and the worst of the winter seemed to have passed. In a little while the days would grow warmer and the immense drifts begin to waste away. One cold, still, moonless night, Archie got so excited over a bison hunt in a dream, that, just at the critical moment when a huge bull was charging down upon him with most murderous intent, he sprang out of his way so energetically as to spring clear out of bed, and woke up to find himself shivering on the floor. He was about to dive back under the warm clothes again, when it struck him that the window showed out with unusual distinctness, and if his ears did not play him false, he surely heard something that sounded strangely like the crackling of fire.

It was not his way to hesitate. Rushing to the window, he dashed his fist through the parchment and looked out, unheeding the stream of frost-laden air that poured in upon him. The next moment he bounded into his father's bedroom, crying out—

‘Get up quick, father! the storehouse is on fire!’

In an instant the factor was awake.

‘What do you mean, Archie?’ he exclaimed. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, father,’ answered Archie. ‘Come into my room and see.’

One glance was sufficient.

‘Heaven help us, you're right!’ groaned Mr. M'Kenzie. ‘Get into your clothes quick, and call the men.’

In a wonderfully short time both father and son were dressed and were arousing the sleeping men, who, tumbling into their clothes, hurried to the fire. But by this time the flames were in full possession of the storehouse in which the provisions were kept. Crackling and hissing in the calm, still night, they rose higher and higher, filling the air with the odour of burning meat, while the men whose only supply of food was being destroyed before their eyes looked

on in helpless horror. Mr. Wentzel, Akaitchko, and some others, drawing the hoods of their *capotes* about their heads, dashed fearlessly into the burning building and brought out a few bags of pemmican, salt, and flour; and Archie, inspired by their gallantry, was about to imitate it, when the factor grasped him by the arm and drew him roughly back.

‘The powder!’ he cried, in consternation at the thought that had just occurred to him. ‘Get back for your lives! get back!’

He did not speak a moment too soon. Indeed, the words had hardly left his lips before a loud explosion shook the very ground upon which he stood. Another and another followed, and had not the men fled from the spot, many of them must have been killed by the broadside of heavy timbers and burning fragments that came from the doomed building.

Only for the snow that lay deep upon the roofs and high about the walls of the other buildings, they too would inevitably have shared the same fate. Happily, however, the firebrands quenched themselves harmlessly in the protecting drifts, and only the storehouse was destroyed.

But of all the buildings in the fort that very one was the most precious. The goods and the furs might easily have been spared; but the food and the powder—how was it to be replaced, and what was to be done in the face of such a catastrophe? The group that gathered in the factor’s room after the fire had burned itself out bore very gloomy and troubled faces. Two bags of pemmican, containing eighty pounds each, a bag of flour, and another of salt of the same weight, represented all that was left of a stock of provisions calculated to last until midsummer.

Counting all hands, there were sixty persons to be fed at the fort. The five loaves and two fishes for the multitude were hardly a less adequate provision, and, alas! there was no one here to multiply each bag of pemmican into a hundred.

‘’Tis a grievous state of things,’ said Mr. M’Kenzie, looking anxiously at Virginie and Rose-Marie, who, not yet entirely recovered from the excitement of the night, were sitting together beside the fire. ‘There’s not much more than enough pemmican for them, and where can we get more until the snow goes?’

‘But we don’t want it all, Donald dear,’ cried Mrs. M’Kenzie. ‘You and Archie must have some too.’

The factor smiled sadly.

‘I’m not thinking only of myself,’ said he. ‘But there are other women and children, and they must have a bite too. As for us men,’ glancing round at the

clerks, 'we must just live on the skins until we can get some meat.'

The other men nodded a gloomy assent. They understood well enough what the factor meant. Mr. Wentzel in particular had already passed through a similar experience, having lived for weeks upon nothing but dried beaver and moose skins.

What made the situation so serious was the absence of game within reach of the fort. The hares, which usually were a safe dependence, had totally failed, and the moose seemed to have been driven southward by the severity of the winter. Neither could the lake be looked to for food supplies. The intense cold had covered it with an icy armour from three to five feet thick, and made the fish so torpid that they would not touch bait, while net-fishing was of course out of the question. There was no disguising the fact that famine, gaunt and pitiless, stared them in the face, and that unless a supply of meat were obtained in some way, many of the weaker ones must perish, for the diet of dried skins would not furnish sufficient nourishment to sustain life very long, except for the very strongest.

Gathering into his own hands all the provisions that remained, so that he might dole them out to the best advantage, Mr. M'Kenzie prepared for the worst. His wife and daughter were his chief concern. He and Archie might endure to the full limit of human strength, but they were ill fitted to bear extreme privation. He had always cared for them according to the best of his ability, and they had never before been called upon to suffer actual need.

Yet none were calmer or more cheerful than they. Not because they failed to realise the seriousness of the situation, but because they had such implicit faith in the big father and the sturdy son that they felt perfectly confident of their proving equal to the emergency.

'Don't you feel so badly about us,' said Rose-Marie, looking bravely up into her father's face. 'We'll eat such a little every day that we'll make what we have last all right until you get some more.'

As though some malign fate had befallen the fort, the week following the fire proved so wild and stormy that hunting was out of the question, and the men, eager and anxious as they might be to try their fortune on the prairie, were compelled to stay indoors. Archie found the skin stew a poor apology for the comfortable meals he had been accustomed to, but he did his best to be cheerful over it, and even refused decidedly to take the tempting bite his mother pressed upon him from her own all too scanty portion.

'No, no, mother dear. I'm one of the men, you know,' he replied proudly, drawing himself up to his full height. 'I must not have anything better than

they have.'

Yet, poor fellow, how his mouth did water for what would have seemed very unattractive fare to many of our readers had it been placed before them!

CHAPTER IX

THE MOOSE-HUNT

BY the time the weather cleared, Mr. M'Kenzie had his plans perfected for dealing with the crisis. Taking a strong party of his best men, he would follow the Elk River southward, in the hope of finding a band of the noble animals from whom the stream was named, while the others should remain at the fort to await his return. The moment Archie heard of the arrangement, he was determined to accompany his father. But the factor at first did not approve.

'I think you had better stay at the fort, Archie. Here you are sure of at least something to live upon, poor stuff as it is; but if you go with us, who knows what you may have to suffer?' he urged.

'If I could do any good by staying at the fort father,' replied Archie respectfully, 'I would not mind staying. But you know I can't. There's no hunting or trapping to be done, for all the animals have vanished somewhere, and it's just miserable hanging about in this way, waiting for spring to come.'

The factor regarded his son with a sympathetic smile.

'You certainly don't lack energy, Archie,' he answered, 'and I know it's hard work for you to do nothing; but don't you think your mother and Rose-Marie would be better pleased to have you with them?'

'Doubtless they would, father,' said Archie, 'and if I could be of any use to them, I'd stay quick enough. But what can I do? I can't get them food, and Mr. Stewart and Mr. MacGillivray and plenty of the men are staying to take care of them. Oh, father, you must let me go with you! I can stand about as much as you can yourself.'

Now the truth of the matter was that Mr. M'Kenzie was no less eager to have his son with him than Archie was to go, and it was only a feeling of affectionate anxiety lest he would have to suffer too much hardship in the enterprise that prompted him to refuse his request. But as he listened to his earnest pleadings, he saw plainly that it would make the boy very unhappy to leave him behind; so, after some further show of resistance, more to satisfy his own conscience than for any other reason, he gave his consent, and Archie

went off delightedly to tell Akaitchko that he was to be one of the hunting party.

Without loss of time the necessary preparations were made. The party consisted of fifteen men, and included Mr. Wentzel, and of course Akaitchko, but not Sautloulai, much to the little fellow's grief. It comprised the best hunters in the fort. The factor, Archie, and the Norwegian were the only white men, the others being either half-breeds or Indians. Each man took a toboggan, upon which he put his gun and buffalo sleeping robes, and which he hoped to bring back heavy with moose meat. A small quantity of pemmican and salt was taken as a resource in extreme emergency, and also a quantity of beaver skins with which to make skin stew when there was nothing else to be had.

In the matter of ammunition their supply was all too scant, and but for the happy accident of a small quantity of powder and bullets having been left in the storehouse that was not burned, although as a rule they were all kept in the other, the only available stock would have been what each man happened to have in his own room. As it turned out, there was sufficient to furnish each member of the hunting party with twenty-five rounds, and to leave a hundred rounds or so at the fort, in case of an opportunity to use them presenting itself.

'Now, my men,' said Mr. M'Kenzie to his little company, 'you see how little powder we have. Not a shot must be wasted. Let all who can use the bow take one with them, and plenty of arrows. If we have the luck to find some ptarmigan, we can kill them better with arrows than with bullets.'

The parting was a trying one for the M'Kenzies. None knew whether they should ever see each other's faces again. For the hunters there were perils from storms, starvation, and wild beasts to be encountered; for the women the long, wearing anxiety of waiting, and the possibility of succumbing to the inevitable privations of their life. Before starting out, the father gathered his family about him, and in earnest prayer committed them to the care of the Omnipotent. Then, banishing all sign of worry from his rugged face, he strained his wife and daughter to his breast, and hastened out to take command of the men awaiting him at the gate. Archie delayed for one final parting hug, and then darted after him, his mother's prayer, 'Kind God, take care of my boy,' following him as he hastened to join the little procession, which had already begun to move through the gate into the vast white wilderness, where they must take their chances of life or death.

It was a very grave and quiet party. The men were in no mood for joking or laughter. They fully realised how much depended upon the success of their expedition. They were all dressed alike. A long coat made out of either bison or wolf skin protected the body, and a *capote* of the same material covered the

head. Trousers of thick blanket cloth were tucked into stout leggings that fitted close to moccasins gaily decked with beads and quills, and round the waist was a broad leather belt, from which hung a hunting-knife and hatchet, while across the shoulders were suspended the powder-horn and bullet-pouch. They were, of course, all mounted upon snow-shoes, without which not a mile of progress could have been made.

Taking a short cut across the lake, they struck the Elk River where it loses itself in the lake, and finding that its frozen bosom, covered with firm-packed snow, made an excellent road, they tramped all the rest of that day steadily southward. The factor's idea was to keep on until he reached the confluence of the Buffalo with the Elk River, and then, turning off to the west, to hunt for moose among the thickly timbered valleys which make dark lines in the rolling prairie between the Red River and the Buffalo. This would entail a full week of hard travelling, during which they would have to find sustenance along the route somehow; but Mr. M'Kenzie felt sure it would be only wasting time to stop short of the Buffalo River, as there were no really good hunting-grounds in the intervening country.

Of the whole party Archie was the only one who did not have to drag a toboggan after him. He was quite willing himself to do it, but his father insisted that they should have only one between them, and that he himself should drag that one; so that, being free to move about as he pleased, Archie, accompanied by Edaiye, instead of keeping in line with the rest, made himself busy beating the cover along the banks of the stream in search of partridge and ptarmigan.

They were by no means unsuccessful, either. Edaiye was a capital hunting dog. Nothing could escape his keen eye or nose, and many a bird did Archie contribute to the camp kettle, brought down with a well-aimed arrow. His gun he did not use at all; it had to be reserved for larger game. And as time after time his arrow sped to its mark with unerring aim, he thought what a fortunate thing it was that he had taken such trouble to be expert with the bow as well as with the gun. He missed Sautloulai very much, and felt inclined to find fault with his father for leaving the brave little Indian behind. But he did not express that feeling, knowing well that Mr. M'Kenzie had a good reason for everything he did, and moreover had required to be coaxed into letting him (Archie) go.

The weather seemed to be settled fair. One cold, clear, bright, windless day succeeded another, and under happier circumstances the party would have been quite a merry one; but as they were all half starving, never being able to get enough to entirely appease their hunger, and in addition to their own sufferings could never forget the families and friends at the fort, the

preservation of whose lives depended upon their securing abundance of meat, they talked little and laughed less as they tramped on towards the hunting-grounds.

The part of each day's programme that pleased Archie most was going into camp for the night, partly because he was always very tired by that time, and partly because there was something romantic about it that appealed to his nature. The manner of preparing the bivouac was as follows. A sheltered nook amidst the trees was chosen, and the snow scraped away with the snow-shoes in the shape of a circle to the depth of three feet or more. The hatchets were then busily plied until a great pile of firewood was ready. In the centre of the circle the fire was then built, and upon the snow around it the men spread their buffalo robes, and stretching themselves out with feet towards the fire, and heads protected by the wall of snow, rested as only weary men can rest. Archie never failed to sleep soundly. Not even hunger could keep him awake, and in the blessed oblivion of sleep he forgot for the time all his discomforts and anxieties.

When they were three days out, they came to the junction of the Red River with the Elk, and some of the party were for leaving the Elk and following up the other stream. But Mr. M'Kenzie would not consent.

'We can't afford to lose a single day,' he said. 'If we keep right on to the Buffalo, we can then work back to here, and if there are any moose about, we'll have all the shorter distance to carry them home. Don't you think so, Akaitchko?' turning to the old Indian.

'Me think so too,' assented Akaitchko. 'We get moose near Buffalo, sure.'

Archie was so eager to have a try at the moose that he felt rather disappointed at his father's decision.

'Might it not be worth while to stop here for one day, and see if there are any moose about?' he asked.

'Don't be impatient, laddie,' replied his father, patting him on the shoulder. 'You'll have plenty to do once we find moose, I can tell you.'

So for two days more they tramped and camped, and at last reached the mouth of the Buffalo in better spirits than they had been since setting out, because partridges and hares had been found in sufficient quantity to keep the pot pretty well supplied. Turning away from the Elk River, upon whose bosom they had marched for about a week, they struck off up the Buffalo and followed its course until sundown. The farther they went the higher rose their hopes. On every side they saw in abundance the trees and shrubs upon whose

tender juicy twigs the great creature they were in search of loves to feed. Where its food was so plentiful, the animal itself could not be far distant.

With every sense upon the alert, and his gun ready for instant use in his hand, Archie, accompanied by Edaiye, kept along the river bank, every moment hoping to light upon some trace of the moose. Presently the dog gave a quick, eager bark, and hastening forward, Archie to his delight found printed in the snow the mark of hoofs that there was no mistaking. Only the broad foot of the moose could leave such a track behind, and it had not been long made, either. A young birch tree stripped bare of its smaller branches explained the animal's presence. He must have had a good meal, and have gone off feeling very comfortable. Possibly, then, he was not far away, and reposing in some cosy nook while his dinner was digesting.

For a moment Archie was possessed with the wild idea of following up the track alone, and venturing to attack the moose single-handed. One well-aimed shot might do the business, and then what good grounds he would have for boasting! He would undoubtedly be the hero of the hunt. His heart beat like a trip-hammer, and his breath almost ceased as he struggled with the temptation. Then there came to him the thought of his father's grave, loving countenance, and the tones of tender reproof in which he would say, could he read what was passing in his mind—

'Don't be rash, my lad, don't be rash. You've only one life to lose, and you've no right to risk that recklessly.'

'No, I won't!' he exclaimed, as though his father were present and he were answering him. 'It would be a crazy thing to do.' And calling Edaiye to him he hastened down the bank to apprise his father of what he had seen.

His piece of news aroused the greatest excitement. The eager men wanted to leave their toboggans where they were, and rush off after the moose. But the factor would not allow that.

'We can't be too careful, my men,' he said. 'I shall be much mistaken if the moose have not yarded somewhere near. It's just the right sort of a country for a yard, and to go flying off after that fellow might perhaps spoil our chances of taking a score of them—and it's meat, not sport, we're after now.'

The whole party accordingly climbed the bank, and, piling their toboggans in a heap together, prepared for a systematic hunt. Every man saw to it that his gun was properly loaded and capped, and his hunting-knife ready for immediate action. Then, leaving two of the men in charge of the toboggans, Mr. M'Kenzie directed the others to spread out in a long line, yet keeping within hearing distance of each other, and to steer due north until the game

should be found. The factor's position was in the centre of the line, with Archie on his right, the end men being Mr. Wentzel and Akaitchko. As silently as it was possible for them to move, they stole on through the forest, each man eager to be the first to catch sight of their prey. They must have gone at least a mile without seeing anything save a partridge or two, which were permitted to flit by unhurt, when Mr. M'Kenzie's attention was attracted by a sound as if a sudden breeze had sprung up and was shaking the trees not far ahead of him.

'Hist!' he cried, under his breath, and held up a warning hand to Archie, who looked inquiringly towards him.

They both stood perfectly still for a moment, and listened intently. The disturbance among the branches increased. Archie hastened to his father's side.

'It's one of them riding down a tree,' said Mr. M'Kenzie, his face beaming at the prospect of soon achieving the object of their long journey. 'Let's creep up on him, and see if he's alone, or belongs to a herd.'

Redoubling their care, and bending low, so as to remain unseen as long as possible, the hunters crept forward breathlessly until they reached a sort of ridge, to the crest of which they made their way, and peeped cautiously over. Then a sight met their eyes that made them thrill with joy, for in the hollow below, a cup-like depression about a hundred yards in diameter, was a moose-yard, containing nearly a hundred of the splendid creatures, bulls, cows, and calves, some moving lazily about cropping the branches of the surrounding trees, others reclining comfortably upon the well-trodden snow, enjoying the sunshine which poured down upon them, and which their complete protection from the wind enabled them to fully enjoy.

It was the first time that Archie had ever seen a number of moose together, and they looked so stately, so contented, so happy, that his heart smote him at the idea of disturbing their peace with murderous bullets, even if their flesh was so badly needed. But his father had no such compunctions.

'Slip off quietly along the line that way, and I will go this way to get the men together. We mustn't open fire until we have the yard surrounded,' he whispered, his eyes gleaming with eagerness.

Archie instantly obeyed, and the two dropped down behind the ridge, and separated in search of the others. One by one they were found, and told of the good news, without any alarm being given to the moose. As directed by the factor, one half of them, making a wide detour, approached the yard from the opposite side, while the rest awaited the signal that would announce their being ready.

These few minutes of waiting were very hard to bear, for the moose, seeming to get some wind of the danger threatening them, showed signs of restlessness, and began to sniff the air suspiciously, and utter strange, inquiring grunts. But at last the weird, shrill whoop, that only Akaitchko knew how to give, pierced the air, and, released from all restraint, the impatient hunters sprang forward.

The sudden appearance of so many men, all shouting at the tops of their voices, threw the moose into the wildest confusion, and they huddled together in the centre of the yard, trembling with terror. This was precisely what the hunters wished. Aiming with the utmost care, for every bullet was as precious as if it had been made of silver, they fired a volley into the struggling mass of animals, which brought a number to the ground. Then hurriedly reloading, shouting loudly all the time, so that the frightened creatures should not break away, they repeated the volley, and still more were laid prostrate. The massacre bade fair to include the whole herd, when, just after the second volley, and before anyone had time to reload, a huge bull that had been only slightly wounded in the neck broke away from the others, and uttering an appalling roar, charged down upon the circle of slayers.

It chanced that Archie was right in the line of his onset. His father had moved some distance from him, but saw the danger even before Archie did.

‘Oh—the lad!’ cried the factor, loading his gun with feverish haste. He could not possibly reach the boy in time to get between him and the bull, but a well-aimed bullet might save him.

‘Look out, Archie. Run to me for your life!’ he shouted, ramming down a heavy charge.

Archie, intent upon watching the struggles of a young moose that he had shot, had not noticed the bull bearing down upon him until his father’s call fell on his ears. Then, aroused to his imminent peril, he started to run towards the factor. It was the best thing he could do, and yet it served to make him all the more conspicuous to the infuriated creature, which, sending forth again its awful roar, and looking terrible beyond description, with its black mane erect, bristling hair, bloodshot eyes, and foaming mouth, turned as he turned, and ploughed through the snow in hot pursuit.

Now, had Archie been in his moccasins on smooth ground, he might have safely defied even a fierce bull moose, for the latter is a clumsy animal at best; but he was upon snow-shoes, and in the midst of woods where the roots and branches of trees protruding through the snow were ready to trip him at every step. He could not flee at full speed from his furious pursuer, but had to look

carefully where he placed his feet, so that his rate of progress seemed agonisingly slow to his father, who, having by this time got his gun loaded, was hastening to meet him.

‘Quick, Archie, quick!’ cried Mr. M’Kenzie. ‘He’s right behind you.’

Archie gave a nervous glance over his shoulder. Sure enough, the moose, coming on at his lumbering gallop, was not more than twenty yards behind. Oh, if only he had wings instead of snow-shoes! His feet seemed weighted with lead. A terror such as he had never known in his life before struck to his heart. He felt as though he could not breathe. A horrible sense of suffocation oppressed him. His father appeared to be hopelessly in the distance. Yet life was sweet, and he would put forth one more effort to reach him. Gathering himself together for a supreme spurt, he leaped forward over the snow. But before he had taken two more steps, the toe of his right snow-shoe caught in a projecting root. He made a frantic but futile effort to retain his balance, and then, with a piercing cry of terror, plunged headlong into the snow right in the path of the moose.

CHAPTER X

THE RETURN IN TRIUMPH

ARCHIE'S cry was echoed by a groan of horror from his father. Ejaculating a prayer for Divine help, the factor levelled his gun and fired. But in his haste he aimed too high, and the bullet did the moose no more serious damage than to pierce a hole through one of his mighty antlers, causing him to shake his head a moment, and then continue his course.

So impetuous was his onset that he could not check it when he came to Archie's prostrate form, and planting his hoofs upon the boy's back, he lumbered heavily past. In this piece of good fortune lay Archie's salvation. By a tremendous effort he regained his feet, and ere the bull, finding out his mistake, could wheel about and renew the charge, he had dodged round to the other side of a stout birch that providentially stood near.

In the meantime, Akaitchko, intent as he was upon bagging the whole herd, had become aware of Archie's peril, and hastened to the rescue. It was well, not only for Archie, but for his father, that the old Indian appeared when he did, for the latter, determined to aid his son at all hazards, and knowing there was no time to reload, had dashed down his gun, and, drawing his hunting-knife, rushed recklessly upon the moose with that inadequate weapon.

Seeing Akaitchko approaching from the other side, Mr. M'Kenzie stopped, and shouted—

'Fire! for mercy's sake, fire!'

Akaitchko did not need to be urged. He was only waiting for the chance to take such aim as would make one bullet do the work. The next moment the chance came. As the great creature circled about the tree, striking it fiercely with his antlers in his blind fury, he presented his full side to the Indian. Instantly the levelled gun spoke, the bullet went swift and straight to its mark just behind the moose's fore-shoulder, and uttering an awful sound, half-groan, half-roar, he dashed his head against the tree and fell over in the snow, upon whose spotless white his life-blood soon made ruddy stains.

The moment he fell, Archie forgot his terror, and springing out from

behind the birch, stood over his prostrate foe, crying exultingly—

‘Turn about is fair play. You trod on me, now I’ll tread on you.’

The fallen giant of the forest, as if stung by the taunt, made a desperate effort to regain his feet, but all in vain. His power to harm was gone, and with a deep sigh he laid down his head and expired.

‘Ah! him big moose,’ exclaimed Akaitchko admiringly, as with his eye he measured the magnificent proportions of the animal. He was indeed a monster. Mr. M’Kenzie in all his experience had never seen a grander specimen. He could not have stood less than twenty hands in height, nor turned the scale at much under two thousand pounds, while the branching antlers that so royally adorned his massive head were full six feet from tip to tip.

‘Next to my joy at your fortunate escape, Archie dear, is my satisfaction at securing so splendid a moose,’ said Mr. M’Kenzie; ‘and it is you, my good Akaitchko, that I have to thank for both. Trust me, I’ll not forget how much I owe you.’

The old Indian’s eyes gleamed with pleasure at the factor’s words, but his only reply was a kind of pleased grunt, as he bent over the moose and began the work of cutting it up.

Leaving him to finish this task, Mr. M’Kenzie and Archie hurried back to the moose-yard, to find that there was nothing left for them to do except assist in the final operations. Barring a few, not more than a score altogether, which had followed the lead of the big bull, and broken through the fatal circle, the entire herd had been bagged. A grander day’s work could not be conceived. On the trampled and stained snow before them the hunters had a sufficient store of delicious venison to carry the fort safely through the remainder of the winter, and well on into the spring. No more fear of famine now. Tired and hungry as the men were, they could not settle down to work until they had executed a dance of triumph over their fallen victims, and hugged one another all round, by way of expressing their exuberant joy.

For the business of turning the moose into meat Archie had no hankering. On the contrary, he was particularly anxious to see as little of it as possible. Yet he did not like to be idling about when all the others were working like beavers. Happy thought! There was something he could do.

‘Father, hadn’t I better go back to the men we left in charge of the toboggans, and tell them to come along?’ he suggested.

‘A capital idea, my lad,’ said the factor; ‘if you don’t mind going through the woods alone.’

‘Of course I don’t,’ replied Archie, with a superior smile. ‘There’s nothing in these woods to harm me. So come along, Edaiye; off we go.’ And away he went, stepping swiftly over the snowdrifts, until he vanished behind a ridge.

His route was plain enough, for all he had to do was to follow the marks of the snow-shoes back to their starting-point on the bank of the river, and the distance being not more than two miles, he accomplished it in less than half an hour.

He found the two men sitting beside a little fire, and almost wild with impatience and curiosity. They had heard the reports of the guns, sounding faintly through the still air of the forest like the popping of corks from distant bottles, and they knew that there must be exciting work in progress. As soon as Archie caught sight of them, he took off his cap and waved it in the air, shouting—

‘Hurrah! Hurrah! We’ve killed a hundred! Hurrah!’

‘Killed a hundred what?’ they cried.

‘A hundred moose,’ he answered. ‘Come along. Hurry up and help them. There’s any amount of work to be done.’

The men did not need much hurrying up. Gathering everything together, they hastened to join their comrades, Archie helping by dragging two of the toboggans as his share. They were heavily loaded, and could not go very fast, but the prospect of such a dinner as they had not enjoyed for many a day kept them from getting weary, and in good time they reached the scene of the hunt.

On their way thither they noticed grey shadows flitting silently through the woods to right and left, and at intervals a wild, weird howl broke in upon the stillness. The wolves had scented the slaughter, and were assembling for a feast. Clearly there would be need of watchers at the camp that night.

As soon as he rejoined his father, Archie reported having seen the wolves. Indeed, while he was speaking there came a howl that told its own story from the top of the ridge to the right.

‘Just what I expected,’ said the factor. ‘If we want to keep what we have got, we’ll have to fight those grey pirates for it. But I don’t think we need be afraid of them.’

Archie did not at all like the idea of being surrounded by wolves. They were a long distance from the fort. They had but a few rounds of ammunition apiece, and, loaded as the toboggans would be with the precious meat, it was bound to be slow work getting home. Boy-like, he felt much more disturbed at

the idea of a danger that might continue day after day than of a peril which, though far more serious, would, for better or worse, be over in a few minutes. The object of their expedition having been so fully accomplished, he was impatient to be back at the fort, and to see his mother and sister enjoying the juicy venison that would be brought them.

‘Bother the wolves!’ he exclaimed in a fretful tone. ‘Why can’t they leave us alone? If they want moose meat let them kill it for themselves, and not come sneaking round us watching for the first chance to steal what we’ve had so much trouble to get.’

The factor laughed quietly. ‘It’s not the way with wolves to consult one’s feelings, Archie. They prefer following their own sweet will. But we’ll do our best to disappoint them this time, won’t we, laddie?’

‘I hope so, father,’ replied Archie despondently. Then, after a pause, he added, ‘Oh, how I wish we were safe home again!’

‘My poor boy,’ said Mr. M’Kenzie, putting his arm about him tenderly, ‘I don’t wonder you say so. You must be very tired of this, and greatly in need of a rest. I’m thinking I was right in wanting you to bide at home.’

The fact of the matter was, that as to both mind and body Archie was in a very run-down condition. The meagre fare, the continuous travelling, the stress and strain of the moose-hunt, had completely exhausted him, and, big boy as he was, he thought with inexpressible longing of his comfortable home and his beloved mother, and in the bottom of his heart wished that he had not left them to go upon this expedition. He would have given anything to be lying on the floor before the fire, with his head resting on his mother’s lap, and her soft brown hand gently stroking his forehead, as she loved so to do. Oh that dreadful distance of bleak, snow-covered wilderness! How could he be patient until the long journey was over? And then the wolves! Was there no getting rid of them?

But he had to keep these thoughts to himself, for everybody was too busy cutting up the moose and packing the meat snugly into the hides for transportation to the fort, to pay attention to anything else. It was not a particularly pleasant employment, and so Archie went off to the top of the ridge to see how many wolves were gathering. Sure enough, there they were, skulking about among the trees in ever-increasing numbers. How he longed for some magic power, something more deadly than the best aimed bullet or arrow, wherewith to destroy the miserable brutes!

The men’s work was but half done when night came and put a stop to it, so all hands turned to and cut an immense quantity of wood, with which a circle

of fire was built about the camp, and then two-thirds of the men slept, while the other third kept watch.

Tired as he felt, Archie at first found it hard to get to sleep. The wolves drew as near to the fire as they dared, and, sitting upon their haunches, howled so dolefully and persistently that every now and then those on watch, losing all patience, would snatch up burning brands and charge upon the unwelcome chorus, causing a temporary panic amongst them, and securing silence for a while. At length, during one of these lulls, he dropped off, and did not waken until broad daybreak.

That morning the work was finished. All the meat that could not be taken was slung high in the trees out of the wolves' reach, in order that, if necessary, a second trip might be made for it, and by midday the party started upon its return journey, with nearly three thousand pounds of venison stowed carefully upon the toboggans. Heavily loaded though they were, they hoped to be no longer getting back than they were coming down, because, with strength sustained by abundant food, they would be capable of much greater exertion.

Greatly to their joy and comfort, the fine weather continued unbroken, and as no more snow fell, they had the advantage of the path broken on their way down. The wolves followed them day by day, and refused to be frightened away. Every now and then one would be shot, just to let the pack understand that the hunters were not to be trifled with. But this had no effect upon the others. They just paused long enough to eat up their stricken comrade, and then continued the pursuit. It was fortunate for the heavily laden hunters that they were passing through a well-wooded country, which afforded them the means of keeping up big fires every night, or assuredly neither they nor their treasure would ever have reached Fort Chipewyan.

Archie found the constant presence of these tormentors very trying. If he could only have waged war upon them with powder and bullet, he would not have minded half so much. But it was the leaving them alone that bothered him. It seemed to him like sitting still and allowing yourself to be freely bitten by mosquitoes without as much as raising your hand to brush them off. Yet there was no other alternative. However, the longest journey, as well as the longest night, has an end, and with the fort drawing nearer and nearer, his depressed spirits began to assert their elasticity.

The closer he got to home, the more absurd the conduct of the creatures seemed. What a fruitless chase was theirs! He almost pitied them as he thought of the profound disgust they would feel when the last toboggan passed through the gate, and the heavy door shut them out contemptuously in the cold.

On the twelfth day from their setting out, the eyes of the wearied hunters were gladdened by the walls of Fort Chipewyan coming into view, the one dark patch amid the universal white. They halted for a moment to send up a cheer, for powder was too precious to be expended in a *feu de joie*, and then pressed eagerly forward. Ere the van of the procession reached the gate, the whole garrison poured forth to welcome it, and the air was filled with cries of joy and hearty greetings in English, French, and Chipewyan, as the wives and children gathered about the dear ones whose return had been so anxiously awaited. Never before in the history of the fort had such a scene been witnessed. All were included in the rejoicing, for the success of the expedition meant the rescue of all from the dreadful possibility of death by famine.

As soon as he could, the factor withdrew to his own quarters, and with Virginie and Rose-Marie for small but sufficient audience, and Archie as prompter, proceeded to relate the events of the trip, the dewy eyes, trembling lips, and changing cheeks of his listeners showing how deeply the story stirred them. When he told of Archie's narrow escape, Mrs. M'Kenzie threw her arms about her son, and pressing him to her heart, lifted her eyes upward as she murmured—

'How kind the good God is! He heard my prayers for my boy, and kept him safe. What would I have done if that dreadful moose had crushed him to death?' and she shuddered at the very thought.

In the comforts of home Archie soon forgot all his tribulations while on the expedition, and retained but one regret, namely, that he had not been able to kill more of those scoundrelly wolves. He found great enjoyment in relating his adventures to Sautloulai and the other boys. They were, of course, eager for every detail, and if in his desire to satisfy their interest he added sundry embellishments to the narrative—why, what boy would not have been tempted to do the same under similar circumstances? The fact of the matter was, he rejoiced in the prestige which the fact of his being the only boy in the party naturally gave him. The older he grew, the stronger became his thirst for leadership. He could not brook the idea of any other boy at the fort being his match in anything, and the more complete and unquestioned his supremacy stood, the better he was pleased. His position as the factor's son was of course very much in his favour. Indeed, but for this he might have had more serious opposition than he met in the various contests of skill and strength that were often taking place. His competitors naturally shrank from doing their best against him lest they might incur his ill-will, and from this cause he sometimes won victories that might have been defeats.

The result of all this was the development of a consequential, patronising

manner that was much to be regretted, and of which the two junior clerks, Stewart and MacGillivray, were especially conscious. It irritated them exceedingly, and caused them to cherish in their hearts a vigorous desire to 'take the young cub down a peg or two' at the first opportunity. The factor was not unaware of this failing on his son's part, but thought it well to say nothing about it.

'The lad's young, and if he sticks out his horns too far, he'll learn by plenty of hard knocks to haul them in again. Doubtless I was just as foolish myself at his years.'

If the truth must be told, Mr. M'Kenzie was just a wee bit open to the same charge, even at his mature years. He too had been for many years wont to have pretty much his own way in his little domain in the heart of the Canadian wilderness; and much as Mr. Wentzel, the next in command, loved and respected him, he could not help sometimes wishing that his chief had not quite so good an opinion of himself or such unshaken confidence in his own judgment. But there are spots on the sun, they say, and the M'Kenzies, father and son, had no more than their share of human frailty, to which it would not have been necessary to make any reference but for its bearing, as far as concerned one of them at least, upon forthcoming events.

After the excitement occasioned by the return of the hunters had subsided, life went on very quietly at the fort. Although sufficient meat had been brought in to last, with strict economy, until the spring, Mr. M'Kenzie thought it well to send off a party for what had been left hung up in the trees. Accordingly, the men who had remained in the fort, with Akaitchko as guide, were despatched, under the command of Mr. Stewart, to do this work. Sautloulai, much to his joy, was permitted to accompany his father, and, far better provisioned than the first party had been, the second expedition started gaily southward. They were gone only ten days, and had a very quiet time of it, except when the wolves sat round and howled them to sleep. They found the meat untouched and in perfect condition, and brought back nearly as much as the others had done. This second supply removed all necessity for short rations, and plenty reigned where famine had threatened.

Spring is a very laggard comer to Lake Athabasca. Not until April does the air grow really warm and the snow show signs of melting. Only one very new to the country would ever think of hunting for May flowers in the month their name suggests. May, indeed, is more a month of mud and slush than anything else. The hills are streaming with water, the hollows are turned into ponds, the brooks into torrents. There is absolutely nothing to be done but to wait for the world around you to dry up.

This was the time of year that Archie found hard to get through. It was so fine overhead that staying indoors seemed out of the question, but then it was so wretched underfoot that one could do nothing when out.

The days, therefore, dragged heavily, and he looked forward with much impatience to the coming of summer in earnest, when everything was possible, and each long day might be filled with enterprise and achievement.

CHAPTER XI

SUMMER AT FORT CHIPEWYAN

SURELY and steadily, if not quite rapidly enough for impatient Archie, the days grew warmer and longer, until at last the thrice-welcome summer entered into full possession. An Athabasca summer has not the same length of life as one farther south, but what it lacks in duration it makes up in beauty. The days are bright, clear, and warm without being oppressive, the nights are cool and refreshing. Rain comes but seldom. The ground, so deep frozen in winter that it never really thaws out to the bottom, retains sufficient moisture to render rain almost unnecessary. The prairie puts on a robe of richest green, spangled with flowers innumerable. The trees beside the watercourses rustle proudly in the breeze their flaunting wealth of foliage. The birds, glad to be back from their winter refuge in the South, express their joy in wonderful warbling; while the deer grow fat upon their verdant pastures, the beavers toil earnestly at their dams, the fish leap sparkling from the lake, and everywhere there is life, life joyous and unfettered, in the midst of which anyone possessing a sound body a clear conscience, and a sure supply of ordinary comforts, can have no possible excuse for not being happy.

And Archie was happy. Not a happier boy had foot upon the continent, for, beside enjoying all the essentials to happiness just mentioned, he was in the first flush of that precious pleasure which comes from the sense of being considered something more than a mere boy. He did not cherish the ideal of manhood. But to send a bullet or an arrow straight to its mark, to paddle a canoe hour after hour without missing a stroke, to tramp on snow-shoes four miles an hour for half a day without sitting down to rest, to bestride a half-broken horse and stick there until the creature, panting and exhausted, confessed defeat, to set a trap so cunningly that even the wary wolverine would fall a victim—these were some of the attributes of manhood according to his way of thinking, and all these he possessed in a degree which rendered the pretty high opinion he held of himself at least excusable, if not altogether admirable.

He found great enjoyment in recounting his various exploits to his mother and sister. They had nothing but applause for him. They never dreamed of offering either criticism or counsel. Everything that he did seemed good in

their eyes, and he desired no more appreciative audience. But his tongue did not wag quite as freely in his father's presence. If he had been talking much about himself, and chanced to glance at the factor's face, he was apt to find its rugged outlines touched with a kindly yet quizzical smile, that sometimes caused him to feel as though his father were amused at him instead of being impressed by him. In fact, although it made his cheeks burn to take that view of it, he could not help thinking sometimes that the factor would have very much the same look if he were watching the antics of a conscious puppy-dog.

One evening, after he had been dilating at some length upon the way in which he had mastered a two-year-old horse whose education was but begun, Mr. M'Kenzie, who had listened with no small pride to the story of his son's prowess, hiding this feeling behind the smile that bothered the boy so much, said quietly—

‘Eh, lad, no doubt but you did well. It's no easy job to stick fast to one of those wild creatures. But though you're learning how to master them finely, I was just thinking there was something else you need learn to master, Archie, which may be a tougher task than even the two-year-old.’

Pleased at his father's praise, which was all the more precious for being sparingly bestowed, Archie forgot the curious smile, and asked eagerly—

‘What is that, father? I'm not afraid to try anything that there's any sense in trying.’

‘There's plenty of sense in trying it, Archie,’ answered the factor. ‘The wisest men have been those who tried it hardest.’

By this time Archie began to suspect that it was not something in the physical world his father had in mind, and that he was coming in for a bit of a lecture. But, determined not to flinch, he asked again—

‘Well, father, what is it? I'm in a hurry to hear.’

‘You've got to go no farther than yourself for an answer, laddie,’ replied Mr. M'Kenzie, the smile giving place to a look of profound affection as he added, ‘You're much concerned to be a man, Archie, and I'm not saying it becomes you ill to have such notions. But there's no use in hurrying off if you're not ready for the road. If the porridge is too hot, it's better to let it cool than to scald your mouth with it. And before thinking so much of breaking in horses, and such-like doings, you'd do well to make sure that you've broken in yourself.’

Archie blushed and was silent. He felt tempted to protest against his father's words. He was sure he did not deserve them. But somehow or other

the tongue that could say so much in argument with anybody else always seemed stiff and halting when the discussion was with the factor, so, deeming discretion the better part of valour, he held his peace, as well as his opinion that he knew well enough how to take care of himself. Had he, however, been able to look a few weeks ahead, he would hardly have deemed the hint so undeserved.

So soon as the travelling became good, the Indians began to make their appearance at the fort, bringing with them the bales of furs which represented the results of their winter's trapping. The first to arrive were of course the Chipewyans, a quiet, peace-loving, and fairly honest people, sturdy of stature and dark of countenance, who, under various tribal names, but speaking much the same language, occupied the vast region extending from Hudson's Bay to Lake Athabasca, and thence northward to the snow-covered territories of the Eskimo. They were excellent hunters, and generally came well loaded with valuable peltries, with which they discharged the debts incurred the previous autumn for supplies advanced, and then were granted fresh credits. For the factor always found them trustworthy customers. Their debts were debts of honour, and whatever their hunters and trappers secured came straight to him. If they returned with empty hands, it was entirely because fortune had not favoured them in their precarious business.

During the trading season everybody was very busy at Fort Chipewyan. The annual visit thither was the great event in the Indian calendar, and they took care to make the most of it. Bringing all their families and possessions along with them, they would set up their *tepees* not far from the walls of the fort, and proceed to business with a deliberation and indifference to the flight of time that tried hard the patience of the white men. But to hurry them was out of the question. It would have given offence by suggesting that their concerns were not of the utmost importance, and a falling away in custom would have surely resulted. The only thing to do was to have as many to wait upon them as possible, and thus remove all excuse for unnecessary delay; and accordingly, as either interpreters, clerks, or packers, there was work for everybody.

What Archie liked was to be in the trading-room with his father, and to watch the Indians as they came in one by one, unrolled their packs, and selected their supplies. He had a decided bent for business, and was no poor hand at a bargain himself, having inherited a good share of his father's Scotch shrewdness, and the factor afforded him opportunity for developing his commercial talents by allowing him to do some trading in his own interest, the base of his operations being what stood to his credit for the furs he trapped himself during the winter.

The way they did business at the fort was as follows. The Indian with his pack of furs came to the trading-room, where he was welcomed by the factor, and given a small present of some kind to put him in good-humour. Only one Indian was allowed in at a time. Having opened the pack, and separated it into lots according to the different kinds and qualities of skins, the factor then put a valuation upon each lot, and handed the expectant Indian a number of little pieces of wood indicating the number of 'made-beavers' to which his 'hunt' amounted.

For the beaver was then, throughout the whole North-West, what the dollar is amongst Americans to-day, the common standard of value and medium of exchange. Everything that could be bought and sold had its value in 'made-beavers.'

Having made sure that he had got all the sticks the factor could be coaxed or cajoled into allowing, the trapper, then feeling almost as rich as an Astor, proceeded to the storeroom, where he found himself surrounded by a bewildering wealth of blankets, knives, hatchets, kettles, traps, tobacco, tea, and so forth, until his feelings, as he gazed eagerly about him, were pretty much like those of a hungry schoolboy let loose in a confectioner's. Then would business really begin, and then would the dusky purchaser, by his hesitation, his indecision, his sudden changes of mind, his unreasonable demands and childish sulking at their denial, test the patience and diplomacy of the factor and his clerks to the utmost. The bundle of sticks was soon found to be quite inadequate to the demands made upon it. A blanket took twelve of them, a kettle ten, a hunting-knife two, and there were not half enough left for all the tea and tobacco he craved.

So there would be more coaxing and arguing and promising, until at last, having been granted as much credit as the factor deemed prudent, and realising that there was nothing more to be gained, the Indian would take himself off to his *tepee* proudly to exhibit his purchases, and boast of the good bargains he had made, while another hastened to fill his place; and thus it went on all day long, until the whole band had been served.

While part of the staff were thus engaged, the other part were sorting, cleaning, and repacking the furs in secure bundles for despatch to Fort William, hundreds of miles away, on the shore of Lake Superior. The canoes, too, had to be put in thorough repair, new ones built if necessary, plenty of pemmican laid down, and other preparations made for the long journey by river, lake, rapid, and portage to the central depôt. Mr. Wentzel was to take charge of this expedition, and Archie begged hard to be permitted to accompany him.

‘Surely I’m big enough to go now, father,’ he pleaded, ‘and I would like it so much. Mr. Wentzel says he’ll be very glad to have me.’

‘I quite understand your being eager to go, Archie boy,’ said the factor kindly. ‘But somehow I feel as if I couldn’t be without you this summer.’

‘But, father, I haven’t been to Fort William, or even to Red River, since I was a little chap, and I do so want to go,’ persisted Archie.

The factor took the boy’s flushed face between his hands, and turning it up so that their eyes looked straight into each other’s, said in a tone so serious that it went straight to his son’s heart—

‘I cannot explain why, Archie, but something tells me you had better not go away from me this summer, and to heal your disappointment I’ll promise you this. If all is well next year, I’ll take not only you, but mother and Rose also, and we’ll all go to Fort William together. What say you to that, laddie?’

In an instant the cloud vanished from Archie’s face, and was replaced by a beaming smile. For the sake of such a delightful prospect as that, he was quite willing to forego the pleasure at hand.

‘Hurrah, father!’ he cried; ‘that will be just splendid. I won’t say another word about going with Mr. Wentzel.’ And so the matter dropped, very much to the factor’s satisfaction.

But busy as they were at Fort Chipewyan in summer-time, it was not all work. There was plenty of play too. In the long lovely evenings, after the day’s work was done, there were races on foot and on horseback, wrestling contests, Lacrosse matches, canoe races, and other sports, in which the garrison of the fort and the picked athletes of the lodges round about were pitted against each other. No one enjoyed these games more than the factor himself, and he encouraged them by offering prizes frequently, which were very eagerly competed for.

About midsummer there came to the fort a large band of Indians from the plains of the Peace River. They were much superior in stature and looks and general bearing to the Chipewyans, and were in fact unusually fine specimens of the red man. They had a rich supply of skins, and from the way in which they prepared their encampment it was evident they proposed to make a long stay, taking advantage of their nearness to the lake to do a good deal of fishing.

They proved to be very expert in all the amusements in vogue at the fort, and not an evening passed without some exciting event taking place. Among the boys of this band was one in whom the clerks Stewart and MacGillivray found what they had long been looking for, namely, a rival that Archie would

have hard work to defeat. This was the eldest son of the chief, a stalwart, shapely lad of sixteen, to whom the name of Beddakoonnai, or 'the Lightning,' had been given because of his remarkable fleetness of foot.

He was a very fine-looking young fellow, of about the same height as Archie, but more lightly built. His countenance was pleasing, if his complexion was dark, and when he smiled he displayed two rows of shining teeth that no dentist could have counterfeited. Being the chief's son, he was always clothed in the best of buckskin and beads, and altogether presented quite a striking appearance as he moved over the ground with the long, lithe step peculiar to his race.

The first time that Beddakoonnai and Archie met, the pale-face boy realised that he was no longer to have matters all his own way, and the spectators congratulated themselves on the prospect of some more than usually exciting contests. The occasion was a race of about a quarter of a mile in length. Archie had entered simply for the fun of the thing, expecting to have no difficulty in winning. He noticed the new-comer among the starters, but took it for granted he would have no particular trouble in defeating him. Accordingly, he was careless about starting, and allowed the others to get well off before he moved himself. Then he put on a spurt to overhaul them, and one by one they were caught up to and left behind, until, by the time the race was two-thirds run, only one remained. This was the tall, dark son of the Peace River chief, and Archie did not fail to notice the ease with which he was speeding over the ground. Calling upon himself for the best that was in him, Archie made a desperate effort to run down the Indian. For a few moments it seemed as though he would succeed. The distance between them materially decreased. Already he had begun to exult in another victory, when, to his intense chagrin, just as they were shoulder to shoulder, the Indian, who seemed to have plenty in reserve, put on a sudden burst of speed that left Archie, who had shot his bolt too soon, hopelessly in the rear, and carried him to the goal a winner by full fifteen yards.

Archie felt his discomfiture keenly. He blamed himself for having been indifferent about getting a good start, and burned to wipe out the stain of defeat. His keen eye at once caught the gleam of satisfaction in the faces of Stewart and MacGillivray, as they pretended to sympathise with him and encourage him by saying—

'A sly chap that chief's son, Archie. He's no green hand at racing. You'll have to give him a good beating next time, for the honour of the fort. It would never do for an Indian to worst our champion.'

And even his father's well-meant words—'Ah, Archie my lad! Met your

match this time, eh? Well, we can't always have it our own way, you know. If the Indian boy can beat you at running, you doubtless can beat him at something else, so don't take it to heart'—angered rather than soothed him, because they seemed to imply that Beddakoonnai had conclusively proved his superiority, and this the young Scot was far from being ready to admit.

He hardly slept that night for worrying over the surprising result of the race, and early the next morning, taking Sautloulai with him as interpreter, he sought out the Peace River chief's *tepee*, and gave Beddakoonnai a formal challenge for another trial of speed that evening. The young Indian accepted with an alacrity that rather disconcerted his challenger. It seemed to indicate such a serene confidence in his own superiority. But this was not really the case, the truth of the matter being that the night before MacGillivray and Stewart had paid a visit to the Indian encampment, and after expressing in big words their admiration of the fleet-footed lad, had promised him what above all things his heart desired, a good gun and a supply of ammunition, if he would again defeat his pale-face opponent.

Beddakoonnai's eyes flashed eagerly at the offer of this tempting prize, and in his own tongue he cried, accompanying the words with expressive pantomime—

'My name is "the Lightning." To-morrow I run like the lightning. My pale-face brother will see nothing but my back. Oh yes, I am the Lightning. No one can run so fast as I.'

When Mr. M'Kenzie heard of the intended race, he attempted to dissuade Archie from it.

'I doubt if you're doing well to try that Indian chap so soon again, Archie,' said he. 'I never saw one of his kind show a cleaner pair of heels. You'd better have a little practice first, I think.'

'Tut, father!' replied Archie impatiently. 'I can beat him right enough. It was only because I was so foolish as to let him get a good head start that he beat me last night.'

The factor smiled one of his deep, shrewd smiles, and shook his head in a sceptical way as he answered—

'Maybe, my lad, maybe; but don't be o'er-sure. They tell me the boy's name means "the Lightning," and lightning's pretty hard to beat, you know.'

But Archie was not to be dissuaded. He could think of nothing else but the race, and would have no peace of mind until it was over and done with. Meanwhile, the news went round of his challenge and its acceptance, and

everybody in the fort and among the encampments looked forward eagerly to the approaching contest.

CHAPTER XII

LESSONS NOT TO BE FORGOTTEN

WHEN the time came for the race to be run, Archie was by no means in condition to do himself credit. He had slept badly the previous night, and had fidgeted and fussed all day until he had got himself into a feverish, excited state that could not fail to tell against him. Now and then the voice of his calmer reason found opportunity to whisper that he would show more wisdom by postponing the race than by persisting in it. But the mood of unreason was upon him, and he yielded to its sway.

The event took place at six o'clock in the evening. The distance had been fixed at half a mile, as affording the fairest test of both speed and endurance. The track, it need hardly be explained, was no modern cinder path, but as level a piece of prairie as could be found in the near neighbourhood of the fort. Starting from the top of a slight slope, the runners would descend it to a stretch of level ground, and then, after crossing that, come to another slope upon the side of which a stake driven into the ground, with a blanket thrown over it, formed the turning-point, and thence back to the goal.

Every man, woman, and child in the fort and encampment turned out to witness the contest. Archie was the first to make his appearance, his face having an anxious, impatient expression that showed how deeply he was stirred.

Beddakoonnai did not keep him waiting long, and as he passed through the crowd MacGillivray caught his arm a moment, and whispered in his ear—

‘Remember, now, you beat him well, and you shall have this too;’ and he touched the handsome hunting-knife that hung in his belt.

The Indian gave one of his brilliant smiles by way of reply, and hastened to the starting-post. Archie’s quick eye did not miss this little incident, and in an instant he understood its meaning.

‘He wants him to beat me,’ he muttered bitterly. ‘That’s all *he* cares for the honour of the fort.’

Mr. M’Kenzie was the starter, and as the two boys ranged themselves in line he was struck by the difference in the expression of their faces. The Indian

looked excited, but sanguine of victory. His eyes were flashing with eagerness, and his whole body seemed to quiver like a fine steel spring. Archie, on the other hand, had a stern, set look, as though his very life were at stake. The colour had entirely deserted his face, his breath came in quick, short pants, and he showed none of the bright, confident spirit of his rival.

‘Keep a tight hold upon the reins, laddie,’ said the factor in a low tone. ‘Don’t go too fast at the start.’

Archie made no reply except to tighten the grip of his fists and fix himself more carefully at the line.

‘Are you ready?’ cried the factor, while the spectators held their breath, and could hear their hearts beat like little drums. ‘Then—Go!’ and amid the shouts of the men and soft murmurs from the women the two boys darted off shoulder to shoulder.

Now, had Archie been in his ordinary cool, canny state of mind, he would never have acted as he did. But, instead of that, he was so wrought up as to be quite out of his own control, and, as though his idea was to distance his opponent at the start, he darted down the slope at the very top of his speed, opening a wide gap between himself and Beddakoonnai, it was true, but causing his father to shake his head gravely and exclaim—

‘Tut! tut! What’s the lad about? He’ll be blown before he reaches the blanket.’

While Stewart and MacGillivray looked into each other’s faces with a smile that said, ‘He’s doing our work for us. He can’t keep that up.’

Meantime, the Indian, going as easily and lightly as a bird, had reached the level ground, and put on a spurt which reduced by one half Archie’s lead, and when the two came to breast the other slope the ascent seemed to matter little to him, while it was evident that Archie’s speed was slackening. When they turned the stake, the white boy led by fully ten yards, and taking advantage of the down-hill, he let himself out for another burst that gave him ten yards more before the Indian followed his example.

Then Beddakoonnai, as though hitherto he had been only trying to keep Archie in sight, but now proposed to show the speed that was in him, uttered a shrill whoop, swung his arms about his head, and bending forward like a young tree in the wind, bounded over the level with the spring and stride of an antelope. More beautiful running could hardly have been conceived. Never had the people at the fort seen anything to surpass it. So light was the boy’s step that it seemed as though his foot might have touched a grass blade without

crushing it. On he came, overhauling Archie at every stride. The twenty yards were quickly cut down to ten, the ten reduced to five, and as the runners reached the foot of the final slope they were once more shoulder to shoulder.

Now did Archie regret his folly in forcing the pace at the start, for while he was labouring hard, his chest feeling as though it would burst, his brain reeling, and his legs weakening under him, the Indian boy at his side was running as steadily and strongly as though the race were only begun. Concentrating all his faculties upon one supreme effort, he strove to make a finishing spurt that would carry him first to the goal. But the effort was vain. Beddakoonnai perceived his purpose. His time had now come. Once more he gave his piercing whoop, and then, leaping to the front, left his opponent behind almost as though he had been standing, and shot over the line an easy winner; while poor Archie staggered blindly after him, and would have fallen but for his father's prompt support.

The Peace River Indians showed their joy by a chorus of guttural 'Ughs,' intermingled with whoops, in which MacGillivray and Stewart would dearly have liked to join, had they dared thus openly to express their glee; and the factor, too big of heart to withhold a due meed of praise, even though the victory was over his own son, gave the panting Indian a hearty clap on the back, exclaiming—

'Well done, young fellow. Prettier running I never saw in my life. You deserve to win;' and then, taking Archie by the arm, hurried him off to dress and rest. So profound was his son's chagrin that Mr. M'Kenzie made no attempt to console him, knowing well it would be a mere waste of words. When they reached the house, Archie, giving no heed to the expressions of tender sympathy his mother and sister sought to make, went straight to his own room, threw himself upon his bed, and—if the truth must be told—burst into a wild passion of tears. Never in his life before had he met with so keen a humiliation, and the bitterest portion of it was the conviction deep in his heart that there was little hope of his ever wiping out the defeat he had sustained. Beyond a doubt, in Beddakoonnai he had met more than his match, and further trials would only have the same result.

He did not leave his room until the following morning, and by that time there was fully formed in his mind a plan for retrieving his reputation, in part at least, the thought of which somewhat restored his equanimity. If Beddakoonnai was swifter, he was surely stronger. He would issue another challenge, this time to a wrestling match. Wrestling was always a favourite amusement among the Indians, and his old friend Akaitchko had taught him every trick of hold and tackle known to that wily veteran, so that no one of his

own age or weight had ever been able to vanquish him. Accordingly, he paid the Peace River *tepee* a second visit, and through his faithful Sautloulai made known his wishes.

The Indian was not quite so prompt about taking him up this time. He knew well enough how to wrestle, but his eyes told him that Archie ought to have more strength, and if his skill were equal, why, he was sure to get the best of it.

‘The Lightning’s tired,’ he said doubtfully, ‘and has no heart for wrestling. Will not his pale-face brother run another race?’ and he smiled in a conscious way that was very aggravating.

‘No, I will not run another race just now,’ replied Archie. ‘But I will wrestle. Is the Lightning afraid to wrestle with me?’

Beddakoonnai’s eyes flashed at the taunting question, and just then Mr. Stewart appeared, with face full of curiosity. Instantly the Indian threw away his assumed indifference.

‘Is the Lightning afraid?’ he cried, springing to his feet, and waving his arms. ‘No, he is not. He will wrestle. Oh yes, he will wrestle with his pale-face brother.’

And he struck an attitude as though he would begin at once.

‘It is well,’ answered Archie quietly. ‘We will wrestle at sundown;’ and he went away with Sautloulai.

As soon as he was out of sight, Beddakoonnai, with a crafty look in his bright eyes, turned to Mr. Stewart.

‘My pale-face brother wants to wrestle with me. What will the white chief give me if I throw him—so?’ and he pointed expressively to the ground.

‘What would Beddakoonnai like?’ asked Mr. Stewart, willing enough to do anything that would ensure Archie getting another ‘taking down.’

‘Beddakoonnai would like to have a hatchet, sharp, sharp, sharp;’ and he showed his glistening teeth.

Quite relieved at the moderation of the request, Mr. Stewart readily promised to comply with it, and the Lightning on his part promised to do his best to give Archie another beating.

The news of the second match soon spread, and when the time came everybody, as before, was there to witness it. Archie’s bearing was so different this time that his father did not think it necessary to give him any cautioning.

Instead of being anxious and impatient, he was calm and resolute. He seemed to have regained his confidence in himself, and to entertain no fears as to the result. But his mother, who did not altogether like wrestling matches, fearing some strain or injury, could not refrain from saying—

‘Be very careful, Archie. Don’t overdo yourself;’ and Archie smiled reassuringly, and said—

‘All right, mother; I’ll take good care of myself.’

The wrestling took place upon a smooth, soft, level piece of turf just outside the gate. The spectators ranged themselves in a circle; the women and children squatted upon the ground, the men standing up behind them. There was a murmur of admiration as the two boys stepped into the ring, accompanied by their fathers as seconds. They were both naked to the waist, their only clothing, in fact, being short buckskin breeches, just reaching to the knee, and soft moccasins. The style of wrestling was that known nowadays as catch-as-catch-can. Starting from opposite sides of the ring, the contestants approached until but a yard apart, and then circled warily about each other, watching for a good chance to jump in and tackle.

The contrast between the pair was very striking—Archie, with skin as fair and smooth as a woman’s except where the sun could burn it, and compact, well-knit frame, set his feet firmly upon the sod at every step; while the Indian, as brown as a nut, and lithe and active as an eel, seemed to touch the ground only with tiptoe. For a couple of minutes they dodged and feinted, and then Archie, seeing his opportunity, sprang at Beddakoonnai, gripped him around the waist, and the struggle began. At the start the issue was by no means certain. What the Indian lacked in strength and weight, he seemed fully to make up in expert agility. He writhed and squirmed and twisted in Archie’s grasp, meeting artifice with artifice, and showing thorough training in the exercise. Evidently he would have to be tired out before he could be overcome.

To and fro they swayed and staggered, locked tight in each other’s embrace, now one seeming to have the advantage, and then the other. The spectators, who had begun by cheering every movement, soon grew so absorbed that they forgot to cheer, and the struggle went on amid perfect silence. At length Archie’s superior strength and stamina began to tell. Slowly but surely, twist and contort as he might, Beddakoonnai’s supple form was bent backwards, until, with a sudden supreme effort, Archie swung him clear off his feet, and pinned him to the ground, with both shoulders pressing into the turf. It was as fair a fall as could be asked for, and springing to his feet, Archie walked back to his father, smiling triumphantly, while the Indian, with a sullen countenance, picked himself up, and went to his corner.

The arrangement was that they should wrestle for the best two out of three bouts, and after a few minutes' rest they faced one another again, and the cautious seeking for an opening recommenced. This time the Indian was the first to attack, and so quick was his onset that he had secured a favourable hold before Archie could ward him off. But even this advantage might not have availed him much had not his opponent, ere they had been struggling a minute, lost his foothold through the sod giving way. Beddakoonnai felt his feet slip, and seizing his opportunity with a swiftness worthy of his name, put forth his whole strength, and at the same time gave Archie's other foot a vicious kick. It was not a fair thing to do, but it succeeded. Unable to recover himself, Archie fell over on his side, and thence upon his back, and thus lost the second bout.

The excitement was now intense. Each of the boys had won a fall, and though the chances were, if anything, in Archie's favour, still Beddakoonnai had plenty of vigour left, and was much inspirited by his success, against which his opponent scorned to protest, even if it had been obtained by resorting to a mean expedient.

'Keep very cool, laddie,' whispered the factor to his son. 'He'll soon tire, and then you may do with him what you please.'

Archie smiled and nodded, and took his place in the ring. They were much longer this time than before in coming to close quarters. They feinted and fenced about the circle, each trying his best to gain some advantage at the start, until at last, by a common impulse, they rushed together, and grappled. Bearing in mind his father's injunction, Archie at first did keep cool, and sought to do no more than frustrate the Indian's clever and impetuous efforts. But as the struggle went on his blood rose. Beddakoonnai, determined to win at any cost, put into practice every knavish trick the cunning fellow knew. He dug his sharp nails into Archie's back. He tried more than once to thrust his knee into his stomach. He even bit him upon the shoulder.

Then did Archie lose all control over himself. The wild blood in his veins asserted its presence as it had never done before. A passion of fury seized upon him, so transforming his countenance that his father, catching a glimpse of it as the wrestlers swayed to and fro, felt strongly tempted to rush in and part them. But the thought that his action might be construed to mean over-anxiety for his son restrained him.

Well would it have been had he thus interfered, for, a few moments later, Archie, enraged beyond all thought of the consequences, shook himself free from Beddakoonnai's grasp, and then, rushing at him again, caught him around the waist, and bending his back with a tremendous effort, hurled him clear over

his head. With a dull thud that sent a thrill through the breathless spectators, the Indian struck the ground, and lay there motionless.

With a fierce look of triumph his conqueror stood over him, and stretching out his hand, said—

‘Here you are. Let me help you up.’

But Beddakoonnai never stirred. Startled at his stillness, Archie bent down and lifted his head. It lay limp and lifeless in his grasp. The eyes were closed. No breath seemed to come from the set lips. With a sharp cry of alarm he laid it down again, just as the others gathered round, wondering what was the matter. In a moment all was clear. A sunken stone from which the turf had been torn away by the wrestlers’ feet had received the Indian when he fell headlong, and a bleeding bruise just over the right temple told its own story. Beddakoonnai, if not dead, was seriously injured.

Instantly all thought of triumph in Archie’s mind gave way to keen concern for his vanquished opponent.

‘Oh, father, he is not dead?’ he cried. ‘He cannot be dead! I did not mean to kill him—indeed I didn’t.’

‘Of course, of course,’ said the factor consolingly. ‘Don’t fash yourself, laddie; he’s only lost his wits a minute. We’ll soon bring him to;’ and then, stooping down, he lifted the senseless form gently upon his mighty shoulders, and strode rapidly off to his own house, Archie keeping at his side, his heart heavy with apprehension.

On reaching the house, the medicine-chest was ransacked for restoratives, which were one after another applied by Mr. M’Kenzie and his wife, but apparently to no purpose. Beyond a hardly perceptible breathing, the Indian showed no sign of life. The hours dragged on, and still he moved not. Archie was in a pitiable state of anxiety. He could not remain in the room, but would rush out and wander aimlessly around for a few minutes, and then come back, asking eagerly, ‘Has he come to yet?’ only to be met with the answer, ‘Not yet, Archie.’

Oh, how bitterly he reproached himself for his mad outburst of rage! He could easily have thrown Beddakoonnai without hurting him at all, for the boy’s strength was nearly exhausted, and in a minute more he would have been like a child in his hands. But, alas! he could not hide from himself the painful truth, that a desire to be revenged as well as to triumph had filled his heart. His father’s words, ‘Before thinking so much of breaking in horses, you’d do well to make sure that you’ve broken in yourself, Archie,’ came up in his mind, and

each of them brought a pang of remorse. He realised that he had borne himself more like a savage than the son of a Christian gentleman. With passionate earnestness he vowed that never again would he so disgrace himself. He felt that if Beddakoonnai really died, he could never be light of heart again. His whole life would be shadowed, because of a moment's blind fury.

While the anxious hours dragged slowly on, there sat in one corner of the room, as silent and motionless as if cast in bronze, the Peace River chief. He was a medicine man of great repute among his own people, but in the presence of the factor and his more potent remedies he at once admitted his own powerlessness, and unquestioningly committed his stricken son to the white man's ministrations. He took no notice of Archie. If he cherished any hard, revengeful feelings, no trace of them appeared upon his impassive countenance. His whole attention was fixed upon the motionless form that he loved better than anything else in the world.

CHAPTER XIII

THE EXPEDITION TO THE GREAT SLAVE LAKE

IT was almost midnight before Beddakoonnai showed any signs of coming to himself. Then at last, to the unspeakable relief of the anxious watchers, he stirred a little, opened his eyes, moved his head as though it gave him pain, and took a long, deep breath. But immediately he relapsed into such perfect stillness that Archie, who was bending over him, eagerly welcoming the tokens of returning consciousness, cried out in agonised alarm—

‘Oh, father, is he dead? Oh, don’t let him die!’

Mr. M’Kenzie was half persuaded that the boy had really drawn his last breath, and there was a pitiful look of despair upon the face of the Peace River chief. But the keen intuition of Mrs. M’Kenzie told her that the end had not yet come. Laying one soft hand upon the Indian boy’s forehead, and the other upon Archie’s shoulder, she murmured tenderly—

‘He is not dead, Archie darling. He will not die.’

And she was right. Beddakoonnai was not dead, nor did he die, though his escape from death was little short of miraculous. Later on in the night his consciousness came fully back, and he was able to speak a few words to his father, which caused the dark, troubled countenance to become radiant with joy, and when the morning dawned his recovery was no longer a matter of doubt. He would need to be very quiet for many days, but in due time he would get up as strong and active as ever.

During the next few weeks Beddakoonnai lived in paradise. Archie, his mother, and Rose-Marie were unwearied in their attentions, while his own father, and the factor, and others came in constantly to see him; and altogether he was made so much of that, barring a certain uncomfortable sense of confinement due to his being so long in a room, when his previous experience had been entirely of wigwams, he felt as happy as a bee in clover, and was in no hurry to confess convalescence.

In the meantime, the summer was wearing on, and the factor became impatient to put into execution a design he wished to carry out before the advent of autumn. This was to take a number of his men, and go up north as far

as the Great Slave Lake, in order to visit the different posts established upon its borders, and stimulate them to increased activity in obtaining furs, the returns from that district having somewhat fallen off the past two seasons. Being convinced that Beddakoonnai was quite well enough to go back to his father's lodge, yet feeling reluctant to ask him to leave his house, he resorted to diplomacy. The Indian already possessed a gun and hunting-knife—and, by the way, the factor had a shrewd suspicion how he acquired them, although he sagely kept his own counsel. But a pistol might tempt him. He accordingly offered him an excellent pistol, on condition that he returned to his own encampment. The Indian, of course, eagerly took the bait, and thus, between winning a race and getting a broken head, became the proud possessor of a hunting outfit that no other redskin in the country could match.

His hands being thus freed, Mr. M'Kenzie lost no time in making ready for the expedition, and Archie, feeling something like Pilgrim after the bundle rolled off his back, enthusiastically assisted. He had learned lessons that would last him through life. He had suffered defeat from both the physical and moral standpoint. But, like a brave, clear-headed fellow, he determined to let such defeats point the way to future victories. He no longer thought of himself as an 'Admirable Crichton,' but simply as a boy with much to learn still, and very willing to be taught. The race and wrestling match marked a distinct epoch in his experience.

The prospect of the trip to Great Slave Lake filled him with pleasure. The farthest he had ever been in that direction was when the Quarrellers ran off with him at the instance of Miles M'Dougal, and he longed to see for himself the country concerning which Mr. Wentzel, Akaitchko, and others had told him many things. Sautloulai, of course, would be one of the party this time, and they were sure to have some grand sport together, especially as they were both now fully admitted into the ranks of the hunters.

The time was the beginning of the month of August, and allowing himself six full weeks for his journey, the factor calculated upon being back before the end of September, so that he would have the finest weather in all the year. Messrs. Stewart and MacGillivray would share the responsibilities of looking after the fort and Mrs. M'Kenzie and Rose-Marie during his absence, and he would leave twenty trustworthy men under their command, he himself taking ten, besides Akaitchko, Archie, and Sautloulai.

It was a magnificent morning when the expedition started. The fourteen members of it were disposed in four large, strong canoes, Mr. M'Kenzie, Archie, Sautloulai, and Akaitchko taking the lead in the largest, the others following, with three or four men in them, according to their size.

In addition to its human freight, each canoe carried a good load of provisions, ammunition, goods for trading, and buffalo robes for sleeping in, done carefully up in bundles of about ninety pounds' weight, for convenient handling at the different portages.

Mrs. M'Kenzie and Rose-Marie were at the shore for a last kiss and good-bye. They had grown somewhat accustomed to lengthy absences on the factor's part, but this was the first time Archie was to leave them for long, and they knew they would sorely miss him.

'Oh, father, I wish you'd take me too!' cried Rose, looking up at the factor with a most beseeching little face. 'Couldn't you take me even yet? I could be ready in a few minutes.'

Her father smiled affectionately upon her.

'And what would my little lassie do if I did let her come?' he asked, taking her soft cheeks between his big hands.

'Oh, I don't know. I'd be as good as I could, and try not to be any trouble,' replied Rose, half hoping he might yet consent.

'And what would mother do without her daughter, and all the rest of us away?' inquired Mr. M'Kenzie further.

Rose-Marie turned to look at her mother, in whose brown eyes the tears were already gathering. With quick sympathy she understood her feelings and darting towards her, clasped her about the waist, exclaiming—

'My darling mother, I won't leave you!'

'God bless you for your kind little heart, Rose!' said the factor. 'I'll give you a promise that will make you happy. If all goes well until next spring, I am going to take you and mother and Archie with me down to Fort William to show the gentlemen there what a fine family I have. Now then, just keep thinking of that, and you'll soon be comforted for not going with us this time.'

Rose-Marie did not take in the import of this promise as fully as Archie had done when it was made to him, but she knew from her father's tone that it meant something very delightful, so she wreathed her pretty face in a radiant smile as she answered—

'All right, father; I'll wait until mother and I can go together. That will be best of all.'

Then the final farewells were said, the canoes shot out from the shore, and in a few minutes rounded the point that hid them from sight, while those that

had come down to see them off went slowly back to the fort, where life would move very quietly until the little fleet returned.

The course of the canoes lay due north from the point, and paddling briskly on, ere the sun reached its zenith they were treading their way through the maze of barren projections called the Stony Islands, which mask the entrance to the Slave River. Old Akaitchko knew every turn and twist of the shortest channels, and wasted no time in following blind leads, although it would have sorely puzzled the ordinary individual to make out by what marks he was guided, the different islands seemed to have such a bewildering family resemblance. Sitting right behind him, and keeping perfect stroke as the canoe rippled steadily forward, Archie closely studied their course, and wondered if by any possibility he could retrace it. A similar thought passed through Mr. M'Kenzie's mind, for he called out—

‘Archie, do you think you could pilot us through these islands if you had to?’

‘I'm afraid not, father,’ answered Archie; ‘I'd have to take a good many lessons from Akaitchko first.’

‘Well, my lad, get all the lessons you can. Make Akaitchko tell you every secret of his skill, for such knowledge will be of incalculable value to you when you come to strike out for yourself, as you must do before long;’ and the factor heaved a sigh, as though the prospect of his son striking out for himself was not particularly attractive.

‘No fear but I'll do that, father,’ responded Archie. ‘It was for that very reason I took my place here.’

During the next few days Archie had plenty of opportunity for studying the fascinating science of canoe management. Their course down the Slave River was marked by every imaginable difficulty and obstacle. Rapids, shallows, whirlpools, and waterfalls followed one another in close succession, and Akaitchko's skill and strength were often tried to the utmost to prevent disaster. In this he was successful so far as his own canoe was concerned, but some of those who came behind were not equally fortunate.

After its confluence with the Peace, the Slave River became a magnificent stream nearly three-quarters of a mile wide, down which the canoes sped with delightful rapidity, the current being exceedingly swift, until they reached a group of islands separated by narrow channels, in passing through which the utmost care had to be exercised. Beyond these islands was a whirlpool, which seized the frail barques and tossed them to and fro like chips, causing Archie's heart to leap to his mouth more than once, when it seemed as if they must be

upset by the violence of the whirls. But in the end the persistent paddlers, aided by the mighty current, worked out their own deliverance, the whirlpool was passed unscathed, and they pitched their tents just beyond the seething waters, for the factor considered that his men deserved a good rest after their prolonged struggle.

But, unhappily, it was not in the order of things that they should have much of a rest that night, for hardly had they got the tents up before a terrible thunderstorm fell upon them, the rain poured down in torrents, and the violence of the wind made the river overflow its banks, completely flooding the site of the encampment. Nor was this all, for when the storm subsided the mosquitoes came in swarms that actually darkened the air, and their tormenting stings grew so unendurable that at last the whole party were compelled, after snatching a hasty supper, to return to their canoes, and seek refuge in flight down-stream.

Drifting and paddling all night, they passed the Reindeer Islands soon after sunrise, and a few hours later reached the mouth of the Dog River, where a halt was made in order to set the nets and try to catch some fish. The boys felt too weary to care about anything but sleep, and selecting a shady, sheltered spot under the trees, they lay down for a good nap, which they had without interruption.

Early in the afternoon, Mr. M'Kenzie wakened them with the pleasant announcement that dinner was ready, and they were then in excellent humour to do full justice to the delicious trout broiled to a turn by Akaitchko, the man of many accomplishments.

Dinner disposed of, they re-embarked, and essayed the intricacies of the Dog Rapid. Their canoe got through safely, and so did the next, but the last two, being allowed to approach too close, came into violent collision, with the result that the sternmost had its bow broken short off. Fortunately, the accident happened near the shore, and the disabled canoe was beached before it had time to sink. But the injury took two hours to repair, and no further progress could be made that evening.

Bright and early next morning they set off again, and paddled steadily until they reached the Cassette Portage, where they had to carry their canoes and their contents more than a quarter of a mile—and very hard work they found it. The boys, of course, could not be expected to shoulder one end of a canoe, or a ninety-pound pack, so their part was to carry the guns and ammunition, which gave them each a pretty fair load. They were as happy as a pair of larks at midday. This active, varied, adventurous mode of life was precisely according to their liking, and they enjoyed every moment of it.

After the Cassette Portage came a narrow channel full of troublesome rapids, through which the canoes danced in a way that would have been poor fun for a 'tender foot,' but which only tickled the boys' midriff pleasantly, causing them to shout in audacious glee as their barque darted hither and thither through the curling, foaming waves, under the unerring guidance of Akaitchko. To these rapids succeeded the Portage d'Embaras, a very short one, and then a little farther on the Little Rock Portage, in the course of which a curious accident happened to the second canoe. While it was being carried over the rough, rocky path, the bowman slipped upon a loose stone, and let his burden fall to the ground, with the result that it broke in two as promptly and perfectly as if it were a stick of candy.

'You there!' exclaimed Mr. M'Kenzie, when he saw the catastrophe. 'What on earth are you men about?'

The one who had stumbled picked himself up, and eyed the broken canoe ruefully.

'Him bad break, sartain. But,' with a sudden brightening of his countenance, 'not take long mend him.'

'Ah ha, you redskin rascal!' cried the factor in pretended anger; 'it's all well enough to talk that way, but you must take better care of my canoes. The next man that breaks one, I'll break his head, see if I don't.'

The process of repair took only a couple of hours. The sundered halves were skilfully sewn together, the join thickly covered with rosin, of which a supply was carried for the purpose, and then, the canoe being made quite as good as before, the journey was resumed.

The Mountain Portage was the next, and here they had to toil up the steep sides of a high hill, which they found very hard work, and by the time they got safely down the other side they were all so weary that the factor directed the tents to be pitched for the night, though it was still some hours to sundown. So splendid was the view from the summit of the mountain that the boys went back there after supper, and watched the sun sinking out of sight behind the western hills. At their feet the river broadened out to almost a mile in width, and they could follow its course for a long distance northward.

'See, Sautloulai, that's the way we'll go to-morrow. I wonder how many more of these tiresome portages we've still before us,' said Archie.

'Only two more, father says,' answered Sautloulai.

'Hurrah! that's good news,' cried Archie; 'for I'm just about sick of

portages.'

'So am I,' answered the Indian. 'It's too hard work for me. I'd rather run the rapids in the canoe than tote everything overland.'

'I don't see why we couldn't try some of them.'

'Try some of what?' inquired Mr. M'Kenzie, at that moment joining them.

'Why, try running some of these rapids instead of portaging,' explained Archie.

Mr. M'Kenzie did not answer at once, but pointing with his outstretched arm to where the river seemed to lose itself amidst a maze of pine-clad islands some miles away, he said—

'That is our last portage, Archie. There is only the Pelican Portage between. Do you know the name of it?'

'No, father,' replied Archie, 'I don't; but I'm very glad to know it is the last, for I've had all the portaging I want for some time.'

'Well, Archie, that's the Portage of the Drowned.'

'The Portage of the Drowned?' echoed Archie in a somewhat startled tone. 'What a doleful name! How did it come to be called that?'

The recollection was evidently a painful one for the factor, and he was silent for some minutes before replying. At last he said—

'Sit down here, laddie, and I'll tell you the story. It's just twenty years now since it happened. I was only a clerk then, like Mr. Stewart, and we were making a trip to the Slave Lake, just as we are doing now. There were three canoes, and I was in the head one. Keskarrah, the best guide in the country, was our pilot, and when we came to the rapids, he thought that the height of the river would make it safe to run them, instead of going overland. So he arranged for our canoe to go on ahead alone, and if we got through safely we would fire a gun as a signal for the others to follow. Off we started, and a right terrible time we had of it. The rapids were awful. They tossed us about as if our heavy canoe was but a feather. Not one of us expected to get through alive. Even Keskarrah looked frightened. But he was a wonderful hand at steering, and we all worked for dear life, and in the end his skill and our strength brought us safely to the bottom, and we put into the bank all of one mind, that no other canoe should run the same risk. Just as we landed, a duck rose up a few yards away, and one of our men, without stopping to think, picked up his gun and fired. The moment he did, he remembered about the signal, and alarmed at the possible consequences of his thoughtless act rushed off along—

shore at full speed to prevent the other canoes from starting. But he was too late to stop one of them. It was already well into the rapids, and it had no Keskarrah to pilot it through. Standing upon the bank, and utterly powerless to help, he had the agony of seeing the canoe dashed upon a rock, and all four men drowned in the dreadful rapids; and ever since then the place has been called the "Portage of the Drowned." ’

CHAPTER XIV

AT GREAT SLAVE LAKE

ARCHIE gave a shudder as Mr. M'Kenzie finished his explanation of how the Portage of the Drowned came by its ill-omened name.

'After hearing that, father, I'm no longer anxious to try running the rapids. If we did, perhaps there might be more than one Portage of the Drowned,' said he.

'There might indeed, Archie boy,' Mr. M'Kenzie replied; 'and the giving a new name to a rapid would be poor consolation for losing one's life, wouldn't it? But come along, we must be getting back to camp;' and they all descended the hill to where the tents were pitched.

The next day's canoeing was of a very uneventful character. The rocks and high land ceased at the last portage, and the river bank became low and composed of soft rich soil held together by the tangled roots of the trees and shrubs that crowned the summit. The stream spread out until it was a full mile in breadth, and the rushing current quieted down to a sluggish drift.

When the party reached the mouth of the Salt River, they turned aside and ascended that stream for twenty miles, until they arrived at the salt springs which change its sweet waters into brine. Mr. M'Kenzie wished to gather some of the salt that the heat of the summer had made ready by evaporation, and ordered a day's halt for the purpose.

This arrangement pleased the boys greatly. They did not object to being 'up Salt Creek' upon these conditions, for, the factor not needing them to help in gathering and packing the salt, they were free to go off for a day's hunting, which, whether they had any luck or not, would be a great treat after the restraint and toil of many days' canoeing. As soon as breakfast was despatched, therefore, they started out together, Mr. M'Kenzie calling after them in a bantering tone—

'Be sure and bring us back a buffalo at least, boys.'

Archie stopped and turned round. 'What will you give me if I do?' he asked, with a challenging smile.

‘What will I give you?’ laughed the factor. ‘Why, let me see. I’ll give you five pounds in good money as soon as we get back to the fort.’ He felt very safe in promising this, because bison were rarely known to venture so far north as that locality.

Archie’s eyes sparkled. Five pounds in good money, and a trip to Fort William promised for next summer, when he would have a fine chance to spend it royally. He caught Sautloulai by the arm.

‘Sautloulai, do you hear that? Five pounds! Just think of it. Oh, if we can only find a buffalo!’ he cried, fairly dancing with excitement.

But the Indian shook his head doubtfully. ‘Akaitchko says no buffalo about here. Told your father so last night.’

Archie’s heart sank. That, no doubt, was why Mr. M’Kenzie had made so lavish a promise. He knew he would never be called upon to redeem it. However, he would not let out he had no hopes, so, calling back gaily, ‘All right, father, I’ll get a buffalo for you if there’s one to be had,’ he wheeled about, and was soon lost to sight in the shrubbery that fringed the river bank.

‘Your father’s a splendid hunter, Sautloulai, and knows a great deal,’ said he, eager to persuade himself that the five pounds were not utterly unattainable; ‘but he might make a mistake, you know, and these plains certainly look as if there might be buffalo about.’

Sautloulai was not quite ready to admit that his father could make a mistake, yet at the same time he was in entire sympathy with his companion’s eagerness to secure the tempting prize, so his only reply was a very diplomatic ‘Ugh!’ which Archie understood to mean assent to his suggestion, and was content.

They tramped on for a couple of miles in a direction parallel to the course of the stream, it being their idea that whatever game, large or small, there might be, was more likely to be found near the water than anywhere else; and, moreover, there was no fear of their being lost so long as they kept the river in sight. Away westward, until bounded by a dim line of blue-tinted hills, stretched the plain, waving with dense grass turned brown by the summer heat. The sun rose high in a cloudless sky. The air was warm without being oppressive. A delicious breeze blew across from the hills; and the two boys, exulting in the possession of perfect health and more than ordinary vigour, and thoroughly equipped with guns, tomahawks, and hunting-knives, made up an effective picture as they pushed rapidly forward, keeping a keen lookout for something worth a charge of powder.

There were ducks paddling about in every little pond, and snipe and plover in plenty, but they resolutely passed them by. To fire might be to disturb some nobler game within sound of the gun, and, anyway, they could get all they wanted on the way back, and it was no use burdening themselves then. By and by they got thirsty, and turned to the river for a drink. Archie was a little ahead of the Indian, and as he made his way through the bushes he caught sight of something which caused him to throw himself flat upon his stomach and hold up his hand with a gesture for Sautloulai to do the same. The boy dropped at once, and then wriggled forward silently until he was beside the other.

Archie was quivering with intense excitement. His face was as pale as it could become, and, not trusting himself to speak, he pointed with trembling finger to the opposite bank of the river.

The moment Sautloulai looked, he too shared his companion's emotion, for, just entering the water, with the evident intention of crossing, was a noble bison, utterly unconscious of the presence of any danger! Unless alarmed, he would undoubtedly land right at their feet. He was all alone, a young bull driven from the herd to seek his own fortune, and bearing the marks of recent conflict. Without opening their lips, the boys looked into each other's eyes. Despite the opinion of old Akaitchko, then, there were bison still to be found on the Salt River plains, and the five pounds might yet be won.

Breathlessly they awaited the bison's approach. In a leisurely fashion he stepped into the water, too shallow to take him off his feet, and ploughed through it until he reached the other side. Then he drew himself out, and stood for a moment sniffing the breeze somewhat suspiciously.

'Now,' whispered Archie. The two guns made but a single report, and the two bullets went straight to their mark in the broad breast of the bull, thus suddenly awakened to his peril. With a tremendous bellow the giant creature lowered his head and charged furiously up the bank. The slope was slight, and in an instant he was at the top and looking around for his assailants. The boys had separated, one to the right, the other to the left, and were reloading their guns with feverish haste.

He caught sight of Sautloulai first, and with another bellow bore swiftly down upon him. The clever Indian waited until he almost touched him, and then, stepping coolly to one side, resumed ramming down the powder. By the time the bison had checked his mad onset and returned to the charge, Sautloulai's gun was ready, and this time, as he dodged, he discharged it into his side, a little below the shoulder. Mortally wounded, yet still able to do mischief, the infuriated animal, at this moment seeing Archie, who, having reloaded, had hastened to his companion's aid, made a fierce dash at him, and

the boy narrowly escaped his deadly horns. But a quick spring aside saved him, and the bison crashed into a clump of trees instead. In so doing he tripped and fell. Archie saw his opportunity, and seized it. Before the creature could regain his feet, another bullet had gained its way to his vitals. He strove gallantly to rise, but the weakness of death was upon him. He got as far as his knees, and remained there a few seconds, swaying from side to side, the blood pouring from his wounds and crimson foam dripping from his mouth. Then, with a pitiful sound, half-groan, half-roar, he fell over, a shudder ran through his mighty frame, and he was dead.



THE INFURIATED ANIMAL MADE A FIERCE DASH AT HIM.

[See page 190.]

‘Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!’ shouted Archie, as, grasping Sautloulai’s hand, he danced three times round the huge carcass. ‘What will father and Akaitchko say now? We’ve killed our buffalo in spite of them, and the five pounds are

ours. Ours, Sautloulai; *ours*, my hearty! and won't we have a fine time making them fly? Just wait till we get to Fort William.'

'Is Sautloulai to have some of the money?' asked the Indian shyly.

'Why, of course you are!' cried Archie. 'The buffalo is as much yours as mine. But come, let us run back to the camp, and tell them the good news.'

Leaving the guns beside the carcass, the boys set off at their best pace for the camp, and did not take long to reach it. The men were getting dinner ready when they arrived, and Archie burst in upon them, panting out—

'We've killed a buffalo—a great big one!'

'None of your tricks, you rogue,' said the factor, taking his son playfully by the ear. 'Are you in earnest?'

'Of course I am!' exclaimed Archie, 'Ask Sautloulai.'

Sautloulai was too much out of breath to say anything, but nodded his head vigorously, while a triumphant smile spread over his face. The questions then poured in thick and fast, and when the whole story was told, the men could hardly wait to eat their dinner, so impatient were they to see the bison for themselves.

Immediately after dinner the whole party took to their canoes, and paddled up the stream to where Archie pointed out the marks made by the bison in crossing, and led them straight to the scene of its death.

'Well done, my lads!' exclaimed Mr. M'Kenzie when he saw the great creature. 'A buffalo it is, and a fine one too. I'm afraid there's no way of my getting out of paying you the five pounds, Archie.'

'The money's Sautloulai's as well as mine, father,' spoke up Archie. 'I couldn't have killed the buffalo alone, you know.'

'As you say, laddie,' returned his father. 'It will be given to you in good time, and you can share it with Sautloulai in any way you like.'

There was great rejoicing over the bison. He proved to be in excellent condition, and the men soon had him cut up into convenient pieces, and stowed away in the canoes. Then, resuming their places, they made the air ring with their jolliest songs as they swept down the river.

In the course of the following afternoon they passed the point where the Slave River fell into the Great Slave Lake, and pushing right out into the lake, succeeded in reaching Moose-deer Island before the night set in. On the island stood a small post of the North-West Fur Company, and here they made a stay

of a few days to rest and refit. The boys' first business was, of course, to explore the island. They found it to be about three miles round, with a hill in the centre, rising several hundred feet in height, from the summit of which they had an outlook far and wide over the magnificent sheet of water below them.

'Isn't this grand?' exclaimed Archie, seating himself upon a flat rock, and gazing around with appreciative eyes.

Sautloulai, who had no care for the picturesque, and regarded a landscape entirely from the point of view of the hunter and trapper, had no other remark to make in reply than one of his guttural 'Ughs!' which Archie always translated in the way that suited him best.

'But oh, how lonely this place must be in winter!' continued Archie, 'It is tiresome enough at Fort Chipewyan, but it must be ever so much worse here;' and he gave a shiver as he pictured to himself the utter desolation of the scene. Then his thoughts turned from the view to a matter that had been much in his mind of late. 'Sautloulai,' he cried, with a suddenness that made the Indian start, 'I'm getting tired of the fort; I want to see other places. Not like these,' and he pointed contemptuously at the shabby little establishment below them, which hardly deserved the name of fort, 'but places where there are crowds of people, and fine big houses, and splendid shops, like Montreal. Father has often told me about them, and I'm longing to go and see them. Wouldn't you like to see them too?'

Sautloulai shook his head dubiously. He was a child of the prairie. The wonders of big cities had not much meaning for him. His ambition carried him no higher than the obtaining of a situation as hunter or canoeman at the fort, just like his father had, which would ensure him food and shelter the whole year round.

Archie hardly expected him to enter into his feelings, so he did not mind his silence, but went on—

'I'm so glad father has promised to take us to Fort William next summer. He's sure to keep his word, and if he gets that far, perhaps he'll take us right on to Montreal. Indeed, he must do it. Mother and Rose want to go as much as I do, and we'll join together and make him.'

Enjoying in sanguine expectation the vaguely conceived delights of such an expedition, Archie gave a ringing whoop, and rushed down the hillside at a reckless rate, Sautloulai following him much more cautiously, and having the opportunity for a sly laugh at his companion's expense, when, tripping over a hidden root, he took a brilliant header into a blueberry bush, and was glad to have help in getting out again. A good deal shaken up, and somewhat put out

by his tumble, Archie struck a more sober gait for the rest of the way to the fort, where the two arrived just in time for dinner.

There was nothing to be shot or trapped on the island, and Archie was very glad when the party once more launched the canoes, and set out for Fort Providence, another of the Fur Company's posts, situated on the mainland, two days' journey north-west from Moose-deer Island. They had a pretty rough passage thither, and were more than once compelled to run for shelter into the narrow channels between the innumerable islands that dotted the lake, so that they did not reach their destination until the morning of the third day.

At Fort Providence, then the farthest north of all the Fur Company's establishments, and a place of not much more importance than Moose-deer Island, a stay of several days was made, as Mr. M'Kenzie wished to have a powwow with the Copper Indians, in whose country they were, and messengers had been sent out to summon them to the fort immediately upon the arrival of the expedition. On the afternoon of the third day the Indians appeared, and the following morning a conference was held before the gate of the fort with all due solemnity. In order to make an imposing appearance, Mr. M'Kenzie and his men were arrayed in their very best clothes, and armed to the teeth with guns, pistols, tomahawks, and hunting-knives, which they ostentatiously laid aside as soon as they took their seats. The Indians likewise had on their bravest attire, and bore their best weapons, following the example of the pale-faces in putting the latter away before taking their places.

Archie was much disappointed in these new acquaintances. They were shorter, slighter, uglier, and dirtier than any Indians he had ever seen before. There was nothing interesting or impressive about them, and when, by way of opening the proceedings, they rose at the command of their chief and executed their tribal dance, it was with great difficulty that he could restrain himself from being guilty of the bad manners of laughing in their faces.

The dance was after this fashion. The men and women formed a ring together, the former holding a bone dagger between the fingers of the right hand, which they kept extended above the head, and in continual motion, while their left hand was worked backwards and forwards in a horizontal direction. The women let both arms hang motionless at their sides. Then all set to work to jump about, and throw themselves into various absurd postures, meantime keeping up a hideous wailing that passed for singing, and bringing their heels together at every pause in the music, as if they were having a high old time.

'Is that what they call dancing?' exclaimed Archie, with a curl of his lip. 'I wonder what they'd think of a Highland fling. What do you say, father; may we show them one?'

‘Certainly, Archie, if you want to,’ said the factor, smiling. ‘They’ll think all the more of us if we show them something new in the way of a dance. Who’ll dance it with you?’

‘Oh, Sautloulai will. He can dance as well as I can,’ replied Archie. ‘We had plenty of practice last winter.’

‘Go ahead, then, laddie. I’ll whistle for you,’ returned the factor; and amid the wondering expectation of the Indians the two boys took their places in the middle of the circle. The factor at once struck up a lively tune, whistling it with the strength and purity of a flute, and the young dancers started off to open the eyes of the aborigines.

Both the whistling and the dancing were entire novelties to the red men, and it was hard to say which they admired the most—the wonderful music which came so freely from the puckered lips of the big pale-face, or the intricate evolutions of the graceful boys, one of whom was evidently of their own kind. Their dull, dirty countenances lit up with smiles, they unconsciously kept time with head and hand to the rhythmic movements of the dancers, and altogether showed such unmistakable pleasure in the performance that Archie was fain to modify his first impressions, and admit that they were good for something after all, if it was only to appreciate his dancing.

The dance was followed by a smoke all round at the expense of the factor, and then by the speeches, which were, in brief, on the pale-faces’ part that they wanted more furs, and on the red men’s part that they wanted more goods; with the result that each promised to do the best they could for the other, Mr. M’Kenzie exacting the most solemn possible undertaking from the chief and his followers to have no dealings with the Hudson’s Bay people, but to bring all their peltries to the North-West Company’s posts.

Satisfied that his visit would have good effects, the factor distributed a lot of presents among the tribe, making the poor natives happy for the nonce; and soon after his party re-embarked in their canoes, and bidding good-bye to Fort Providence, to whose lonely little garrison their visit had been a rare gleam of pleasure in the dull monotony of their lives, set out gaily upon the journey back to Fort Chipewyan.

CHAPTER XV

‘THE PORTAGE OF THE DROWNED’

FOR the return journey Archie changed his seat, in order that he might be able to talk freely with his father. His head was full of the idea of being allowed to visit Montreal the following summer, and he was constantly bringing up the subject.

‘Well, Archie,’ said his father, ‘I’m sure I’d be very glad to take you to Montreal. For that matter, I’d like well enough to go there on my own account, but I really do not see my way clear to doing it. I’m afraid you’ll have to be satisfied with getting as far as Fort William.’

‘But, father,’ Archie urged, ‘just think how long it is since you’ve been there yourself. Surely the Company will give you a holiday after so many years’ steady service?’

‘The Company might very well do it, my lad; there’s no doubt about that. None of their factors have served them more faithfully than I have,’ answered Mr. M’Kenzie. ‘But these are troubled times, you know. I’m always looking for M’Dougal to be back at Wedderburne with a gang of ruffians from the Bay or the Red River, and it wouldn’t do for me to be away from Chipewyan in that case.’

‘But perhaps he won’t come back, father,’ urged Archie earnestly, ‘and then there’d be nothing to prevent your going, would there?’

‘Well, of course that would make a difference,’ admitted the factor. ‘I’d feel freer to go, for it’s not likely there’d be another of the same kind in his place, and Mr. Wentzel could look after the fort right enough for a while. And that reminds me, I hope we’ll find Wentzel back when we get to the fort. He’s full due now, and ought to be there before us.’

‘That dreadful Mr. M’Dougal!’ cried Archie in tones of intense aversion. ‘I hope he’ll never show his ugly face at Lake Athabasca again.’

‘I hope the same, with all my heart,’ said the factor. ‘But I misdoubt it. I’ve a kind of premonition that that man’s going to give us some trouble yet.’

‘Well, as sure as he does, father, I’ll make him suffer for it,’ burst out the

boy, his face flushing with passionate feeling.

‘Softly, laddie, softly,’ said Mr. M’Kenzie soothingly. ‘He played you a sorry trick, no doubt, in trying to have you carried off by the Quarrellers. But, remember, it is not ours to take vengeance. The good Book teaches better than that.’

‘Yes, I know it does, father,’ admitted Archie, very reluctantly. ‘But surely such wicked men deserve to be punished some way?’

‘Certainly, my boy, certainly they do, and they are. Sooner or later the punishment comes. But it is not for any of us to take upon ourselves to administer it.’

Archie was silent. He was ready enough to argue with his father, but he knew it was useless to attempt to argue against the Bible. And yet there burned within him, losing none of its strength through lapse of time, an intense desire to repay the factor of Fort Wedderburne for the evil he had sought to do him. The Indian passion for revenge was in his blood, tempered, it is true, very materially by the other elements of his nature and the excellence of his training, but there nevertheless; and as he contemplated the possibility of the man he hated inflicting a still further injury by preventing his father from going to Montreal, he felt that he was equal to doing anything to him, short of taking his life.

In the meantime, the party was making steady progress southward. As they were going up-stream, they could not, of course, advance quite as fast as on the down trip, but they paddled away all the more vigorously for that, and in due time came to Salt River, into which they turned again in order to replenish their supply of salt, having divided what they had got before between the Moose-deer Fort and Fort Providence. They also kept a sharp lookout for bison, and the boys tried hard to repeat their former success while the salt was being gathered, but not a horn, hump, or hoof was to be seen. The following morning they arrived at the foot of the ill-omened ‘Portage of the Drowned,’ the first of the series of rapids which would have to be overcome before the Salt River settled down to quiet ways again.

The arrangement was the same as before, the boys carrying the guns and ammunition, and the two men first taking up the canoe, and then making a second trip for its lading. When they reached the head of the rapid, Archie was delighted to find a fine flock of ducks floating quietly on the bosom of the river a couple of hundred yards from shore.

‘Hurrah! Here’s luck!’ he cried. ‘Sautloulai and I will bag some ducks for dinner while you’re bringing up the packs. Come along, Sautloulai; let’s

launch the canoe.'

'Be careful not to get into the current, Archie,' called out Mr. M'Kenzie. 'It's very strong at the head of the rapids.'

'All right, father; I'll look out for it,' answered Archie, paddling out from the bank, while his father and Akaitchko hastened off for the baggage.

Stealing gently over the still water, the canoe drew near the unsuspecting ducks. They had evidently never seen such a thing before, and perhaps mistook it for a floating log. But when, having got within range, Archie laid down his paddle and picked up his gun, the birds, startled by the movement, rose from the water, and fled away in the direction of the rapid.

The moment they did, Archie fired into their midst. It was a rather long-range shot, but his gun was a good one, and at least a part of its contents did their duty, for one duck fell at once, while another, after frantic endeavours to keep its balance, soon followed its example, although, having only a broken wing, it was able to continue its flight by swimming.

'Paddle, Sautloulai, paddle hard!' shouted Archie, forgetting everything in his eagerness to secure the ducks.

The dead one was soon picked up, and seizing the other paddle, Archie sent the canoe rippling through the water after the wounded bird. A dozen vigorous strokes brought it within reach, one well-directed blow of the paddle finished it, and having got it safely on board, the boys turned the canoe towards the shore.

To their surprise, they found that they could make no headway. They put all their strength into their strokes, but the canoe refused to respond. A stronger influence than they could exert was fighting against them. Soon they realised their peril. In their thoughtless haste to recover the ducks, they had ventured too near the rapid, and were now in its irresistible grasp.

'Sautloulai,' gasped Archie, his face whitening with terror, 'we're in the rapids!'

The Indian made no response, save to dig his paddle more desperately into the swirling water.

'It's no use,' cried Archie; 'we can't get back, we'll have to run them. Save your strength for that.'

The boy kept on paddling as if he did not hear him.

'Stop, I say!' shrieked Archie. 'You're only tiring yourself for nothing.'

Let's turn her round and run for it.'

As though in a dream, Sautloulai obeyed. He was dazed with fright, and Archie, seeing his condition, and realising that if they were to escape at all, he must think for both, sought to control his own feelings, and nerve himself for what was coming. Happily he had the bow of the canoe, and if Sautloulai would only obey his commands, they might yet survive the passage of the terrible 'Portage of the Drowned,' slight as the chances were.

'Now, Sautloulai,' shouted Archie, 'do just as I tell you, and don't be afraid.'

The frail barque was turned about, and at once sped away down-stream like an arrow. For a little distance the current ran smoothly, giving the boys time to brace themselves firmly in their places and prepare for their tremendous struggle with the relentless rapid. Only by some miracle could they escape the fate of those whose death had given the place its name, and yet that miracle might take place. Keskarrah had got through safely, was the thought that flashed into Archie's mind. Might they not do so too?

'Do just as I tell you, Sautloulai,' he shouted once more; and the Indian, who now seemed to have somewhat recovered his wits, straightened himself up, and answered with a steady—

'All right, Archie, I'll do my best.'

There was no chance for further words. The next moment they were amidst the wild turmoil of water, and the canoe swerved and plunged, and darted hither and thither, as the violent swirls and eddies caught it in their grasp for a moment, and then flung it away with reckless force. The whole volume of the river was here confined to a narrow channel running between high banks, and thickly studded with mighty boulders worn smooth by the ceaseless rush of water. Great as was the peril from the furious waves, these boulders were still more to be feared. Were the canoe but to touch one of them while flying on at so tremendous a speed, it would be crushed like an egg-shell.

Braced firmly in the bow, and holding his paddle before him as a pole with which to push the canoe away from the rocks, Archie brought every power of mind and body to bear upon his work. The task was one from which even Akaitchko, the best canoeman in Athabasca, would have shrunk, and well was it for the boy that his training in the management of the canoe had been so thorough, for one mistaken stroke, one wrong signal to Sautloulai, and their fate was sealed.

In the intensity of the struggle he forgot all his fear and nervousness. He

even felt a thrill of exultation when a boulder that threatened destruction was safely passed or a gaping whirlpool dexterously avoided. There was a wonderful exhilaration in the wild descent, and even when in the very midst of it the thought came to him—

‘If we only get through alive, what a fuss they will make over us!’

In the meantime, the two men upon the bank above had become aware of their sons’ peril. It was Akaitchko who first observed the canoe darting after them, and without a word he grasped the factor’s arm, and pointed down to the raging waters below.

‘Merciful heavens!’ exclaimed Mr. M’Kenzie, as an awful chill struck to his heart. ‘Our darling boys! Can we do nothing to save them?’

The old Indian shook his head despairingly. Indeed, no earthly power could have helped the boys then; and realising this, the factor, breathing a prayer at every step, rushed frantically along the bank, turning every moment to look at the canoe, while Akaitchko followed close behind. The inequalities of the ground would at intervals shut them out from sight of the canoe, and when it came into view again, still riding the billows bravely, the factor would gasp out a fervent ‘Thank God!’ and take fresh hope.

The rapid ended in a sharp drop, almost worthy to be called a fall, and after escaping in some marvellous manner all other perils of the passage, the canoe now came to this, the last, and the most appalling of all. Archie knew of its presence, and prepared for the worst. The canoe could not possibly pass it without upsetting. They must swim for their lives then.

‘Be ready to swim, Sautloulai,’ he cried, at the top of his voice.

The next moment the canoe shot far over the brink of the fall, and disappeared in the foam at its foot.

‘They’re gone!’ groaned Mr. M’Kenzie, catching sight of what had happened from the high bank above.

But hardly had he spoken before first one head and then another appeared. They were not lost yet. But neither were they saved. The canoe, flung violently over by the furious torrent, had dealt poor Archie a cruel blow upon the head, and rendered him insensible. Before striking out for the shore, Sautloulai looked around for his companion, and saw him as he rose for an instant, white and still. With quick intuition he realised what was the matter, and there came to him the noble thought to rescue his helpless friend or die with him. Though only a poor Indian boy, he had the hero spirit in him.

Regardless of the fact that, owing to the fearful strain of the passage of the rapids upon both his nervous and physical system, and the sudden plunge into the icy water, he himself had barely sufficient strength left to reach the land, Sautloulai fought his way to Archie's side, and catching him by the arm ere he sank again, put forth all his remaining energy in a supreme effort to make the shore.

But gallant as the effort was, it would have ended mournfully for both had not Mr. M'Kenzie and Akaitchko, reaching the foot of the rapid at the same moment, flung themselves instantly into the water, and with mighty strokes cloven their way to the struggling boys. They were just in time, and no more. Little Sautloulai's strength was not equal to his spirit. Even alone and unencumbered he would have had hard work to free himself from the current's grasp, but burdened with Archie he could do no more than keep afloat, and that only for a few minutes at best. Exhausted and despairing, he was giving up the struggle, when the voice of the factor, crying—

'Keep up, Sautloulai! keep up, my boy!' fell upon his ear, and a moment later a powerful hand seized him, while another relieved him of his senseless burden. Mr. M'Kenzie and his own father were beside him, and the next thing he knew they were all four safe upon the shore, and surrounded by the rest of the party, who had just returned from their first trip over the portage.

Archie, who had been only slightly stunned, soon recovered consciousness, and then great was the rejoicing over the boys' extraordinary escape, while the men vied with one another in showering praises upon Sautloulai for his heroism, much to the gratification of proud old Akaitchko. So soon as Archie was himself again, he looked about him at the circle of smiling faces, and then, turning to his father with a sly twinkle of the eye, said in a quiet tone—

'We'll have to give the place a new name, father; won't we?'

'How is that, Archie?' asked the factor, beaming on his son with unutterable affection.

'Why, instead of calling it "The Portage of the Drowned," it ought to be called "The Portage of the Boys that wouldn't drown." Don't you think so?'

The factor's answer was to throw his brawny arms about his boy, and give him a hug worthy of a black bear.

'It was a miracle, laddie, nothing but a miracle, for which we cannot be too thankful to a merciful Providence.'

The thrilling episode cost the party their morning, and Archie and Sautloulai their guns, for of course it was impossible to recover the latter. But

the canoe and paddles were regained uninjured, and in the afternoon the homeward journey was resumed. Nothing further of note occurred. Portage after portage was passed without trouble. By the middle of the third day the canoes were once more cleaving the waters of Lake Athabasca, and ere the evening darkness came their occupants were receiving warm welcomes from the dear ones eagerly awaiting their return at Fort Chipewyan.

The whole evening was given up to rejoicing and recounting the incidents of the trip, Mrs. M'Kenzie and Rose-Marie listening with bated breath and overflowing eyes as the factor told of the passage of the 'Portage of the Drowned.' When he had finished, Mrs. M'Kenzie strained Archie to her bosom, murmuring through her tears—

'My precious boy—my precious boy!' Then suddenly rising from her chair, she exclaimed—

'That darling Sautloulai! I must see him and thank him for myself. Archie, do run and bring him in!'

Off sped Archie, delighted at his errand, and presently returned holding by the hand the Indian boy, who hung his head and looked as sheepish as if he were about to receive reproof instead of praise. As soon as he entered the room, Mrs. M'Kenzie rushed up to him impulsively, and taking his tawny face in her hands, gave him a hearty kiss upon both cheeks, greatly increasing the poor lad's confusion while Rose-Marie made matters still worse for him by promptly imitating her mother's example.

'Donald, this dear boy must be well rewarded mustn't he?' said Mrs. M'Kenzie.

'He shall indeed, Virginia,' replied the factor. 'We can never fully repay what we owe him.'

As soon as he could, Sautloulai beat his retreat, the proudest and happiest little Indian in the North-West country.

After Archie and Rose-Marie had gone off to bed, the factor and his wife drew their chairs closer together by the crackling fire, and settled down for a good long talk. They made an effective picture as the firelight flashed upon their countenances, the factor's so square, strong, and shaggy, and Virginie's so smooth, plump, and placid, now that all cause for anxiety was gone, and her dear ones were safe at home again.

'I wonder what's delaying Wentzel,' said Mr. M'Kenzie. 'He ought to be back before this. I hope nothing has happened to him. It would be a bad business if we didn't get our year's supplies. We need almost everything.'

‘We haven’t heard a word from him,’ replied his wife. ‘I do hope he’s all right.’

‘If he isn’t, we’re all wrong, Virginie. Could the Hudson Bays have interfered with him, I wonder?’ and the factor knitted his brow perplexedly.

‘The Hudson Bays?’ cried Mrs. M’Kenzie. ‘Oh, Donald, I forgot to tell you!—Mr. M’Dougal’s back at Fort Wedderburne.’

With an exclamation of profound annoyance, the factor sprang to his feet and with heavy steps began pacing up and down the room.

‘M’Dougal back at Wedderburne? When did he come back?’ he asked, looking so disturbed that the placid expression gave place to one of tender anxiety on his wife’s pretty face as she answered—

‘I’m not just sure when. But he can’t be back long. Mr. Stewart told me about it only yesterday.’

‘I hoped we were done with him,’ growled the factor. ‘His presence here can mean nothing but mischief.’

Ever since M’Dougal had attempted to rob her of Archie Mrs. M’Kenzie had felt towards him the most intense aversion, but she did not quite understand why her husband should show so much concern.

‘But, Donald dear,’ said she softly, ‘you’re not afraid of the wretch doing us any harm, are you? Would he dare to?’

‘I don’t know, Virginie. I’ve a queer feeling about that man which I can’t explain. Something seems to tell me that he’s going to give us trouble yet. The cowardly cur!—to try to revenge himself upon a mere boy! I wish he’d never set foot here again.’

While they were talking, Archie came into the room half undressed. He had overheard his father’s excited tones, and was curious to learn the cause. As he appeared with an inquiring look upon his face, Mr. M’Kenzie, not waiting to be questioned, said meaningly—

‘Archie, M’Dougal’s back. I’m afraid you’ve a poor chance of getting to Montreal, or even to Fort William, now, for I can’t leave the villain unwatched.’

CHAPTER XVI

ARCHIE TO THE RESCUE

AT his father's words Archie's face flamed with sudden anger. Was the man, whom he with so good reason looked upon as most hateful of human kind, to cheat him of the joys on which his heart was set? So furious was his indignation that for a moment he could not find words to express it. Then, with clenched fists and flashing eyes, he cried—

‘Mr. M'Dougal shall not prevent us going to Fort William, father, or to Montreal either. We will go in spite of him.’

Mr. M'Kenzie smiled bitterly.

‘It is easier to say that than to carry it out, laddie. My duty to the Company will not suffer me to desert my post when I'm most needed, you know.’

Archie had nothing just ready to say to this, but, throwing himself into a chair, he gazed at the fire intently, as though he might find there some solution of the puzzling problem. They talked for another hour without finding matters growing any clearer, and then separated for the night, Archie returning to his room very heavy at heart.

The next morning the factor made inquiry about Mr. M'Dougal, and ascertained that he had brought back with him an increased staff of employees, with a great supply of goods, and evidently intended to enter into competition, as vigorous as it would be unscrupulous, with his rival at Chipewyan. What the factor did not learn, because only those at Fort Wedderburne knew it, was that the strife between the two companies had reached a crisis. Strategy and artifice had given place to brute force, one bloody encounter had followed fast upon another, until at last the contest had culminated in a battle royal that very summer before the gates of the Hudson Bay's chief fort at Red River, in which Governor Semple, three of his officers, and seventeen of his men had fallen victims to the bullets of the Nor'-Westers. Thenceforward the cry was, ‘War to the knife!’ and Miles M'Dougal had come back to his post accompanied by a score of the most desperate characters in the employ of his Company, and determined to deal the Nor'-Westers a blow at Lake Athabasca that they would not recover from for many a day.

There never had been any actual conflict between the two forts, and coarse and brutal as he was, he shrank from beginning hostilities in cold blood. Moreover, he had his doubts as to the result of a trial of strength with his sturdy, lion-hearted rival. A less dangerous, yet no less effective, method of attaining his object presented itself to his crafty brain, and without delay—for the autumn was well-nigh gone, and his scheme must be executed before winter came—he proceeded to carry it out.

Mr. M'Kenzie had been back for two days, during which he had seen nothing of the Fort Wedderburne people, when in the evening, while he was enjoying his after-supper pipe before the fire, a messenger from there asked to see him. A good deal surprised at this announcement, he ordered the man to be sent in to him. He proved to be one of the new staff, a keen, hard-faced man, with an easy, plausible manner. He at once made known the reason of his errand. Mr. M'Dougal had been taken suddenly ill, and was in great suffering. None of those at his post knew anything about applying remedies, and Mr. M'Kenzie's reputation as a 'medicine man' being founded upon many successful cures by the aid of a well-furnished medicine-chest, his rival, feeling his life to be in danger, had sent over for him, hoping that in Christian charity he would not refuse to do what he could to give him relief.

Mr. M'Kenzie was completely taken off his guard. No resentment for past injuries or apprehension of present treachery was present in his mind as, rising promptly from his comfortable seat, he said—

'Certainly I'll come. The man mustn't die, if I can help him.'

While he was buttoning on his coat, his wife, coming up to him, whispered —

'Why should you go to him, Donald? He would never give you aid.'

'Hush, Virginia!' he answered softly. 'Does not the Bible say, "Love your enemies"? I'm doing no more than I would expect another to do for me.'

Meantime, the messenger was watching him with such a look of crafty triumph that, had the factor only caught it, he might have hesitated before putting himself in his rival's power. But he suspected nothing, and filling his pockets with different remedies, he kissed his wife, saying, 'Don't worry if I'm not back soon. Perhaps I'll have to stay all night with him if he's very ill,' and went out with the man, whose evil face bore a leer of satisfaction at these parting words.

As they walked over to Fort Wedderburne Mr. M'Kenzie asked many questions concerning the sick man; but his companion seemed to know very

little about the matter, except that Mr. M'Dougal had sent him with the message, and was anxiously awaiting his return.

All was quiet at the fort when he arrived, and he was conducted at once to the sufferer's room. He found him in bed, tossing about and groaning, apparently in intense agony. Seating himself upon a chair placed conveniently at the bedside, he began to ask M'Dougal some questions as to his trouble. That moment a strong rope was flung around him from behind. Without uttering a word, four powerful men seized him in their grip, and giant though he was, so swift, so unexpected was the attack that, before he could make any effectual resistance, he was bound hand and foot and lying on the floor as helpless as a baby; while the scoundrel whom he had so kindly come to help, leaping from his bed, all pretence of suffering thrown away, stood over him, his repulsive countenance lit up with a grin of diabolical triumph as he shouted—

‘Who's the sick man now? Ah, I've got you tight and fast, and I'm going to send you on a pleasant little trip to Fort York for the good of your health. What do you say to that?’

Dumbfounded at the man's abominable treachery, Mr. M'Kenzie lay silent, and tried to take in the full purport of his words. What did he mean by sending him to Fort York, a thousand miles and more away, on the bleak shores of Hudson's Bay? As if in response to the bewildered look on the factor's face, M'Dougal continued—

‘You don't seem to understand me. Well, I'll make it plain enough. The Hudson Bays have put up with you Nor'-Westers altogether too long. If we'd taken you in hand twenty years ago, we'd have been saved a sight of trouble. But we're going to rid ourselves of you now; we're going to clear the country of you, and my orders are to send you a prisoner to York, and to leave not a stick of Fort Chipewyan standing.’

Losing all thought of himself in the anxiety for his family these startling words aroused, Mr. M'Kenzie moaned, ‘My poor wife and children!’

‘Oh, you needn't worry about them,’ sneered M'Dougal, catching what he said. ‘I've no quarrel with the women and children. They can stay there all the winter, but I'll give them notice to quit in the spring.’

And now did Mr. M'Kenzie's superb self-control stand him in good stead. M'Dougal had expected that he would storm and rage until exhausted, which would be fine fun for himself and his rascally accomplices. But, much to his disappointment, the factor did nothing of the kind. He thoroughly understood that it would not only be utterly useless, but would expose him to the jeers and

taunts of his captors. So he held his peace, while they marvelled at his composure.

Presently, addressing M'Dougal, he asked, in tones of quiet dignity—

‘When do you intend to start with me for York?’

‘Right off,’ replied M'Dougal roughly. ‘The men are getting ready now.’

The factor could not repress a shudder at the idea of being thus ruthlessly snatched away from the dear ones whose hearts would be torn with anxiety concerning him.

‘Is it any use asking a favour of you?’ he inquired, without a trace of anger in his voice.

‘I can’t say,’ answered the other. ‘That depends upon what it is.’

‘Will you let my family know what’s become of me?’

‘Humph! let me see. Well, I might send them back word after we’re safe on the other side of the lake,’ said M'Dougal grudgingly.

‘I shall be grateful if you will. It will relieve their minds a little,’ said the factor, sighing heavily as he thought how slight the relief would be; still, it would be better than the harrowing uncertainty of entire ignorance.

A moment later, one of the employees came in and announced that everything was ready.

‘Here you are, then,’ said M'Dougal. ‘Just pick him up and carry him down to the shore.’

Four of the men, lifting Mr. M'Kenzie to their shoulders, bore him out into the night and down to the shore of the lake, where two canoes and a number of men were in waiting. The helpless captive was deposited in the bottom of the largest canoe, a buffalo skin thrown over him for warmth; and presently the canoes, each having a crew of four, set out across the lake, steering due south by the aid of the stars, which sparkled brightly through the still, clear atmosphere.

Harassed by the keenest anxiety, and suffering much discomfort from his bonds, Mr. M'Kenzie, enduring his misery in heroic silence, looked up at the pitying stars and prayed fervently for deliverance. He had no fear of actual violence, so long as he quietly submitted. M'Dougal was no doubt acting under some pretence of legal authority, and the worst that could happen to himself would probably be his being sent across to England in one of the Hudson’s Bay ships, and then turned adrift to seek redress as he might,

friendless and penniless.

It was the wife and children whom he loved better than his own life that occupied his thoughts to the exclusion of all else. What was to become of them in the long space of time that must intervene ere he could by any possibility regain them, if M'Dougal carried his nefarious scheme to completion? Where could they go if driven from Fort Chipewyan in the spring? There was but one ray of light upon this dark prospect. Wentzel might be able to protect them and restore them to him at last. But where was Wentzel? What caused his strange delay?

In perfect silence, save for the soft splash of the paddles and an occasional question as to their course from M'Dougal, who was in the stern, to the Indian pilot in the bow, the party glided through the night hour after hour, until at length the dark line of the southern shore loomed dimly ahead, and presently the canoe touched the beach not far from the place where the Athabasca River enters into the lake. Not caring to attempt the navigation of the river, which was beset with shallows and sandbanks, in the darkness, M'Dougal called a halt until daylight. So the canoes were drawn up, a fire lighted, and the men hastened to catch a wink of sleep. Much to Mr. M'Kenzie's relief, the ropes were removed, and in their stead his hands were tied together in front, and his feet fastened so that he could take short steps, but could not possibly run. In fact, he was hobbled in precisely the same way as a horse. Sitting down before the fire, he waited for the dawn, plunged in distressing thought.

As soon as day broke, the journey was resumed. But, before the party started, Mr. M'Kenzie reminded M'Dougal of his promise to send word to Fort Chipewyan.

'Oh, that's all right!' said M'Dougal carelessly. 'I left directions at the fort for a man to go over and tell your folks in the course of the morning. You needn't worry yourself.'

And with this the poor prisoner had perforce to be content, although it was very different from what his self-constituted captor had promised. As fast as their strong, skilful crews could paddle them, the canoes advanced up the Athabasca, while the factor tortured his brain with endeavours to hit upon some feasible scheme of escape.

In the meantime, how had matters been faring at Fort Chipewyan? It was with an inexplicable feeling of apprehension that Mrs. M'Kenzie saw her husband go out. No sooner had he disappeared than she reproached herself for not detaining him, and although he had told her he might be away all night, she felt so uneasy that she determined not to go to bed until he returned. So all

night long she sat by the fire, or paced up and down the room, a prey to the keenest anxiety. When dawn came without her husband, she could bear the suspense no longer, and rousing Archie, she bade him dress as quickly as possible, and run over to inquire why Mr. M'Kenzie did not return.

Somewhat alarmed by his mother's evident concern, although the good woman did her best to conceal it, Archie obeyed promptly. But when he reached the fort, he found the gates shut fast, and, knock and shout as he might, not an answer could he evoke, so that, after spending half an hour fruitlessly in the cold, he was compelled to return no wiser than he went. And all the time, the crafty rascal who had decoyed his father into the trap was peeping through a loophole in the palisade, and laughing gleefully at his vain endeavours.

A little later, Archie, now thoroughly alarmed, came back. This time he was admitted, and, after being badgered with inconsequent replies until about desperate, he was at length told the truth. He could not fully take it in at first, but when he bore the news back to his mother, her passionate distress helped him to grasp the seriousness, not only of his father's situation, but of their own likewise. At once he realised that he was face to face with a crisis which called for his utmost power. As in the fairy stories, at the touch of the magician's wand the tree turned into human beings, so, at the touch of a trouble transcending all previous experience, the light-hearted, care-free boy was transformed into an anxious, determined man, with but one thought, the rescue of his father from the clutches of the scoundrels who had so foully entrapped him.

With a strange sense of having in some way suddenly become older than his mother, he sought to stay her wild grief, and comfort her.

'Mother dearest,' said he tenderly, 'don't be so terribly distressed. We will go after the ruffians and take father from them.'

Mrs. M'Kenzie checked her sobs and gazed eagerly into her son's face.

'Oh, Archie darling, will you? Oh, hurry, hurry, hurry before they get too far! But no, Archie, you mustn't go. I can't let you go. They may take you too, and then I'll lose both my husband and my son.' And the poor woman gave way to another outburst of passionate weeping.

'Not a bit of it, mother,' answered Archie stoutly. 'Once I catch up to them, I'll soon let them know what they've got to do. No fear of them getting hold of me.' And bidding her try to compose herself, he hastened out to make ready for the pursuit.

To his amazement and anger, he found himself opposed at the very outset by the man to whom he naturally looked for the most help. This was MacGillivray, the junior clerk, the only one of the officials left at the fort, Stewart having gone off with a couple of Indians for a few days' deer-hunting the day after Mr. M'Kenzie's return; a circumstance, by the way, not unknown at Fort Wedderburne, whose spies had kept close watch over the rival establishment.

MacGillivray scouted the idea of following after M'Dougal. It would be impossible to overtake the party, and even if they did, they would only be putting themselves in the way of their bullets. No, indeed; he was not going to be a party to any such folly as that.

Disgusted and enraged at the man's canny cowardice, Archie rushed off to Akaitchko's lodge, and, as he expected, found the old man smoking his morning pipe. Breathlessly he told his story, and very different was its reception. The moment he took in the boy's meaning, the grand old Indian became the incarnation of avenging wrath. There was not a drop of blood in his heart that he was not ready to shed for his friend and benefactor of so many years. No better ally could Archie have desired. Hurrying through the fort, they gathered the men together, and explained to them what had happened, and what they proposed to do. At first there was some demur, and MacGillivray, secretly ashamed of his own cowardice, sought to cover it by persuading the others to agree with him. But no sooner had he spoken than Archie rushed furiously at him, and, catching him by the throat, cried—

'Say another word, and I'll strangle you!'

MacGillivray flung him off and slunk away, for his eyes at that same moment caught Akaitchko's, and there was a look in the Indian's that sent a shiver to his craven heart.

Then Archie appealed to the men again, with pleading, passionate words, while Akaitchko supported him with gestures of infectious sympathy. Such intensity of feeling was irresistible. The fire went from heart to heart. Fear, prudence, indolence melted away like ice before it, and in a few minutes every man in the crowd was ready to start at once.

There were twenty men, all told, at the fort. Of these, Archie selected the twelve who were most skilful with the paddle and gun. Then all set to work with a will to make ready. Arms, ammunition, buffalo robes, and provisions were gathered together. In a sore strait betwixt fear lest Archie also should be taken from her, and hope that he might be able to rescue his father, Mrs. M'Kenzie looked helplessly on, while Rose-Marie bustled about, aiding her

brother to the best of her ability.

Within two hours after his return from Fort Wedderburne Archie marshalled his little force, and taking the three best canoes in the fort, they hastened to the lake. No time was lost in launching and getting off, and, once afloat, the paddlers put all their strength into their work, as they sent their light craft skimming over the water, now rippled by a faint morning breeze.

Standing at the gate of Fort Wedderburne, and watching these proceedings, was the man who had been sent for Mr. M'Kenzie, an expression of mingled surprise and concern marking his unprepossessing face. Giving vent to a volley of oaths, he exclaimed—

‘Ho! ho! is that what they’re about? Going to try and run M'Dougal down. There’ll be bad work if they do. But who can be at their head? Wentzel and Stewart away, and MacGillivray afraid of his own shadow, according to all accounts! Surely it can’t be the young cub? Though he’s a chip off the old block, they say.’

And back into the fort he went, to question some of the others, while the three canoes grew smaller and smaller in the distance, until at last they disappeared altogether, the pursuit that M'Dougal thought out of the question being well begun notwithstanding.

CHAPTER XVII

THE END OF MILES M'DOUGAL

THE sun had reached its zenith ere the pursuing party touched the farther border of the lake, and one of the first things which caught the keen eye of Akaitchko as he leapt ashore was the little heap of grey ashes which told of a fire not many hours extinguished.

'Ah ha!' he exclaimed, darting forward and taking up some of the ashes in his hands; 'we not far behind 'em. This their fire. Made last night. They go way one—two—three—four—five—six hours. We catch 'em bimeby, certain sure;' and there came a look of fierce joy into the old man's face that boded ill for 'em' when they should be caught.

He had an account to settle with the factor of Fort Wedderburne. That cruel stripe upon Sautloulai's shoulder had cut even deeper into the father's heart, and the memory of it was as fresh as though it had been inflicted yesterday. With no partial retort would he be content. Although he kept it to himself, it was his purpose full and fixed to put it out of M'Dougal's power ever to injure Mr. M'Kenzie or himself again.

Archie was greatly cheered by the evidence that his father's captors were not many hours ahead, and his men shared in his hopeful spirit.

'They can't go as fast as we can,' said he to them. 'We've got the best canoes on the lake, and we're bound to overtake them before long, and then they'd better look out for themselves.'

And his eyes flashed as he felt within him the same spirit of determination that possessed Akaitchko.

All through the afternoon they paddled steadily. Akaitchko, in the bow of the leading canoe, steering a course that cleverly avoided the full force of the current, and took advantage of every eddy and backwater. Although the river ran swiftly on towards the lake, there were no portages to pass, as the banks were low and the depth of water sufficient for much larger craft than canoes. A careful lookout was maintained, lest M'Dougal might have been stopped by some accident, and they should come too suddenly upon him. Indeed, the greater part of the time one of the men ran along the bank in advance of the

canoes, and made sure that the coast was clear.

Up to midday the weather was fine, but during the afternoon the clouds gathered ominously, and the wind blew from the east with a threatening chill in its breath. Akaitchko did not like the look of things.

‘Ugh!’ he grunted, giving his shoulder an expressive shrug; ‘storm coming. Bad for us. Make hard work. But never mind. Not stop us, certain sure.’

The rain began to fall before dark, and it was only after much difficulty that they succeeded in lighting a fire, which soon sputtered out again. Then, without any other protection than that afforded by the trees, the tired men curled up in their buffalo robes to try and forget their discomforts in sleep.

The next day was dreary beyond description. The rain fell without cessation from dawn until dark. The wind blew in fitful gusts, sometimes dashing the drops violently into the paddlers’ faces, and sometimes dropping almost to a calm. Everybody got wet to the skin, and the utmost care had to be taken to prevent the ammunition and provisions from being ruined by the water that was everywhere. One after another of the men began to lose spirit, and their paddling lacked that spring and vigour which had marked it the day before. When they stopped in the middle of the day to rest and appease their hunger by gnawing at the cold dried meat (for to light a fire seemed out of the question), there were some that grumbled a little, taking good care, however, that Archie did not overhear them, for they knew well enough what answer he would make.

During the afternoon, as the pitiless rain came pelting coldly down, making it necessary to land more than once in order to empty the canoes, the men became still more discouraged, and by nightfall there was not one of them that would not have eagerly jumped at the suggestion to give up the pursuit and return to Fort Chipewyan. This state of feeling was not altogether due to the depressing effect of the weather. After the first flush of enthusiasm had passed, and the contagion of Archie’s fervour spent itself, they naturally began to turn over in their minds the probabilities of their mission.

They had no definite knowledge of the number of M’Dougal’s party. So far as they could judge, it was no larger than their own. But of this they were not certain. Then they well knew him to be a brutal, reckless character, who would have no scruples about shedding blood if driven into a corner; and although they were all brave enough as hunters of wild beasts, they had never acted as hunters of men before, and, with the exception of Akaitchko, they shrank from the idea of a hand-to-hand struggle. Finally, they felt the absence of their accustomed leader, Mr. M’Kenzie. Had he been present to cheer them by his

genial smile, to inspire them with his own serene courage, to set them an example of exhaustless resources and un murmuring patience, none of the influences indicated would have had much weight with them. But instead of the father they had only the son, a mere youth after all; and however fully they might sympathise with his passionate impatience to rescue his father, and admire his wonderful endurance and quenchless ardour, they could not help feeling the lack of a stronger hand and a wiser brain to control and direct them.

Akaiitchko's penetrating glance soon took in the situation of affairs, and at the first opportunity he drew Archie aside to make it known to him. Archie was at first disposed to be incredulous. He thought perhaps the Indian was a little officious, or anxious to make himself out the only faithful one. Then, as he looked more closely into the earnest, honest face, he felt ashamed of himself for entertaining such a suspicion, and grew so indignant with the men that he wanted to call them together at once and give vent to his feelings. But the shrewd old man restrained him.

'No, no,' said he, shaking his head decidedly, 'you not speak first. You not see anything. Just go right on. Bimeby they speak to you. Den you speak to 'em, and that better.'

Perceiving the wisdom of this suggestion, Archie gave no hint of knowing his men's feelings, although he found it no easy task to conceal the anxiety as to them which was now added to his worry concerning his father. But when the following day broke upon the same dreary, distressing state of things, he found it hard to resist saying something to them as they made preparations for the start in a very slow, dispirited manner. They clearly had no longer any heart in the matter, although happily they were not yet ready to give open expression to their feelings. But there was a sad falling off in their rate of progress, and Archie fretted and fumed as the canoes pushed their way all too slowly against the stream, already much swollen by the heavy rain.

In the meantime, M'Dougal and his party had been actually increasing the distance between themselves and their pursuers. The case was very different with them. They had a double reason for keeping up the highest possible speed. They desired to get altogether out of reach of pursuit, and they were anxious to reach Lake La Crosse before the frost should come and compel them to abandon their canoes and take to travelling on foot. Mr. M'Kenzie gave them no trouble whatever. He was unarmed and pinioned. They were well armed and unfettered. He could gain nothing by attempting to break away. His only chance was to try and lull them into carelessness by seeming to be resigned to his fate. He maintained a dignified silence save when directly addressed, and then replied with grave courtesy. He made no effort at

conciliating any of his abductors. If he did succeed in effecting his escape, it would not be by persuading one of them to betray his trust. Two sources of hope cheered him in his trying situation; one was that pursuit would be made from the fort, the other that Mr. Wentzel might be met, and M'Dougal compelled to surrender his prisoner. They must encounter him if he were on his way back to Athabasca, and any hour might bring him into sight, although no doubt M'Dougal would do his best to avoid him.

So intensely was his mind occupied with thoughts of escape or rescue that the added discomfort of the rain made little impression upon him. M'Dougal swore at it with his accustomed vehemence, and the other men grumbled, but the factor held his peace. In his far-seeing sagacity he recognised in the rain a friend rather than a foe. For so weary and uncomfortable did the men feel by nightfall, that the task of keeping guard had its difficulties greatly enhanced, and the chances of the sentry for the time being relaxing his vigilance and indulging in a nap were thereby so much increased.

The third day came, and with it the rain, now showing signs of sleet. The men of Archie's party could stand it no longer, and when he gave orders to start, they all hung back, and finally one of them, Jean Baptiste Cadotte, a bright, good-tempered half-breed, and next to Akaitchko the best man in the party, plucked up courage to speak for his companions and himself.

'Archie,' he said, respectfully enough, 'we want to go back. We no catch up to Mr. M'Dougal. He go quicker than we. No use to follow any farther.'

Archie felt that the crisis had come, and that everything depended on what he should say and how he said it. Akaitchko stood near, scowling ferociously, and seeming quite ready to slay Cadotte on the spot. But Archie was too shrewd to think of trying threats. He was completely in the hands of the men. He must appeal to their sympathies, not to their fears.

And so, with the tears standing in his eyes, he pleaded with them not to turn back. He reminded them of all his father's kindness, of the fair and liberal way he had always dealt with his employees, of his unwavering goodness to the Indians. He assured them that his mother's heart would break if they returned without the factor; and wound up by declaring that if they would not go on, Akaitchko and he would, in the desperate hope of being able to rescue Mr. M'Kenzie somehow, for give up the pursuit they would not.

The men listened with kindling glances. Their hearts were touched as at the first. They could not be callous to such an appeal. And then, just as he finished speaking, as though the heavens would respond to his passionate words, the sleet suddenly ceased, the wind began to veer round to the south, and a rift in

the western clouds appeared which gave promise of a speedy clear-up.

Akaitchko, quivering with excitement, exclaimed, 'Look—look! rain all gone!' and pointed to the harbinger of finer weather.

'Hurrah!' cried Archie exultantly; 'it's going to clear up. No turning back now. Come, fellows, let's make up for lost time.'

The last trace of opposition disappeared before his impetuous urging. Like one man the hardy *voyageurs* sprang to their work. The dark look left Akaitchko's face, and in a wonderfully short space of time the canoes were afloat, and cutting through the water at a rate that made Archie's heart glad.

By midday they reached the place where the Washa Cumow or Clearwater and La Biche rivers unite to form the Athabasca or Elk River, up which they had been making their way, and without hesitation Akaitchko turned into the Clearwater, for M'Dougal was certain to have taken that route, as it led most directly to Lake La Crosse. So excellent had been their progress that they might expect to make the Cascade Portage before dark, and there they ought to find some trace of the men they were pursuing.

The Clearwater was a very different stream from the Athabasca. Its course lay in a valley between hills rising to the height of a thousand feet. Its current ran deep and swift, and both pole and paddle had to be used to make headway against it. But the day was bright and cold, and the men worked with a will, having promised Archie that they would not say another word about turning back until they got to Methye Lake at all events, and in the meantime would do their level best to overtake M'Dougal.

By dint of persistent effort Cascade Portage was gained an hour before dark, and leaping eagerly ashore, Akaitchko hunted about for traces of the Hudson Bays. He had not long to look. The marks of moccasined feet were plainly to be seen in the soft sand of the landing, and having examined them carefully, the old Indian gave an exulting grunt, and announced with smiling face that the trail was but a few hours old, and that in view of the difficulties of the course M'Dougal could not be many miles ahead, for the rest of the way to Methye Lake was a succession of portages—Pine Portage, White Mud Portage, and others—over which progress must be exceedingly slow.

While he was explaining this, an idea came to Archie that made his heart leap within him. Why could they not leave their canoes and proceed on foot? They would get ahead twice as fast, and, moreover, could keep on all night instead of having to stop as soon as it was dark. If the Hudson Bays were only a few hours ahead, they could not fail to overtake them.

The moment he broached the scheme, Akaitchko endorsed it warmly, and the other men, weary of canoeing, and glad to escape the additional labour of portaging, joined in heartily.

‘Oh, you splendid fellows!’ exclaimed Archie, tears of joy and gratitude brimming his eyes, as he beamed upon his supporters. ‘Won’t my father be proud of you when I tell him how brave and good you’ve been? Come along, then; let’s get as far as we can before dark, and then we’ll take a rest, and start again when the moon rises.’

With great alacrity the men put the canoes in a safe place, made up a good supply of ammunition and provisions, and falling into Indian file, with Akaitchko at their head, set off along the portage path, feeling ready for M’Dougal or anybody else on equal terms. They kept up a rapid walk until nightfall, when they halted for a brief rest and a bite of supper. A good fire was made, plenty of meat broiled before it, big bumpers of hot tea absorbed, and then the pipes were lit, and they gave themselves up for a spell of well-earned repose. By the end of a couple of hours they were well rested, and in the best of spirits. Archie was not afraid to ask anything of them now.

It was about seven o’clock when the moon, peeping over the edge of the western range, gave the signal to start. Each man saw to it that his gun was duly loaded and capped, that his powder-horn hung ready to hand, that knife and hatchet were in their place, and tightening up their belts and pulling their caps down firmly on their heads, they took their places in line behind the old Indian, and resumed their rapid walk. Unless their leader had miscalculated, they should come upon the Hudson’s Bay camp before midnight, and then——

Hardly a word did they speak as they pushed their way onward, up-hill and down-hill, through dense underbrush and over lichen-covered boulders, slipping and stumbling often where the shadows were black, splashing into hidden pools of icy water left by the recent rain, but heeding no discomfort or obstacle, as, keeping the river on their right, they followed its crooked, troubled course.

Wherever he got the opportunity Akaitchko took a long look ahead, in hopes of discovering M’Dougal’s camp-fire; and at length, after they had been tramping for full four hours, he caught a flash of firelight from a hollow not more than a mile away.

‘Ugh!’ he grunted triumphantly; ‘me see ’em. Right near. Catch ’em soon.’

‘Where? Where?’ exclaimed Archie, all in a tremble. ‘Show me, quick!’

Akaitchko pointed with his forefinger to where the darkness was broken by

fitful flashes that told of an expiring fire.

‘There they are, certain sure.’

One look was enough for Archie. Clutching the Indian’s arm, he cried—

‘Hurry! hurry! Let’s go to them at once.’

But Akaitchko did not move.

‘No, no, Archie. Mustn’t hurry. Must be very careful now.’

As the men gathered eagerly about, he gave directions for the order of attack. Keeping close together, they should steal quietly up to within fifty yards of the camp, and then spread out so as to surround it.

With beating hearts and throbbing pulses the little band of thirteen crept stealthily through the woods towards the unsuspecting objects of their pursuit. They were all expert in stalking, and knew how to move as silently as lynxes, so that the keenest ear could not have detected them at a distance of a few yards. Never in his life had Archie felt such intense excitement. His breath came short and quick. Every nerve and muscle in his body seemed to be tingling and quivering. It was well for him that he came next to Akaitchko, and had the example of the old Indian’s stolid composure to restrain his wild impatience.

Yard by yard the thirteen silent figures stole like ghosts upon their prey. Each man held his gun in hand with finger upon trigger. There would be no sparing of bullets, if the Hudson Bays should fight. Even Archie felt no misgivings or qualms of conscience. His wonted tenderness of heart had been submerged beneath an overmastering sense of unprovoked injury and cruel wrong that swept everything before it. There was little difference between his mood and Akaitchko’s now.

At length the camp came into full view. M’Dougal had halted beside White Mud Portage, and his tired men had lain down for a good long rest, he himself having taken the first watch. But he was no less weary than they, and, moreover, he had rapidly been making his way during the past two days to the bottom of a keg of spirits, and drunk himself into a muddled, boozy condition, which made him a poor sentinel. His prisoner, on the other hand, was wide awake, sitting with his back against a tree-trunk, and gazing thoughtfully into the flickering fire. When Archie’s eyes first fell upon him, it was only by an heroic effort that he restrained the impulse to rush forward and cut the thongs that bound him. But Akaitchko, as though divining his thoughts, turned round with a warning gesture, and the boy became motionless again. Then they waited for what seemed to him interminable minutes, while the rest of the

party encircled the unconscious sleepers and their precious prisoner.

Presently a peculiar note like the distant hoot of an owl broke the stillness. It came from directly behind Mr. M'Kenzie, and was repeated on either side of him. He looked up with eager, inquiring face, and made as though he would spring to his feet. But, M'Dougal stirring a little, he restrained himself. Once more the owls hooted—this time still nearer the camp. Then a dark form might have been seen crawling noiselessly towards the factor. It came close to him. A hand holding a long knife stretched silently past him. It gave two quick cuts, and his bonds were severed. The factor was free.

Archie could control himself no longer. Springing up from the ground, he shouted—

‘Here, father! this way, quick!’

It was a natural but unwise act. His shout, and the factor's quick response, aroused M'Dougal. With a horrible imprecation he staggered to his feet, and raising the gun he had been holding in his hands, took aim at Mr. M'Kenzie. He was too close to miss his mark. A moment more, and his bullet had buried itself in the factor's heart.

But that moment never came for him. Quick as his movements had been, there was one at hand still quicker. The instant Archie rose Akaitchko had risen also, and, anticipating what would happen, had covered M'Dougal with his gun, while a look of awful joy illuminated his dusky countenance. His opportunity had come, and he was ready for it. Before M'Dougal's finger could find the trigger, the crack of the Indian's musket split the still air, and with a bullet crashing through his brain the factor of Fort Wedderburne plunged forward upon his face, stone dead.

The report of the gun aroused the others, and they sprang up, looking fiercely about them. But they found a circle of deadly muzzles pointed at their hearts, and their arms dropped helplessly to their sides, as they realised that resistance was worse than useless.

CHAPTER XVIII

ARCHIE REALISES HIS DESIRES

PAUSING for an instant only to give Archie a fervent embrace, Mr. M'Kenzie at once took the control of affairs.

'Lay down your guns!' he commanded, and with sullen reluctance the Hudson Bays complied.

'Put your knives and hatchets with them,' was the next order. This too was done.

'Now, then, sit right down where you are; and *you*,' turning to his own men, 'take charge of them, and put a bullet into the first man that makes a move.'

The Hudson Bays did as they were bid, and seating themselves in a little group, were surrounded by the Nor'-Westers, not one of whom would have hesitated a moment to carry out the factor's instructions to the letter.

Then did Mr. M'Kenzie feel free to indulge his joy, and bidding Akaitchko keep wood upon the fire, he drew Archie to him, and sat down to hear the story of his rescue. Beyond all expression was the delight of father and son at their happy reunion. They forgot everything else as they recounted to one another the details of their different experiences, and nearly an hour passed in this way before the factor had thought for other matters. It was not until Akaitchko, growing impatient, pointed to M'Dougal's body and asked, 'What do with this? *Caché* it?' that Mr. M'Kenzie, feeling half ashamed of himself, got up and went over to the body.

'Poor wretch!' he said gently. 'The death he would have inflicted upon others has come to himself. May God have mercy on his soul! We cannot give him a decent Christian burial here, although he should have it if it could be done. We can only *caché* his body. Here, my good men; a couple of you carry it away a little and cover it with a buffalo skin, and in the morning we will put it out of sight.'

There was not much sleep for either Hudson Bays or Nor'-Westers that night. The fire was kept in full blast, and all gathered near it to await the coming of day. Mr. M'Kenzie expressed his gratitude to each member of the

rescuing party in turn, and promised them the best rewards in his power to bestow. They had, he assured them, placed him under an obligation he could never adequately repay, and would certainly never forget.

So soon as day broke preparations were made for the return. The body of M'Dougal was buried beneath a pile of stones that would defy even a carcajou. His men, having first been deprived of all their guns but one, were ordered to continue on southward, and never to show their faces at Lake Athabasca again if they valued their lives; and then, with glad hearts and joyous songs, the Nor'-Westers turned their faces to the north.

The canoes were found as they had left them, and taking up the paddles, the party swept swiftly down-stream, with nothing to break their course until they reached Lake Athabasca. So diligently did they press onward that early in the afternoon of the second day they were upon the bosom of the lake, and ere the night fell, singing one of their gayest *chansons*, they marched through the gate of Fort Chipewyan, to be welcomed with shouts of delight and blinding tears of joy from the men and women who had grown haggard with harrowing anxiety and waiting.

The colour soon came back to Mrs. M'Kenzie's cheeks, and Rose-Marie's merry song trilled through the factor's house all the more brightly because of its silence during the days of agonising uncertainty.

'And now, father,' said Archie, with a confident smile, as the four were talking together late into the night, too happy to think of their beds, 'there's nothing to prevent us going to Montreal, is there? M'Dougal will never trouble us again, and it's not likely any of his ruffians will care to come back. The way is as clear as you could wish, isn't it?'

'It certainly is, so far as going to Fort William is concerned, laddie,' answered the factor. 'But as to Montreal, that will depend upon how I can arrange at Fort William. If the head partners are agreeable to giving me long enough leave, I'll be right glad to go on to Montreal. But it's for them to say, not for me. I'm only a servant, you know.'

'But, Donald,' interposed Mrs. M'Kenzie, 'you expect them to make you a partner next summer, don't you?'

'I have very good hopes of it, Virginie,' replied the factor. 'But I would not like to set my heart too strongly upon it, dear.'

"The best-laid schemes of mice and men
Gang aft agley,"

as Robbie Burns says so truly. However, we'll leave it all in the hands of Providence. I've always tried to do the best I could for the Company, as the Montreal partners know well. I much doubt if any other post has sent in as many packs of good furs during the last twenty years as Chipewyan, so let us hope everything will turn out as we wish.'

A few days after the triumphant return of the rescued factor the long-looked-for Mr. Wentzel made his appearance, just in time to escape the frost, which the very day of his arrival set in with such severity that within twenty-four hours travelling by canoe was rendered impossible. A succession of provoking mishaps had delayed him beyond all his calculations; but happily, by dint of dogged persistence and untiring ingenuity, he had come through with a very slight loss of stores, and had brought in a supply of flour, tea, tobacco, ammunition, goods, and some few luxuries, including a fine package of books, that made glad the factor's heart; and, as the storehouses were already full to overflowing with fish, pemmican, and dried meat, ensured a winter of plenty and comfort.

Just such a winter did it turn out to be. Not an unpleasant event occurred to mar its peaceful monotony. Mr. M'Kenzie was too magnanimous to take any notice of MacGillivray's refusal to go to his relief. In his joy at the happy issue of events, he could not only forgive, but forget, and the faint-hearted clerk found no difference in his manner towards him.

When the snow lay thick upon the ground, Archie and Sautloulai resumed their trapping operations with great vigour. They needed no protector now, but went out on their own responsibility, and, after catching many a mink and marten, were lifted into the seventh heaven of proud delight by securing a splendid black bear, which, getting both its forepaws into a large trap set for a wolverine, proved an easy victim to their bullets. By the coming of spring they had a really fine stock of furs, which the factor took over at the best rates he could grant.

Mrs. M'Kenzie and Rose-Marie were no less busy during the long winter months, but in a different way. Among the packages brought up by Mr. Wentzel was a bale containing cloths of linen and wool, which their deft fingers were to fashion into garments that would make the wife and daughter of the factor of Fort Chipewyan not ashamed to face the gathering at Fort William. Virginie had little knowledge of the fashions, but she had no slight skill with the needle and scissors, and knew how to give full sway to her inherited fancy for the picturesque and striking in costume. Both Mr. M'Kenzie and Archie took a deep interest in these preparations, and heartily applauded her clever handiwork.

And so the winter went by, and spring came to warm and waken Nature into life after her long sleep beneath her snowy counterpane. The factor had promised that as soon as travelling could be done in comfort he would set out. With almost feverish impatience Archie watched the time approach. Happily for him, the season was an unusually early one, and by the end of May the spring floods had sufficiently subsided to render travelling practicable. Accordingly, preparations for the long journey southward were hurried forward, and on the first day of June everything was ready for the start. The party consisted of twenty men, including all hands, and the two ladies. They took five of the best canoes, and abundant supplies of everything necessary. Akaitchko and Sautloulai were to accompany them as far as the Red River. Mr. Wentzel would remain in charge of the fort, with Stewart and MacGillivray as his lieutenants.

There is not time to detail the incidents of the many weeks' journey, by sluggish river, roaring rapid, and placid lake, to far Fort William, on the eastern shore of peerless Lake Superior. To the factor and his family it was a time of rare enjoyment. Never before had they gone travelling with him in this fashion, and they appreciated the novelty of the situation with the keenest relish; while he, on his part, laughed at himself as he recognised how much his feelings were like those of a schoolboy just beginning the long vacation. He felt hardly less youthful and buoyant of spirit than Archie, and while the little fleet of canoes paddled and portaged its way southward, he took good care that his companions should miss none of the beauties and marvels of the route.

Their course lay through the Athabasca and Clearwater Rivers to Methye Lake; thence across Lake des Bœufs and Lake La Crosse and by sundry small streams to the noble Saskatchewan, which led them into big Lake Winnipeg, along whose western shores they coasted to the southern end, and thus reached the Red River. Here Akaitchko and Sautloulai parted company with them, manifestly much against their inclination, and Archie did his best to comfort his fond, faithful companion by promising to send him handsome gifts from Fort William, while the factor assured Akaitchko that he would make special mention of him to the chief partners, and ensure him due reward for his great services.

After a few days' halt at Red River, where the North-West Company had an important post called Fort Gibraltar, the party proceeded on through the Lake of the Woods, and the connecting streams, until they came out upon the winding Kaministiquia, whose current helped them on to Fort William.

It was with mingled feelings of diffidence and pride that Mr. M'Kenzie presented himself at this famous mustering-place. As the factor of one of the

most important and profitable posts belonging to the Company, he was entitled to special recognition. Nevertheless, his long seclusion from any other society than that of Fort Chipewyan had naturally enough tended to develop a certain sense of shy constraint, which was rather increased than diminished by the presence of his wife and children, for whom he was exceedingly anxious that they should not only receive, but create the most favourable impression possible.

In these feelings Mrs. M'Kenzie to some extent shared, but Archie and Rose-Marie were blessedly unconscious of anything of the kind, and they looked about them with wide-open eyes of wonder and delight.

Fort William was then at the zenith of its greatness, and formed quite a considerable village. Its centre of interest was an immense wooden structure, containing the grand banqueting hall, the council chamber, and other rooms, fitted up with a certain sort of rude splendour, and adorned with Indian weapons and trophies of the fur trade. Here were assembled for purposes of consultation the chief partners from Montreal, men of imposing presence and luxurious ways,—in the eyes of the *voyageurs* and half-breeds the most important personages in the world,—and the subordinate partners from their posts in the interior, with forms and faces showing the effects of toil and privation during summer heat and winter cold.

Intensely curious and interested, the two young people went about together, missing nothing that was worth seeing, and forming their own opinions concerning the M'Tavishes, the Frobishers, and the other grandees from wonderful Montreal. These gentlemen had come to the annual meeting in great state, voyaging in huge canoes lined with furs, propelled by a score of stalwart paddlers, and freighted with abundant stores of costly wines and civilised delicacies for the sumptuous banquets that were no less essential a feature of the gathering than the councils.

Archie was deeply impressed by the stately dignity of the Montreal partners, yet there was not one of them—and in this opinion Rose-Marie heartily concurred—who seemed to him one whit more noble of presence or worthy of respect than his own father, and his young heart swelled with filial pride as he noticed the consideration the factor received at their hands.

As a matter of fact, Mr. M'Kenzie occupied a position of peculiar interest and importance. Miles M'Dougal's designs had not been hidden from the Nor'-Westers, and every effort had been made to nip them in the bud; but the cunning rascal having overreached his opponents, they were fain to await with lively anxiety the result of his expedition. So far, but little more than that he had miserably failed, and lost his own life into the bargain, was generally

known, and at the very first of the council meetings his intended victim was called upon to relate the whole story.

When the factor told, in simple but graphic language, how he had been entrapped, and how bravely he had been rescued, the staid and solemn assemblage broke out into a hearty round of applause.

‘M’Kenzie,’ burst out Mr. M’Tavish, from the head of the table, ‘that boy of yours must be a lad of rare spirit. You must bring him in and let us see him. He certainly deserves the thanks of the Company, and he shall have them, and more too.’

‘Hear, hear!’ shouted the others. ‘Bring in your boy, M’Kenzie, and introduce him to us.’

Only too glad to comply, the factor hurried out to seek his son. But, as it happened, Archie had that morning gone some distance away in a canoe, and being unable to find him, the father promised to have him at the next meeting. So when he returned, he informed him of the honour awaiting him, and told him he must be on hand the following morning to be presented to the council.

It was a bit of the good fortune which had attended Archie through life that he should make the acquaintance of the great Mr. M’Tavish in quite an unexpected way, without a formal introduction. The annual rendezvous had one feature which was not at all creditable, even if characteristic of those hard-drinking days. Wine and brandy flowed without stint, and as a consequence it was frequently a matter of some difficulty to find a sober man. The *voyageurs* and *bois-brulées* made up for their long months of enforced abstinence by gross indulgence, and quarrels and combats were of constant occurrence.

Early on the morning in question, Archie, in company with Rose-Marie, had gone down to the riverside, some distance from the buildings, when his attention was attracted by the sound of two voices, one cursing, the other entreating, in half-breed *patois*. Hastening to the spot, he found a drunken *voyageur* belabouring a boy about Sautloulai’s size, who was evidently in mortal terror. Archie’s anger was at once aroused, and he shouted out in commanding tones—

‘Stop that, you cowardly brute; leave the boy alone!’

The *voyageur* paid no heed, but continued his blows. Archie’s indignation got to white heat.

‘Then I’ll make you stop,’ he cried, and rushing upon the man, he caught him by the collar, and swung him away from his victim, who seized the opportunity to spring to his feet and make his escape.

Furious at this interference, the *voyageur* now turned upon Archie, and being a powerful, active man, and frenzied with drink, it certainly would have gone hard with the boy had not a gentleman suddenly appeared upon the scene, and with one well-aimed blow of a stout walking-stick felled the half-breed to the ground, where he lay stunned and motionless.

‘That was a crack in good time, wasn’t it, my lad?’ said the new-comer, puffing a little from his sudden exertion. ‘What was the rascal about? You were no match for him.’

Archie at once recognised in his friend in need no other than Mr. M’Tavish, who had been enjoying an early constitutional when he so opportunely chanced upon the unequal encounter.

‘Why, he was pounding a poor little fellow, and I made him stop,’ he answered respectfully.

‘That’s right, my son; that’s right,’ said Mr. M’Tavish, smiling. ‘Never refuse help to those who are in trouble. You may need it badly enough yourself some day.’

‘I did need it pretty badly just now, sir,’ said Archie, with a grateful look. ‘If you hadn’t come along when you did, I should have got a good licking, for certain.’

‘I’m afraid you would, my son,’ responded Mr. M’Tavish, evidently well pleased at his own part in the matter, and appreciating Archie’s indirect praise. ‘But may I ask your name? I do not remember having seen you before.’

‘My name is Archie M’Kenzie, sir,’ replied Archie, feeling entirely at his ease with this genial old gentleman.

‘What?’ queried Mr. M’Tavish. ‘Is your father factor at Chipewyan?’

‘Yes, sir,’ answered Archie. ‘His name is Donald M’Kenzie, and this is my sister Rose,’ slipping his hand through the arm of Rose-Marie, who had come shyly up, still trembling from the fright the fracas had given her.

‘Dear me!’ exclaimed Mr. M’Tavish. ‘How odd! Why, we were all talking about you yesterday at the council, and your father promised to bring you in and show you to us this very morning. No wonder he’s so proud of you; any man might be proud of such a boy.’ And as he spoke these last words, his voice fell away into a sigh, for he had no son to inherit his honoured name and abundant wealth, and it was the one cloud upon his career of otherwise unshadowed prosperity. Then, brightening up, he added—

‘But come along. It’s nearly time for the council. I am going to have the

pleasure of introducing you to my partners myself.'

Thus it came about that Archie appeared before the awe-inspiring council under the wing of its most important member, and was given a reception that bewildered him, so that he completely lost the use of his tongue, and could only blush his acknowledgments.

Henceforth Mr. M'Tavish took a deep interest in Archie. He had him much in his company, and drew out from him all the dearly cherished thoughts and plans that he had conceived concerning his own future. Brought up as Archie had been, far away from the cramping, conventionalising influences of city life, and yet not lacking in any of the attributes of sturdy, self-reliant manhood, the keen, kindly old magnate found him peculiarly attractive, and resolved to bring about the fulfilment of his fondest desires.

It was as much due to his son as to his own deserts that Mr. M'Kenzie found the way open for him to obtain a year's leave of absence and proceed to Montreal. And Mr. M'Tavish had Archie in his mind no less than the worthy factor when he secured for the latter the goal of his highest ambition, by having him admitted into the Company as a partner.

To Montreal the M'Kenzies went, in company with the returning partners, and Archie wondered as, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, he gazed about him if there could be a grander city in the world. But there were greater marvels than Montreal in store for him. Early in the autumn Mr. M'Tavish invited him to accompany him on a visit to New York, and when he beheld this great city, and pushed his way through her crowded streets, he was quite convinced that the world had nothing more astonishing to show him. He had a wonderful fortnight there, and returned loaded with presents for his parents and Rose, and overflowing with what his eyes had seen and ears had heard in the American capital.

Not long after this Mr. M'Tavish made a proposal which gave the factor grave concern, for it was nothing less than that he should be permitted to adopt Archie as his own son. The offer was so brilliant and enticing that Mr. M'Kenzie would not take upon himself the whole responsibility of refusing it, and accordingly laid it before Archie. But Archie did not hesitate for a moment.

'No, father,' he answered decidedly. 'I will never be any other man's son than yours. I love Mr. M'Tavish, and thank him very much for the honour he has paid me; but Archie M'Kenzie I am, and Archie M'Kenzie I'll stay as long as I am alive.'

'God bless you, my darling boy!' exclaimed the factor, the tears running

down his cheeks. 'You've spoken just as I prayed you would. No, no; not even Mr. M'Tavish, with all his wealth and power, can have you. We'll stand by one another until the end.'

Although deeply disappointed at this decision, Mr. M'Tavish was too sound of heart to take umbrage. On the contrary, he thought all the more of his young *protégé*, and intimated clearly that by declining to become his heir he had not forfeited his regard, or brought to an end his good intentions concerning him.

On his return to the North-West, Archie entered the service of the Company as an apprentice, and by dint of faithful performance of duty, combined with the continued interest and influence of Mr. M'Tavish, rose rapidly in rank, until, in early manhood, he was in command of an important post, and ere he retired, to spend an easy and honourable old age at Montreal, had reached the highest position of all—to wit, that of the Chief Factor at Red River. But it would take another volume to relate how all this came about, and it cannot therefore be set down here.

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THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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[The end of *The Young Nor'-Wester* by J. Macdonald Oxley]