RIVER OF STRANGERS

Frank Parker Day

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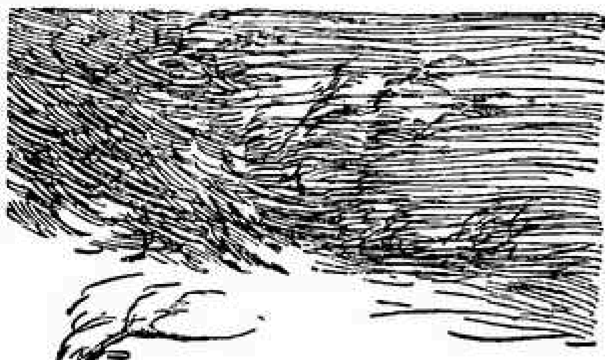
By Frank Parker Day



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River of Strangers

CHAPTER I

It was thirty below with no wind stirring; not a twig moved or spruce branch swayed to drop its glittering load. A full cold moon gleamed on rounded drifts of snow; a broad level marked the river, though no one could say where bank ended and river began. Beyond the river rose a black cliff, crowned with pointed black spruces. An infinitude of chill unfriendly stars glittered in a blue sky. Save an occasional dull rumble of impetuous water fettered beneath four feet of ice, there was no sound in Nature; not a rabbit stirred, so deeply the snow shrouded everything.

A stranger standing there might have thought himself in a wilderness had it not been for a stiff black thing, the smokestack of the Company's sawmill, that stood up against the whiteness of the river, and that the chill stillness was pierced by wild whoops and yells, mingled with the shrill notes of a fiddle, from a long low building with lighted windows across which human figures twinkled. Closer inspection would have revealed that this was but one of a group of similar buildings, roofs so rounded with snow, so hung with icicles, so deeply banked, that in the moonlight they might easily have been mistaken for snowdrifts. The fiddle shrieked higher; the yells reverberated from the black cliff across the river.

They were raising hell down at Duggan's. Half-breeds and Indians, the Company's trappers, had arrived from up river at eleven that morning, furs piled high upon their sleds, and since then everyone had been drunk. Now, close upon midnight, they were dancing furiously in the long mess hall. Big Pete, the Indian with the white scar down the left side of his cruel face; Roxy, the half-breed Eskimo; Johnny Deveau, headman of the half-breeds; Pete Surette; Lanky Morris, the frozen hobo, and a score of Duggan's men were there, all drunk and dancing with the girls. There were almost enough

girls to go round, for Duggan had turned loose his retainers for the evening, some Indian girls had come in from the village behind the hill, and MacDonald's Rosy had joined the party. It was too bad that it was "almost" and not quite enough, since "almost" meant a fight in the end.

The room in which they danced was oblong in shape and large—sometimes fifty men sat down to eat there—the boards and studding of the walls, uncovered by plaster or paint, were mellowed by time and smoke to a dingy brown. The long tables had been carried outside and laid on the snow. Suspended from the rafters were six coal-oil lamps with big tin shades that swayed and jingled with the beat of the dancers' feet. Beneath their yellow light, the motley crowd of white men, half-breeds, and Indians, the girls in gaudy cottons bedizened with cheap jewellery, the men red-sashed with great rings of gold in their ears, brown faced and hard after months of living snowbound in the forest, danced furiously. A big sheet-iron stove stuffed with knots glowed at one end of the room; at the other end was the bar behind which sat the white-jacketed McGowan, Duggan's business man. McGowan was a drunken Scot from Glasgow, who held his job with Duggan because he had a system in his drinking: he kept sober when everyone else was drunk, and drunk when everyone else was sober. In the small room behind the bar, all the bargains were made with the trappers after they had been properly lined with whisky. There McGowan displayed a collection of glittering trash, bright cottons, gaudy muslins, shoddy clothing marked pure wool, brass lamps, pocket knives, brass watches, rings set with coloured glass, celluloid combs, gilded necklaces. "A nice present for your woman, boy," he would say to the salacious trapper with a simpering grin, as he fondly handled these gewgaws. When he had done trading for furs, he played poker with the boys and arranged assignations with the girls. In the end, McGowan had the furs and his money back. He was a good trader and, though drunkard, cheat, and pimp, a staunch Presbyterian, upholding the Kirk and sniffing at both Anglicans and Romanists. That night he was sober as became the high priest of Bacchus. He loved to ladle out drink to the boys as they staggered up to the bar and to watch the stages of their drunkenness. He loved to rake in the money for Duggan too, and was none too particular about change toward the end of the evening.

Tap, tap went the moccasins over the swaying floor. The dancers were all gliding to a slow waltz time; the room was for a moment almost quiet. Suddenly the music passed into a quick and furious reel. Big Pete whooped and, grasping Bertha Riel by the waist, swung her in a circle clear of the floor; Johnny Deveau danced a buck-and-wing dance with his girl; all essayed their best steps; everyone yelled; red faces flamed and eyes blazed.

Then the fiddler passed as suddenly into an old folk song—the fellow could make dance music out of anything: "Isabelle se promène" and "Marbrouch s'en va-t-en guerre" he played, and the dancers took up the chorus. Into drunken eyes came a sentimental leer. Then the music swept into "Ho ro mo Nighean donn Bhoidheach" and "Fhir a Bhàta na hóro eile," with sad strains from the "Flowers of the Forest," the pipes wailing in the hills, for the fiddler came from Cape Breton and was for a moment dreaming of his native land. Down dropped the drink-inflamed dancers to a tragic mood, and, pitying them, he played gaily "The De'il's Awa' wi' th' Exciseman." He held them in the hollow of his hand and could sway them to any mood.

The fiddler, Alex MacDonald, who sat on the bench beneath the bar by Duggan the factor, was a curious fellow to look at, one that you could never pass without a second glance. He was tall and strongly built, with broad, thick shoulders. His head was crowned with a shock of long auburn hair that waved to and fro as he played. As he turned his head to laugh and talk with Duggan, you saw a gleam of white and well-formed teeth. Deep-set blue eyes contrasted strangely with the red of his skin and hair. He was flushed with drink, but not maudlin like the others. Duggan, his stubby hands folded over his paunch, slouched in his corner with a crumpled back; MacDonald sat erect, his legs, extraordinarily long from knee to ankle, carelessly crossed. He had been a runner in his day, the half-back to whom the ball had been given in many a tight corner. The line of his jaw was firm; he was big, but neither fat nor flabby. On the Company's books he appeared as, "Doctor at our post, River of Strangers."

He stopped playing, and McGowan handed him and Duggan another whisky out of a special bottle. The whole gang swelled up to the bar, swilling more liquor. They were pretty far gone, another round would finish them; McGowan had handed out free drinks in the afternoon as he traded. Now the skins were safe in the fur room; to hell with them! Pete Surette, who had been eating candy with his whisky blanc, was sick in the corner behind the stove. They were an unwashed crowd and reeked to heaven. To rid himself of them and get fresh air, MacDonald picked up his fiddle and broke into another jig.

He was in strange company. He had been born thirty-five years before on a Bras d'Or lake farm in Cape Breton, the youngest of seven children. His father, a substantial, thrifty farmer, a man devout and severe, had picked him, after the fashion of Scotch people, as the scholar of the family and sent him to Pictou Academy, hoping that some day he might be a preacher in the Kirk. But Alex had no bent for theology; on the other hand, he devoured

chemistry, zoölogy, and microscopic botany, and the “Origin of Species” finished for him the book of Genesis. When the principal wrote the old man of Alex’s talent for science, family pride impelled him to send the boy to McGill for medicine. He said to his wife in the privacy of their bedroom: “The boy may make the name of MacDonald go far.”

Now, Alex was endowed by the gods with great strength, fleetness of foot, and a fondness for liquor, fine girls, and music. In some sunny clime, these qualities might have been assets; in ancient Greece, he might have been the comrade of Ulysses, hero of an epic that smug young divines could have painfully conned over at Dalhousie, but in the dour land of his birth, these became traits to be fought against and repressed. But these strains were strong in Alex, harking back to some MacDonald of the clans who had fought, raped, pillaged, and drunk to the fulfilment of his heart’s desire. In the university, Alex found a new world of freedom, for thinking in the faculty of medicine was almost unfettered. He read widely, heard many concerts, and practised on his beloved fiddle. On the football field, his strength and speed made him the centre about which most plays were built. Many a fair heart sighed for him as he raced down the field, but no hand was stretched out to save him. When he met nice girls in the houses of his student friends, they admired him, but were afraid and repelled by his wild, rough vigour. Moreover, he had no dress suit, never went to church, and had never lost completely the manners of his country home. He trod the streets of the city clad in cap, sweater, and velveteen trousers, a great staff in his hand. Everyone in the university knew Alex MacDonald, but he had few friends for whom he cared. ’Twould have been a bold woman who could have dared to love him. In his junior year, he drank heavily, and when a pious young friend wrote to his people at home, he received a letter from his father full of reproaches. More reproaches followed, from time to time, and finally a letter of disinheritance, almost a curse, when the old man learned of Alex’s intrigue with his landlady’s pretty niece from Tadoussac.

Fortunately, he had a little money in his own name, so he stayed on and was graduated in the middle of his class, though he was by far the most brilliant man in the university. He felt that established convention had given him a raw deal: how could the old man, with his limitations, interpret life to him? He knew his job well, he had a real understanding of books, he had some skill with his fiddle and loved music—he desired an untrammelled intellectual life. Sex matters seemed an incident in life to him: why did people make such a fuss about them? He thought vaguely that they must be necessary to the full development of man or woman. For two months after

graduation he loafed about Montreal thinking, observing, drinking heavily, and steadily slipping down hill.

One night in August, as he sat drinking in Surette's bar on the Rue Cartier, Duggan, the New World Fur-Trading Company's factor, came in. Duggan had with him a strong-arm man and a big dog, half mastiff, half husky. His quick eye caught in a glance the handsome figure, flushed face, the mop of red, the half-finished whisky of the lonely man at the table in the corner. The dog followed Duggan to the bar, then crossed the room, sniffed at Alex's legs, and laid his muzzle across his knee for a pat. Alex liked dogs. Strange that the action of a dog should change the whole course of a man's life and lead it into a new channel. Duggan was in a good mood. He had done good business in Montreal. He crossed the room to Alex's table.

" 'Tisn't often Jack makes friends with a stranger," said Duggan, his Irish eyes twinkling. "May I sit down with you?"

"Sure," said Alex.

"My name's Duggan from River of Strangers, New World Company's post up North."

"Mine's MacDonald from Cape Breton. Glad to meet you, Mr. Duggan. Where did you say you came from?"

"River of Strangers, New World post two hundred and fifty miles up the Churchill River. I'm factor there."

"Oh, ay," said Alex.

"The Company sent me down here to see about selling some skins; it's sure great to hit the city, after five years in the bush."

"Ay," said Alex. "You've got a fine dog here; do you breed them where you come from?"

"Huskies are the native breed, but Jack's a cross between a husky and an English mastiff. He can't bark, only howl."

"I suppose the cold makes their pelts thick."

"Cold! Man, it's a caution up there. Forty below, sometimes fifty, for weeks on end. It's all right, though, when you get used to it and learn how to handle yourself. What are you doing so far from home?"

"Bumming around."

The Irishman saw that the Scotsman had not yet had enough drink to make him communicative.

"Jo," he called to his strong arm, "two double Scotches."

They drank them as Duggan stuffed an ancient pipe.

"Another drink?"

"I don't care."

"Now, man," said Duggan as they finished their second round. "Open up—what are you doing here? I liked your cut as soon as my eye fell on you. There's the man, says I, for the North country. What a build you've got!"

"I'm doing nothing," said Alex. "The old man's sore at me for drinking and casting my eyes on a maid, and will have nothing to do with hair or hide of me. I'm a doctor since May, and ready to hang out my shingle; meantimes, I'm drinkin' and looking about me."

"A doctor! Holy Mother of God, what luck! Do you know the Company has commissioned me to get a saw-bones for the post? Man, you're going North with me."

"It takes two to make a bargain."

"A bargain—it's written in the book of fate—a hundred dollars a month, a house, fuel, a chance to do some trade in furs on the side, good whisky, and a couple of half-breed girls thrown in. You should see our girls, half French, half Indian."

"I'm none so keen on women."

"Fire and flame, fire and flame, they're none of your dull jades. I've got, let's see"—Duggan stopped to count on his fingers—"seven; one for every day of the week, like razors."

"I told you I wasn't hipped on women," said Alex sulkily. "How's the shooting and fishing?"

"Shootin' and fishin'! The caribou migrate across your back yard; the river's alive with salmon, the lakes are black with blue wings, and the still waters with geese. Shootin' and fishin'! It's the home of game."

Alex took a long pull at his whisky and thought the matter over. He had little money in his purse, and his trousers were fringed at the heels. A worn-through sole he had kept turned away from Duggan, though the quick-eyed factor had seen it at the first encounter. His student friends had long since

departed, and his hard drinking had estranged him from acquaintances in the city. He felt that he was sinking. The smug boy from home had closed Cape Breton to him. Why not try it? Here was a chance to live alone and think, remote from stupidity, convention, cant, and the jingle of church bells.

"I'll go with you," he said suddenly, reaching across the table to shake Duggan's hand.

"Done," said Duggan.

"What about instruments and medical stores?"

"We'll get everything and charge to the Company's account. They've given me carte blanche on this deal. You'll need some equipment too, heavy boots, larigans, shoe packs, rifle, shotgun, six-shooter, and rods. Let me get everything and take it out of your salary," said Duggan tactfully.

Alex nodded assent, and after a brief good-night, staggered off to his room. When he awoke, the bargain was clear in his mind; the world looked blue, but he was not sorry for what he had promised. It seemed that Destiny had brought him and Duggan together. Three days later, they proceeded down the Saint Lawrence, on one of the Company's boats, en route for River of Strangers. Alex had his fiddle, a microscope, a box of books, and the kit that Duggan had bought him.

That had happened ten years before, and it all ran through Alex's head as he drew his bow across the strings and incited the dancers to madness or dashed them to despair. He had lived among them but not become wholly one of them. Convention would have dubbed them dirty dogs in mind and body, but, at any rate, they were free and generous. He had learned to love the great river, the broad lakes, the interminable forest. It was a giant's land of mountainous rocks piled on rocks, down which crushed and slipped glacial masses. He was always conscious of great forces chained beneath the surface, struggling to be free. It was a land of strange gods, gods that lurked in deep forests, crashed ice masses from the mountains, and hung a curtain of fire across the sky: gods of the strong cold, not friendly but vindictive.

Ten years had slipped away quickly. He had tended the sick, bound up broken limbs, sewed up knife cuts, and probed out bullets from the shrinking muscle. Drunks he had treated without number; he had done three operations for appendicitis on a kitchen table. Once he had found a leper among them. He had never heard from his people; to them he was dead. Probably he would grow old and die here alone in the wilderness. Through all this thinking his fiddle rambled on.

Suddenly, there was a roar, a snarl, and a crash of two fighting bodies on the floor. Indian Pete had tried to cut in on Johnny Deveau, who was staggering around with big Bertha. The fiddle flickered out. There had been not quite enough girls to go round, that was the trouble. McGowan cleared the counter of glasses, while Duggan sprang up, rushed across the room, and began kicking both the fighters.

"Get up, get out and fight in the snow, you lousy dogs. You know what I mean, get up, get out." He kept kicking them all the time. They unclinched, got to their feet and staggered out. The opened door let in a biting blast. A couple of friends put on their fur coats and went out to see the fight in the moonlight. Some heavy blows were heard by those within, groans, grunts, a yell of anger, a crashing smack of naked fist against naked face, and a heavy fall. Horrid, vague, terrifying noises! Johnny Deveau came in with a bloody nose, put his arm about big Bertha, and swaggered up to the bar. Some friends brought in Indian Pete and sat him behind the stove, where he toppled over on Pete Surette—sick earlier in the evening—and went to sleep. For a half hour they tugged limply at each other for breathing space. The rest roared round the bar.

> "*Alouette, gentille Alouette, Alouette, je te plumerai,*
> *Je te plumerai le nez,*"

they roared with obscene emendations. They drank Johnny's health. Big Bertha swabbed off his wounded nose. Yes, he should be her lover for that night, and none else.

"Dance, dance," they yelled, and MacDonald's fiddle put mettle in their heels.

John Paul's Lisa had lost her skirt and was dancing in her short petticoat. There were enough girls now, for three of the trappers had fallen on the floor. They were rolled against the wall, where they slept: the girls lasted better than the men.

Duggan, who had been dozing after his last three fingers, sat up and began fumbling in his pocket. "I almost forgot," he said to Alex. "Listen to this letter they brought up river to-day. Doesn't it beat the cards? Listen!" And he read while Alex played.

> " 'The Company has heard with distress of the debauched life that you and your trappers and employees of the Company live in our post, River of Strangers. Such appalling reports of your drunkenness and licentiousness have reached us that, had it not

been for your long service and that your accounts have always been in good order, you should have been recalled. At the instance and expense of the British Missionary Society, we are sending a missionary out to you, who, we hope, will restore decency and godliness to the Post. You will house him decently, pay him the respect due his calling, and see that he has every opportunity to preach the Gospel to the employees of the Company.'

"Doesn't it beat the cards! After all these comfortable years, a bloody parson coming out to Christianize us. Here, Alex, play the doxology, and I'll announce it to the boys."

Alex drifted into the ancient hymn tune with all kinds of quaint improvised trills. The dancers' feet got slower and slower, dragged, and stopped. With difficulty Duggan climbed upon a bench. He swayed to and fro, grasping in one hand the rail of the bar and waving in the other the Company's letter. Two of the lamps were smoking; the room reeked like the pit of hell. The dancers clustered about the swaying Duggan, the downward glare of the lamps making high lights on their upturned encrimsoned faces.

"Boys, the Company's sending a bloody parson to Christianize us! A bloody parson." Alex's violin rambled on to Duggan's rhythm, from the doxology to "The Son of God Goes Forth to War," in a strange, subdued minor key.

"A bloody parson," screamed Duggan.

"A bloody parson," yelled the gang.

"Do we want him?"

"No."

"He'll have to be some kind of a parson to last around here."

"Is he a Presbyterian?" queried McGowan timidly.

"Presbyterian be damned! Doesn't the priest, Father what's-his-name, come on here at Easter and forgive all the boys' sins? Have you got anybody in the Presbyterian Church that can forgive sins? Tell me that, you drunken lout," and he grasped McGowan by the blond forelock and used him as a support in place of the hand rail. Holding McGowan's hair firmly he continued to speak.

"We don't want no parson in River of Strangers. House him well! In hell, yes, we'll house him." Here his little eyes twinkled. "We'll house him

with the doctor and Rosy. He's the only learned man in these parts.

"Boys, the party's over. Get the girls home. We're all drunk now! Hurrah!" He released McGowan's hair and pitched forward. The door was flung open: men and girls wrapped furs about them and stepped out into the stinging night.

"Hurrah for Christ," yelled Lanky Morris, but that was too blasphemous, and someone struck him in the mouth.

Alex placed his fiddle in the case and strolled toward the door. Roxy was holding Rosy by the waist and casting amorous glances upon her.

"Come home now, Rosy," said Alex.

Roxy stepped back; they all feared the doctor. Rosy clung to Alex's arm, and they stepped out into the night, the frosty snow crunching beneath their feet. The stars burned bright, and a curious draped aurora of red and lemon-yellow flickered across the sky. They walked up the hill to the bungalow Alex had built in a setting of pines and low spruces.

CHAPTER II

On the morning after the orgy, Alex lay late in bed. He half woke and looked about him, then turned over and snuggled under the clothes for another nap. At last he really woke and, sitting up, looked out of the window; the sun was shining, everything was a monotony of dazzling white. He slipped back again, yawning and running his hands through his hair. There was nothing much to get up for; the drunks would not wake till noon; he could tend them and, later, ski over to Fond du Lac to see John Paul, a case of pneumonia. He had neither a headache nor a bad conscience; he and Duggan had drunk good whisky. He picked up a book that lay on a box by his bedside, but after leafing it through, he laid it down, grinning broadly. He was thinking of Duggan's indignation at the intention of the Company to reform the Post, how he had made his speech supported by McGowan's hair, and toppled to the floor as the strands slipped through his fingers. The look on McGowan's face had been most comical; he had hated to appear in an undignified position before the trappers, yet feared to offend his master. He had therefore smirked painfully, as if to indicate that he was a willing party to a difficult yet amusing situation. The door opened and in came Rosy with a steaming mug of coffee and a bowl of oatmeal porridge. Rosy loved to make Alex comfortable.

"Lazy, lazy," she said, placing the tray beside the bed.

"You didn't fiddle for six long hours."

"But I danced."

"Indeed you did, danced every dance and flirted shamefully with Roxy and Pete Surette. I watched you out of the tail of my eye."

Rosy stood in the middle of the floor with arms akimbo, her black eyes twinkling. She was plump, pretty, and her short well-combed curly hair hung about her shoulders. The name Rosy suited her well. Some sprightly, mischievous, and whimsical lower deity, half god, half fairy, must whisper to parents and god-parents the first names of children.

"The poor fellows need a little comfort after six months in the far back country."

"How much did you drink?"

"I drink not at all; not that stuff. I pour it on the floor, when the boys not looking."

"That's the reason you look so fresh this morning."

"Roxy bring me six fine mink skins. Do you mind, Alex? You know I stick to you."

"No, Rosy, I don't mind. What are you going to do with them—sell them to McGowan or make yourself a neck piece?"

"He sell them to McGowan first."

"And stole them afterward; good for Roxy. Any one who can steal from a Glasgow Scot has a real talent for business."

Rosy laughed and began picking up the clothes scattered about the room. She loved tidying up Alex's things, and had a real flair for housekeeping and cooking.

"What's all this Duggan said about a parson? What's a parson, anyway?"

"A Protestant priest. He's coming out here to make all the people good and honest. No more dancing and drunks at Duggan's, or stealing mink skins for the girls, after he comes. We'll have only hymn singing and prayer meetings."

"Hm, he'd better stay where he is."

"Duggan says he's going to lodge him with us."

"That'll spoil it all," said Rosy with tearful, flashing eyes.

"Not a bit; we'll stick him in the far room in the ell, and he'll be busy with his prayer book."

"Anyway, he can't come for a long time."

"Clear out now, Rosy, I'm going to get up."

"You can dress in the living room; I put your things before the fire." She smiled at him, blew a kiss, and went out.

But Alex did not get up; he still lay in bed thinking. If he must lodge the parson, it was lucky that he had made his house big. Its size and number of rooms had been a standing matter of jest with Duggan's employees. They always implied that he meant to branch out after the manner of the factor and keep several girls. He had built it on the hill to be away from the others, to live apart, and now his privacy was to be invaded.

He had built his house with loving care. For his first year he had lodged on the flat by the river in one of the Company's shacks. But the life was too much in common, the trappers too dirty in their habits. He was restless and ill at ease. One day, as he stood looking across the river, his eye rested on the Company's sawmill, backed by the mountain covered with a fine stand of spruce and pine. "Why not build myself a decent house?" he thought. "Here are the materials at hand." He knew how to do things, for he had helped raise many a barn at home in Cape Breton. Next day, with the help of some half-breeds, he began to clear and break ground on the hill, after getting Duggan's approval. On the spot, he had cut ten big pine trees that made his sills. It was hard work dislodging the roots, but, eventually, time and patience conquered them; the cellar was dug, walled, and floored with great slabs of aqueous rock that had slipped down the mountain-side into the river. Upon this massive foundation he laid his hand-hewn sills of pine. It had been great fun making the sweet-smelling chips fly with his broad ax. When the lumber was ready at the mill, he set up studding, plates, and rafters, planning as he built. He had triple-boarded floor, walls, and roof, laying tarred paper between the boards, and covered both walls and roof with hand-cut pine shingles that last for ever. Doors and windows had been the hardest problem, but he was skilful with his hands, and, by stolid perseverance, had overcome all difficulties. He had stained the outside with brown creosote, and painted doors, window sashes, and finish a dull green, to harmonize with the setting of brown tree trunks and evergreen foliage. When winter came and he stuck his wind-break, a hedge of young spruces, close to the sills, the bungalow nestled so closely to the corner of the hill that it seemed to have grown there, or to have arisen from the hillside by enchantment. The bungalow faced south, with two long ells stretching back toward the north, between them a tiny courtyard, paved, as was a path about the house, with gray flagstones from the river bank. In the western ell were Rosy's room, a tiny kitchen and dining room; the two rooms of the eastern ell stood vacant. Why he had built that second ell, Alex had never known; it was of no use to him; he seemed to have been guided by some inscrutable order, and Alex, scientist as he was, believed dimly, as had his Scotch forbears, in fate, second sight, and a strange guiding of human affairs. Perhaps he remembered fondly, as he built, the interminable ells of milk houses, woodsheds, and stables that stretch from the backs of Cape Breton houses. Now, as he lay dreaming in bed, it came to him in a flash that he had built that ell for Duggan's bloody parson.

The front and main part of the house was divided into two parts; a smaller room on the western side and a large living room on the eastern side.

The small western room, into which three doors opened, from dining room, living room, and outdoors, was Alex's office and bedroom. It was furnished simply with a single couch on which the giant sprawled, a stove, table, desk, and a couple of chairs. Shelves running about the room were piled with books, bottles, instruments, and medical supplies. A rag mat—Rosy's contribution—covered part of the floor. A case of whisky stood under the table. In this room Alex slept, saw his patients, and drank with Duggan and his gang when they visited him.

The big eastern room with its wide fireplace was Alex's own domain. Three doors opened into it: one from Alex's office, one from the dining room, and one from the empty ell. The preparation and decoration of this room had been Alex's great delight. He had stained the walls a light colour and covered the floor with choice skins of moose, bear, and caribou. There was nothing above this room; it was lofty, stretching upward to the darkness of the rafters. Of curly birch, he had built himself a great sofa, an oblong table, and two easy chairs; the sofa stood before the fireplace, the table behind it, while the chairs closed the gap between sofa ends and fireplace. Between the studding timbers that protruded into the room, he had built shelves on which stood his books; the first box, brought with Duggan, had been augmented by many more in each spring boat from England. On a table near the window was his microscope; in a rack above it, his beloved fiddle. Sofa and chairs were covered with beaver furs, edged with mink and muskrat. It was a wonderful room when the fireplace roared on a winter's night. Here he never admitted Duggan or the gang. Now it was to be invaded by the parson.

Alex rolled out of bed, washed himself, stuck his feet into house moccasins, and strolled out to the living room to dress. Quickly he donned the clothes warmed before the fire and, sitting down, stretched out his feet toward the blaze. It was still two hours before he need make rounds. He picked up his fiddle, tuned it, and played softly. He soon tired of that and, laying the fiddle down, he stared out of the window at the monotony of white. When would the spring come? He longed for it deeply as only those in the frozen Northland do. He longed for the time when the buds would swell and the sap flow in the maples.

To the eastward of his bungalow, along the ridge of evergreens, was a grove of white birches, where a spring bubbled from white sand at the foot of a great rock. Alex had trimmed out the grove and built a rustic seat near the great rock and ever-running spring. He longed for this retreat as he gazed at the expanse of frozen whiteness. He sat there on warm days of July and

August to watch the sunshine make mottled shadows on the gleaming tree trunks. There he read and thought much. His bower seemed to epitomize a complete cosmos. The pool at his feet swarmed with countless myriads of tiny things that the microscope revealed. There spirogyra lived and reproduced itself and regulated its affairs unnoticed by human eye. Through the trees loomed a mountain, testifying to the strength of the hills, convulsions of the earth's crust and a million years of erosion. The great scratched boulder at his side was clear evidence of a glacier's moraine in one of the ice ages. How slender and attenuated seemed Hebrew or Christian philosophy; not a philosophy for men at all, simply a rule of life. But what was the mystery of existence, what was worth while, what was hid at the centre?

Sometimes he took out his fiddle and played to an audience of squirrels and blue jays, whose curiosity led them to chatter and draw nearer. Massenet's "Meditation" or Handel's "Largo" mingled with the gurgle of the spring and the wind among the trees. There, when he played, he sometimes felt like a god, knowing there was an absolute beauty that must be sought, something that came from nothing material. Perhaps that sum total of all beautiful things and ideals was God.

Rosy was bustling about his bedroom and whistling scraps of a voyageur's song. He turned from the window and flung himself down on the sofa to read, but after a few pages his attention wandered. He felt restless; the news of the parson had awakened in his bosom a strange feeling of discontent. Rosy whistled louder in the bedroom; she obviously wanted to come in and talk, but she never invaded his domain without invitation. To while away the time, he allowed himself to think, as he seldom did, of home and of himself as a little boy. Their house stood on a narrow strip hemmed in between forest and sea, both of which he feared. The sea, so powerful and relentless, had upset the dory of a big brother and swallowed him up; a neighbour's boy had been lost for two days in the dark and foreboding forest. He remembered his father and the neighbours setting off with lanterns for the search, as he peeped at them through a crack of the kitchen door. In the solitude and loneliness of River of Strangers, he had sometimes tried his hand at turning those early impressions, especially his childish fear of sea and forest, into little poems.

He never forgot his gratitude to the gracious fog bank that had rolled in every afternoon, to mingle in ragged mist swirls with the tops of towering spruces. In this friendly fog bank that hid both sea and forest, he had seen, even as a child, a friendly face smiling down upon him, a face unlike that of

any one he had known. The face was oval, and its pallor was accentuated by a pair of tender brown eyes and by surrounding masses of dark, smooth hair. Whenever he had been afraid or in trouble, he had seen this kindly protecting face. In the night, when he had lain awake, listening to the ceaseless pounding of the surf upon the beach until he almost screamed at the dull threatening monotony, the kind face had smiled at him from the darkness and comforted him.

He remembered his arrival at the famous academy whither his father had sent him, ill prepared, from a small country school, with but one suit of clothes, too short in sleeves and back—an ignominy to be borne for a whole year. On the first day, he had bought all the books he must study, and had carried them to the garret room of his boarding house, where he had piled them upon the table and looked at them in fear and discouragement. They were so many and so big and thick! He had read over the titles with staring wide-open eyes: Green's "Short History of the English People," Lounsbury's "History of the English Language," Norrie's "Epitome of Navigation," Smith's "History of Greece and Rome," Hall and Knight's "Higher Algebra." How could he ever master them! Evening began to fall, and he sat silent, in despair, before his pile of books. Suddenly, from the darkness, the Lady of his Dreams, as he had learned to call her, smiled down upon him. He lit his candle and opened Green's "History" at chance. He never forgot the first sentence that caught his eye: it was the real beginning of his appreciation of literature:

> Blue masses of woodland crown the distant hills; within the river curve lies a dull reach of flat meadow, round which the Seine, broken with green islets, and dappled with the gray and blue of the sky, flashes like a silver bow on its way to Rouen.

He read on to midnight, believing that his guardian spirit had directed him. After that, he never faltered in his work. Later, he found, one day in the university library, some prints of Botticelli, whose women bore a likeness to the Lady of his Dreams. During his later drunken days at the university he had lost her. Lost she had been for many a year, but sometimes, lately, as he had played his fiddle of an evening in his bower, he had seen her vague face and figure among the birches. Dreams, dreams, what was the matter with him to-day? He flung himself from the sofa, yawned, and stretched his great arms. Was he getting tired of River of Strangers? He must take these megrims out of himself by action.

"Rosy," he called.

“What is it?”

“Bring me my moccasins and two pairs of socks.”

Rosy appeared in the doorway.

“I’m going over to Fond du Lac to see John Paul.”

“It’s far to go in an afternoon.”

“I’ll be back soon after nightfall.”

He strapped on his snowshoes, slung his skis, and departed. Rosy watched him swing off. “No kisses to-day,” she said to herself. “He’s in a bad temper after all that whisky. I must cook one good dinner to-night.”

CHAPTER III

Spring came at last with a sudden leap; the snows melted and May-flowers blossomed on the hummocks. One day, the river began to creak and groan; the ice barrier burst, and huge cakes began to float out to sea. The swollen river was deep blue streaked with pale greens along the ripples; the ice cakes dazzling white against banks lined with sturdy blue-green spruces above which were puffy wind-blown clouds. After a few days came tender greens. Rosy found some violet clumps in a sheltered nook, dug them up, and put them in pots along the window sill, where, in a little while, they put out broad leaves and long-stemmed blossoms. In the still water below the hill, the trout took Alex's Jock Scott and brown hackle; he was happy again, tramping along the streams.

Then came summer with a profusion of gay-coloured flowers, a mild generous season with no extreme heat. There was little sickness at that time, since all were out of doors in the sunshine. Alex worked in his garden in the mornings and was happy in his birch grove, reading and playing his fiddle, through long afternoons. He had almost forgotten about the parson.

One afternoon, in late September, Alex went shooting, his spaniel following close at his heels. He knew every alder cover between the ridges where grouse and woodcock love to lurk in the damp grasses, and followed his favourite haunts along unnamed brooks. It was hard shooting in that country, for the grouse rose with a sudden whirr and gave only a flash of whirling brown between the trees, and the flushed woodcock nose-dived, like a stricken aëroplane. But his eye was keen, he was used to such rough shooting, and his bag was soon filled with the birds his dog retrieved for him. On his way home, he crossed a ridge and bagged two dappled ptarmigans that rose from the gray rocks of the hillside. Beyond the ridge was a famous duck pond. He lay down in the yellow reeds and listened to the quacking, domestic chatter in the pond below. Presently a couple of blue wings splashed noisily, rose, and flew in Alex's direction. He shot these, and, slinging them over his shoulder, turned homeward. He loved this season, the season of storing up against the long cold of the winter. His cellar was already stocked with potatoes, vegetables, and boxes of smoked salmon. In November, he would hang up in his larder many geese, ducks, and grouse. Later, he would shoot a young bull moose and a couple of caribou. He felt

happy as he strode over the hills and thought about these things. After all, this was a man's life; lonely sometimes, it was true, but at any rate remote from bores, hypocrisy, and religious humbug. Here he would grow old in peace, reading, thinking, playing the fiddle, drinking, hunting, and tramping his woods.

He followed the ridge and came through his bower, where yellow birch leaves came whirring down, to settle near the great rock for their long rest. "Thus all things end," he thought. He hurried on, and as he broke through the spruces, he saw two men standing before his bungalow. One he recognized as the squat, thickset figure of Duggan. As he came nearer, he saw that the other, clad in a brown Norfolk jacket and baggy flannel trousers, was rangy, tall, and thin. His pale face was heavily lined, and though his tweed cap partially covered his forehead, it was apparent that his hair was receding and that his temples were sprinkled with gray. He stood with his hands in his jacket pockets staring with prominent and spectacled gray eyes at the outline of the shaggy mountain beyond the river. God! It must be the bloody parson! Duggan had noted Alex's approach and twinkled derisively with his fingers.

"He's like the fellow on the pole stuck full of arrows," thought Alex, as he came up to them with his noiseless swinging stride.

Duggan's pig eyes shone as he said: "Doctor, this is Mr. Sedding, the missionary."

Sedding started and, turning toward Alex, held out his hand.

"How do you do, Doctor. Mr. Duggan's been telling me about you." Alex wondered how much, as he threw the game on the ground and shook hands.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Sedding. Did you have a good voyage out?"

"Very good, no storms at all; the trip up river was the most trying. I got stiff sitting day after day in the canoe."

"You should have taken a turn at the paddles."

"I tried it, but it seemed to make the boatmen nervous. Curious fellows, aren't they?"

"They have very distinct ideas about canoes."

"Where did you get all the game?" said the parson, aware for the first time of the birds on the ground. It seemed to take him a long time to change focus and become aware of objects near him.

“Over yonder along the brooks.”

“Game is plentiful in this country, then?”

“Of all kinds,” said Duggan, wagging his thumb in the direction of Rosy’s room. Duggan was tickled with Alex’s predicament. Nothing so rare as the lodging of the parson with the doctor and Rosy had happened for him in years.

“I must be going now,” said Duggan. “It’s nigh supper time. I hope the doctor will lodge you well, Mr. Missionary. You two will work together: one cares for souls; the other, bodies.”

“Very well put, Mr. Duggan.”

“But a word in your ear, Parson,” said Duggan, grinning broadly. “You’d better try your arts of conversion on the doctor first. The rest of us are only ordinary fellows, but he reads big books and is an out-and-out heathen and disbeliever.”

Sedding felt that the conversation was rather personal for so short an acquaintance, and he turned it in another direction.

“You have a fine view here,” he said. “Does the river freeze over in winter?”

“Nearly always,” said Duggan.

“And you have snow too during the winter season?”

“Several inches.”

Sedding’s staring eyes turned back to the mountain, behind which the sun had dropped. He seemed to forget his companions for a moment; they all stood in silence. Beyond the river the mountain in shadow was a great mass of heliotrope mottled with spots of gray stone and tree trunks. The river was clad in a purple haze; a cloudless sky behind the mountain flamed with lemon-yellow.

“Look, look!” cried the parson suddenly. Duggan and Alex started.

“Look, look, the Cross,” he cried again in his shrill voice. He stood with staring eyes and outstretched arms. On the top of the mountain, silhouetted against the lemon sky, stood a pine stump with two half-broken branches stuck out on either side. A vivid imagination might have made of it a cross. Alex stood bewildered at the excited outburst; Duggan shrugged his shoulders and, grinning broadly, tapped his forehead with two fingers.

"He won't last long," he said silently with his lips to Alex, and made his departure.

"Come in and I'll show you your room," said Alex, turning toward the house.

Sedding became aware of his existence again and, picking up his bag, followed.

"My boxes will be up in the morning, Mr. Duggan says. Some of the men will carry them up the hill."

Alex led the way, though he hated to introduce such a stranger to the place he loved.

"Here's where you'll sleep. I hope you'll find it comfortable. We'll eat in about an hour, as Rosy didn't expect you."

He thought it best to introduce her name casually.

"Right, I'll have time to wash up and change my clothes."

"If any of your things are wet, you can have them dried in the kitchen."

"Thanks."

Alex went back to his office, took a stiff peg of whisky, and sat down on the couch to think. What kind of a strange creature was this dropped from the sky? Could he endure him; would he be the prying kind, or would he pay strict attention to his business? He was obviously odd and something of a fanatic. He sprang up quickly and went into the kitchen. Rosy, in her element, was bustling about with pots and pans; strangely enough, she loved cooking. She was baking a salmon and boiling potatoes in their jackets, for she knew Alex liked them that way. She smiled up at him with her big brown eyes.

"The parson's come, Rosy."

"I know, I peeked through the window and see you all."

"We'd almost forgotten him."

"I wish the canoe had upset on La Plonge."

"Don't you like the look of him?"

"No," she pouted. "I only want you here."

"Well, we must make the best of what the Lord sends us. How long before dinner? Don't forget, you're my staid and respectable housekeeper, if

the holy man quizzes you. It's too bad you're so pretty, Rosy."

"Don't tease to-night. I'm sure he bring us bad luck. Why couldn't Duggan have put him in one of the shacks by the river?"

"Duggan prefers to have him away from headquarters. One theologian like McGowan is enough for him; besides, he's delighted to plague us."

"Couldn't you refuse to have him?—it's your house."

"I suppose it is. I built it, but the land is the Company's, and the lumber too. No, I couldn't very well refuse."

Rosy pouted and sidled up to Alex.

"You'll love me just the same?"

"Sure," said Alex, giving her a bear's hug. She was a good girl and had stuck to him faithfully for five years. He thought of the time he had first seen her in the passing canoe of Joliette the trader, and of how soon after she had said, when he invited her to keep his house, "Sure. I go anywhere with a man like you." Yes, Rosy was a brick, a fit companion for a man in a wild country. She never exacted promises or pledges or asked for past histories; with his love she was content. She was as simple in her morals as are the birds of the air, and yet had delicacy withal. She was faithful, she loved to cook good food for him, mend his clothes, and tend his house. There was no agreement between them; she was free to go when she chose. He paid her a monthly salary, but her wants, beyond pretty clothes, were few. She was frugal and hoarded up her wealth in a black teapot on the top pantry shelf. Alex's birthday fell in May; that was the greatest day of the year for her. Then she had a grand dinner and sat at table with him, and they interchanged gifts which they had made or bought in secret. He demanded nothing of her mind. Her attraction for him was largely physical, though often of an evening he invited her to come in and sit by the hearth, while he talked to the gods with his fiddle. She had temperament and felt and loved music.

"It'll be just the same, Rosy darlin'," said Alex, as he turned to his room. His voice sounded strange as he said it. He shaved, washed, dressed himself neatly, and went into the living room, where he found Sedding standing with widespread legs before the fireplace.

"You must feel free to do what you like in my house," said Alex, as he struck a match under the piled-up sticks.

"You mean I should have lit the fire?"

"Yes, it's chilly of September evenings."

"I was quite comfortable; in fact, I'm never cold."

"How's that?"

"I'm never cold. My mind is on things of the spirit; perhaps I have an inward flame that warms me."

"Ay, man, but it's cold here in winter, thirty, forty, fifty below, even. Have you ever felt the strong cold?"

"Never, I've always lived in England. We often have skating on the Broads. I suppose it's much the same."

"Not at all the same," said Alex.

"Well, physical things are largely a matter of thinking; each man's world lies within himself."

"I've read something like that myself, but you'll find on a breezy morning, with the mercury frozen, that a fur coat and moose shanks are better than any amount of thinking."

"Well, perhaps; time will tell. I can't see it now."

Alex saw by Sedding's wandering eyes that he was no longer interested in the conversation and that his mind had passed on to something else. To dart out of abstraction, engage for a moment in conversation about reality, and to retreat as suddenly to its original ground was a habit of the parson's mind. It embarrassed Alex, who went out to his office to have another whisky as Rosy announced that dinner was ready. Sedding mumbled a grace while Alex sat awkwardly in his chair and Rosy stood demurely by the kitchen door. She enjoyed Alex's embarrassment, something she had never seen before. There was little conversation at dinner, for Alex was hungry after his long tramp, and the meditative parson, his mind sometimes a thousand miles away, was a good trencherman and made a splendid attack on his salmon and potatoes and duff pudding. It was evidently the first good meal he had had in days. "He's not so independent of the physical world after all," thought Alex. With his mug of coffee, Alex filled his pipe with shag and lit it.

"You smoke?" said Sedding suddenly.

"Ay, do you?"

"Never, I believe it injures both mind and body, God's precious gifts."

"We die sometime, anyway."

“But we are not our own. We have no right to do anything that shortens our lives. Tobacco contains a drug, a drop of which placed on a rabbit’s tongue kills it.”

Alex flushed at his childish remark and said rather tartly: “A useful fact for the Australians.”

“I don’t follow you.”

“They have an oversupply of rabbits out there.”

Sedding shrugged his shoulders. They rose and passed into the living room, where the fire crackled. Sedding sat down on the fur-covered sofa, while Alex lit the oil lamp.

“I suppose you know why I’ve come out here?”

“I’ve heard.”

“I’m going to carry the gospel of Christ to every man, woman, and child in this district.”

“Ay.”

“The missionary society tells me that you’re a terrible lot.”

“Pretty bad.”

“Are you a Christian yourself?”

“Not exactly.”

“Christian home, I suppose?”

“Ay, Presbyterian.”

“The established Church of Scotland, at any rate.”

“Yes, a perfectly respectable church.”

Sedding sat silent a moment. Alex’s resentment at his quizzing grew stronger and stronger.

“I gathered from the boatman’s conversation that Duggan, the factor, keeps a number of French and Indian girls. Is that correct?”

“You’ll have to ask him yourself, Parson.”

“I certainly shall, and that at an early date. No man has a right to live with any woman, let alone two or three, until the Church has blessed their union.”

“It’s not good for a man to be alone here in the frozen North, especially in the long months of winter. He might go mad.”

“You defend him, then?”

“I say nothing for or against. But look you, Parson, before you begin to correct, you have much to learn. The poor natives were a sight better off and more healthy before the so-called Christians corrupted them. What’s meat for one man is poison for another. Your religion from the Orient is for a land where the sun shines, where fruits grow in abundance, and life is easy, where the gods are loving and generous. Everything is different here. Except for a few months of summer, life is always a struggle, a fight against nature and the strong cold. Tornarsuk, chief of the native gods in the North, is a hateful, vindictive creature who rides the biting wind. The gods in the hearts of Northland men are no friendly gods. A man must get what comfort he can in this land.”

“St. Paul saith, ‘Beware lest any man spoil you with philosophy and vain deceit,’ and elsewhere, ‘Whoremongers and adulterers are an abomination.’ You manage to live alone; how do you stand it?”

“Some in the Northland take to whisky and some to women. Mine’s whisky, as you’ll soon observe.”

“I never drink.”

“Haven’t you any vice, Parson, not even a secret one?”

“Yes, I have one vice: it is that I am not active enough in the cause of God.”

“Not a very big vice.”

“A terrible one, the worst!”

Alex looked at the man curiously. He was longing for some news of the outside world, something of England, a land that he had idealized but never seen, something of the men whose books he had read. He tried to turn the conversation in that direction.

“You’re an Oxford man, I suppose?”

“Yes.”

“What’s it like over there in the university?”

“The university is a sink of corruption, and the lives of the undergraduates a steady round of debauch. Only a few are real followers of

Christ."

"But surely there are some intellectuals among them."

"Intellectuals! Darwinists, Huxleyites, Materialists! Spirituality is dead! Only those who have memories of Pusey and Newman are worth while. All these have fled to Cuddeston."

"But the dons and professors?"

"Worse than the undergraduates: an unbelieving, sensual, port-guzzling lot. Driver, of Christ Church, with his higher criticism, is a tool of the devil. No daughter of tradesman or porter is safe in that degraded, godless town."

"Something like River of Strangers. I had no idea we so closely resembled the ancient University of Oxford."

"There's no hope there, but much here, where men are primitive and simple."

"At any rate, they're not hypocrites; nobody pretends."

"Some hope here, and the cross in the sky was a good omen."

"A tough job before you, my boy!" thought Alex.

Sedding relapsed into abstraction for a few minutes and as suddenly broke out of his reverie.

"Now, let's begin at the beginning. What about you—why do not you devote yourself to the service of Christ?"

"Look here, Parson, we must not only begin at the beginning, but have an understanding from the beginning as well. You're in my house, presumably my guest; you mustn't quiz me or ask me personal questions about my religion. You've your ideas that you've learned in your world, and I've mine that I've learned in mine. I'm only trying to get by quietly and peaceably. I came to River of Strangers for that, and I won't have my world disturbed. Pray, preach, and fast as much as you like, but leave me alone. Is that understood?"

Sedding was not in the least insulted or perturbed.

"The voice of God is stronger than the will of my host, even in his own house. I must speak what God puts into my mouth."

"Then I sha'n't listen," said Alex. "Whenever you begin to talk religion, I'll play the fiddle. Fire away," and he took down his instrument, tuned it, and began to play some selections from "Martha" that he had lately got in a

packet of music and committed to memory. Sedding sprawled in one corner of the sofa, stretched out his feet toward the blaze, and said nothing. His eyes stared into the blazing coals among which he saw a burning heart. Alex played on and on with all his cunning, drifting into the sextet from “Lucia” and the minor theme of the “Blue Danube” waltz, but there was no response from the man who stared into the fire. His mind was far away and his eye never quickened as the music passed from a lyric strain to a yearning minor.

Alex cursed him in his heart. There was no music in the man. Even an Indian would have understood a little. Here was a man who had travelled thousands of miles to change the souls of men, but his talk had revealed no feeling for the immensity of the ocean, the majesty of gleaming bergs, the sweep of a great river hemmed in by the forest. All these things he had passed without observing them. He had not seen the beauty of the purple mountain speckled with gray and backed with flaming yellow; only a blasted tree like a cross upon the summit. Neither the beauty of the world nor the beauty of music touched him. He was arid. What a strange obsession, this passion for religion!

He put away his fiddle and rose to his feet. Sedding stood up also.

“Good-night, Parson, I see you don’t like music.”

“Only hymns and sacred pieces.”

“Breakfast at seven.”

“Right; good-night, Doctor.”

As Alex lay in bed that night he cursed Duggan roundly. How could he endure this fanatic? It seemed to him that the face of Rosy, untutored wild girl, full of emotion and intuition, was far finer than that strangely lined, restricted, and inhibited pale face of the parson who had been foisted upon him.

Sedding began his work of Christianization the day after his arrival. He learned from Alex that the men had supper about half-past four, and soon after that time he walked down toward the Post, his Bible, hymn book, and Book of Common Prayer under his arm. He stood on a little triangle of grass where the trail forked near the fur-curing hut, opened his Bible, and began to read:

“ ‘Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might.

"'Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

"'For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

"'Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand-therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness;

"'And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace:

"'Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.

"'And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God:

"'Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints;

"'And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel.

"'For which I am an ambassador in bonds; that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.'"

Sedding had a clear, well-trained voice. The message of Paul to the people of Ephesus rang out strangely on the crisp air and was mockingly echoed back from the mountain. At first, he had no audience, but indifferent to that fact, he read on and on; the sun glittered above the mountain that nodded in shadow, the spruces swayed slightly, the dark river raced to the sea. Presently, an unkempt half-breed lurched out of the mess hall, stared, drew nearer, and crouched down on his haunches. He understood a little English, but he had no idea of what the parson was talking about. He was simply moved by curiosity, by hearing a new voice in a place where everything was known, and by the appearance of this strange man with pale face and staring eyes. For a long time, he was the only human auditor, then others came out of the mess hall and joined the single listener. They too squatted down on their haunches or leaned against the hut and spat tobacco juice into the grass. Duggan strolled out, joined the group, and, standing behind the others, put his fingers to his nose and twinkled them at the doctor, who came down the trail from the bungalow. Presently, with exception of the devout McGowan, who stood lounging in the mess-hall doorway in an

apron that had once been white, every man in the post was gathered around Sedding. When he had finished reading the Scripture passage, he bowed his head and repeated the Lord's Prayer and the General Confession.

"'Almighty and most merciful Father; we have erred and strayed from Thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against Thy holy laws . . .'"

Those marvellous winged words fell upon dumb ears; only Alex was moved by them because of their beauty and exquisite simplicity. Turning his back to his audience and his face toward the East he repeated the creed. He attempted no sermon, but opened his hymn book and boldly raised the hymn he had selected. No one joined in the singing, for, even had they been willing, they knew neither words nor tune. Clearly his voice rang out and echoed back from the cliff across the river:

"The Son of God goes forth to war,
A kingly crown to gain;
His blood-red banner streams afar!
Who follows in His train?

"A glorious band, the chosen few
On whom the spirit came,
Twelve valiant saints, their hope they knew,
And mock'd the Cross and flame.

"They met the tyrants' brandish'd steel,
The lion's gory mane,
They bow'd their necks, the death to feel;
Who follows in their train?

"They climbed the steep ascent of Heav'n
Through peril, toil, and pain;
O God, to us may grace be given
To follow in their train."

No one laughed or made any noise; they received all dumbly with the mute impassiveness of the trees and stones around them. The hymn done, Sedding gave them his benediction and, turning on his heel without a word, strode up the hill toward Alex's house. The men stared after him, and then lounged over to the bunk house, where Indian Pete played native airs on a squeaky accordion. They whistled and stamped their feet. Duggan and Alex were left standing together.

“He’s a caution,” said Duggan. “What’s the matter with him—cracked?”

“Obsession.”

“What’s that?”

“Mind flowing all in one direction.”

“He’s no use here, the boys won’t listen to him.”

“Why did you ever wish him on me?”

“Don’t you like his company?” chuckled Duggan.

“He’s awful to live with. He quizzed me last night about you and your girls.”

“Don’t give me away. You know the saying about those that live in glass houses.”

Alex laughed.

“I suppose he may last through the winter, but never again can you billet your parsons on me.”

“I’ll take the next one.”

Then they began to talk of a hunting trip to the La Plonge still-water for the great flocks of brant and geese that were collecting there to fly south. The Indians who had brought Sedding up river had brought word to Duggan of the preparations for migration.

Every night, while the weather held, Sedding repeated his service, though he never had as many auditors as on the first occasion. He preached, prayed, and sang with devotion but without result. He knew Duggan and the scoundrelly McGowan by sight, but he never talked with the men, learned their names, or attempted their acquaintance. He was always remote and full of contemplation.

Within a week, he invaded Duggan’s office, accused him of keeping Indian girls, called him a whoremonger, and invoked the wrath of Heaven against him. Sedding was no coward; he could easily have died a martyr’s death. Duggan retaliated by pushing him out of his office, though he dared not do him violence because of his fear of the Company. “Livin’ in sin,” he thundered, repeating Sedding’s words; “what do you know about a man’s life here in the North?” Sedding tripped over a bench and fell backward on the sawdust of the floor, but, nothing chagrined, he said:

“Thou shalt not commit adultery. He that looketh on a woman and lusteth for her has already committed adultery in his heart.”

“You poor louse of a man,” yelled the enraged Duggan, “go back to your home where you belong, where men have skim-milk in their veins instead of blood.”

Sedding picked himself up, brushed the sawdust from his clothes, and strode to the door. There he turned and said:

“You’re living in sin, Mr. Duggan, you’re living in sin, and unless you change your ways, God will punish you some day.” He walked out of the room and turned his eyes toward the blasted pine, the cross on the mountain-top. He was neither aggrieved nor insulted; he enjoyed suffering for the cause. He had delivered God’s message, and for him the incident was closed. But with Duggan, who raged and cursed half the night, drinking glass after glass of whisky and bullying McGowan shamefully, it was different. The parson had Duggan’s undying hate from that day, and Duggan never forgot his hates. McGowan, to please his master, dubbed the parson “Wild Jack”—Sedding’s first name was John—the name caught the fancy of the half-breeds and stuck.

When the snows and cold came and Sedding could no longer hold services out of doors, he came to the mess hall faithfully every night at supper time. Duggan dared not exclude him, but he rattled with the dishes, pounded his pipe on the table, and shouted obscene jokes to the men in patois that made them roar with laughter. Duggan had a rough wit. Sometimes he sang a high falsetto tenor to the parson’s hymn, ending each stanza in a squeaky quaver. Of course, the men took the cue from their boss, and the services became a form of comic entertainment, interrupted as they were by laughter and rude noises. Sometimes the girls were allowed in to join the tittering group.

Often it was necessary for Alex to visit the Indian villages Lac Seul and La Tuque, farther up the river, when word was sent down of sickness or broken limb. Thither Sedding accompanied him to preach to the Indians. He was more comfortable with them. Although they understood nothing of what he said, they never laughed but listened in a kind of dignified silence. Sedding would have been surprised had he known what they thought of him; they looked upon him as a kind of mad white medicine man. For them, as for many primitive peoples, the insane and idiots were especial favourites of the gods. Once, after his prayer, a child who had been ill became suddenly well, and this confirmed their belief in his powers of magic. Thus, a certain

vogue sprang up for him in these Indian encampments. He never learned the trail, but with the help of a guide he visited them weekly and they heard him gladly.

Gradually, winter closed in around them; in October, the snows began; November saw the river fettered in blue ringing ice. The geese had flown southward, the caribou began their migration. Alex and the parson spent many evenings together, but Alex learned little more than at the first encounter. Sedding gazed into the fire, meditating on the millennium and the Cross of Christ; while Alex, whose conversion he had abandoned, read and played his fiddle. Alex liked to read two books at once: a sound book that tried the muscles of his mind, and a romance for pleasure. He had always had a poetic and philosophical bent. As a relief to some hours of Locke's "Human Understanding" or Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason," he would turn to "War and Peace" or Thackeray's "Esmond."

One December night, as they had sat long in silence, each engaged with his own occupation, Sedding broke out:

"Do you know what I must do? I see it now."

"What?" said Alex, laying down his book wearily. Sedding had broken into a particularly fine passage.

"Establish a Christian home in this wilderness."

"What are you talking about?"

"Establish a Christian home and give them the example of a pure and holy marriage."

"How do you propose to manage that?"

"I've never told you, Doctor, but I am engaged to be married to a lady in England. She does not believe in the cause as devoutly as I do—that is her only fault—but she loves me and believes in me. She has promised to come to me when I call her."

"You wouldn't bring a lady out to this place?"

"That's exactly what I intend to do."

"That's impossible! How and where would you live?"

"I suppose we'd have to lodge with you until we get a house built."

“Good Lord, why hast thou forsaken me?” thought Alex. “First a mad parson invades my house, and now he wants to bring his woman with him.”

“You’re mad, man, to think of such a thing. This is no place for a woman.”

“I’m not mad. God has put the thought into my mind. Say, Doctor, that you will lodge us for a little till I can get something built. Rosy is such an excellent cook, you have plenty of room here, and I am sure we’d all get on capitally together.”

Alex groaned, his innate sense of hospitality deeply strained.

“You’re mad, man—mad as a hatter.”

“I’m not mad, I’ve heard the voice of God. I’ve decided. I’m going to send for her. You surely won’t compel us to live in one of Duggan’s shacks by the river?”

“No,” said Alex at last, “I won’t compel you to do that. That would be too horrible for any lady. If you must commit this madness, I’ll keep you for a little, but you must hurry on with your building as soon as the frost leaves the ground.”

Sedding sprang up. “I’ll write the letter now. I’ll tell her to come by the first boat in April. A post leaves in the morning, does it not?”

“Yes, Surette’s dog team leaves early and will carry the last bag of mail.”

“I’ll take it down to the mess hall to-night.”

Sedding sat down at the table to write his letter. Alex stretched out his legs and did nothing, he could read no longer. He was angry with himself for having half agreed to the parson’s plan. Perhaps he had better withdraw his consent before the letter was finished. He looked over at Sedding who, with puckered brow, was busily engaged in his task. In spite of himself, he felt a certain sympathy for this weak and tiresome idealist without a single friend in the Post, who had pledged himself to achieve the impossible. Duggan had been too hard on him. Still, the morals of the Post were none of his business and he could not see why he should be disturbed in his own house by the very things he had sought to escape. First a mad parson and then an Englishwoman! Good Lord, what must she be like to have fallen in love with Sedding! Probably she wore spectacles and had a big nose that she would poke into everything. If she attempted to run the housekeeping, sparks would fly in the kitchen, for Rosy would brook no invasion of her domain. Of course, she would spot Rosy and him at once; trust a woman for

that. Well, it seemed impossible to escape fate, even in the uttermost parts of the earth. He felt a strange and unusual sinking at heart. Outside, the snow fell softly over everything; a dismal north wind swirled the flakes, whined about the eaves, and snorted down the chimney. There was something malicious and vindictive in the sounds; they seemed to Alex the mocking voices of Northern gods.

CHAPTER IV

"I tell you, Doctor, I'm going to wear the boots I brought from home."

"They'll leak; your feet will get wet and freeze."

"No, they won't leak."

"Any leather like that will soak up snow water."

"Haven't I told you that they were guaranteed by the Army and Navy stores? Besides, they're greased."

"Guaranteed and greased, they'll leak."

"I'm confident in them, and I'm going to wear them, no matter what you say."

"Very well, then," said Alex wearily, throwing two extra pairs of mukluks and moccasins into the pack. "You'll perhaps learn some day, Parson, that local knowledge is worth something."

Alex was about to make a long journey with Sedding, and for days there had been a jangle about equipment. It had come about in this wise: As the winter wore on and Sedding had not made a single convert, receiving only insult and derision from Duggan and the gang, his interest in preaching had flagged. He was obviously doing no good at the Post, and deep snows kept him from the Indian villages. He might have got there through half-broken trails, but even from the Indians he had received a rebuff that had cut deeply.

At first, he had read to them passages from the New Testament. When he declaimed such passages, " 'Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal,' " the Indians sat in grave silence, charmed by the music of the great apostle's words. One day, he gave them, through an interpreter, the story of Noah's Ark, and at a subsequent visit, that of Jonah and the Whale, hoping by means of these simple tales to impress them with the greatness of his God. After that, they would have nothing but these passages, for story-telling is a great pastime with the Indians, and those gifted as story-tellers are held in high repute. Sedding, in his innocence, thought that he was making a great spiritual impression. On the occasion of the fourth reading of the story of Noah, a young brave tittered: the idea of that big boat tickled

him. The whole circle began to grin broadly, and at last broke into roars of laughter. They had imagination enough to see the troubles of Noah in getting all the animals into his boat, and the humorous situations arising from providing for and keeping such a cargo in harmony.

"The white men can beat us all at making up stories," said one.

"Do the white men believe these, or are they stories such as we make up to amuse ourselves on long winter nights?" queried another.

Sedding was deeply shocked at their irreverence. He abandoned the Indians for a time and mooned about the house or spent long hours in his room wrestling in prayer. Alex, though sorry for the parson, could scarcely endure the sight of him. At table, there was little or no conversation. Sedding's idea to establish a Christian home in the wilderness, as a visible symbol of right living, grew and grew; it became a pet obsession, and when he talked, it was of nothing but this. Alex was thoroughly bored over the too-frequent recital.

In midwinter, a letter arrived from England brought from Quebec by the overland mail. Sedding was elated by the news it contained. Mary Ramsay, his fiancée, wrote that she was willing and anxious to come and share his work with him, and that she had made inquiries from the Company and would arrive on their first boat in April. Now he was jubilant and certain of success. He even pictured Duggan in a happy state of matrimony. It would be necessary for him to meet Mary at the port and bring her up river. He realized that he could not go alone, and he besought Alex to go with him. Strangely enough, Alex was free; a young doctor detailed for a post farther in the interior had been caught in River of Strangers by heavy snows and must remain there till the river broke. He could take care of all cases of sickness or accidents. Something pushed Alex on to this adventure, though he hated the company of Sedding. At any rate, he would have him out of the house, and it was impossible and inhuman to allow Sedding, helpless as a babe, to attempt a journey of two hundred and fifty miles over the snow and ice of a frozen river. Alex soon realized that he was the only one to go, for he found, after a preliminary conversation with Duggan, that the factor's hatred was so intense that he would allow none of his responsible men to accompany the parson even on such a necessary journey. Moreover, the idea of an adventure against snow and ice, the testing of his strength against the rude forces of nature, attracted Alex. He was sorry, also, for this unfortunate Englishwoman. He knew what she would be like: he had formed a very definite picture of the kind of woman who could fall in love with Sedding: a female bluestocking with spectacles, prominent upper teeth, and a nose tilted

as if in the permanent presence of a bad odour. She, too, must be a religious maniac, and would compare everything done in the rough colonies with the way things were done in England. He would get them out of his bungalow by August if he had to build them a house with his own hands. However, she was a stranger and a woman, and he must do everything possible to make easy her coming to this rough land.

By the middle of March, Alex and Sedding were making ready for departure. They were packing up for the long journey down river. It had been a mild winter in River of Strangers, as winters go there, the thermometer rarely falling more than forty below zero. The river ice had not formed as thick as in previous winters, and it looked as if the break might come early that spring. They could not afford the risk of being caught on a breaking river and missing the boat. As a matter of fact, Sedding had been fretting and fuming for a fortnight in his anxiety for departure.

On the nineteenth of March, they set off with a five-dog team, the sledge packed with tent, sleeping bags, extra moccasins and mittens, oil stoves, and food for themselves and the dogs. Since Sedding could be only something between a hindrance and a help, Alex took Roxy, the half-breed Eskimo. The dog team he had chosen with care: Lingo, Wolf, and Nanock were thoroughbred huskies, Rose and Foxey crosses between husky and malamute. He was careful to avoid siwash dogs, for, while they often pulled well, they were, for the most part, unreliable and full of dirty tricks. Rose, the lead dog, he knew of old, for he had made many journeys with her. She was not large, but was great-hearted. No matter how heavy the snow, she would pull to her full weight; her trace was always tight. If she slipped in the snow, she was instantly on her feet, straining at the collar. She always slept upon the sledge at night to guard it.

They set out gaily from the bungalow that morning, Rose's bell jingling, the bright-coloured cloth on each dog's collar bobbing merrily. Though the sun shone bright, each dog's head was enveloped in a little cloud of breath steam. Rosy stood at the door to see them off. Alex turned back a moment to kiss her good-bye.

"Be a good girl, Rosy, and mind the house."

"I will be good. You have Roxy with you, he the only boy I flirt with," she said, with twinkling eye.

"I may be gone two months. There's no saying when that boat gets through the ice."

“The house will be clean and tidy when you come back, and if the fish come up the river early, I look out for the winter’s supply.”

“Larsen will plant the garden if I am late. I have arranged with him. He is a good gardener and will do what you tell him.”

“Good, but be careful, dear one. It is dangerous on the river when the ice breaks. Push on hard at first, before you meet the tide drift. I wanted to see you, but you should not have turned back after the dogs started. You know it is unlucky.”

“I will be careful.”

“Be careful! Last night I dreamed that you were lost, not wholly lost, somehow half lost. It was a nightmare! Come back soon to your Rosy.”

Alex kissed her again and waved good-bye. The three men on snowshoes tramped beside the sledge. As they passed along the trail by the mess house, Duggan and McGowan slouched in the doorway. It had been necessary for Alex to confide in Duggan the reason for their journey, in order to get permission to leave the Post. The news had spread like wildfire among the men, and was the subject of jest and many a caustic remark from McGowan.

“Bon voyage, Doctor,” called Duggan, ignoring Roxy and the parson. Alex waved his hand in acknowledgment but said nothing. He thought that Duggan and the gang had carried matters too far with Sedding. Despite the fact that he was bored from morning to night, he felt some sympathy for the parson. Some ruffian, presumably McGowan, called from a shack door:

“Wild Jack’s going to get his girl.”

The blood flew to Alex’s cheek; the parson was his comrade in adventure now, not one to be lightly insulted. For a moment he had half a mind to turn back and punish the scoundrel, but he checked himself and pushed on beside the dogs. Sedding’s face twitched but he said nothing.

They entered upon the broad expanse of white that was the river. Beneath four feet of ice and snow, the green water slipped silently seaward. The sun shone with almost level rays from the southern horizon, lighting up the majestic cliff with its towering bare trees, and glittering on the crusted snow. The air was clear: there was no wind blowing; everywhere a great silence save for the crunch of runner and snowshoe, the patter of the dogs’ feet and the tinkle of Rose’s bell. The weather was propitious; it was an ideal day for travelling such as one seldom found in the North. Sedding, happy to be on the move, walked beside the dogs or, if they struck soft snow, tramped

in front to break a trail for the sled. Roxy cracked his long whip and uttered his round of senseless objurgations familiar to all dog drivers, while Alex walked behind, guiding the sled by the handle bars.

"A great day to travel," said Alex to Roxy.

"You bet."

"We must make thirty miles to-day."

"We can, how much he stand?"

"He'll do, I think."

"I travel many days, I never travel better day than this. Tornarsuk must be asleep or having trouble with his wife to-day."

All day the weather remained fine and they pushed forward rapidly. Sedding looked about him little, but showed no signs of fatigue. About four, as darkness began to settle, Alex estimated that they had done their thirty miles and gave orders to pitch the tent. They unhitched and fed the dogs and Roxy cut a pile of firewood and cooked the supper. It was a fine starlight night with not a breath of wind blowing. They turned in and slept warmly in their fur sleeping bags. Next morning they were off in the dark at about four. The dogs pulled willingly, and Alex saw before him another thirty miles run off the long journey. As he guided the sled by its handles, he could not but reflect on the strangeness of the journey and the way in which Sedding's fate seemed bound up with his. About noon, as they stopped for a snack, Roxy called his attention to a small black cloud to the northward, apparently travelling straight up the river to meet them.

"There comes Tornarsuk," he said. "He not forget us after all."

"It looks like a snow cloud," said Alex.

"Ay, snow and wind."

Sedding overheard the conversation and began to fumble in his prayer book, perhaps to find the prayers for fine weather.

"We'll camp early to-night," said Alex.

"We better camp now," replied Roxy.

"No, no, we must push on while we have this chance of fine weather."

Suddenly they felt chilled. Alex looked at the thermometer: it had already begun to drop. The southern sun was still shining on them, but the instrument registered five below zero. He stepped up to Sedding, pulled the

parkee well forward over his face and showed him how to arrange his scarf, threw the cooking utensils on the sled, and pushed on rapidly. The dogs sensed what was coming and ran, whining nervously. In about an hour, the blizzard struck them. At first came great flakes of snow, then the wind with a howl and a roar through the cañon of the river. In an instant the sun was blotted out: now nothing but white and angry gray. Invisible and hostile hands tore at them and pushed them. It was useless to try to make head against such a storm. They pulled in to the bank, in the slight shelter of a big rock, and began fumbling with the tent. The wind almost tore it from their hands as it flapped open. Sedding stood idly with his back against the rock: he knew that he would be only in the way of the two men. Alex ran over to him and shouted in his ear, "Move about man, flap your arms. Do something or you'll freeze. Tramp down the snow there by the end of the rock where we're going to pitch the tent."

Somehow Alex and Roxy managed to get the tent rope fastened from a jag of the rock to a stout spruce. In the furious gale the canvas and rope slashed and struggled like a half-pinioned eagle. There was no possibility of pegging down the tent, but luckily there were some great slabs of rock that had slipped down the cliff. These they laid on the windward flap and stretched four stout guy ropes to trees and stones. The hardest task was over. Smaller stones were laid about the tent to leeward, and over these snow was piled high, though the wind whirled it away almost as fast as they piled it. Sedding scraped and pounded with his snowshoes in a willing but ineffective way. With the tent pitched, Alex and Roxy took their axes and cut spruce and fir boughs. With armloads of these, they struggled back to the tent, shingled the tent floor, and made beds for the dogs outside to leeward. Rose would sleep nowhere but on the sledge. This they drew close to the tent door and made a comfortable place for her. Alex adjusted the stove pipe and tent stove with great difficulty, while Roxy cut down a dead pine and a white birch for firewood. At the end of two hours all was finished and they lay on their bags upon the spruce twigs exhausted with the effort. The tent stove burned furiously in the draught, and they were warm and comfortable. The blizzard roared like many wild beasts in the gully of the river. As long as the rocks, guy ropes, and tent held they were safe. "Otherwise," thought Alex, "it will be a matter of minutes."

"How do you like it, Parson?" he called out to Sedding.

"We are in the hands of God."

"Ay, but what god?"

"There is but one great God."

"The gentle myths of Greece and Palestine don't hold here."

"Even the hairs of our head are numbered. We shall get through safely, you shall see."

"Tornarsuk, hateful god of the Indians and Eskimo, rides the wind to-day. If this tent blows down, he will have us in half an hour." Roxy nodded approval.

"But it will not blow down. My God never fails me."

"Could you have put up the tent without Roxy and me?"

"No, you, too, are the instruments of God sent to protect me."

Alex was puzzled at the man's strange egotism.

Presently Roxy, rested after the struggle, stirred himself and began to get supper. Alex, slipping on his fur jacket and parkee, stepped out to get the dog pot, into which he put their ration of rice, tallow, and fish. The dogs, already deep in snow, were curled up on their beds of spruce, their bushy tails tucked about their toes. Rose gave from the sledge her five short barks of welcome. He dug out their feet, feeling them carefully and pressing each pad. None of them flinched or whined; thank goodness, there were no sore feet so far! How the storm raged! He examined the guy ropes; they were stretched taut but unfrayed; the rocks he had carried were holding the tent flaps firm. He drew forward his fur hood, wrapped his scarf firmly about his head, and, bending forward, ran out from the shelter of the rock to face the forty-mile gale. There was something fine about bidding defiance to the wild beast wind or the strong cold.

He turned back to the tent, opened the flap cautiously, and crept in. A good smell greeted him: Roxy had dinner ready—pork and beans piled on tin plates, and thick biscuits and molasses, and mugs of steaming tea. They were all hungry, and the contrast of discomfort without with the warmth of the tent made them glow with happiness. Alex missed his fiddle; he would have liked to play something to the accompaniment of that gale. He wondered who would ever write a symphony of ice and snow and cold with the arctic wind yelling through the cañon. Grieg might have done it, he thought; "In the Hall of the Mountain King" approached the theme. Sedding, too, looked happy as he chewed his biscuit and ate his beans. Regardless of the storm, he smiled cheerfully, thinking of his Christian home in the wilderness. After supper, they lay back on their sleeping bags. Roxy, who had a musical turn, sang a chanty he had learned from boatmen or sailors:

"Santa Anna fought for fame.
Away Santa Anna!
Santa Anna fought for fame
Along the plains of Mexico."

"A strange thing for a half Eskimo to be singing in the midst of a blizzard on a frozen river in the Northland," thought Alex. Who made that chanty and how had it travelled to Roxy's ear? He thought of the tall ships that had harboured before his home when he was a boy, and of how the sailors had sung when breaking out the anchor.

"Santa Anna's men were true,
Away Santa Anna!
They were the men for me and you
Along the plains of Mexico."

continued Roxy, quite unconscious that he had a listener. He had no regard for the meaning of his words—Santa Anna and Mexico meant nothing to him; the lilting melody carried him along.

After a while, they crept into their bags and lay in silence. One had to speak in a loud voice to be heard above the madness of the gale that tore at the tent and made the ropes creak. Suddenly Sedding spoke:

"Do you think the storm will delay us, Doctor?"

Roxy chuckled.

"Yes, it will delay us. We can't start till it stops."

"How long do blizzards like this last?"

"Sometimes a day, sometimes a week."

"Sometimes a month," piped up Roxy.

"We'll be in good time for the boat," said Alex comfortingly.

"I hope so."

"It's only by luck when the ice opens early in the Bay. The boats seldom get in till late in April. We can surely travel two hundred and fifty miles in a month."

In the morning, Alex pulled on his furs and crept out while the others slept. Four black muzzles in the snow marked the beds of the dogs, who had never stirred. Rose sprang up from the sledge and fawned on him. It had stopped snowing, and though the wind had abated, the temperature had dropped. He looked at his thermometer; it was 35 below. They must remain

where they were for the day. He patted Rose's head, led her back to the sledge, and then, reëntering the tent, crept into his bag without awakening his comrades. They could save up sleep, at any rate.

For five days they remained in that camping place, and for that time the wild beast wind raged. The tent stood, and Sedding seldom crept from its shelter. Roxy, clever axman, kept them well supplied with wood. On the third night, as they were composing themselves to sleep, the dogs began to whine and then snarl and howl. Alex knew what that meant.

"Timber wolves," he shouted to Roxy and seizing a brand from the stove, he dashed out and hurled it toward the gray pack. They retreated and sat down on their haunches in a circle. There were twenty of them. He could count their yellow eyes in the darkness. Roxy soon joined him.

"Timber wolves and starving. Get my rifle, Roxy."

Alex aimed at a pair of yellow eyes, though he could not see his sights, and fired. There came a yelp of agony and the whole pack disappeared around the bluff.

"They're starving, or they'd never be so bold."

"They'll be back when they eat their friend you hit."

"We must build a fire under the lee of the rock and stand watches."

"What's the matter?" cried Sedding, popping out of the tent. "Are we attacked?"

"Timber wolves."

"I thought it something serious."

"It's serious enough. We must stand watches or they'll have both our dogs and provisions."

"I can certainly help as a watchman."

"Yes, if you know how to keep a fire going."

Roxy fetched the ax to cut more wood while Alex brought coals from the stove and kindled a fire in a niche of the rock. Once started, it blazed fiercely. Roxy came back with armloads of birch logs. Alex looked at his watch: it was eight o'clock.

"You can stand the first watch, Parson, from eight to eleven, Roxy from eleven to two, and I the rest of the night. I'll show you how to keep the fire

going. Shove the embers together and pile on wood when it flags. Here's my rifle."

"I've never fired a rifle."

"All you have to do is to keep the muzzle away from you and pull the trigger. Call Roxy or me if they come too close, or fling a brand at them. They fear fire more than bullets. Walk about all the time, or you'll freeze, and don't go to sleep."

They built up the fire and Roxy and Alex went into the tent. As they lay, sleepless, they heard Sedding rattling at the wood pile and tripping over ropes. Once he apparently stepped on a dog, for there arose a howl in which anger, outrage, and disgust were mingled. Up and down he shuffled; then, to keep himself company, Sedding began to sing his favourite hymn. Alex heard his shrill voice above all the din of the storm, and could even distinguish the words:

"The Son of God goes forth to war,
  A kingly crown to gain;
His blood-red banner streams afar!
  Who follows in His train?"

After a long time, as Alex was just dozing off, he heard Sedding stop singing, rush toward the fire, and cry out:

"Scat, you ugly beasts."

Presently Sedding stuck his head in the flap.

"They won't go away, they're all around us, I've flung most of the fire at them."

Alex pulled on his furs and went out to find the fire, a mere spark, and, as Sedding had stated, a circle of yellow eyes. He seized his rifle and fired again. This time the shot went home. As the pack fell upon the dying wolf, Alex fired four shots into them in rapid succession. Wounded and unwounded fled yelping, bearing what they had torn from their fallen comrades.

"I guess they won't bother us more to-night." He built up the fire, and Sedding resumed his beat, taking up his song as he walked:

"They met the tyrant's brandish'd steel,
  The lion's gory mane,
They bow'd their necks, the death to fell,
  Who follows in their train?"

Alex fell asleep thinking how far love and religion could carry even a weak man.

For five days they lay in the tent sleeping, cooking, getting wood, feeding the dogs, and watching by night while the gale blew itself out. Sedding was restless and uneasy; that "sometimes a month" of Roxy had stuck in his mind. He dared not think what Mary would do if she found herself in Port Churchill alone.

On the sixth day, the wind had abated and Alex gave the order to move. It was still intensely cold. They broke out the sledge, packed it, rolled up the tent, hitched up the dogs, and set out. About two feet of snow had fallen, but it lay level nowhere. Sometimes the river ice was scraped bare and polished, so that the dogs found no "tooth" for their pull. Then snowshoes must be abandoned and slung over the shoulder. After a few hundred yards of "glare" came drifts three and four feet deep. Through these Roxy and Sedding tramped to break a trail while Alex held the pole of the sled to keep it from upsetting. It required great physical strength. When the trail was sidling, the sledge was held upright only with the greatest difficulty. Roxy might have done it, but he was busy breaking trail and encouraging the dogs. Sedding, always awkward on his snowshoes, wallowed ahead as best he could and gave some assistance in making a path for the dogs. It was wonderful to see Rose work; if she went down in the soft snow, she was up in an instant tugging at her trace. Toward the end of the day she was just as eager. Her example encouraged the other dogs. Whenever Roxy or Alex came near her, she looked up at them with big sympathetic eyes. Alex loved that dog. So they went on day after day through the deep snow and bitter cold. Sometimes the wind blew so fiercely that they made only five miles in a whole day's struggle. On the tenth day of their journey after the great blizzard, Sedding began to limp as he tramped.

"*Mal de raquette*," said Roxy.

Sure enough, Sedding had *mal de raquette*, a tendon of his right leg behind the knee becoming swollen and increasingly troublesome. It had developed from the unusual strain put upon the tendon in lifting the snowshoe through the heavy drifts. That night, Alex rubbed the tendon long and carefully and applied some menthol balm that seemed to give relief. It was necessary to keep Sedding on his feet, or he would become a serious encumbrance. As it was, Alex decided to remain in camp two whole days, till the parson's leg was better. The dogs were worn, and it was impossible to drag him on the sledge, where, even if the going had been good, he would have perished in the wind and strong cold. For during all this time they were

enduring the "strong cold" from thirty to fifty below: the strong cold that pierces any kind of clothing and drives one to continual motion. A moment's stillness, and one is chilled; if the hand is uncovered for an instant, the fingers begin to chill and freeze. They were bound to follow the river bed, coldest of all places, for there was no winter trail over the hills. Never had Roxy or Alex known such bitter weather in March.

As they neared La Plonge, the great rippling rapid, they saw that the river had broken through and that the water was gushing up like an artesian well. This was not because of the spring thaw, as it still held intensely cold. The ripple had frozen to the bottom and created a solid dam of ice. The flow from the great lakes and still waters far inland had not ceased, so that perforce the water must go somewhere, and it was driven into the air with giant force. There was no danger in passing this flashing column. They pressed close to the bank and escaped without being even wet by its spray. The danger lay below the rapid. Alex and his companions strapped on mukluks over their moccasins—Sedding's English boots had long been thrown into the discard—and prepared to "mush" it. Overflow ice had formed below the rapid, and for a long distance there was a depth of from three to nine inches of water over the solid ice. The rapid was spouting so fast and in such great volume that only a skim of ice had formed, even in the intense cold. The new ice was not strong enough to support the sledge and the dogs, and they continually broke through. It was an anxious time for Alex, who dared not risk the wetting of the sledge load of equipment and provisions. Sedding staggered wearily on. He was failing fast, but made no complaint. Whenever they left the overflow ice and reached a place covered with snow, it was necessary for Alex and Roxy to clear the feet of the dogs. The dampened snow froze between their toes, and unless the pieces of ice were immediately removed, lameness would result. Rose was clever enough to tear these fragments out with her teeth, and the other dogs tried to follow her example. But this consumed time, and Roxy and Alex found it easier to bare their hands and pick out the pieces of ice. They were thoroughly tired of this performance after having done it thirty times in one day. Without this precaution, however, they would have been lost. Even with the utmost care, two of the dogs went lame that night and had to be provided with dog moccasins. After the day of overflow ice came a day of "rubber ice," ice that bent and swayed and threatened to break and yet somehow miraculously held. Then, for a week, they travelled over unbroken snow without a trail. As they were about to stop for lunch one day, Alex saw Sedding stagger and grope wildly with his arms.

"How quickly night has come," he cried. "It is as black as pitch."

This was the last calamity—he was snow blind, blind as a kitten. It had come upon him in an instant, as it nearly always does. Fortunately, they had only fifty miles more to go. He grasped Sedding and led him to Roxy and told him to put his arm about his shoulder. Then he went back to the sled poles and pushed slowly on. He knew that they must rest for another period until the parson recovered. A little way ahead was a deserted mining camp that Alex knew on the west bank of the river. Just as dusk was falling, they came up to this dead village at the mouth of a little creek. It had been the product of some false rumours of gold in the creek and told a story of dreams, hope, despair, and wasted effort. The drifted snow lay untrodden in the doorways. They found a tight cabin and lodged in it. Alex was glad that they had not to pitch the tent that night. The dogs had an outhouse to sleep in. Roxy quickly got a fire going, and Sedding stretched himself out on his bag without saying a word. He was blind and weary but not discouraged. For four days they rested in that cabin, until Sedding had partially recovered his sight. The cold weather abated, and it was again good to travel. A day's journey below the mining town, they struck rough ice where the tidal waters had met the waters of the river. Here the ice was furrowed as if some giant or demi-god had been ploughing. Every ridge had to be clambered over, the sledge held steady, and the dogs helped up. Roxy and Sedding were harnessed with ropes to the sledge and helped as best they could. Never was sight more welcome than the little church tower at Port Churchill. They limped into the village a melancholy group just as a gibbous sun, that glowed red and yellow, like a distorted Chinese lantern, grazed the horizon. The dogs wearily hung their heads; Sedding, half-blind, clung to Roxy's arm; even Alex, giant as he was, staggered as he guided the sledge through the ruts. It had taken thirty-five days to do the two hundred and fifty miles from River of Strangers to the port. All the forces of the North had fought against them. Alex felt that, for a casual acquaintance like the parson, he had endured a good deal of physical discomfort.

CHAPTER V

Oh, the blessedness of that inn kept by Mrs. Morris at Port Churchill! Alex, Sedding, and Roxy washed themselves and turned into warm clean beds, where they rested for two days and nights without stirring. Mrs. Morris carried them hot soup and tea at intervals; she was used to seeing tired men, but seldom men so worn as these. She was a plump, rosy-cheeked woman of forty, whose accent told that she had been born in England. Beyond that, people knew little and made no inquiries. She received no letters and, like most of the villagers, she had no antecedents. They were a rare collection of waifs and strays of the Old World—a queer flock, the vicar often thought. No one ever asked about the past in Port Churchill. Everyone knew that Mrs. Morris had been there for twenty years and that for nineteen she had kept her inn well, conducted her bar in an orderly fashion, and made a considerable amount of money by trading in furs and small Indian wares. Old Salters said once, when he was drunk—that is, exceptionally drunk—that twenty years before, when she was a fresh-faced girl, she had been brought to the settlement by some rich English sportsman, who established her in the village and went off to hunt big game. But the Englishman never came back; either he was killed or he forgot his mistress and went home by some other route. At any rate, there she was, alone and abandoned without resources. After a period of despair, she went to work in the ramshackle inn kept by an old woman. Soon after, the old woman died, and she took over the establishment and somehow gradually became its owner. Everyone called her Mrs. Morris, for that was the name she announced on arrival, though they all thought that Mr. Morris was a myth. She had passed through the deep waters of affliction, she had been cut off from home and those who loved her, she had been carelessly abandoned in a rude land, but she had become neither cynical nor unkind. She loved men and liked to tend them. The tired travellers had fallen into good hands. Alex's type, iron man from the hinterland, drinker and lover of women, she recognized at once. She was not so much interested in him; but for Sedding, poor lamb from the old land, she had the deepest feeling. Him she nursed back to strength with a loving hand. Of course, he told her everything about his missionary work, his love affair, and the reason for his journey down river. Fortunately, Mrs. Morris was discreet and kept his counsel. She had received many strange confidences in twenty years.

She had gradually remodelled her inn and made it the most decent house in the village. New sills had been put in the place of rotting timbers, the roof straightened, new windows cut or enlarged, and the whole painted. Alex and Sedding lay in the two front rooms upstairs where they could look straight out across Hudson Bay. Downstairs there was but one large room with a door behind the bar that opened into the kitchen. From the strategic position near this door, Mrs. Morris could control the two important parts of her establishment. The bar was furnished with a counter and shelves full of bright-coloured bottles. At the other end of the room was a big fireplace, the brick of the chimney stretching to the ceiling. Upon this, some wandering artist, with a good sense of decoration, but without money to pay for bed and board, had painted a flowering apple tree as a return in kind. In the large room were a piano and long tables where meals were served. Mrs. Morris kept an orderly place. She liked to see men drink but hated drunkenness. She had a stout staff and a revolver on a shelf beneath the bar, and in her time had shown many a rowdy half-breed the door. She made no objection to men who brought women to her house, provided they were clean and orderly and had a sense of decorum. If they got drunk and began to use foul language, she turned them out at once. This little Englishwoman who had been abandoned on the frozen coast of Hudson Bay was courageous and in many ways admirable. She accepted human nature as it was, and demanded only quietness and order in her world.

Port Churchill consisted of two lines of straggling shacks about a single mud street. All the houses were low and banked with seaweed. They cowered close to the ground, as if to escape the biting wind, and gave one the impression of mushrooms newly emerged. There were a general store, a blacksmith's shop, a cobbler's place, a huge sawmill at the mouth of the river, for timber on the river banks was unlimited and easy of access, and the warehouse of the New World Company. The general store, run by a mean little Englishman named Eardley, was the place of most importance. In the summer, the men lumbered or fished or were longshoremen or worked for the Company; in the winter, there was nothing for them to do but to loaf in Eardley's store. It was the village clubroom. Eardley did not want them, they interfered with his business, they were for ever eating biscuits out of the boxes, or cracking nuts, or taking his dates, but as he was only five feet two in height and a natural coward, he could do little with the loafers. They sat around his stove and spat into the coal scuttle with accuracy and frequency. Eardley often complained that the coal was so damp that it would hardly burn in the stove, but his remonstrance carried no weight with them. Chief of these loafers was the drunken old Salters, who was captain and owner of

a tugboat that towed rafts of logs in the summer. He was known as “Cap” and was a person of great importance, since he could read and expound from the newspapers, which the boats brought at long intervals, the doings of the outside world. Salters boarded with Mrs. Morris, and the morning after the arrival of the travellers he retailed to his gang all that he had gathered.

“The big fellow with the red hair is the Company’s doctor up at River of Strangers.”

“He’s been down here before.”

“Ay, I thought I’d seen him.”

“Didn’t he used to come down here sometimes with Duggan the factor and live in one of the Company’s shacks by the mill?”

“That’s him, that’s him. I remember now. A great fellow to booze.”

“It takes something to give him a skinful.”

“Who are the others?”

“There’s their dog man and a long, skinny, pale-faced fellow.”

“Sure he isn’t the missionary that arrived last summer?”

“Perhaps he is. I didn’t get a good look at him. They had a hard trip, been in bed ever since they came.”

“I guess they had a rough time coming down river in this cold snap.”

“Shouldn’t wonder; even the red-head looked about worn out.”

“What do you suppose they’ve come for? Did they bring down any skins?”

“No, only a five-dog team and one sledge.”

“Perhaps the thin one’s going back on the boat.”

“Did he look sick?”

“No, just worn out.”

“What did Mrs. Morris say?”

“Nothing, you can’t get anything out of that woman.”

“They must be here to meet the first boat.”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps someone’s coming.”

"Perhaps."

"I'll try and find out from their dog man."

"He'll tell."

"Bring him down some day and we'll loosen him up with a little whisky blanc."

So the village gossips rambled on.

When, after a few days, Sedding was able to go about, he became strangely busy. He was impatient for the boat to arrive. Every morning and afternoon he went out to the jetty by the sawdust pile and peered for hours across the waters of the bay, dotted with ice cakes and small bergs. He always came back discouraged and despondent, and fell to pacing up and down his room like a caged beast. How slowly everything moved in this land! He was all on fire to get back to River of Strangers and show them what he and a fine woman could do. Alex, on the other hand, was very happy and peaceful. On a shelf in the hallway he discovered a box of books that some traveller had left. With Mrs. Morris's permission, he opened it and found a complete set of Scott. He lay on his bed, smoked his pipe, and with great joy reread "The Heart of Midlothian," "The Talisman," and "Quentin Durward." He had one peculiar pleasure that brought back a memory of long ago. When he was a little boy, his mother, a woman ambitious to give the best to her boys and yet thrifty withal, had bought, from the catalogue of some department store, cheap complete sets of Dickens and Scott. They were villainously printed in fine type, and still more villainously bound in pink paper covers, so tightly that one had to bend the book back till the covers met, as the printing ran down into the crack between the pages. He had read them all. Over one, "Anne of Geierstein," he had had a bitter disappointment. When he had come to about the middle of the book, he found that the binder had left out fifty pages, and as he was not able to follow the thread of the story, the book had to be abandoned. Now, in Mrs. Morris's inn, he read "Anne of Geierstein" from cover to cover and felt a great satisfaction in the achievement.

Sedding had one other diversion besides haunting the pier, and that was to visit the old clergyman who lay ill in bed. He had, of course, called on him before going up river, and had thus formed an initial acquaintance. One day, Sedding besought Alex to go with him.

"What does he want with me?" said Alex, who was deep in a book.

"You might be able to help him get well quicker."

“How old is he?”

“Eighty.”

“I can’t do anything; he needs only rest; he is simply tired and worn with old age.”

“He says he’d like to see you.”

“Why, to get some medicine?”

“No, not exactly, he just wants to talk with someone. I’m afraid he’s rather tired of me.”

Alex felt sympathy at once. If the old vicar was tired of Sedding, he must be something of a kindred spirit.

“I’ll go with you,” he said, laying down his book, “if you are sure the old man wants me.”

Together they went to the vicarage, and Alex found Mr. Armitage, the vicar, a venerable old man with a white beard, propped up in bed. His table was littered with books; among them he saw “Pendennis” and a volume of Herbert Spencer. The old man had a saintly face and, as he smiled, he gave them a blessing without moving his hands or speaking a single word.

“It is very good of you to come, Doctor, and visit a poor old man,” he said faintly to Alex.

“I’m very glad to come, especially if I can be of any use.”

“You can do no good to my body—that is almost worn out; but you have already done good to my spirit by your health and vigour. You know I have always had a hobby horse that I have ridden. I think we communicate with each other without either words or touch. Some kind of strange vibration surely flows from one man to another.”

“Perhaps; it is surely strange how much we understand about each other sometimes.”

“And yet how little we understand. Now, there is our poor Sedding. He thinks he knows a perfect philosophy of life.”

Sedding rubbed his hands and smiled lamely.

“But he is young yet and he must learn, or the forces of life will destroy him.”

“I see you are a great reader.”

“Yes, I have been here for forty years, and without books my life would have been impossible. Thirty years ago, I lost my wife, and we had no children. For thirty years I have been alone with my books, watching the winter rage, and praying for the spring to come.”

“Well, you have been faithful to these people, helped them, and done them a great deal of good.”

“Ah,” said the old man as he lay there, “that is what I have been puzzling over. Have I really done any good here? I have christened them, buried them, married them, but have I really changed any nature? Human nature is much the same and changes little, if any; we die with the potentialities with which we are born. I sometimes wonder how the human race has improved at all. I question if the race has advanced much since we know its story; intellectually, yes, perhaps; at any rate, we have a greater store of facts, but morally and æsthetically, I question whether we have made any advance.”

Alex wondered at the frank talk of the old man. Here was another type of parson, a man who thought, the garden of whose mind had not been choked by the weeds of creed and dogma.

“Look at the people in this village,” continued the old man. “They are in the presence of the great forces of nature, the works of God, yet they are unmindful of them and live drunken and profligate lives. I can see no change in them in forty years. Mrs. Morris is the best human being in the village, yet she is a publican and came to us in a mysterious way. Certainly, she got no start to make her better than the others. She must have had it in her by nature.”

When they bade good-bye to the old man and went out of the house, Sedding said to Alex, “Poor old Armitage, his brain is softened by age. He is mad to say such things.”

“I thought him very wise.”

“Belief in Christ can keep a man from all sin, we know that. It is the hope of the world; our faith alone can save humanity.”

Alex said nothing as he walked along. He did not know. His life had been neither successful nor happy nor of any particular interest; why should he argue the point?

A week after their visit, the vicar died, and Sedding buried him in the little graveyard at the foot of the glacier. Everyone in the village turned out to the service. The old man had been mistaken: they were sorry he was gone

and would miss him sorely. Drunken, debauched, and vicious as they were, they were glad that one had lived among them better than they, someone like the person each might have been.

Week after week they waited for the boat. The river broke and rolled its ice masses out into the bay, fishermen got ready boats and nets for the salmon fishing, great booms were stretched out to catch the logs that would be rolled from many brows to float hundreds of miles down the great river. Sedding went daily to the pier and paced his room at night. One day, he broke into Alex's room.

"She's coming, she's coming," he cried. "I've seen her smoke."

Alex peered out of the window. Sure enough, there was a streak of smoke to the northward.

"Come on, come on, let's get down to meet her."

"Don't be foolish, man, she's thirty miles off and can't dock for two or three hours."

Sedding looked sulky.

"Why do you always put a damper on my plans?"

"I don't mean to, but I refuse to stand around a cold windy pier for hours and do no good."

Sedding left the room, shutting the door angrily behind him. After an hour, Alex took pity on him and, putting on his fur coat, he called out to Sedding:

"Come along, now, I'll go with you."

They went down to the pier to watch the boat's hull grow larger and larger. The deep blue of the water was accentuated by the dazzling whiteness of floating ice. Though there was not a cloud in the sky, a chilly wind blew off the bay that made them wrap their coats tightly about them. In the bright sunshine the prow of the steamer glittered: the whole bow was covered with sheets of ice. From the pendent figurehead huge icicles hung, touching the water as she dipped. The bobstays and lower shrouds, wrapped in ice coats, were twice their normal size. A seaman stood in the top to watch the ice, another in the bows patiently swung the lead, calling out the depths in a monotonous voice, for during the winter the depth of onshore water often changed through the action of ice masses that dragged along the bottom and formed new shoals and channels.

By the time the boat swung in to the pier and the engines reversed with a swirl of ice and water at the screws, every man, woman, and child of Port Churchill was on the pier. They were in a state of great excitement: some of them might get letters or parcels from home; they knew some of the ship's crew and waved greetings as they recognized them. The coming of the first boat was for them the symbol of the real coming of spring; it meant that the straits to the northward were clear and that activities of all kinds would begin. Sedding stared eagerly at the groups of people along the steamer's rail. There were several young women among them, bound for various points where the boat would touch. Near the stern stood a tall lady wrapped in furs, surrounded by several of the ship's officers.

"There she is, there she is, there's Mary," cried Sedding in his shrill voice. He stepped forward and waved his hand and the girl waved back. Her face was muffled so close in the fur coat that Alex could not see it, but obviously she was not as ugly as he had expected. Presently the gangway was let down and Mary and the ship's officers descended to the pier. In that moment, she seemed to Alex like one the Athenians had sent to Crete as a sacrifice to the Minotaur. She came forward and kissed Sedding before them all, and for a moment his face lit up. Then she introduced Sedding to the ship's officers, who still clustered around her. It was obvious that she had made a great impression upon them and that they were loath to lose her from the ship.

"We'll miss you, Miss Ramsay."

"And I shall miss you all, too."

"No more concerts in the saloon."

"You'll find someone else who will play and sing for you." Alex pricked up his ears.

"It won't be quite the same."

"Greet England for me when you get back."

"Yes, good-bye, good-bye."

During this period of conversational good-bye, Alex was left standing alone. He was introduced to nobody, and Mary's back was turned to him. Suddenly Sedding woke up to the situation.

"Mary," he said, nudging her arm and drawing her away from the officers. "This is Doctor Alex MacDonald, in whose house I have been living." She turned quickly to him and Alex saw with amazement her oval

face, dark hair, and brown eyes wide apart. She was tall and slender, her lovely face responsive and sympathetic; the opposite of everything he had imagined. Where had he seen such a face before, and how had Sedding won such a radiant creature? Fine women must be a drug on the market in England! His astonishment was so great that he stood awkwardly, scarce able to move, as she smiled and held out her hand to him. By a great effort of will he got up his hand to take hers. She gave him a firm, cordial pressure and did not withdraw her hand at once.

"I am for ever in your debt for the care you have taken of Edward."

"I've done very little for him," mumbled Alex. He felt like a schoolboy and began to shift from one foot to the other. Mary noted his embarrassment and took it for the shyness of a man in a wild land, who sees little of women.

"You're right, Mary, he's done everything for me. Without him, I should never have got down river to meet you."

"Someone else could have come with you as well as I."

"You're much too modest, Doctor. Edward's letters have been full of your wonderful doings."

Alex could not think of a word in reply. He stared straight into her eyes.

"We were stuck in the drift ice for days," said Mary in an effort to put him at his ease.

"Where?"

"Uganda Strait, I think they called it."

"Was the drift heavy?"

"It made the ship creak and groan. Of course, one can never get anything out of the officers: they minimize and laugh at all dangers to keep the passengers quiet. I thought the captain looked grave at times."

"Heavy drift is always a danger to the stoutest ship. Was your voyage across the ocean pleasant?"

Sedding ran off at that point to fuss about the luggage, and they were left standing alone.

"Yes, a pleasant voyage, cold, of course, but we had music and dancing every night in the cabin. I don't care for dancing much myself, so I supplied the music."

"You are a musician, then?"

"I play the piano a little, and I used to play the viola in an amateur orchestra at home. I've brought my viola with me."

"You won't hear much music in River of Strangers."

"Aren't the natives fond of music?"

"They like voyageur songs or chanties."

"Edward wrote me that you played the fiddle."

"I do a little."

"Then we shall make the music for River of Strangers; fiddle and viola go wonderfully together."

"I'm afraid you'll think me an indifferent musician; I like it but I haven't had much instruction. We hear strange noises in this North country that I've often thought some great man might put to music: the howling of the huskies in the dead silence of the strong cold, the cracking and rumbling of ice masses in the river, or the roar when an avalanche slips down the mountain."

"That sounds too rugged to be put into music. Perhaps a big orchestra with plenty of brass and drums might do it. I like chamber music best, with plenty of quaint plaintive themes; Mozart is my favourite."

Alex was suddenly at ease, though he found it hard to take his eyes from hers.

"But where is Edward?"

"Gone to look after your trunks and bags."

"I seem to have a mountain of stuff with me. I'm afraid your porters—do you call them porters?—will swear at the Englishwoman's heavy boxes. I expect to be here a long time, and I had to bring everything with me."

Sedding came running back to them.

"Come along, now, up to the inn, Mary." Roxy and some of the men placed the luggage on a hand cart and trundled it along the pier. "We need big canoe going back," said Roxy to Alex as they passed.

"I told you," said Mary with twinkling eyes. "They are already passing remarks on the Englishwoman's baggage."

Arrived at the inn, Sedding handed Mary over to Mrs. Morris, who gave her a kindly welcome. Mrs. Morris recognized her at once as the type of gracious English lady she had seen in her youth. No such lady had ever

visited Port Churchill before. She was glad she had made preparations for her arrival and that she had assigned her a neat room with a southern exposure that looked out over forest and river. She resolved that Miss Ramsay should have the best her house could supply. Mary expressed pleasure at the simple preparations made for her; her gracious manner brought out the best in everyone she met.

As soon as he was alone, Alex went to his room and threw himself upon the bed. Wonders would never cease! How had a weakling like Sedding won the affection of such a woman! Of such a mate he had been dreaming all his life, but luck had never been with him. He had talked to her for only five minutes yet seemed to understand much about her. Those wonderful wide eyes that looked so frankly and honestly at everything! Where had he seen such eyes? He was puzzled and tried to remember all the women he had known years before. Like a flash came to him the realization that they were like the eyes of the Lady of his Dreams. He must be on his guard and see as little of her as possible; it wouldn't do to fall in love with the parson's wife: he had Rosy, she was enough for him. Fate had played him a strange trick in lodging in his house this beautiful woman, the wife of a man like Sedding. There was obviously no sense or rhyme or reason in this world; it was ruled by no benign influence that gave men peace and satisfaction, but rather by some mischievous spiteful spirit like the Eskimo god Tornarsuk. Nothing in reality was ever right or perfect or complete; only in music and the arts was an approach to perfection; the life of man was always marred and broken. He picked up a book and tried to read, but he could see no printed words upon the page, only two brown eyes that looked faithfully into his. "I must shake this off," he said—and throwing down the book, he drew on his coat and went out to walk the roads. As he passed the door of the sitting room, he heard Mary and Sedding chatting of home as they sat together before the fire.

Out he went, past the cemetery where they had laid old Armitage to rest, the wise old vicar who had striven for forty years and felt that he had done no good. His life, too, was a broken fragment. He climbed the mountain and strode across the glacier that was brightly coloured with "pink snow." Up, up, he climbed, to the highest peak, and let the chill wind blow through him. Far out across the bay, where the sunlight fell in little patches upon blue water and gleaming ice, the hull of the steamer that had loaded its furs and departed was just disappearing below the horizon.

Next morning, Sedding came to Alex's room to discuss plans for his wedding.

"I want to act as quickly as possible and get back to River of Strangers and begin my new work."

"Perhaps Miss Ramsay is tired after her long sea journey."

"She says she is not tired but rested and refreshed."

"You should give her a few days to look about her and get used to this new land."

"No, we are both of the same mind. We want to get married quickly and get back to our home. The whole decision rests with you. Is the river fit for travel now, or is it still too swollen?"

"To-morrow will be the twentieth of May. Yes, it will be good for travel now. It may take a day or two to pick up canoes and arrange for extra boatmen."

"You think, then, that we might arrange the wedding for the day after to-morrow?"

"Yes, as far as travelling is concerned."

"Then . . ."

Suddenly both men stopped and stared at one another in blank dismay. They were both thinking of the same thing. Why had they been so stupid as not to have thought of it before? Since the death of Mr. Armitage, there was no one in the village to perform the ceremony of marriage. Alex knew more than that—there was no one within hundreds of miles to do it.

"What are we going to do? There's no clergyman in the village now."

"Miss Ramsay will have to go up river with us."

"We couldn't do that; think what Duggan and his gang would say. Moreover, how would we be better off in River of Strangers?"

"The Catholic priest, Father Saulnier, who comes once in a while, could marry you."

Sedding flared up at that.

"Married by a Roman Catholic priest! What do you think of me! Besides, he wouldn't do it."

"Well, what's your solution for the problem? Are you going to let Miss Ramsay go back to England unmarried? That would be hard to explain to her friends."

"I don't know, I don't know," cried Sedding, burying his face in his hands. "Why are things made so hard for the servants of God?"

Then there was a general state of excitement. Sedding broke the news to Mary and confided his troubles to Mrs. Morris. Of course, the story got to the gossips around the grocery stove who chuckled over the parson's predicament. Sedding began to pace his room again, but Mary was strangely calm.

"What's the good of knocking your head against the impossible, dear? If it's impossible for me to go to the mission with you, I can stay here with Mrs. Morris and go home again."

"There's not another boat till August, they tell me. Oh, dear, why didn't we think of something while the boat was here? The captain might have married us, they have the right."

"There's no use in talking about what might have been; we have to decide on some plan of action. First, can I go to the mission with you on the chance of some missionary coming along and marrying us?"

"No, no, that's impossible. You'd realize if you knew the local conditions."

"Then I must stay here till August, and we can be married when the boat comes in. You can stay here, too."

"I'm afraid that would look very bad to the villagers. They're a hard, rough lot, I believe. What would they think of us waiting to be married and living for months together at the same hotel?"

"Nonsense, let them think what they like."

"A missionary has to be careful to maintain a good name among these heathen."

"Well, if you cannot stay with me, go back to River of Strangers and come back for me in August."

Sedding groaned in travail of spirit and went off to consult with Mrs. Morris. He needed the motherly advice of this woman who handed out drinks to the lumberjacks, sometimes took a drink with them herself, and ruled the French girls in the kitchen with a rod of iron. She was outside his world, he could not understand her attitude toward morals, but she had somehow completely won him over. He had great confidence in her judgment. To her he described the difficult and delicate situation in which he and Mary were placed.

“Can you keep Miss Ramsay till August?”

“Sure.”

“I will go back to River of Strangers and return. It wouldn’t be seemly for me to remain in the same house with her.”

Mrs. Morris looked at him with pity, but said, “Well, no, perhaps you’re right.” The reputation of her house must be upheld before the parson.

“In August, when the boat comes, the captain can marry us; captains have the right to perform the ceremony of marriage.”

Then Mrs. Morris had an inspiration.

“Why can’t Captain Salters marry you, then? He’s captain of a boat, not a very big boat, it’s true, but a boat just the same, and his certificate hangs on the wall. I’ve read it many a time.”

“Where is he?”

“He boards right here in this house. He’s a very nice old man, and he’s lived with me every winter for years. His boat is laid up till the logging begins.”

“When can I see him?” Sedding was ready to grasp at any straw.

“I don’t think you’d better see him. Let your friend, Doctor MacDonald, talk with him. He understands men of that sort.”

“Very good. Oh, Mrs. Morris, you’ve saved me and all of us from a great deal of unhappiness.”

Mrs. Morris patted his hand and he rushed off to announce the good news to Alex and Mary. There was a common sitting room where they sometimes met, and Alex and Mary were seated before the fire when Sedding dashed in.

“Mrs. Morris has found a solution of our troubles. We needn’t wait until August after all.”

“What is it?” said Mary eagerly.

“Captain Salters, who lives in this very house, can marry us.”

Alex pulled a long face.

“Captain Salters?” he said.

“Yes, Captain Salters! He’s the captain of a small steamboat, a tugboat, I think Mrs. Morris called it, and you know captains have the authority to

marry."

"I never heard of a tugboat captain marrying anybody," said Alex.

"It's not usual, of course, because there's nearly always a clergyman available, but in case of necessity, I'm sure it's all right. I must go look it up in my book," and he went out of the room.

"What do you think of this, Doctor?" said Mary.

"I don't think much of it; you'd better wait until August."

"Poor lad, his heart is so set on being married at once and getting back to his work. I really don't care who marries us as long as it's legal. It's really an affair between the hearts of a man and a woman and God."

"Quite true! Still, this is a very important matter, and you should think it over carefully. Many a marriage has been made in this land without bell, book, or priest, but that means nothing to you. You are not like these people; you come from a different land."

Mary sat a time in silence, reflecting.

"It's a big risk, but I believe I'll take it. Edward seems so excitable and nervous since I came here that I do not feel that he can do without me. He needs mothering. His mind is so intent on religion that he has no time for practical things. We women always love those who need help, rather than the strong ones."

"Curious, isn't it? The so-called strong ones are out of luck."

"Oh, no, they marry some clinging vine who twines about them."

"One of the two must always lean, then."

"Yes, certainly, if they are equally strong they never get on."

Sedding came back with his finger in a book.

"It's all right, I've found it. Here it is among those having authority to marry, 'Captains at Sea.'"

"How about captains on land?"

"I don't see any point to that question, Doctor. If a man is given authority by Church and State to marry in one place, surely his authority cannot be taken away from him in another. What do you say, Mary?"

"I'm willing to do whatever you want, dear, in a case of necessity. Certainly, our hearts are right before God, and that is all that matters."

Sedding clapped his hands with joy.

“Will you speak to Captain Salters, Doctor? Mrs. Morris thought that you had better approach him.”

“I’ll do anything I can to help you, though, if you want my opinion, I think this step very ill-advised.”

“We are agreed,” said Mary. “Please help us and see this man.”

To such a request, Alex could say nothing, and he rose reluctantly.

“I will go and talk to him at once, he is nearly always in his room,” and added to himself, “for a very good reason.”

Alex found Captain Salters seated in his rocking chair by the stove reading an ancient newspaper. He was a seedy old ruffian, his gray beard stained with tobacco juice, his peaked cap pulled down over his eyes. He was without coat or vest, and the nails that attached his suspenders to his trousers were apparent. On a peg behind him was his blue coat with brass buttons that he wore when commanding his tugboat. He had a crew of two, a half-breed engineer and a Negro who tended the tow ropes. To these he bellowed orders all day long during the season. He was fuddled with drink when Alex entered, a half-empty bottle of whisky on the table at his elbow. He did not deign to look up, but kept steadily on with his paper.

“Are you Captain Salters?”

“I am.”

“I’m Doctor MacDonald, from River of Strangers, and I have some business to talk over with you.”

“Glad to meet you, Doctor! Have a drink. Seems to me I’ve seen you down here before with Mr. Duggan.”

“Yes, I’ve been down here before with Duggan.”

“How’s he?”

“Going strong, as usual.”

“How’s the young woman getting on who came on the boat?”

“Very well. It’s about her I want to speak to you. You see, she’s going to marry Sedding the parson.” Alex hated to make this explanation to the hoary ruffian. It cut him to the heart; he only did it for the sake of Mary.

“Ay, I thought something like that was in the wind.”

“They planned to have old Mr. Armitage marry them. Now there’s not a clergyman within hundreds of miles.”

“They’re in a bad fix.”

“You’re the only one who can help them.”

“Me? How?”

“Marry them!”

“Marry them! Man, you’re crazy! I never done such a thing in my life.”

“The parson says you have the authority. You are captain of a boat.”

“I won’t do it, I don’t know how to do it.”

“It’s easy, it’s all in a book, and I’ll mark the places for you. Look here, Salters, you’ve got to do it for them. You can read the service out of the book, and, look ye, man, it’s worth fifty dollars to you.”

When old Salters learned that the service could be read from a book and that fifty dollars was involved, more money than he had seen for many a week, he came down from his high horse and began to reflect.

“I’m game, I’ll do it,” he said eventually. “If they’re willin’ to take the risks, I am.”

“Good,” said Alex. “Be ready, then, to-morrow night. You’d better go easy on that whisky.”

Alex never forgot the day of the wedding. Everyone came to him for advice; they seemed to regard him as the promoter of the affair. Mary spoke to him in the morning; she had been thinking of what her people at home would say and had begun to falter.

“Are you sure it is all right?” she said, appealing to him.

“I’m not at all sure. You remember I advised you both to wait until August; it is only four months.”

“I’m willing to wait, but I am really afraid of Edward’s health. He has never been strong. He looks so worn and might become ill if I stopped now.”

“Then you’d better go through with it.”

“Do you think so?”

“Yes, if you think Mr. Sedding’s health is in danger.”

“I’ll do it, I’ll do it. There shall be no more question.”

Later on, Sedding approached him with doubts and fears, but he hardly listened to him; Mary’s opinion was all that counted. Sedding got the licence from the local justice of the peace, while Alex spent the afternoon with old Salters, drilling him on the service and keeping him sober. The old man pleaded for whisky, but Alex was relentless. He allowed him only one little drink during the whole afternoon. Just before the hour of the ceremony, Alex gave him a double whisky and drank one himself. Both he and Salters needed a little Dutch courage.

The wedding took place in the big room downstairs, which Mrs. Morris closed early, putting the bar of oak timber across the door. In the rôle of chief bridesmaid, Mrs. Morris, the abandoned mistress, stood up with Mary, while Alex acted as best man to the parson. Instead of a surpliced priest and the stained glass of a chancel was old Salters with the background of the bar and a row of whisky bottles. The girls from the kitchen peeped through the cracks and giggled in spite of Mrs. Morris’s frowns. She was tied to her post and could not get at them to drive them back. In the midst of the service, some lumberjacks came thundering at the door, demanding drink. Old Salters mumbled through the service creditably. To Alex, the whole thing was a fantastic nightmare. Sedding looked miserable and frightened; only Mary, with her calm and inscrutable womanliness, seemed to see nothing incongruous in the affair.

Next day, they left in two canoes for River of Strangers. Alex had hired reliable boatmen, and Roxy took the dogs home by the overland trail. In nine days, they made the journey up the river that had taken them thirty-five days to descend. Every day was fine and clear, and they arrived at the Post without mishap.

CHAPTER VI

"Isn't it charming! Did you build it yourself?" said Mary.

"I had some men to help me," replied Alex.

"It fits into the hillside so beautifully; that is the first requisite to me about a house: it must belong to the ground on which it stands."

"It belongs in the sense you mean, but in another it doesn't. The house is mine, but the land is the Company's."

"Please don't be so literal. Your browns go with the tree trunks and the greens with the foliage."

"There's not much architecture in River of Strangers to compete with."

"You're right! I must confess my heart sank when the canoes pulled in by those tumbledown buildings near the river. Now, the sight of your bungalow has quite cheered me up again."

Mary, Alex, and Sedding were walking up the path from the river to Alex's house; behind them followed the boatmen with luggage. Rosy, trim and neat, was at the front door to greet them. The house was spotless, and all the dead leaves had been raked up and burned; Alex had never seen the place looking better.

"You have been a long time gone; I have missed you. It was cold and dangerous going down river, yes. Why have you been so long?"

"Rosy, this is Mrs. Sedding," said Alex quickly, in an effort to cover the warmth of her greeting. "Mrs. Sedding, this is Rosy, our housekeeper and chief factotum."

Mary held out both hands and smiled.

"Rosy, but Rosy what? Isn't Rosy rather informal for an introduction?"

Alex was nonplussed; for a moment he could not remember Rosy's name; it had been years since he had heard it; she had always been Rosy to him. He racked his brain to bring the name over the threshold of his memory. Rosy came to his assistance. "Rosy Gautier, at your service, madame, but everyone calls me plain Rosy and you must do the same."

"I shall never be able to call you 'plain Rosy,' your hair and eyes are much too pretty for that."

Rosy laughed and curtsied; she was going to like Mrs. Sedding. Alex noticed that Mary had a way with people that made them take to her at once.

They went into the house, and Rosy led Mary to her room, the second in the ell beyond Sedding's bedroom. Before his departure, Alex had left instructions for its furnishing. A Franklin stove stood in one corner, skins covered the floor, and there were two rocking chairs and an old desk. A large clothes closet opened into it. The two windows looked over the garden backed by the forest. When Rosy had seen the canoes at the head of the river, she had gone out and picked masses of trailing arbutus that grew on the hillside behind the house and decked Mary's room with it. Altogether, the room looked clean, bright, and cheerful. Mary was pleased with it, and was glad to have a place she could call her own after weeks of travel in boats and canoes. She had never before seen arbutus or smelt its delicate perfume. She looked out of the windows at the hillside and felt that she could be happy in this place.

On the day after her arrival, Mary began to work about the house, for she was determined that she would be no useless member of the community. She assigned herself the care of the east ell and living room. These rooms she dusted, swept, and polished, and even peeped into Alex's office to see that it was tidy, though that room was forbidden territory. By nature active and energetic, she bustled about singing and, strangely enough for an English girl, whistling as she worked. She invaded the kitchen to learn something of cooking, an art in which she had had no training. Rosy worshipped the hem of her garment, and her adoration became complete when Mary joined her in singing some of the French-Canadian songs. Alex, in his office, often heard the two harmonious voices:

"*À la claire fontaine*
M'en allant promener,
J'ai trouvé l'eau si belle
Que je m'y suis baigné.
Il y a longtemps que je t'aime,
Jamais je ne t'oublierai."

Sometimes the kitchen rang with laughter. Mary had been educated in France as a young girl and found Rosy's Canadian idioms amusing beyond

words. Rosy's "*Tuez la lampe*" was a frequent source of laughter in which she joined heartily. "Why kill the poor thing, Rosy?" Mary used to say.

Mary was a woman of intuition and quick intelligence, with no great desire for reflection or introspection. From Alex and Sedding, she loved to hear all the details of their daily affairs. Sedding was weak in description, for all his thought centred about the Christian home in the wilderness and the Christianization of the world in one generation, but Alex could tell a thousand interesting things about the forest and the animals in it, about getting and curing furs, and how the trappers were treated by Duggan and McGowan. When he made sick calls, she must know all about the patients, their illnesses and methods of cure. As a matter of fact, Alex liked to tell her all these things. Sedding was her baby, the man she cared for and tended, but upon Alex they both leaned from the beginning. She soon knew the names and persons of every one in the Post, and even some of the Indians in the settlements, for she was a great walker and accompanied her husband whenever she could. She was perhaps more interested in nature and in the lives of those she met than in the salvation of their souls.

She was loyal to Sedding, however, and accompanied him when he preached on the green by the fur house. With him she sang the hymn in a clear voice, and no one laughed when she was there. Occasionally, she brought her viola and played an accompaniment as Sedding sang. Then every man in the Post was present, but Sedding, for some strange reason, did not like this. He felt, perhaps, that the men were coming to hear an entertainment by this strange woman rather than to listen to the word of God. Moreover, the viola was a secular and worldly rather than a sacred instrument.

Music became a bond between Alex and Mary, however. In the evenings, he played the fiddle for her at her request, played as he had never played before, his love singing in every note. Sometimes he was afraid: she was an artist, surely she must understand what he was saying with his fiddle. But Mary was free of heart and apparently as innocent of his affection as if she had been his sister. Sedding listened not at all and gave no thought to either, but stared into the far away, meditating on the Cross of Christ.

Sometimes, of a summer afternoon, the three went into the birch grove by the spring, Alex's hitherto uninvaded retreat. There, as the spring gurgled and the breeze rustled the birch leaves, they played together some quiet chamber music Mary had brought from home. Those were moments of ecstasy for Alex. He prayed that time might stop and that they might play on for ever. If one cannot possess the woman one loves, the next finest thing is

to make music with her. They were both artists enough to improvise, and Alex would ramble on into tragic lovely melodies, which the viola accompanied with its plaintive tones. Then surely their spirits were close together, for she was helping to interpret what he felt, the tragedy of his life, of all life, the utter waste of his strength.

He had been in love with Mary from the moment she had laid those frank responsive eyes upon him. There was no doubt in his mind that she was the woman for him, the woman with whom he could accomplish great things. Physically, she had a great attraction for him. Her dark hair glinted auburn when the sun touched it; her oval face with well-shaped nose, wide mouth, and eyes far apart, was beyond doubt beautiful. She was tall and well formed. It is impossible to live in a house with a woman for weeks without getting to know every curve of her figure. The gingham dress that she wore about the house but slightly concealed the depth of her bosom and the fullness of her hips. When she sat to listen to his music, she revealed almost carelessly a slim ankle and a well-shaped leg. Sometimes, when she bent forward to tie a shoe or straighten a rug, his eye caught a glimpse of creamy breast. She was an exquisite creature. Though he noted all her rare beauty, he felt no rude passion for her. Her physical charms were to him the least of her attractions. Her mind was so akin, so attuned to his that their natures seemed counterparts. She understood so easily, she was so full of spontaneous humour! It was never necessary to explain to Mary: she anticipated a remark before it was made; like Falstaff, she was often the source of jest in others. A hint was sufficient to supply her imagination with a whole picture. She appreciated in Alex that he never sought for the exact detail. That was Sedding's greatest fault; when he was interested in anything, he must know text and letter, what Smith said to Jones, how Smith stood and looked when he made a certain remark, and in what attitude Jones received the information. But to the glory of Mary, she loved Sedding and only laughed at his obtuseness. She had always known that he was devoid of both imagination and humour; she loved him because of his helplessness and devotion to a great ideal.

As Alex associated with her day by day and grew to love her more and more, he found an agony of jealousy growing in his breast. The caresses and kisses of Rosy were repugnant to him now; he tried to conceal this, but Rosy, with a woman's quickness, sensed it. But there was no spite in Rosy. She was a creature formed for love. She knew that the end of things had come between Alex and herself, and she guessed the reason. Strangely enough, she felt no resentment against Mary, whom from the first she had accepted as a favoured being from some strange superior world. She

resolved to keep her eyes open and take up with the next likely trader who came to the Post. Even Roxy might do in a pinch, though he could not give her much of the comforts of life.

Alex, as he lay of nights on the trundle bed in his office, heard the mumbled conversation of Mary and Sedding in their room. Ah, how much would he have given to have been born under a lucky star! Often he lay awake, twisting and turning, tortured with his thoughts and desires. He recalled his old peaceful life with Duggan, the gang, and the girls. Now he had no pleasure except in the company of Mary. There was no joy in walking the hills unless she went with him; everything seemed gray without her, all people and places drab. He tried to think of other things, but his mind circled back to her, what she had said, how she had commented on that, the quick sparkle of her eyes when a humorous situation struck her, the flash of her teeth as she rippled with spontaneous laughter. He twisted and turned, but no sleep came to him till dawn. Sometimes he got up and drank glass after glass of whisky; that did not do any good, he remained perfectly sober, and his imagination worked more vividly than ever. Once he threw himself upon his couch and cried as he had not cried since he was a child. He wept for he knew not what; for something of the sweetness and beauty of life that had escaped him. His youth seemed spotted and defiled. The brightness and glory of Mary made its blackness seem blacker.

Sedding seemed content to live on at Alex's house indefinitely. He was lacking in initiative, and practical things were difficult for him. For weeks, no mention had been made of building the new house, and half of summer was gone. Mary pressed him finally into action. Together Alex, Mary, and Sedding staked out a pretty knoll overlooking the river as a site for the new home. In Duggan, however, they encountered a serious obstacle. Duggan hated the parson and was bound to get him out of River of Strangers by hook or crook. All the land for miles around belonged to the New World Company. Duggan stood upon his rights; he would allow no further building upon the property without the consent of the home office. Of course, Sedding could get the permission for building, but a great question of time was involved, as it would be necessary for a letter to go to England and return before anything could be done. By that time, it would be too late to attempt building that season. Duggan and McGowan chuckled over the predicament of Alex and the parson; they were sorry for Alex with his woman lodger, but they enjoyed the parson's rage. Duggan's decision about the land by which he hindered Sedding in the building of his house meant that Mary and her husband must lodge for a whole year with Alex. To have Mary about his house as the wife of another seemed to Alex more than a

man like himself could bear. He had come to River of Strangers to find peace, and now peace was taken away from him for ever. He turned the thing over in his mind for hours; what should he do? At last, it seemed obvious and imperative that he must go away and leave Mary and Sedding in possession. Fortunately, he had saved his money in all these years. After much reflection, he decided on the following pretext: a year's study somewhere, perhaps in Edinburgh or London; Duggan would have to get another doctor for the Post.

One evening, as they sat after dinner in the big living room, Alex broached the subject to Mary and Sedding.

"I think I must go away in September."

"What!" cried Sedding.

"Isn't this your home?" said Mary.

"Yes, it's my home, but I've been thinking for years that I should go away and study. You know how quickly medical science advances; I have become rusty and far behind here in the wilderness."

"What a pity, just as we were beginning to enjoy ourselves! Can't you put it off for a year?" said Mary.

"I believe I should go now, before I'm too old."

"Surely a year wouldn't make any difference. We will be lost without you."

"A year's a year, and they pass quickly."

"I agree with Mary, River of Strangers would be impossible without you. Where do you plan to go, back to Montreal?"

"No, I'd like to go to either Edinburgh or London and try after a year the Royal College of Surgeons examination. It would take a long time to rub off the rust, but I really owe it to myself."

"And what do you think we will do without you?"

"You can live in my house until I return. Yours will be built by that time. Rosy will stay with Mrs. Sedding, I am sure. They seem very good friends. I am not as indispensable as you suppose."

"You know everyone is against me in this place."

"At present they are, but perhaps Mrs. Sedding's influence will overcome that in time; moreover, I've always been told that young married

people should have a house to themselves. That idea fits in with my plans: I want a year to study and you can have my house."

"And what if Mary or I become ill?" said Sedding indignantly, as he turned to leave the room.

"Some other doctor will be sent to the Post."

"Yes, some fellow hand in glove with Duggan, one of his gang. We couldn't rely on them in an emergency."

That was the trouble Alex had found through life. People like Sedding were always relying on him to pull them out of their difficulties. He thought to himself, "Oh, if the poor fool could only understand what I am trying to do and how I am going out of my way to help him." At that moment he longed for someone to lean upon, someone to whom he could go for advice and comfort. Perhaps it would be better if he made a clean breast of the whole thing to Mary. She had that wonderful woman's understanding that pours balm on a man's troubled mind.

When Alex and Mary were left alone, she said to him:

"Why this sudden decision, Doctor?"

"It isn't sudden. I've been thinking of it for years. This merely seems an opportune time."

"Most inopportune for us. Surely something has moved you to think of this now. Do Edward and I annoy you in your home?"

"No," said Alex, lying stoutly. "I am delighted to have you both. Nothing has moved me to a quick decision except that I think you should have the house to yourselves."

"But I don't want to be alone here with Edward."

Alex's heart gave a great throb.

"What do you mean?"

"He is devoted to his work, to things of the spirit. He is my husband, and of course I love him; still, I crave human companionship, and I find that in you."

Mary's frankness filled Alex with dismay. He sat several minutes in silence. Should he tell her all now?

"Your companionship is a delight to me, too, Mrs. Sedding, but I am a rough fellow, you know, and not much company for ladies."

"Rough fellow, nonsense; you play the fiddle like a virtuoso, and no one is ever dull who loves the arts."

"I cannot stay. I am a man who is the plaything of Fate. Fate pushed me to River of Strangers; now Fate pushes me away. I can do no good; wherever I go I am always alone. Some men are like that, you know, the plaything of Fate. The enlightened think they have a bit of temperament; the mob calls them queer and unfortunate."

"How strangely you talk!" said Mary. "I was only thinking to-day that, of all the men I have met, you seem the strongest and wisest."

Alex gasped: "Then you have met many fools. Excuse my ill manners."

Mary laughed. "Conceit is not one of your vices, Doctor, at any rate."

"No, I'm not conceited. I know myself pretty well, my powers and my limitations. I have been endowed with strength and weaknesses that do not well fit me for civilized society."

"Then why choose Edinburgh and London for a year?"

"I should be a student there, and a student can always live as he pleases."

Mary sat for a moment in silence.

"It seems frightfully rude for one like myself, who has only known you a few months, to make demands of you. You know how quickly acquaintance ripens on shipboard or when people are thrown much together. Under such conditions you learn to know a person better in a week than you might in years, under ordinary social conditions. At Port Churchill, in the canoes, in this house, I have seen you and talked with you hours every day. I already feel as if you were an old friend. On that basis of friendship, short in time, but long in reality, I beseech you not to go away now."

"Really, Mrs. Sedding, you make me feel much too important."

"No, not at all. Everything hinges about you. I have only been here a little while, yet I see clearly as you do the hopelessness of Edward's venture. He cannot stay here, he is doing no good; he is unfitted for this work, and he is losing his health. He is a Christian, heart and soul, but he cannot appeal to these men. You know that as well as I. He belongs to some peaceful vicarage in England, to some sleepy village with an old-world church. The time is not yet ripe to tell him this, but when the time comes, I am sure that I can persuade him to go home. The time will surely come before next spring. Stay with us till we go."

“You ask more than you know,” said Alex, on the verge of telling her.

But Mary was so intent on pursuing her theme that she did not catch the sombre intensity of his remark.

“Moreover, Doctor, and this is the real reason for my talk, I shall need you this winter. I have a secret that even Edward does not know; perhaps you can guess. I shall need you. Do not leave me in the hands of some young bungler, fresh from the schools. I must repeat that I regard you as an old friend in whom I have the utmost confidence.”

Mary looked straight into his eyes. Alex was astonished at the frankness of this wonderful woman.

“Perhaps your confidence would not be so great if you knew something of my life and habits.”

“I understand more than you think about you, and yet I have the utmost confidence. I have told you my secret: will you stay or go?”

“Of course, I must stay,” said Alex wearily. “I can do nothing else, since you ask me.”

“Then Edward and I can go away together, and you can have your year in London and spend week-ends with us, and I will introduce you to all my friends and show you off as my wild man from River of Strangers.”

Poor Alex, every word cut him to the heart. He rose, kicked the fire together, and laid on a fresh stick. At that moment, he remembered a Gaelic maxim in Cape Breton that his mother had taught him when he was a little boy. The English of it was “Learn to endure.” “God knows,” thought Alex, “I have been enduring all my life because of my nature. How shall I get through this winter? Can I learn further to endure?”

“Don’t pull such a long face, Doctor. One more winter in River of Strangers won’t be any worse than the ten you have spent.”

“I am only disappointed about my plans; it will, of course, be a delightful winter.” He was glad he had not told; now he would never tell her.

“Come, let’s make some music together and be gay again,” said Mary, picking up her instrument.

CHAPTER VII

Indian summer came late in September, after frosts that made the hardwood ridges glorious in red and gold. Then the leaves, after their riot of colour, twirled in the autumn winds, geese gathered in noisy flocks to wing southward, grouse broke up their coveys to push out into the forest world alone, and ice formed in the puddles of the roadway. The air was cold and invigorating, the sky full of great wind clouds that rolled majestically above the mountain. The river, in its deepest blue, swollen by late summer rains, raced and swirled, as if seeking to escape its enemy the ice coat, that would soon try to fetter it and shut out its friend the sky. Mary thought that she had never seen anything so beautiful as this northern Canadian autumn—fall, the local people called it. The word was new to her, and she thought that some poet, who had seen twirling maple leaves drifting down from the tree-tops, must have struck upon the name. There was nothing insipid or devitalizing about such a landscape or about such weather; everything inspired one to vigour and action.

In November, the cold of winter was upon them, and perforce they spent much time indoors and long evenings by the open fire. Sedding gave up his out-of-door preaching and, after much solicitation by Mary, no longer visited Duggan and his ruffians in the mess hall. She had brought with her a box of books from home, and this proved to them a treasure store. There were, among others, sets of Thackeray, Trollope, and Dickens—the only novelist Sedding liked—and in French the works of Turgenev, Balzac, and Victor Hugo. Mary had spent some years of her school days in Rouen, and spoke and read French as easily as English. Sedding knew no French, but to Alex, who had spent so much of his life among the French-Canadians in Montreal and River of Strangers, French, full of patois, had become a second tongue. Moreover, as he was a student by nature, he had read many of the French classics and studied with a priest from old France who, years before, had lodged for parts of three winters in his house. Here was a new bond between him and Mary. Balzac and Victor Hugo were new to him, and "Les Misérables" and "Le Médecin de Campagne," as interpreted by Mary's soft voice, seemed finer than anything he had ever heard. Mary and Sedding in the corners of the sofa, Alex in one of his great chairs, sat warm and comfortable on those winter evenings, when snow swirled about the eaves and winds blustered in the tree-tops. From far off the wind bore occasional

dull heavy rumbles of falling snow and ice. Music was for the time abandoned. Mary loved to read aloud, Alex listened eagerly to the music of her voice, while Sedding settled back, taking everything as a matter of course. To please Edward, Mary began with “David Copperfield,” but, as he always began to nod and doze early in the evening, they never finished that single volume of Dickens. Sedding had no taste for romance; the Bible and Prayer Book were the only literature he liked, and he read these, not as literature, but rather as a divine confirmation of his own ideas. He soon slept soundly because he was always wearied in the evening by the long journeys he made across country through the snow, and by his constant mental struggle and worry to uplift the world. Mary used to smile when she saw Edward sleeping and say:

“Poor lad, he is wearied with his work.”

Then, laying down Dickens, she would take up the book in which she and Alex were really interested. First of all, they read “Les Misérables,” and as she went on and on in her sweet-voiced French, it was to Alex so strange and beautiful that all things seemed to him unreal. Surely it was a dream. He could not believe in the reality of this radiant creature whom he loved, nor that she was reading to him by his fireside in River of Strangers. He pinched himself sometimes and touched the wood of the sofa: yes, it was real and substantial, and there was Sedding, sleeping in his corner, whistling slightly with half-opened mouth. Mary read on and on of the great love of a good old man and of the remaking of Jean Valjean; Alex smoked his pipe and listened to every word, hoping that she would never stop. Often it was midnight before she laid down her book.

“We are night owls, living like people in cities.”

“Night is always better than day here in winter. Even before you came, I always read late and slept late. It helps pass a dreary season.”

“I think you are right, night is best in winter. It is really wonderful here, because there is such contrast between the cold howling desolation outside and our snugness within.”

“These nights have been so wonderful that I am glad I did not go away.”

Then she would rouse the sleep-sodden Edward, as Alex raked back the embers, covered them with ashes, and put on a back log to smoulder till morning.

“Good-night.”

"Good-night and happy dreams," and Alex paced off to his room as Mary and Sedding retired to theirs. Thus many nights of winter passed.

On a certain day of late January, Sedding felt moved to visit the Indian village of La Tuque, where he thought he had had some success in Christianizing the natives. It was twelve miles to the village over a rough and dangerous route; snow lay deep everywhere, and more was threatened in the gray clouds that lowered over the mountain. Alex did everything in his power to dissuade him from this journey, and to his dissuasion Mary added her solicitations; but Sedding was adamant when he thought his Christian duty was involved. It was obvious to Alex that Mary's time was approaching and that her confinement might be expected any day. His experience told him that Mary had confided her condition to her husband long since, yet Sedding seemed to give neither thought nor consideration to this serious situation. In his attempt to dissuade Sedding against his journey through the snow, Alex thought of speaking to him of Mary, but he refrained, feeling that he had no right to interfere in such private matters between husband and wife.

Alex and Mary stood at the window as Sedding lumbered off, his guide Indian Pete in the lead. His gait was a peculiar one, for he had never learned the art of lifting one snowshoe above the other; instead, he spraddled, leaving a wide track like the trail of some huge prehistoric animal. Alex smiled at Mary and she smiled back, as Edward and his guide disappeared among the spruces.

Alex stood before the fire warming the backs of his legs and watching Mary through the half-opened door. She made her bed with great care, singing, as she worked, the melody she had learned from Rosy in the kitchen:

"*Sous les feuilles d'un chêne*
Je me suis fait sécher.
Sur la plus haute branche
La rossignol chantait.
Il y a longtemps que je t'aime,
Jamais je ne t'oublierai."

For a long time he stood thinking what strange creatures women were. Here was one who had left kith and kin, comfort and home, to share hardship and discomfort with a most indifferent kind of man, who gave little or no thought to her. Yet she seemed perfectly happy. "Happiness must be a

thing that lies within one's self," thought Alex. "A thing almost independent of external surroundings." At last he stepped to his room and drew on woollen socks and larigans.

"Where are you going?" called Mary.

"Down to the Post to see Pete Surette."

"What's the matter with him?"

"Don't know yet; bad cold settled in his chest; perhaps pleurisy or pneumonia."

"Poor fellow, I wish I could go with you. I hate sticking to the house as I've had to do lately."

"It can't be helped."

"You know what's going to happen soon?"

"Yes, I understand; that is what worried me about your husband going away just now; I wondered that you did not tell him; but perhaps you did."

"I was afraid he might think me a hindrance to his work. He was set on going, and he is so intense in his convictions. Women have pride, you know; well, to tell the truth, I was afraid he might still insist upon going."

"He would never have done that."

"No, I suppose not. However, I feel safe with you in the house."

"He'll be back easily by ten to-night."

"Of course. Now I am keeping you. Don't be late for lunch."

"No, I'll soon be back."

Alex huddled on his great coat and went out, turning an anxious eye toward the gray mass lowering over the mountain. In the east, the sky was becoming a constant leaden colour through which a few scraggly blue patches peeped. It was cold, but the temperature was rising, for a bit of slush showed in the footpath. The gusty southeast wind swirled round the house corner in a cloud of fine snow dust; the big pines near the spring were swaying their tops and moaning softly. "Snow to-night sure, and perhaps a gale," thought Alex. "What a donkey that fellow Sedding is to leave his wife at such a time for the souls of a few mangy half-breeds. There's certainly no accounting for people's actions!" He comforted himself by the fact that Sedding had promised to be home that night, and he knew that the parson would make every effort to keep his word. He plodded on, listening to the

ominous twitter of birds tucked snugly under the branches of the thick spruces.

On entering the barroom, he found Duggan in close conference with McGowan. They stopped abruptly as he came in, and Alex surmised that they had been talking about him. Duggan had been somewhat unfriendly of late, and McGowan was the dispenser of all dirty-minded gossip as well as liquor.

" 'Morning," said Duggan. "Where's Wild Jack, the loony parson, off to to-day?"

"To visit the Indians at La Tuque."

"Didn't pick a very good day for the trip."

"No, the weather looks bad."

"Left you alone with the lady, hey! Good thing he doesn't know as much about you as we do. I expect he'll make you chief elder when he founds his church."

McGowan grinned, showing his yellow teeth.

"Have a drink, it's good stuff." Alex took the proffered glass.

"He'll be back to-night," said Alex.

"Why the hell don't you come down here some nights like you used to and have a game of poker with the boys?"

"I don't know; perhaps I'm getting old and settled down."

"Sit-by-the-fire stuff."

"Yes."

"Guess you like the parson and the parson's wife better than you do us."

McGowan snickered in his dirty fashion.

"Look here, Duggan, suppose you keep the parson's wife out of our conversation."

"Why so touchy?"

"Because she's a stranger in a strange land and a lady. Moreover, I don't like your insinuations."

"Lady or not, she's still a woman."

“Yes, a woman.” Alex’s eye had a curious glint of red as he looked straight into Duggan’s. “But not the kind you and I know. Do you understand, once for all, that she’s not to be the subject of dubious conversation between you and me.”

Duggan flinched and said nothing; he had seen Alex in the famous fight with Pierre Le Blanc, the bully of Ange Gardien. McGowan, who could never afford to observe the embarrassment of his chief, picked up his rag, turned to the shelves, and began to polish glasses with industry.

“Did Surette spend a good night?” asked Alex.

“All right.”

“How is he this morning?”

“Go in and see,” said Duggan curtly. “I’m not the doctor.”

Alex had sensed Duggan’s animosity earlier in the winter, but this was their first open breach; part of Duggan’s hatred for Sedding had evidently been transferred to him. He stepped into the room to attend the sick man, who lay on the bed moaning softly. By his side sat a half-breed woman who gazed at him in mute sorrow. She looked up at Alex with eager hopeful eyes. For this low-down drunken trapper now at the point of death the woman was only a convenience, a temporary attachment, and yet she looked at him with pity, love, and sorrow. “What a strange world,” thought Alex, “in which the lowest and dirtiest can find love from some woman. How much they bear for men!” He listened to the man’s congested lungs and took his temperature and pulse. He was in a bad way with pneumonia. He did what he could, leaving some medicines and instructing the woman in their use. He reopened the window which he had ordered last night to be left open.

“Will he get well?” she murmured as he turned to the door.

“Perhaps. God knows. I will be back this afternoon.”

Tears shone in her eyes; she crossed herself and sat down by the bed with folded hands. Alex went out through the mess hall intending to say no word to Duggan.

“Will he live?” called Duggan.

“I don’t know. I’ll be back this afternoon.”

Outside it was spitting snow in big flakes and getting softer underfoot. An ominous stillness was followed by heavy gusts that shook the matted snow from the tree-tops. Alex turned and wandered down to the river,

looking at the broad track that Sedding and Indian Pete had made. He had half a mind to try to overtake them and bring them back before it was too late, but when he looked at his watch he realized that they had been two hours gone and that he, too, might be caught in the storm and unable to return. He turned on his heel and hurried back to the mess hall.

"Duggan," he cried, bursting in, "there's a big storm brewing. I want you to send a runner after Sedding and Indian Pete with an order for them to return at once."

"They're all right. They can stay at La Tuque if they're snowed up."

"No, they won't be all right."

"I don't see why I should put myself out for either you or Sedding."

"Very well. If anything happens to Sedding, the Company shall know that I made this request and you refused it."

"All right," said Duggan sulkily. "I'll send a man."

"Send Roxy or Johnny Deveau—they're the fastest."

"Anything to oblige," said Duggan sarcastically, realizing that he dared not refuse a request when the parson's life was in danger.

On his return home, Alex found Mary seated before the fire. She greeted him with her usual smile.

"How is Surette?"

"About the same."

"Will he live?"

"I can't tell yet. I'm going to see him again this afternoon. It looks stormy and I got Duggan to send a runner after your husband with an order to return."

Mary said nothing in reply to this, her thought circling back to the sick man.

"Has he any one with him?"

"His woman is there and seems most devoted."

"Who, Annie Tibeau?"

"Yes. Tell me this: how is it that the poorest, most low-down man can win the devotion of some woman?"

“I suppose we’re made that way. Men, the egoists of creation, love themselves, we always must adore something outside of ourselves. We must find something to love, even if the object is unworthy. We love it in lieu of something better.”

“Is that the secret?”

“That’s the secret. It’s quite natural that Annie Tibeau should love poor Pete Surette. He is the best object her affection can find.”

“I guess the mind of a woman can be fathomed by no mere man.”

“Right you are. I’ll tell you another secret. We are not naturally intellectual, though we pretend, to please you. We are creatures of emotion. Often, we cannot fathom ourselves or account for our strange preferences.”

“Men are not so rational, either.”

“How serious we are. You must play for me this afternoon. I have not heard you for weeks. How strange the wind sounds about the house.”

“It’s blowing up a gale from the southeast.”

“Do you think it will be a big storm?”

“Nothing serious, I hope.”

Rosy announced that the soup was on the table, and they went out to lunch. Before they had finished their meal, the air was full of soft fat flakes of whirling snow. The wind blew up apace. From the window, they could no longer see the buildings at the Post and could catch only fitful glimpses of the tall pines near the spring. Little spruce bushes near the house cowered and bent beneath their burden of wet snow and the fury of the gale. All tracks were soon covered and the roadway blown full. All through the afternoon it snowed and blew. Both had the same thought, though neither expressed it. “He cannot return to-night; he has had plenty of time to reach La Tuque before the storm broke, and he is safe there.” Mary read aloud for a little while, and then, as she felt tired, Alex played his fiddle at her request. He racked his mind for something fitting and finally struck upon Ernst’s “The Erl King,” which he had committed to memory long before. The wild melody fitted with the howling and whistling of the wind without, and he played it over many times. Mary closed her eyes and listened. She was rarely tired, and he was distressed at the strange pallor of her face. “She is worried by the absence of her husband,” he thought.

Above five, he again donned larigans and sweaters, took up his snowshoes, and set out to visit the sick man. He tried to open the front door

but found it impossible, as the doorway was drifted full. For some odd reason, an inscription he had read somewhere in his student days flashed across his mind, and he called it out gaily to Mary, “The doors of all public buildings must open outward, but not so in this mad land.” He brought a shovel from the kitchen, lowered the upper sash of his office window, and clambered out, sinking at once to his middle. He wallowed to the door, shovelled away the mass of snow and strapped on his snowshoes. The wind-driven snow came so thick that he could not see ten feet before him. He kept the wind, his only guide, on his left cheek and pushed on rapidly for the Post, his snowshoes bearing him up well on the wet, matted snow. He saw at once that the cold that would inevitably follow when the wind hauled would make a thin crust that would make travelling dangerous for days. Indian Pete or Roxy would know when it was safe to return; Sedding’s judgment would, of course, be negligible.

When he reached the Post, he found the sick man gasping for breath and swollen about the face. The woman sat faithfully by his side and the window was closed tight. He could teach these people nothing; they lived in the open, but hated fresh air when they lay in bed. The window was on the leeward side of the hut, and without saying a word of reproach to the woman, he opened it again. He repeated his instructions about medicines and attention, showed the woman how to turn the patient gently from side to side, and though he knew it useless, repeated that he could not get well unless he had plenty of fresh air. He turned homeward again, keeping his right cheek to the wind that whirled the snow in furious gusts. His excavation at the doorway was already half filled, and it was with great effort that he pulled open the door. As he took off his snowshoes and stamped his feet upon the door sill, he realized that he had better break the news to Mary now. She must have guessed it herself. She was still seated by the fire as he entered.

“I’m glad I don’t have to go out again to-night. It’s blowing up a furious gale. Your husband cannot get home to-night, and perhaps not for three or four days. They had plenty of time to reach La Tuque before the storm broke, and I am sure they are safe there.”

He expected some outburst on Mary’s part, but on the contrary she sat quite still, calmly smiling into the fire. Finally, she said: “The important thing is that they are safe. I am convinced of that myself. At any rate, you will be here and you are the person I need just now. I’m afraid I must ask you to stay pretty close to the house. Even this afternoon I felt some strange pains.”

“You can rely on me,” said Alex. “At no time need I go farther than the Post, and I will not go there if I am needed here.”

After dinner, they sat before the fire listening to the strange concert of the elements. Snow pelted against the window; the fire growled and roared as gusts whistled in the chimney; the wind whooped and yelled about the eaves; trees laden with snow moaned and crashed as the wind tore them; from time to time, small avalanches of snow slipped from the roof; it was as if all the demons of the Northland were unleashed. It was impossible to read and well nigh impossible to talk in that mad medley of noises. Alex threw great logs upon the fire and heaped upon them lumps of coal. They would be snowed in by morning, but at any rate there was plenty of fuel and food in the house. If Sedding had not gone on his journey, they all would have been quite comfortable. Rosy, frightened by the gale, came in and sat with them for a little. She sat at Mary’s feet holding her hand and looking up and smiling with kind sympathetic eyes; Rosy had borne one child and knew what Mary must endure.

At ten, Mary rose, said good-night, and went to her room. A little while after, she called out:

“The storm makes such a noise that I am going to leave my door open after I go to bed so that you can hear me if I call.”

“All right,” replied Alex. “I shall sleep here on the couch. I shall hear you if you call.”

Mary nestled in her bed and Alex settled himself on the couch before the fire. Without, the wind screeched, pelting snow against the roof. He lay sleepless and open-eyed, rising frequently to mend the fire. He lay there thinking about the strangeness of his life. If he had been dull like his brothers, Malcolm and Donald, he might have worked on the farm and married some country girl in Cape Breton. His life then would have been comfortable and uneventful. He wondered whence he had derived his strange temperament that made him always alone, that had driven him into the wilderness. Here even he could have no peace, here he had found the deepest distress and encountered the greatest of all his adventures. Next spring, he must take the road again and seek new fields. He had sounded the deeps of sorrow but never stood on the mountain-tops of joy.

About midnight, he heard her moaning, and a great dread stole over his heart. Somewhat later, he heard a pitiful call like the cry of a child that wakes and is fearful of the dark. He sprang up, his heart pounding, went into

her room, lit the oil lamp, and placed the shade upon it. Mary, pale as death, lay twisting and turning in the first agony of labour.

"Help me, help me," she gasped.

He did what he could, showing her the best position in which to lie and fastening a towel on the foot of the bed on which she might pull. In a little while, the first intense spasm was over and there came ten minutes of relief. Then it began again; each time fiercer and more agonizing. The intervals of relief grew shorter. Was ever man in such strange plight! He had almost carelessly and callously delivered hundreds of babies, but now the agony of his beloved entered into his own heart. His muscles contracted violently with great cramps; he was torn as Mary was torn. He loved her so that he endured with her every pang that racked her throbbing, beautiful body. He prayed to some vague God that he might bear her sufferings for her. In vain he prayed. Mary tore at the sheets with her hands, bit into the quilts, and struggled like some frantic wild thing caught in a trap. When her suffering became too intense, he gave her a few whiffs of chloroform. She spoke no words, but her eyes looked mute thankfulness at him. At five in the morning, the baby was born. Rosy came and wrapped it in clothing that she and Mary had prepared and placed it in a wool-lined box near the fire in the living room. With the greatest care, Alex did everything that was needful for the mother, who lay half sleeping, utterly exhausted, without power to speak or open her eyes. He covered her warmly and stepped out of the room to look at the helpless mite in the box before the fire. What a struggle to reproduce life! Why had nature made it so hard? He felt that he understood something about the world that he had never known before.

He stepped to the window and looked out at the weather. The wind had abated somewhat, but snow was still falling. Day was breaking, and against the faint light in the eastern sky he could see the snow piled in huge hummocky drifts. As he stood looking out there came a great pounding at his front door. It was impossible to get it open without a great deal of digging. Eventually, the half-breed messenger got in through the office window. Duggan had sent word that Surette was much worse and needed the doctor at once. Alex sent back word that he could not leave Mrs. Sedding, who was very ill, but that he would come as soon as possible. In a couple of hours, it stopped snowing, the wind veered around to the north, and the thermometer dropped rapidly. Mary was resting easily. Alex left Rosy in charge and, taking a long pole in his hand, he made his way with some difficulty to the Post.

Pete Surette was dead when he arrived, his Indian woman bent over him in despair. There was nothing he could do but speak a word of comfort to her. As he turned homeward, Duggan stopped him in the mess hall. A handful of trappers stood around the stove; McGowan, behind the bar, cocked his ear for anything he could gather from the conversation.

"Why didn't you come when I sent for you?" said Duggan sharply.

"It was impossible."

"Are you afraid of a little snow?"

"No, nor of you and all your gang."

"Why didn't you come?"

Alex hated to speak the truth. He hesitated and stammered, making a bad impression before the men. Some explanation was due Duggan, his employer, and at last he ventured:

"Mrs. Sedding was very ill last night and I could not leave her."

"Are you the Company's doctor or private physician to the parson's wife?" sneered Duggan.

Alex's blood boiled; he longed to strike Duggan to the ground. He stood speechless with anger, trying to restrain himself for the sake of Mary.

"Pete Surette, one of my best men, is dead, and you didn't get here in time to see him before he died," added Duggan loudly, leering at the men about the stove.

"Look here, Duggan," said Alex, "for that remark, I'm through. I could have done nothing more for the man. He was well tended, and you know, as well as I, that a snowstorm has never held up my work. When the spring breaks, I'm off. You can make arrangements at once to get another doctor for the Post."

Duggan's jaw dropped. He had no wish to make a complete breach with Alex; he had thought of him as a fixture, tied by his house and his long habit of life in the North.

Alex stepped out of doors, and once more he battled with the snow and his own sorrowful thoughts. No one could accuse him with impunity of flinching at danger or of failing in his duty. Now, he had lost everything, since Duggan and the men had turned against him. He grasped at the shadow of his love for Mary; he loved her truly, but Mary could never be anything to him. She had Sedding and her baby. They would doubtless soon leave the

Post, and he would have nothing but an aching heart. How could he begin life anew away from the home he had made, away from this rough, fierce land he had learned to love? Something within him said: “Fight, man, fight, now is the time; it is nothing to fight with your hands against material things, or to die in grips in battle; these are nothing to the fight of the spirit.” Then the strength of his ancestors who had torn boulders of granite from Cape Breton hills and turned shaggy mountains into fruitful farms rose up in him. In a kind of berserk rage, he turned his face to the north wind and dashed in the deepest drifts to his middle, shouting exultantly. He had his secret, he was stronger than all of them; no one should know it but his friends the hills and towering pines.

He reached home exhausted by his mental and physical struggle after a night of anxious watching. He changed his wet clothing and went into the living room, where he found the faithful Rosy on duty. He patted her shoulder and smiled at her. Rosy was a wonder! Soon after, Mary called faintly from her room. Alex picked up box and baby and stepped in. Mary had recovered quickly; though still pale, her eyes shone radiantly.

“What is it?” she asked faintly.

“A boy,” said Alex, as he placed the baby gently in the bed beside her.

“I am so glad. Edward will be pleased. I have chosen a name for him already.”

“What name?”

“Alex,” she whispered, “for without you I should have died.”

Five days later, Sedding struggled back worn and exhausted, the lines in his face deeper than ever.

As he pulled off coat and pack, he inquired:

“Where’s Mary?”

“In her room,” said Alex.

Then a faint infant cry fell upon his ear, and his eyes showed that he had grasped the situation. He hurried into Mary’s room.

“I am so sorry my work took me away and that the storm delayed me.”

“You couldn’t help it, dear.”

“I should have been with you.”

“No, everything is all right. It’s a boy—I knew you would like that—and healthy and well formed, the Doctor says.”

Edward looked casually at the red blinking object cuddled against Mary’s breast, then sat down to tell her of the conversion of two Indians and an old squaw. He related every incident of how they had knelt and prayed and what he had said to each. He had given the converts a Bible, though they could not read, and a little money from the missionary fund, which was more to the purpose.

“Did you meet my whisky Indian?” asked Mary.

“No, not this time.”

Mary had never forgotten her first encounter with the natives. She had asked one of them:

“Are you a Christian Indian?” and received the reply, “No, me whisky Indian.”

She lay on the bed with smiling, inscrutable eyes looking her husband through and through. He could never understand what she had endured, and she could never tell him.

CHAPTER VIII

For a long time after the great storm, billows of snow rolled as far as the eye reached. A wide track was broken and packed down between the Post and the bungalow; everywhere else the snow lay unbroken. The strong cold that came immediately after the gale formed a hard crust, and in a few days, everyone walked over the top. In the forest, however, in the shelter of spruce and fir, the crust was thinner, and many a sharp-hoofed deer and moose wallowed to a frozen death. Alex visited the sick and made his daily rounds of the Post, but Duggan and his men shunned the bungalow. Since the incident of Surette's death, Duggan's animosity against Alex and Sedding, fanned by the rascally McGowan, increased daily. Duggan was jealous of Mary and Sedding, for he felt that they had stolen Alex's company and friendship from him. He was continually restricted by the presence of the missionary in the Post, and sighed for the old days of free and open living. His life was the same as of old, but it was necessary to cloak things somewhat, lest they be reported to his superiors.

"Livin' in sin," he used to chortle to McGowan. This stock phrase of Sedding's had stuck in his crop. "What does a nincompoop like that know about livin'!"

"Nothing at all," chimed in McGowan.

"Did he ever fell a tree, or build a boat, or tramp three hundred miles through the forest and live by hitching up his belt, or strike a blow? He doesn't know what a man's life is."

"One trip in the snow did for him."

"Ay, they say he's ailing now."

"And the Doctor's got his woman."

"No, I can't believe that, McGowan."

"He's a sly one with a skirt; mind how he hooked Rosy away from the French merchant."

"Perhaps, but I don't think so; this woman's different from Rosy."

"They're all alike, all alike, and a man like the Doctor will have his way with her."

“It would be a rare joke on the parson with his Christian home in the wilderness—what, McGowan?”

Duggan chuckled for a moment, but his brow blackened when McGowan added:

“They’ve turned the Doctor against you, Duggan.”

“Damn them, damn him, I’ll get square with the lot of them yet. Livin’ in sin!” And he turned and flung out of doors, while McGowan cowered over the stove, warming his bony hands as he grinned broadly.

Spring came early; by late April, the ground was bare; the river was free, a riot of blue gladness racing to the sea. Young Alex was a lusty babe and blinked with pleasure at the warmth of the sun when he was wrapped up and carried out of doors. Sedding, who had been ailing with a hacking cough ever since his snowbound stay in the Indian huts, paid little attention to his offspring, but Alex was very fond of the infant, and often asked to be allowed to hold him. Heretofore, he had not been interested in little children; this one seemed different, almost a part of himself. The baby had been delivered by him and bore his name; that was some assurance that he would be remembered for a little. He could think of no one else who would think fondly of him when he died. Mary would certainly tell little Alex of his godfather when he was grown to manhood. Mary was always amused to watch the awkward way in which Alex balanced the baby on the biceps of his left arm, holding him close to his breast lest he should drop him, or dandling him in his great paws extended at arm’s length. If the infant made the faintest cry, he rushed to Mary and held him out to her with an imploring glance.

Sedding’s health was so bad that Mary had at last persuaded him to leave River of Strangers. Some day they could come back and build their house, when he was stronger, she told him. At any rate, they would go back to England for a little, till Edward got rid of that cough in the sunshine of Sussex downs. Alex had handed Duggan his official resignation and was to go with them, when the warm days of June came, for his year’s study at Edinburgh. He was no longer tormented by a hell of jealousy; his mad love for Mary had grown into regard and strong affection. The presence of young Alex and the pitiful condition of Sedding had somehow brought this about. The future seemed brighter to all of them.

But Fate plays strange tricks. Sedding was not the kind of man to escape lightly in this world. Perhaps the malicious gods of the Northland resented

the intrusion of the Gospel of sunny Palestine. From their homes in ice-hung caverns, where they had ruled from the beginning of the world, they laughed spitefully and sent out evil influences against him. While the snows of March had lain thick upon land and river and they had sat sheltered waiting for the spring to come, a man far away past the immeasurable forest, a man who knew them not and was unknown to them, made a decision that cast a blight upon their lives.

In Ottawa, some obscure clerk, looking over the records of marriage licenses, discovered that a man by the name of Salters, a tugboat captain in Hudson Bay, had performed the ceremony of marriage. To him, it seemed a colossal joke, and he chuckled over it with the other clerks of his department. Then, in the hope of currying favour, he carried the certificate to his superior officer, the Deputy Minister of the Interior. This Deputy Minister was a martinet. In his youth, his left arm had been blown off by the accidental discharge of a gun. Over his artificial hand he wore a tight black glove, and it had not improved his temper to learn that his subordinates referred to him as "Black-hand Bill." He was small and sickly but possessed of enormous ambition. Blighted in his hopes, he continually cavilled at the slacknesses of his chief, who, it is true, had no great intelligence but was merely a successful politician. All these things had accumulated to make him an enemy of mankind. To him there was nothing comic about the marriage certificate shown him by the grinning clerk. "A tugboat captain!" he shrieked. "Did not the fools know that only captains upon the high seas have the right of marriage vested in them?" To the trembling clerk he dictated two letters, one to old Salters informing him, that he, the Deputy Minister, had been informed of his misdemeanour, and that, if such an act were ever repeated, he would be lodged in the penitentiary; the other to Sedding, informing him in the curtest way that his marriage was not legal and that his way of life was exceedingly unbecoming to any man and disgraceful to a clergyman. He instructed the clerk to dispatch these letters as soon as they were signed and turned back to his morning paper with a feeling of elation. He smiled sardonically as he thought of the parson's consternation on the receipt of the letter.

It was weeks before the letter arrived in River of Strangers. McGowan opened the mail and saw the franked letter from Ottawa addressed to the parson. It aroused his curiosity. "What's he up to now?—been reporting something on us?" He held it up against the window pane, but the thick paper of the envelope was opaque.

"Duggan!" he called.

"Ay."

"Here's a queer letter for the bloody parson."

"What's queer about it?"

"It's franked and from Ottawa."

"Let's have a look at it." Duggan tried it against the window.

"That's no use, the envelope's too thick."

"What do you suppose he's up to?"

"Can't imagine, better have a look."

"We can't, it's sealed with wax."

"That's easy," said McGowan, and taking a thin knife he bulged the envelope and easily loosened the mucilage of the flap as far down as the seal. Then, by a little skilful twisting and turning and the use of a salmon-spear barb, he extracted the letter from the envelope. Duggan read the document in astonishment.

"Here's a rich one," he cried. "They ain't really married, after all. There goes the old Christian home." Then he read the letter aloud to McGowan. It was a great hour for the two of them.

"What'll we do with it?"

"Do with it? Seal it up and send it to him, of course. This'll finish him."

"Yes, that's right, seal it up, McGowan, and get some whisky, quick. I'm going to celebrate to-night." Duggan poured down two double Scotches in quick succession.

"And, I say, McGowan, there'll be free drinks for the boys all round. We'll do what we like from this on. He can't hurt us now. We'll have a regular old-fashioned jamboree."

McGowan sealed the letter, glorying in the instructions of his chief. Of all the fine bits of gossip that had come to his malicious mind, this was the choicest bit. There'd be a bit of the old times to-night, hell to pay, and plenty of good liquor. If only Duggan had not said "free drinks," his cup would have been full. What did these other churches amount to, anyway? A minister of the Kirk would never have been caught in a fix like this.

An hour later, after he had lit the gang up with whisky, he sent a messenger to the bungalow with the letter.

While Mary was putting young Alex to bed, Alex and Sedding strolled down the path before the bungalow. It was a warm night of early May. Though the sun had disappeared behind the mountain, twilight still lingered and the birds were still calling to each other from the tree-tops. The air was warm for that season of the year. Sedding walked with rounded shoulders, coughing frequently.

"Do you know," he said, "an evening like this quite reconciles one to River of Strangers."

"You'd better button your coat up, the night air is still chilly."

"I'm almost sorry we're going away, even for a visit. Everything is beginning to spring into life now; perhaps, with the summer, the work of the Lord would flourish."

"You will soon be coming back," said Alex, lying stoutly.

"I hate to leave, just the same. This place has got a hold on me, in spite of all my failures. The fault lies within me, I'm sure. I have not been single-minded and zealous enough."

"The place grows on one, beyond a doubt."

"I believe I could reach even Duggan and McGowan in time. Do you know, Doctor, there's a tremendous desire for religion in every human being, if you can only get at it."

"It's deeply hidden in some."

"That's true, but I believe what our old bishop used to say: 'There's a treasure store of love in each human heart.' The truth of that has just begun to dawn on me." Sedding had been somehow softened and humanized since his illness.

"Perhaps you're right," said Alex. "But I haven't found it so. I think most men work for their own advantage and selfish ends."

"You're wrong. Take yourself, now. You're not a Christian, as you frankly admit, and yet, see how kind you have been to Mary and me. I understand now that I have often bored you. Mary is very fond of you."

"Any one would do what he could for a woman like Mrs. Sedding."

"There you are; proving by your statement just what I've said. I'm convinced that Duggan and McGowan, as much as they dislike me, would do nothing actively to injure me. I'm afraid I've turned your friends against you, Doctor."

"Don't worry about that."

At that moment, a messenger emerged from the dusk and shadow of the trees. Reeling as he walked, he handed a letter to Alex and went away without a word. Alex saw that the letter was franked, but did not note the address, taking it for granted that it was for him. He turned the letter over, noted that it was sealed but that the flap was loose and dirtied. He took out his knife to open it, but upon looking closer, saw that the letter was addressed to Sedding.

"It's for you," he said, handing the letter to the parson.

From the house Alex heard Mary's voice:

"Sleep, baby sleep,
In slumber soft and deep;
Sleep, baby sleep,
Your father tends the sheep."

Sedding broke the seal, opened the letter, and read it through. He turned ghastly white, great beads of sweat broke out on his forehead, and his knees gave way beneath him.

"O God," he cried, "why have You forsaken me, why have You forsaken me?" He fell to his knees and buried his face in his hands, the letter fluttering to the ground.

"What's the matter, man? Have you bad news from home?"

"Read it, read it," he whispered.

Alex took up the letter and read it through carefully; Sedding, on his knees before him, swayed backward and forward, moaning pitifully. Alex stood deep in thought for a moment.

"The important thing is that Mrs. Sedding must never know." Alex had gone to the root of the matter at once.

"That isn't fair, she must know everything. Give me the letter and I will take it to her."

"You shall not," said Alex, crumpling up the paper in his great fist.

"I shall say what I like to my wife; I can hide nothing from her, for I love her."

"Fool!" said Alex, tearing the letter into fragments. "Do you want to kill her? Don't you know what that would mean to Mrs. Sedding with little Alex

here? Love her, love her, you say; I love her, too, ten thousand times more than you."

Alex was sorry the instant this admission was made, but it was no time to mince words. Sedding rose to his feet, staggered back, and stared at Alex wildly.

"It is your fault; it was your plan; you persuaded Captain Salters."

"This is no time for childish things or talk of what is past. Promise me silence to your wife."

"I cannot pretend."

"You will pretend and keep silence."

Alex grasped him by the arm and tried to impress his will upon him.

"Why do you treat me like this when I am in deep sorrow?"

"I only want to save Mrs. Sedding. We can pack and leave here in a few days on some pretext, and you can be remarried in England, by a clergyman of your own church. Surely you will have wit enough to make that plausible."

"Oh, the cherished ideal of my Christian home!"

"The trouble with you, Sedding, is that you love ideals more than the hearts of men. Tell me, now, do you promise silence?"

"I promise," said Sedding weakly.

"Very well, then," said Alex, releasing him. "Go in and lie down, saying that you are tired. I must have time to think."

Sedding went to his room to lie down, while Alex entered the living room to join Mary, who was holding the sleeping baby in her arms and crooning to him softly. She was radiantly beautiful and beamed upon Alex. He explained that Sedding was tired and had gone to lie down. This aroused no suspicion, as the parson had spent much time resting quietly since his illness. Mary laid little Alex in his crib and returned to talk to Alex.

"I am almost sorry we are leaving River of Strangers," she said. "I am full of happiness to-night, and I should be completely happy if only Edward were better. Did you ever see anything so adorable as little Alex?"

"Never," said Alex grimly.

"Come, now, Doctor; don't be a great bear. You know you love little Alex. You look as if something were troubling you; tell me all about it and I

will smooth out all your troubles."

"I haven't a care in the world," said Alex with a forced grin.

"Very well, then, pull off that long face and let's enjoy ourselves. I should really like to stroll out of doors, but since Edward is not well, I'll stay at home. What shall we read to-night?"

"We'd better get on with 'Le Médecin de Campagne,' or we shall never finish it."

"Do you know, I think you are something like the doctor in this book."

"Not in the least. He was a man of great refinement from the city, while I am merely a product of a rough environment. He was full of ideas and generosity, while I take what I tear away from the world."

"Somehow, I believe you would be capable of great generosity if put to a great test."

"Nonsense. Come, let's get on with our reading; we haven't much time to spare."

Mary began at the place she had last marked, and Alex sat in silence without hearing a single word. His mind was busy. He felt himself in the presence of a deeper tragedy than he had found in any book. He loved Mary, and his spirit was torn with distress as he looked at her. What should he do, where should he turn for aid? Surely Sedding's statement that he was to blame was false; he had only tried to help them against his better judgment. Of two things he was convinced: the secret must be kept from Mary, and they must get away as soon as possible. Had old Salters been notified? he wondered, and would he be discreet or spread the news among the gossips of the port? He and Sedding must guard Mary by night and day until they got her safely on the boat for England. His contempt became profound for the weak idealist. Mary read on and on with her gentle intonation, quite unaware of the tumult in his heart.

Suddenly, Alex heard sounds of shouting and carousal down at the Post. The voices came nearer and nearer; Duggan and his followers were coming up the trail, shouting something over and over in unison. He strained his ears and at last caught the refrain: "Wild Jack's livin' in sin, Wild Jack's livin' in sin." His heart sank to his boots; they knew, they had opened the letter; this was the explanation of the dirty envelope with its loosened flap. It was a time for speedy action, and he must save her.

“Mrs. Sedding,” he said, “Duggan and his crowd are drunk and coming up this way. You take little Alex and go with Rosy to the kitchen. Your husband and I will meet them and send them about their business.”

“But—but,” she faltered, “is there danger?”

“No, no danger. Do what I tell you and do it quickly.”

She had never seen him in his masterful mood before; she knew it was a time to obey.

Alex darted into the bedroom and shook Sedding.

“Come with me, quick,” he whispered. “Don’t you hear what they’re shouting?”

“God knows it’s true,” he whimpered weakly.

“Rouse yourself, man, don’t be a weak fool.”

“Let me die here.”

“Where you die is a matter of indifference to me; it’s your wife I want to save.” Alex dragged him from the bed and thrust a revolver into his hand. “I may not be able to drive them back single-handed; imagine yourself a man for half an hour.” Alex walked out of the front door and Sedding followed weakly. The darkness was lit only faintly by starlight. Duggan’s gang carried pine torches that flared out against the darkness. The stillness of the night accentuated their drunken shouts. About fifty yards from the bungalow Alex and Sedding met Duggan and the gang. They were all reeling ripe and fit for any deviltry.

“Wild Jack’s livin’ in sin, Wild Jack’s livin’ in sin,” they bellowed. Alex bestrode the road like a colossus, his giant form towering up in the darkness. The gang halted as the light of the torches glinted on him, but Duggan advanced boldly.

“Well, Parson, who’s livin’ in sin now? Tell me that. Let me pass,” he said to Alex, who pushed him backward.

“You shall not come near my house this night, you drunken blackguard.”

“Who and what are you?” screamed Duggan. “Whose is the kid, anyway—yours or the parson’s?”

For that, Alex struck him full in the mouth with his giant fist and crashed him to the ground. Duggan carried a scar across his cheek from that blow to

his dying day. He lay still in the roadway, perhaps dead. The gang faltered, then someone flung a stone.

"Look ye, men," said Alex, drawing his gun. "You know me, I swear by God in heaven and all the devils of hell that I will kill with my own hands any man that comes near my house to-night. Another stone and I shoot. Pick up this drunken brute and lug him home, and don't leave the Post again to-night."

Sullen, sobered, and cowed, they came forward and lifted their prostrate master to bear him off.

"Stop a minute," said Alex.

He listened to Duggan's heart and loosened his collar. He was not dead, only "out."

"Throw some cold water on his face and put him to bed. You, McGowan, there in the rear rank, do you hear?"

"Yes, sir," said McGowan meekly.

Alex then turned to look for Sedding, but he was nowhere in sight. Had the fellow run away from danger? He could hardly believe that. Then a dark form in the shadow of a tree caught his eye. It was Sedding prostrate on the ground, his lips white with foam. His brow was cut, where the stone had caught him, and he had evidently fallen in a fit. Alex got him upon his back, carried him into his room, laid him upon the bed, and bathed the wound in his forehead. After a little, he called Mary and Rosy.

All night long they watched by his bedside as he groaned and struggled in his travail of spirit. In his delirium, he fought against snow and storm or preached and prayed with the half-breeds, breaking off suddenly to cry in a strange voice, "Living in sin, O God, living in sin." Over and over he repeated this phrase, and Alex was fearful lest Mary might become suspicious of the facts. But she suspected nothing; she thought that Sedding's condition had been caused by the blow on the head, and that in his sick condition he was reviewing the thing constantly in his mind, the wickedness of the dwellers in River of Strangers. As a matter of fact, the stone had caused only a shallow scalp wound. Sedding's disease had a deeper cause, as Alex well knew. Toward morning, he persuaded Mary to lie down for a little, and he was left alone with the sick man. Just as dawn was breaking, Sedding opened his eyes and became partially conscious. Alex pressed his hand, and there was slight pressure in return. Then Sedding began to repeat aloud the Twenty-third Psalm.

" 'The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want . . .' " When he came to the verse, " 'Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me,' " he turned suddenly to Alex and cried out, "Where is my rod and staff, where is my rod and staff? I have none, I have no rod and staff to guide me through the valley. I am forsaken and undone. Why are the righteous forsaken and their seed begging bread? . . ." Then he rambled on, lapsing again into delirium with his strange cry of "Living in sin, O God, living in sin."

Next day, he lay in a dull stupor, muttering strange things. He made no effort to save himself, for, with his ideal broken, he, too, was broken. Alex left Sedding for an hour and went down to the Post, to straighten matters out with Duggan. As he sewed up the long gash across his cheek, he frightened the factor by telling him that Sedding had been seriously injured by the stone flung by one of the half-breeds. He accused him also of tampering with the mails, pointing out that he could have obtained the information he had revealed in his drunken state only by opening and reading a sealed letter from Ottawa. Duggan was thoroughly frightened and swore secrecy on the part of himself and his followers. Alex would make no promises of what would happen if Sedding died. The law would probably have to take its course. He knew that he held the whip hand over Duggan.

When Alex returned to the bungalow, he found Sedding resting more easily with Mary at his side. She was talking to him gently of old times at home, and he was listening and apparently understanding, though he spoke no word in return. Toward evening, his temperature rose and he became again feverish and delirious. A little later, he fell asleep, and Alex and Mary went into the dining room to have the meal which Rosy had placed on the table. As they sat there, they suddenly heard an awful voice crying, "I am going to find Christ! I am going to find Christ!" Alex sprang up and rushed to the front door to see a white form disappearing in the edge of the forest. Alex gave chase, but Sedding was fleet of foot and had the tireless strength of madness. Night had fallen and the forest was full of gloomy murk. He ran to and fro among the trees stumbling over roots, brushing against branches, calling, "Sedding, Sedding, where are you?" There was no response. After a half hour's fruitless search, he came back to the bungalow for a lantern and horn. He dispatched Rosy to the Post with the news, and instructed Duggan to turn out every man for the search. Mary was in despair.

"You must not give way, we will find him; you must keep hold of yourself for the sake of little Alex," he said to her almost fiercely.

“I will try; I will not hamper you. You need not think of me. Only search, search everywhere for him.”

That night the forest twinkled with the glare of lanterns and torches, to the amazement of many a wild creature. Bells were rung and horns were blown, to no avail. Next day, they hunted hill and dale. Alex assigned a district to each party and tramped tirelessly himself. He must be somewhere in the forest that covered the great bend of the river. Once they were encouraged by finding the track of a bare foot two miles from the Post. They brought dogs to it, but the rain that had fallen had destroyed the scent. In a few days, they gave up the search of the forest and took up the more sombre work of dragging the near-by lakes and rivers. But it was of no avail; no trace of Sedding could be found.

CHAPTER IX

For days after Sedding's disappearance Mary lay still in bed; the shock had been terrible to her. For a time she neither ate nor spoke nor paid any attention to little Alex. She and Sedding had been friends from childhood; their families had lived for generations in the same sleepy cathedral town; and while they had had no strong passion for each other, their mutual affection had been great. She had been the stronger and the leader and had always thought of him as the little boy who, when he went away to school, had given her half of a sixpence as a keepsake. That childish love token still lay in her jewel case. She felt strangely alone, with a great void in her life.

Rosy tended little Alex with a mother's care, while Alex did everything he could to rouse Mary from her state of lethargy. He told her that, even if her husband were lost, she must live and be strong for the sake of her little boy; she could soon get back to England and there, among friends, her interest would revive in watching his development. This argument appealed to her but little. She had no interest in little Alex, or in a return to her friends; her mind was thoroughly sick. She refused to believe for a moment that Sedding was dead. Although intelligent in artistic matters and by nature intuitive, her religious ideas were in no way profound; she had grown up in the midst of a religion that seemed as impressive and well established as the hoary cathedral in which the worshippers gathered, and had accepted all simply and without question. Her mind revolved about a simple premise: "God loves his children, and He could not let such a good man as Edward, who was so devoted to his service, die and lie unburied in the wood to be torn by wild things." Her God was the God of the English cathedral in whose shadow she had grown up; the gods of the strong cold were unknown to her. She had heard Edward's last mad cry: "I am going to seek Christ," and it had made a profound impression upon her. She became obsessed with the idea that Sedding would find some remote tribe of Indians and be to them a great prophet or Messiah. Thus his dream would be realized. When Alex saw how her mind was running, he encouraged her in this fantastic idea, pointing out that the season was far advanced, the nights warm, the brooks full of trout, and the forest of game, so that a man might sustain himself in the forest for many days. He even told her of the footprint they had found in a brook bed, miles from the Post. He knew that he was lying, for Sedding at his best had little instinct for self-preservation and he had

escaped in the delirium of fever; beyond a doubt, he was dead somewhere in the wilderness. To encourage her in this idea, however, seemed the only way to win her back to health. When her mind was well, he was sure that she would grasp the truth of the situation. One day, when she had become stronger, he carried little Alex in and laid him beside her in the bed. The baby smiled and cooed at her; Mary clasped him to her bosom; from that moment she began to improve rapidly.

She had no suspicion of the fateful letter, the real cause of Sedding's downfall, and Alex was resolved that such news would only reach her over his dead body. He visited Duggan, who was in mortal terror since the disappearance of the parson, and patched up a treaty with him. Alex had the whip hand and swore Duggan and every man in the Post to secrecy on the Bible.

"I forgive you the blow, Doctor; I deserved it," said Duggan; "but don't leave the Post now. We can never get another doctor like you, and now we have no further cause for quarrel."

"I must put Mrs. Sedding and her child on board the boat for England as soon as she is strong enough to travel."

"But you'll come back, promise you'll come back. We must have some more hunting trips together."

Alex reflected. He could not very well travel to England on the same boat with Mary. That would give the tongues of the gossips too much leeway. Perhaps it would be better if he did not see her until years had softened her sorrow. At any rate, he was in no mood to study. He could do nothing in England for Mary, who would be with her family and friends, and he would be happier with his own forests and streams.

"I can't say now, I must have time to think it over."

"I'll take back all I said in the winter; Surette's death was no fault of yours."

"Nor do I suppose you were directly responsible for Sedding's death."

"I'm glad to hear you say that." Duggan, like many a drunken sensualist, had a good deal of pity for those in trouble. Now that Sedding, the object of his hatred, was dead, and Mrs. Sedding ill, he was willing to do anything to make amends. He longed for Alex's old companionship and hated to think of River of Strangers without him.

"One thing you must do, Duggan, is to get rid of that fellow McGowan."

"McGowan's a very useful man in the business."

"Yes, he's a slick thief. He must be rich by this time. He's tucked many a dollar away in the last fifteen years. I expect he has some of your money, too."

"He's a Glasgow Scot."

"But that isn't the worst of him. He's got an evil and malicious tongue. He was the cause of half the trouble between you and Sedding."

"Maybe you're right."

"I won't come back if he's here in charge of store and bar."

"Very well, then, anything you say goes. But you must give me time. I'll get him transferred to some other post. Or perhaps he'd like to go home. McGowan's getting on, you know."

"Old enough to know better. Duggan, we live pretty close to things here, and I've come to see that, while drinking and living with women may be bad, or anti-social, as they call it, the real bad in the world is that which comes from a spiteful and malicious spirit. McGowan is like Tornarsuk, a destroyer of mankind. Yes, you'd better get rid of him."

"And you'll come back?"

"Perhaps for a year or two, till we see how things go."

By July, Mary was strong enough to travel. Alex procured two stout sixteen-foot canvas canoes and two reliable boatmen. The canoe of the boatmen was to carry food boxes, tents, blankets, dunnage bags, and Mary's luggage. He moved the amidships thwart of his own canoe eighteen inches toward the bow, and made a place with skins and rugs where Mary might recline at ease. Beside her resting place, he made a tiny snug nest for little Alex. He found great joy in selecting everything of the best for the comfort of Mary. It was, perhaps, the last service he could render her. Meticulously, he chose blue and gray blankets of the finest wool from the company's stores, and the best things from his larder. Rosy helped him pack the home-cured hams, the roasted chickens, choice bacon, and the best cut from a great smoked salmon. Alex knew that he could get sea trout in any tributary of the river, or pick up a goose or duck in the still waters. Duggan placed everything at his disposal, and even at a remote post like River of Strangers, the Company's stores were well stocked.

One morning in mid-July, they set off from the jetty upon which stood all of the people in the Post. To them it was the closing act of a great tragedy, and even the rudest pitied and loved Mary. McGowan and Duggan were there, and Rosy, who had carried little Alex down from the bungalow to place him in the canoe by his mother. Mary waved a last farewell to them as the canoe turned the first bend in the river. The two boatmen paddled their canoe ahead; in the second was Alex, with Mary amidships, little Alex at her side. Mother and child looked into each other's eyes with that frank relation that only mother and child have. Little Alex, quite unconscious of any tragedy or of the strangeness of his situation, was fascinated by the gleam and swish of the paddle and by the glittering drops that dripped in midstroke. He gurgled something and smiled at his mother, who transmitted the smile to Alex, who sat on the stern thwart, his legs curled under him, wielding his big paddle.

The river flowed swiftly in swirls and oily eddies; the water sucked and rustled against the canvas bottom. Sharply the black cliffs stood up against the clear blue of the cloudless sky; the poplars and young birches were resplendent like shell bursts on the dark hill. The air was like wine. The canoe, responding to each stroke as if it, too, took joy in the journey, moved forward with a gentle undulating movement. "How beautiful and yet how cruel the Northland can be," thought Alex. "I shall never be nearer Heaven than this." The chanty of the boatmen, who paddled in time to their melody, floated back to them over the water:

"Oh Shenandoah, I love your daughter,
 Away, my rolling river!
Shenandoah, I love your daughter,
 Away, we're bound away across the wide Missouri.

"Polly's girl just took my fancy,
 Away, my rolling river!
She's clipper built, her name is Nancy,
 Away, we're bound away across the wide Missouri.

"I take her coral beads and laces,
 Away, my rolling river!
I love to call her queen of faces,
 Away, we're bound away across the wide Missouri."

They stopped for lunch by the side of a great flat rock, where a mountain stream came bustling and hustling to the river in a welter of foam. Little

Alex, who had been lulled to sleep by the swaying of the canoe, woke as they stopped, blinked, and looked about him. It was time for his luncheon, too. Alex made some pretext to join the boatmen while that intimate ceremony was carried on. As the afternoon wore on and they again floated down the river, Alex kept his eye open for a good camping place for the night. Any one who has travelled by canoe down a great river knows how astonishingly few such places are; sometimes the river creeps between sheer cliffs or stony hills, sometimes the forest trees grow to the river's verge. About five in the afternoon, they came to the point where the Opinaka empties into the great river, and there he saw the camping place he sought. In the angle between the two rivers, and ten or twelve feet above their level, was a flat grassy sward with a background of slim white birches. Across the main river rose a cliff of red sandstone over which a ribbon of white water trailed, blown to and fro by every gust of wind that puffed up the river. Below the juncture a great rapid roared and brawled for half a mile. Alex whistled to the boatmen, then motioned with his hand, and they drew both canoes into the deep dead water above the meeting of the rivers. Mary sat on a stone by the river's edge and held her baby while the men pitched the tents. Alex placed the tent for Mary on the open flat with a view up and down the main river and a vista up the turbulent Opinaka; the tent for himself and the boatmen he pitched back among the birches. The men quickly cut poles and put the tents in position. Then Alex gathered armfuls of dry fern for the flooring of Mary's tent and covered these with tiny branches of sweet-smelling fir, shingling each twig beneath the other. Upon this odorous bed he spread blankets and cushions. Over a box at the far end of the tent he threw a bright-coloured cloth and placed there a candle in a brass candlestick. He drove a few nails in the tent poles to serve as clothing hooks, and looked about him, pleased with his work. "It is thus," he thought, "a man should labour for the woman of his heart." Then he ran down to the beach, took little Alex in his arms, and helped Mary clamber up the shingly bank. She said nothing, but she was pleased with the home he had made for her. She placed little Alex in his bed, and he stretched out tiny hands to tap on the tent walls or pull at the stems of ferns that stuck out beyond the edges of the blanket. Mary looked up the two great rivers, at the towering cliff of sandstone, at the rapid that roared below.

"This is the most majestic place I have ever seen," she said.

Alex left her and found that, while he had been arranging Mary's tent, the boatmen had made excellent preparations for him and themselves. He took an ax and cut a heap of knots from a dead pine stump. The red freshly cut wood oozed resin and filled all the air with its sweet odour. Everything

in nature seemed to be at its best for them; how different from his last journey down river with Sedding. He gathered wood up in his arms and carried it to Mary's tent. Throwing it on the ground, he went down to the river bank and gathered an armful of flat stones, which he built into a horseshoe-shaped fireplace. When he had finished, he called to Mary, within the tent:

"May I have dinner with you?"

"Of course, you great dunce! Do you intend to dine with Pete and Jack and leave me alone? Little Alex will soon be asleep now."

Alex unpacked her hamper, and soon bacon and chicken sizzled in the pan and coffee bubbled on the hot stones. He brought up boards and boxes from the canoes, and improvised tables and benches. As he completed his arrangements Mary opened the tent flaps and stepped out.

"Dinner is served! You seem to be an excellent chef, Doctor. Where did you learn to cook?"

"In the woods. One learns a little of every thing here."

"Chicken and bacon and some of Rosy's johnnycake! We're going to do ourselves well to-night!"

"Are you hungry?"

"Ravenous."

"Plain things taste good out of doors."

"I shouldn't call this food plain."

Dusk was falling, making distinct the firelight, softening all lines, and clothing everything in a monotone of gray. There was little wind, and all sounds were dulled by the steady roar of the rapid.

"Must we go through that to-morrow?"

"Yes, it's not dangerous."

"It's worse than any we've been through to-day."

"Yes, I think it is, but there's no risk. I've run it a dozen times."

"I won't worry if you assure me; I am not thinking of myself, but only of the baby."

"It's safe and easy, and the boys know it well. We'll let them lead. You yourself can see from here the main channel, winding like a blue ribbon

through the white water."

They were both hungry, and Mary thought she had never tasted anything more delicious than the chicken and bacon, the toast dipped in drippings, and the rich coffee. After supper, Mary helped Alex clear up. He washed the dishes at the river's brink, and she packed them away. Mary was amused at Alex's method of getting the grease out of the frying pan. He tore up a great sandy sod and scoured it round and round, plunging both in the river from time to time. He looked about to see that everything was right for the night. The boatmen had secured the canoes and turned them over to protect their equipment from the dew. He picked up his rifle and carried it up to the tent and returned to sit down beside Mary. It was almost dark, but over the pointed spruces behind them the sky was full of a golden glow, harbinger of the rising full moon. Soon the two river valleys were flooded with moonlight that vaguely illuminated the sandstone bluff till it looked like some ancient temple. Down its face writhed the bejewelled wraith of filmy spray. The white water of the rapid gleamed fiercely, the deep blue of the channel now changed to black. Far off in some forest still-water a loon sent out its wailing note that sounded above the noise of the waters. They sat in silence, overwhelmed with the beauty of the night. They could speak of nothing trifling; they dared speak of nothing deep. Sometimes Alex stirred to rake the coals together and mend the fire with a stick, and Mary rose to peep at her sleeping baby. The red giant sat thinking of his secret and his love; the wide-eyed English girl of her baby, and of her dead husband lying somewhere in the woods. For them the pine fire exhaled incense, the rivers played their grandest symphony, the red cliff with its trail of spray stood up and glistened; far back, the everlasting hills rose up from the river and clumps of white birches glinted among pines and spruces. To be with his beloved at such a time and place was almost more than a man like Alex could bear. It was well for him that he had schooled himself to keep his secret. Presently he forced himself to rise.

"I must go now, good-night."

"Good-night."

"Nothing can harm you; one of us will be on guard all night."

"I always know that I am safe when you are near."

"Good-night, then, and sleep well."

He turned and stepped off in the direction of his tent.

“Alex, come back,” she called sharply. He turned, his heart thumping; she had never called him by his name before.

She stood with one hand holding back the tent flap.

“You must see little Alex in the bed you have made.”

He knelt down and kissed the little flushed cheek of the sleeping boy and went away.

After his departure, Mary came out and stood a long time alone in the moonlight. But she did not look at the hills, or glistening trees, or the raging rapid, or at any of the beauty of the night. She looked far beyond these and thought of the tragedy of life. She thought of Edward lying dead in the forest; now that her mind was well, she no longer indulged her fantastic fancy of him alive in some Indian village. She could never be certain, however, whether he was dead or alive; she only knew that he had disappeared in the forest and that no trace of him could be found. In this year she had lived more than in all her life. She thought of the tragedy of Alex’s love for her that she had long ago sensed, and how gray would be life in an English town without him, after what she had seen this night. He was a man of iron, he would not speak, and she must not let him know. She knew that she could easily love him, and felt that he needed her. It seemed strange that, within the shadow of her husband’s tragedy, her heart should turn to another man. Life was not simple and straightforward, but complicated by many tangled threads of emotion. She must always be the victim of a great uncertainty. She would never marry again, but would devote her life to little Alex.

Next day, they floated down river through the rapid. Mary was thrilled and little Alex gurgled with delight as the water lapped the gunwale. Each night they sought a camping place and rested each noonday, or whenever Mary was tired or the child grew restless. One day it rained, and they stayed in camp all day; beyond that, their journey was pleasant and uneventful.

When they came to La Plonge, the heaviest and most dangerous water on the river, Alex declared a portage, though he had run the rapid a score of times. Pete and Jack sulked at the prospect of a foolish and unnecessary carry, and eventually Alex allowed them to take the dunnage canoe through, on the condition that they would return and carry his over the portage. He took little Alex in his arms and he and Mary walked over the trail together through the sweet-smelling spruces till they came to the top of the bluff and saw the great river raging below them. The boatmen’s canoe, like a frail toy,

was in the middle of the rapid as they looked down. It dashed over little falls and almost disappeared in the foam of the swift run, then raced along to the next fall. For miles the country stretched out a magnificent panorama before them. There was the great river backed by wooded ridge upon wooded ridge, with here and there the gleam of some unknown lake. It seemed to Mary, as she stood there, that she was a part of this great land; she contrasted this with the hedged fields, the narrow valleys, and little clumps of wood at home. Somehow, that seemed limited, confining, and restricted. Would she ever be happy in such a landscape again? This land where she had spent one year of happiness and sorrow would always be hers, she could hardly believe that she belonged to a civilization of gray houses and clanging church bells. Here, in silence, as the sunlight played upon the hills, she would say good-bye to it for ever. Halfway down the slope they met Pete and Jack returning for their canoe. Soon they were on the river again that below La Plonge began to broaden to the sea.

On the fifth day, they reached Port Churchill, and, to their surprise, saw the Company's steamer at the pier. She had arrived earlier than was expected and was to leave the next morning. They put up at Mrs. Morris's inn, where Alex and Sedding had waited so long for Mary a little more than a year before. From Mrs. Morris Alex inquired about old Salters and learned that he had received a letter of reprimand from Ottawa. As Salters was a drunkard and could not keep counsel, it seemed wisest to confide everything to Mrs. Morris and ask her aid in protecting Mary. He followed this plan, and it worked admirably: Mrs. Morris had known trouble and resolved with Alex to keep Mrs. Sedding from all communication with the local people. She gave old Salters an extra bottle of her best whisky, saw that he drank half of it, then rated him as a drunken scoundrel, and forbade him to leave his room.

In the evening, as Alex and Mary sat together, Mary said:

"I should like to see old Captain Salters who married us."

"I thought you would," said Alex, "and I inquired of him from Mrs. Morris. She tells me that he is away from the village and will not return for a week."

"That's strange," said Mary, "I was sure that I saw him in the corridor just after you left me this afternoon."

"Impossible," said Alex. "There are several old men staying here. You must have mistaken one of them for Salters."

"That's too bad," said Mary. "I should like to thank him for his kindness to Edward and me. I often think, Doctor, about your counsel on that occasion. Do you remember you advised against our marriage? Nearly always you are right, but then you were wrong. Think how much happiness I should have missed had we listened to you."

"You forget that Father Saulnier was at the Post when we arrived."

"But Edward had such an intense feeling against Catholics. He would never have been married by a priest."

When Alex left Mary, he visited old Salters and apparently drank glass for glass of whisky with him till midnight. Salter swallowed his allowance, but Alex's went in the water pitcher. He undressed the old man and put him to bed; he would be a negligible factor till noon next day.

The boat was to sail at ten in the morning, and shortly after nine, Mary and Alex walked down to the pier. They went up the gangplank and straight to her cabin. Luckily, it was not the same boat that had carried Mary on the outward voyage, so that she was unknown. Alex had instructed Jack and Pete to see that the heavy luggage should be placed in the hold, for he did not want to linger on the pier, making the comfort of little Alex the pretext for his haste. They entered the cabin, and he laid the baby tenderly in the lower berth, covered him with a blanket, and kissed him good-bye. "He is almost mine," he thought. Then he turned and mutely held out his hand to Mary. "Sit down," she said. "It's not yet time to go ashore." Alex knew that he should go, but he sat down, at Mary's order. For a moment she said nothing. At last she broke the silence with:

"Words mean so little, I have lived so much this year, you have been so close to me in my troubles. When shall I see you again?"

"Probably never."

"Oh, you must come to England," she said with an affected brightness.

"I am going back to the Post," said Alex; "that is my life. Duggan and the people, drunken ruffians as they are, need me; they are used to my ways, and I to theirs."

"But surely your life can't be the same?" she queried sharply.

"I shall miss you and your husband more than I can say."

"And Rosy?"

"You knew, then?"

"Of course."

"Rosy will not be there when I get back. She has long considered herself neglected and has decided to seek other company."

"Poor Alex, you will be quite alone."

"May I call you by your name, too?"

"Yes."

"Mary." And in the intonation of her name, he expressed all his love for her and his sorrow in parting from her. He sat trembling, shaken by the storm of emotion that raged within him. How could he bear to lose the wondrous "Lady of his Dreams"? Then he remembered with thankfulness the MacDonalds of Marble Mountain, and all they had borne in the rough land of his birth. "Learn to endure, Alex, as those before you did. Learn to endure, for without that life is impossible."

Just then a bell clanged and on deck a hoarse voice called:

"All ashore that's going ashore."

Mary held out both her hands to him. He took them, drew her into his arms and kissed her, looking straight into her wide, fearless eyes.

"Good-bye," she said. "If I only knew, I should never leave you."

She had not meant to say that; something deep in her nature had spoken for her.

"Good-bye," he said, tearing himself away. It was a moment of awful temptation, to tell her she was really free. He never knew how he got on deck and clambered down the gangplank. "There goes a husky who's had too much to drink," said a sailor to one of his mates. The boat pulled off and gathered way. She did not come on deck; she could not bear to see him standing there alone. Motionless upon the pier he watched, till the boat faded into a trail of smoke.

CHAPTER X

The return journey up river was a nightmare to Alex. Since the declaration of her love, his heart ached for Mary. Through his mind ran continually one never-to-be-forgotten phrase: “If I only knew, I should never leave you.” He avoided all the places where they had camped together, and Pete and Jack grumbled when he passed by some grassy knoll to pitch his tent on the rocky shore. To ease his sorrow, he indulged in an orgy of physical exertion. On the long stretches, he took the lead and paddled so fiercely that the two boatmen could scarcely keep up with him. On the rapids, he poled like a madman, or when the water ran too strong, he portaged, slinging his canoe on his broad shoulders, already hung with dunnage. He would allow neither of the boatmen to touch the craft that had carried her. They could not understand his haste as contrasted with the leisure of the descent, nor why he carried his own canoe; that was never a white man’s job. “Perhaps,” they said to each other, “he has caught madness from the parson. None but a madman would have let that fine white squaw go away on the ship when her man was dead in the forest. Duggan or McGowan would never have been so foolish.”

When they reached the Post, Alex paid off his men and, telling them to follow with the dunnage, he slung the canoe on his shoulder and strode off toward his house. Duggan was there to shake him by the hand, but he was glad to have the weight of the canoe on his shoulder as an excuse for haste. He could talk to no one; he must be alone with his thoughts. The songs and foolish chatter of Jack and Pete had bored and irritated him as they had sat around their camp fires. He looked neither at the trees nor the sunshine on the towering hills, but kept his eyes fixed upon the ground. “If I only knew, I should never leave you—if I only knew, I should never leave you”: that was his gospel, his word of life, his song of songs.

He reached the house, laid down the canoe, and opened the door. Within, all was dark and silent. Rosy was gone with Roxy; he would miss her cooking and her cheerful company, but he needed her no more. He threw up the blinds to let in the sunshine and lit a small fire on the hearth, for dampness had gathered in the house even in those summer days. His footsteps echoed in that empty place of memories. He stood before his hearth, sick at heart and alone, alone as he had been years ago, alone as he

had always been till he met Mary. Now youth had slipped away and there was nothing left but to grow old and die. The curse of losing one's beloved is that half the beauty of the world dies with her departure. Would he ever have the heart to touch his fiddle again? The glory of the forest, the blue of the racing river, the majesty of the mountain against the sunset could no longer be shared with her. Her spirit had comprehended all these things; she had understood him, too, and never tried to reform him. He knew why she had asked about Rosy: it was because she loved him. By God, he would reform himself! He strode to his office, took a jug of rum and twelve bottles from a case of whisky, opened them, and poured them out upon the ground, a libation to her memory. At any rate, he had pierced through the shell of life and found beauty and tragedy at the centre. The "Lady of his Dreams" had been with him a little and was gone; henceforth, he must live on dreams. In the night, he awoke with a start from fitful slumber when a bough creaked against the roof; for a moment, he mistook it for the cry of little Alex. It was raining and a dreary wind was blowing up. He lay sleepless till dawn.

Little by little he got himself in hand. He tended the sick, though there was little sickness in the summer season; worked in his garden; fished for salmon; and through many a long day roamed the woods, peering into every thicket, hoping against hope that he might find some trace of Sedding. With Duggan's consent, he cleared a new piece of land. Felling big pines and maples and tearing out their stumps is a great panacea for a heartache. Every night he went to bed physically worn out. After a while, he went back to his books, and last of all, to his fiddle. That was the hardest, for, as he played, he could always hear the plaintive sound of her viola. He renewed companionship with Duggan and the trappers, though he drank no more whisky. That was unnecessary, since he had years ago established a reputation as one who could drink any man in River of Strangers under the table and walk home without lurching in his pace. He had been known as a man of violence among them, a man to be feared in anger; now he was different.

In August came a letter from her, telling of her journey, her loneliness, her life among her friends and family, and the latest doings of little Alex. He read much between the lines, but nothing more than she intended. Thereafter, letters came regularly whenever there were boats or overland mail. He treasured these letters and read and reread them till the paper was worn and frayed. He wrote in reply of the news of the Post, of his own doings, of simple things in nature. He had neglected writing for so long that his style was cramped and stiff. He never spoke one word of love, for he knew that Mary would understand without words, and that his letters might

be asked for by her family as curiosities from a strange world. Mary wrote in her first letter:

DEAR ALEX:

I have so many things to tell you that I hardly know where to begin. When you left me on the steamer, I was frightfully lonely, and I sat down first of all and had a good cry. I couldn't bear to go on deck and wave good-bye to you, standing alone there, even if I could have left the baby. After a while, I pulled myself together and tidied up my cabin and laid out my things and little Alex's. The stewardess was very kind—an English girl from Devon—and I arranged with her to be with the baby two hours every day, so that I could get my walk on deck. We English can never get over the idea of keeping fit, no matter what happens. I hardly got acquainted with any one on the voyage, as I had no desire to talk. Coming out, I knew all the officers and had a jolly time. It shows that people only respond to you when you are yourself responsive.

We had no rough weather, nothing exciting happened, and we landed in Plymouth sixteen days after I left you. Little Alex stood the voyage splendidly. On warm days, he sometimes slept on deck or lay blinking at the sunshine on the waves.

Well, here I am in the bosom of my family and friends. I never told you, but they were much opposed to my going out to Canada to join Edward; so, while they are all sweet and sympathetic, there is a general undercurrent of "I told you so, I knew some disaster would happen." Father is the most understanding of all. He is my comfort. The other night, we sat in his study; he put his arm about me and I told him all I could of River of Strangers and of Edward's struggle. The difficulty was to tell the story without bringing you into every episode; you were like King Charles the First to poor Mr. Dick. Father was understanding and really sympathetic. "Who was this doctor in whose house you lived?" he asked. "He was the great man of that country," I replied, "but so different from us that I can hardly explain. Some night I'll tell you the epic of his doings. He's a tremendous fellow." You see what I think of you.

Mother and sisters insist on decking me out in black and appointing an official time of mourning. Black is a costume I abhor, and official mourning a heathenish custom. I do not care to

wear my heart on my sleeve or advertise my sorrow to the townsfolk. However, there's one good feature of this period of mourning, and that is that I don't have to go out to dinner or tea parties for ever so long. I only have to endure visits of moist-eyed old ladies—friends of Mother—to whom I am exhibited in private view as some strange creature from the New World, not any longer quite English, you know. "It must be a strange rough country and full of inconveniences," they murmur. I'm afraid I'm rather out of tune with my life, Alex.

My window looks out over a valley and a gorse-covered hill, for our house stands on the outskirts of the town. The valley with its hedged fields looks pitifully small and restricted. I sometimes close my eyes and stand again on the bluff looking over the great river and the limitless forests. I tried to explain the river to one of the more intelligent of my old lady callers, and she answered, "Something like the Thames at Oxford, I suppose, my dear. I always used to love it when I went up for May week." The Thames at Oxford! You should see it. *C'est à rire!*

Little Alex grows more adorable every day. I am glad he bears your name. He cuddles his tiny nose and mouth into my neck now and makes sweet baby sounds, and begins to be loving. He has just made the wonderful discovery of his toes and lies for hours on his back pulling them, looking at them sagely, and smiling at them. Some day I will be able to tell him of you, of Edward's heroic effort, and of my life in River of Strangers. All my hopes are centred on him. I think a great deal of poor Edward, but no longer with pain. You know he always dreamed of a martyr's death; he talked as a boy of his desire to die for the cause of Christ. Well, his desire has been fulfilled, and we had one year of happiness together. I have learned that dying is a matter of no great importance; living is the difficult thing. Some people in England seem to think that the rules of life can be set down in a book. Perhaps they can, for those who have no great emotion or affection.

Good-night, dear Alex. I must go to bed now. You must come and see me when the years have cured us both. I shall write often.

Yours ever,

MARY.

Alex wrote in reply:

DEAR MRS. SEDDING:

I was glad to get your letter and to learn that you had reached home safely and that you were once more with your family and friends. I was also glad to hear that little Alex stood the voyage so well. It was lonely here in this empty house when I got back. Rosy is gone, and I miss her cooking. Old Mrs. Deveau—you remember the woman with the limp—comes in by the day to clean the house and cook. No longer am I served with delectable pies and sweetmeats. It will be good for me, I'm sure, as I've put on much too much weight the last few years. To keep myself out of mischief, I've set about clearing the field back of the garden. It's hard work and I enjoy it. There's been little sickness this summer, and most of my time is free. Duggan and McGowan and the rest of the crowd are friendly and try to be the same to me as they were before you and your husband came. I've told Duggan that he must send McGowan away, and he has agreed to transfer him to another post. He's a spiteful and malicious person and has always cheated the Indians. Of course, they all do that to some degree, but McGowan is a super-cheater. Last night, I was down at the pool at the mouth of Burnt Brook and hooked and landed a fine fifteen-pound salmon. Do you remember getting some grilse there late in August last year, after the run of big fish was over? It will soon be time for the ducks and geese to assemble and go south. I must say I rather dread this winter. However, I've begun to read again, and I have the pile of novels to go through that you left me. Somehow, I shall worry along. I haven't had any inclination to play the fiddle since you left. I took it down the other night and ran through a few scales, but it was no go. I always used to think of my fiddle as a joyous instrument, and liked music that sounded like running brooks or the wind in the trees. Now it's different: it sounds sad and plaintive. Perhaps it will come back some day. Some of the maples on the ridges are turning and the river is very full, almost in flood. I have wondered why that is, as we have had no great rains this summer. When we were children we used to say: "Autumn gives the lakes and rivers time to fill up."

The mystery of Mr. Sedding's disappearance is still unsolved. The trappers and boatmen have already woven a fantastic epic about it and have made of him a heroic character. The story will

grow, as time goes on, and become embodied in their songs. I am sorry I was not more helpful to him. I miss you all very much. The other night I woke up at the squeak of a rubbing bough and thought it was little Alex crying. Greet him for me. This is a very stupid letter, but it is so long since I have written that I am quite out of practice. I never could write very well. It will always be a pleasure to answer your letters and give you the "news" of River of Strangers. Good-bye.

Yours sincerely,
ALEX. MACDONALD.

Throughout the autumn, he hunted and tramped the woods. In October, McGowan, not yet transferred, fell ill with pneumonia. Alex tended him faithfully, but he had no constitution with which to resist.

"Do you think I'm going to die, Doctor?" he queried feebly.

"I don't know, you have a fighting chance."

"I don't want to die, I've been a very wicked man. I wish we had a minister of our church here."

"He could do nothing for you."

"A minister's a great help when you have something on your conscience. 'Twas me that opened the letter and urged Duggan on. I can't die now. I've saved a heap of money, and I've got no immediate kin; it'll all go to a rascally nephew in Glasgow."

"Don't be afraid. Don't be a coward, McGowan. That'll keep you from getting well. Keep up your courage. Of course, you've done the men wrong, but it's a great question how free we are in this world. We go along, good, bad, and indifferent, pretty much as nature makes us."

"I can't meet my God now. I must live. I'll give money to a church or something, and spend a pious old age."

"If there's a God for you to meet, He'll understand."

Four days later, McGowan got his long transfer and was buried on the knoll by the river. With the winter came a scourge of sickness, diphtheria, and, the most dreaded of all, smallpox, among the trappers and Indians of the near-by villages. Alex had little time to think of himself as he laboured among them. He was not lonely in his bungalow as he had feared, for he was seldom there. For many a winter's night no lights twinkled from the

windows of his house. He broke trails and travelled over snow and frozen river to tend the sick. Fifty-odd men and women died in the settlements, despite all his efforts. Though he moved continually among the people with these dire infectious diseases, he was untouched.

He was glad when the spring came and the epidemic vanished with the returning sun. He was worn out. He felt in some strange way that he was carrying on Sedding's work, and that Mary would be glad. He wrote her all about his adventures, and he often wondered that he had so much to write. He did not fully realize that, once he began to express himself freely, he poured out all his thoughts and ideas to her. The arduous winter spent in the care of others had pretty well driven the pain from his heart; there remained only a great longing for her companionship, and a kind of sweet sorrow. The memory that he had been able to shield Mary was his greatest satisfaction.

In late April, Duggan proposed a hunting trip and Alex was glad to accede, as he was worn out, and nothing rested him like life in the depth of the forest. For a week they roamed the woods, care-free, sleeping under shelter tents that they carried. One morning, as they sat by a brook far away from the post, chatting and laughing over their coffee, they saw a big brown bear come sauntering down the rocks of the ridge near them. They sat silent and in amusement watched his clumsy sliding passage. He was probably coming down to the brook to catch some trout for his breakfast, and as he was to windward he was quite unaware of their presence.

"I'm going to get that fellow, the pelt is still good," whispered Duggan.

Hidden for a little by some bushes, the bear presently appeared at the brook-side, fifty yards below them. Duggan sighted and fired. There was a roar of rage and a crashing scramble through the undergrowth; Duggan had fired too high at that short range and only wounded the monster. Up sprang Alex and Duggan in hot pursuit. The bushes about the pool where the bear had shown himself were streaked with blood, and it was easy to follow him. Once, as they ran up the steep incline, Alex's quick eye caught a flash of brown, and he snapped at it as he ran. The trail, showing more blood on twigs and leaves, led them at last to a dark cave in the face of the hill with an aperture about five feet high. Within they could hear the snarling groans of the bear. Duggan and Alex stopped and looked at each other; they knew it was dangerous to follow a wounded bear into a dark cave, but what was a hunting trip without some spice of danger. Holding their rifles at the ready, they stooped and advanced a few paces into the cave. They could see nothing; evidently, there was a bend in the cave wall. The air was fetid and heavy with a disgusting odour. They retreated to daylight, held a short

consultation, as a result of which Duggan procured and lit a resinous pine knot. Thus equipped, they reëntered the cave, waited a moment till their night eyes came, and then, advancing, flung the torch around the bend. The head of the bear was at once apparent. Up went the rifles and both fired. The frightful reverberation that echoed and reëchoed was succeeded by the groans and roars of the bear in his death agony. When he lay still, Alex stepped forward, stumbled over something white, and fell forward full length upon the floor of the cavern, his hands striking the bear's carcass. Duggan sprang forward, lifted the torch, and blew upon it. The flickering torch revealed the "something white" upon the ground as the body of a man clad in his night clothes, beyond doubt the mouldering remains of Edward Sedding. The dark dripping walls of the cavern, the chalky faces of the hunters, the great bear lying in a welter of blood and foam, the man's body far gone in decay upon the ground, made a ghastly picture. For a moment, neither spoke; then, moved by a common impulse of horror, both rushed out into the open.

"My God!" said Duggan, "that's the worst thing I've ever seen. What'll we do? I'd never have believed he could have wandered this far."

"Nor I. He had the strength of madness."

"What'll we do? We can't leave his body there."

"No, one of us must go back to the Post for Indians and a stretcher."

"Of course, he must have a Christian burial."

"Yes, it's lucky Father Saulnier is at the post."

"He wouldn't be married by a priest, but now he must be buried by a priest. Isn't that queer!"

"Everything's queer in this world, Duggan. Things never turn out as we expect them to."

"Sure enough, that's right. I guess I'd better go back to the Post."

"Yes, I'll stay here till you come."

"Let's see, now, it's about eight miles to Red Brook. I can't be back before nightfall."

"All right. We can camp near here and take the body out in the morning. You'd better bring four to carry; it's rough going, you know."

Duggan departed, crashing down the underbrush of the slope, and Alex was left alone with the dead.

He stood alone by the cavern's mouth, thinking of the horror he had seen and of the tragedy of Sedding's life and death. How the poor fellow must have suffered, dragging bare feet over sticks and stones, till he found the cave in which to lie down and die.

In a near-by tree a bird trilled, and with its song came a sudden revelation of what this discovery meant to him. This assurance of death meant freedom for Mary and life and hope for the future for him. It seemed cruel to think of it, but to poor Sedding, lying there dead in the cave, all earthly things were matters of indifference. He dropped his rifle, and, running, clambered to the top of the ridge and ascended a great boulder that formed its topmost peak. He breathed deep breaths, flung off his cap, and let the breeze toss his hair. Below him lay lake and river, hill and valley, among multi-coloured woods. God! how beautiful was the world in the springtime! From the rotted masses of last year's leaves, new life had sprung into being; in the presence of death and decay his heart found love and hope. The weariness of all the future years rolled suddenly away. A sentence he had read of Mazzini came to him as an answer to life's hateful problems. "As long as we love, we believe that we are of some use; as long as we love, something attaches us to life." He turned his face toward the east, stared with eager eyes, and stretched out both his arms; somewhere beyond forest and sea was Mary.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *River of Strangers* by Frank Parker Day]