THE HAUNTED TRAIL

E. E. Cowper

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with a https://www.fadedpage.com administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at https://www.fadedpage.com.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: The Haunted Trail

Date of first publication: 1926

Author: E. E. (Edith Elise Cadogan) Cowper (1859-1933)

Illustrator: Henry Coller (1886-1958)

Date first posted: July 10, 2026

Date last updated: July 10, 2026

Faded Page eBook #20260720

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

BUZZ STARED WITHOUT MOVING

The Haunted Trail

BY

E. E. COWPER

Author of "The White Witch of Rosel", &c.

With frontispiece by H. Coller

BLACKIE & SON LIMITED LONDON AND GLASGOW

Printed in Great Britain by Blackie & Son, Ltd., Glasgow

Contents

CHAP.

THE HAUNTED TRAIL

CHAPTER I

"Was It Rather Mad?"

"I think we are doing right, anyway," said Averil, as she watched the saucepan fizzling over the fire between the stones.

"*Right*—of course we are! Dad always said we ought to go back—in the end. And look here, Ave, Buzz ought to be properly trained; he'll make a ripping engineer. He's as inventive—as—as anything. You don't want him to wreck his whole life by being simply a prospecting miner, or an average trapper?"

"Oh no." Averil sighed out the denial, turning over bits of deer-meat in her pan with a sharp stick. "But it's rather a big venture, Doll dear—we can't belittle it, you know. Just us three alone, Charlie and I only eighteen, and you sixteen."

"My dear old girl, why stare at our ages with the corners of your mouth positively hanging? It's sheer tempting Fate. Be cheerful, Ave, and buck up, for any sake! Regardez our advantages. Didn't we come down from Mackenzie River? Weren't we on the Great Slave Lake all last winter in a shack, till Dad was too ill to stick it? If he hadn't frosted a lung, we'd be there still, digging up gold in Squaw Creek. Of course, it would have been better if we could have got off in the spring, but what's the good of talking when we know we couldn't leave dear Dad—but he meant us to go back to

Churchill. He always wanted Buzz to be an engineer, and for us to have some more education—anyway, for me to have. Well, now he's gone, we're doing what he wished. Oh, *do* be pleased, old girl."

Dolly, alias "Kid", whose full name was Dorothea Hanbury, spoke with her usual clear emphasis. She was sixteen and rather small, with red hair—short, thick, and curly—curiously shrewd eyes of a greeny-blue hazel, freckles, and a sharp clean-cut nose. She was not exactly pretty—in fact, more like a very keen boy than a girl of sixteen—but she was so immensely awake, and alive in every nerve and power, physical as well as intellectual, that her personality was much more attractive than that of a merely pretty girl.

Averil Hanbury was very pretty—rather grave, often thoughtful, dark, with brown eyes like the father who had died a month ago at Fort Chippewyan on Slave River. Like him, she was something of a dreamer, with the same vivid imagination that had made him throw up a good billet as bank cashier and come up north gold hunting, when his wife died in Winnipeg four years before.

He had brought his children, because he adored them and would not be parted from them; but he had lived to discover that gold hunting is precarious, and was keen for his one son Charlie, the twin of Averil, to learn a profession—one of the biggest professions for the future, engineering.

So the gold he had collected—dust tied up in buckskin sacks, about five hundred dollars' worth to a fat little sack

like a sausage—had been changed into dollar bills, "green-backs", and the three young Hanburys were bringing this with them on the amazing "trail" they had planned. They had got about fifteen thousand dollars' worth in paper sewn into webbing belts round their waists.

No wonder Averil's dark eyes were serious and she "felt a responsibility". They were going to convey their fortune—in English money about three thousand pounds—to Churchill port on the Hudson Bay, where they had friends and relations. Nor would they be parted from those precious green-backs; they considered themselves entirely capable of this trail, and were not inclined to trust their all to the usual posts of seasoned Scouts with dog teams or canoes. Not even the occasional little steamer plying between impassable falls and rapids seemed to them safe; so much changing of hands, all sorts of risks, they thought. And this money, which had cost their father's life really by exposure in those awful winters on the Mackenzie, was immensely precious; it represented their whole future.

They were carrying out their idea of defending it in the best way, by taking the water trail for seven hundred miles—from the west end of Lake Athabasca, down through Wollaston Lake, Deer Lake, and their linking rivers, then east through the chain of narrow lakes, including Indian Lake (a hundred miles long or more), to the town and port of Churchill.

Charlie and the Kid were hot on this plan from the first. It was great. They understood camping. They were first-class

canoers. They were acclimatized. Even winter would not frighten them, they declared. Why should it?

All the same, they intended to do that journey before the frosts shut down the water trail. It was August now. With the beginning of October—the Indians' "Whitefish Moon", when great stores of that fish were caught and dried to feed the dog teams on the winter trail—all rivers and lakes would shut down under many feet of ice till April, but they would then be in Churchill. Two months was more than time enough—surely!

Canoeing was glorious ease. They had bought a beauty, winter birch bark without cracks, from fifteen to sixteen feet long—rather long for a canoe, which measures fourteen feet as a rule—but they had a fairly heavy "grub-stake", and there were three of them. They had been very particular about the paddles too, following the Indian rule that a paddle must equal in length the height of the person who uses it, and have the narrow maple-wood blade which would not split when held against the bottom to check speed in a rapid.

Old Salt Brydon, one of the finest breed of trappers, had helped them choose this craft; he told them it was "a sure dandy outfit", slapped Buzz on the back and told them they were "ol'timers"—a great compliment, as no one likes to be regarded as a chechaquo, otherwise a tenderfoot.

Each girl had a smart automatic, while Charlie's weapon was a revolver, a six-chambered "forty-five", and plenty of ammunition. Indeed, each wore a cartridge belt, not minding the weight for the satisfaction the wearing of it brought. They

had also a Winchester rifle, as one does not shoot caribou or moose or more dangerous beasts with pistols.

So much for defence. Besides, they had sleeping blankets, thick stockings for night wear, extra moccasins, and they all alike wore buckskin shirts and overalls—not skirts—and soft wide hats. They had not provided themselves with winter clothes—why should they?—but they took extra under-shirts of flannel, and a tarpaulin sheet for protection against rain in camp.

The grub was the heaviest item—a side of bacon, or most of one, a small sack of flour, several pounds of tea, and tobacco to trade with Indians, another small sack of beans, and some coffee.

Variations were to be supplied by trapping rabbits, of which there would be any number of young ones soon, catching fish, and once in a way shooting a young caribou or moose—just at this time of year the young ones born in early spring were getting independent, and the mothers did not worry about them to the same extent.

The idea of running short of food never occurred to the young Hanburys. They knew all about "grub-stake" necessities, and were real "sourdoughs" in so far that they never used baking powder or any artificial aid to their bread.

Three days out from the Fort, they were making good way along the south shore of Lake Athabasca, which is nearly two hundred miles long and one of the loveliest lakes in a glorious country. It is comparatively narrow for its

length—only at one part nearly thirty miles wide. You can see the mountains and woods across the silvery rippling water, and the joy of flashing along under the fir-clad banks, landing on sheltered stretches of the crisp grey moss that caribou eat in winter, and making camp by balsam clumps, with tall rocks clothed in bushy growth, and great forest trees mounting at the back in endless woods, was all very wonderful.

You see, they did not know this world.

Weston Hanbury had started from Winnipeg to Calgary and Edmonton, crossed the Rockies and joined up with other prospecting parties at Vancouver, gone by steamer up Fraser River, and got very far north till he settled in a mining camp on the Mackenzie.

The rest has been told.

Thus, this world of forests and lakes was new to these sourdough adventurers. Because of that, joyously interesting to Buzz and the Kid, though the least bit fearsome to Averil. There was a mystery, a breathless *something* in the greatness of it all, that held her soul. For that reason, perhaps, her mind kept on questioning—"Were they right to risk it with the money on them? Was it rather mad? Was it inviting trouble?"

CHAPTER II

The Shadow in the Forest

It might be as well to explain why Charlie Hanbury was called Buzz. He was a person of mercurial temperament, not like his twin sister, or Dorothea, yet with something of both in his looks. He was never quiet, always full of wonderful new schemes, very inventive—that was why they all aimed at making an engineer of him; but he had not the steady persistency of Averil or the peculiar shrewdness of intuition that was one of the Kid's chief features.

He was clever and plucky, very impulsive and full of conversation—which was why he gained the name of Buzz. When he was a small boy, never still, always talking, Mr. Hanbury had said:

> "There was an old man of Torquay
> Who was horribly bored by a bee——"

and ever after when he talked too much his family said "Don't buzz!"

Consequently the name stuck. Not that he resented it. He was far too good-natured and cheerful. He remained Buzz and earned his name.

In the course of this conversation he came back to the camp laden with dry wood and threw it down in a big heap

near the fire, declaring he was starving and the supper smelled glorious.

"Flap-jacks—hi-yu! That's fine. Coffee! Stew! Only thing we could do without is the fire! My word, but it's hot. Is there time to bathe, Ave?"

Ave said there wasn't. She advised supper and a turn in at once, and why not bathe in the morning?

"D'you realize that we're half-way down the lake," went on Buzz, switching off to a new subject; "just think, it's great. Why, we shall do this travel in a month and we've got two—easy two. Ave, let's stop here a day, at least one day. Fish and bathe; seems sheer waste to paddle all these hours and get nothing out of it! Hark, thunder—far away, but it's coming."

Dolly jumped up, picked her way down to the edge of the water, and stood looking over to the north-east, away down the vast expanse of water. Presently she came back and sat down again.

"Well?" asked Ave, a little anxiety in her eyes.

"Only winks of lightning. Look here, don't you think we ought to get the canoe up and make it secure. Suppose there's a bad storm, really bad. It's been stewing up these five days hotter and hotter. We might get rough water or something."

"Sure no," Buzz interrupted the Kid sleepily; "now why? There may be some noise, but it can't hurt the canoe."

"Can't!" Dorothea was scornful. "It can sure fill her with water, you Buzzer."

"Well, then we can empty it out."

Averil interposed.

"Let's just turn her over," she suggested; "pack the bundles underneath and fetch the tarpaulin for ourselves. If the rain's coming down hard, we must put up a shelter. We don't want the blankets all wet."

Buzz sat up suddenly and clasped brown hands round his knees, then he looked at his sisters gaily from grey-blue laughing eyes.

"Now comes the pounce," said Buzz; "jolly surprise for you both. We've got a *house*! How's that for luck? When I was getting this wood, I came on a travellers' shack—you know the sort, run up for the trappers on the trail, just about half-way down the lake, as we said. There's a key on a nail. I looked for one and found it. Three bunks inside and a stove, a bench. Just the usual log hut, and the roof thatched with reeds, big stones on top to keep it steady. Now what I say is, let's clear into this fine lodging for the night and so keep ourselves and the kit dry. Thunderstorm won't hurt us there; it's a crackerjack of a hut—fine!"

"Oh *yes*," agreed Averil, jumping up; "come on, Doll. It's getting horribly dark, and lightning is nicer when you're indoors. No fun being poured on—you can't sleep in a swamp."

The Kid followed silently, while Buzz, filled with energy all at once, began rolling blankets and pan, kettle, and cups into a rough bundle.

"Follow my trail," he called, laughing, and disappeared into the wood.

The sisters lifted packages out, put them neatly on the ground by the side of a convenient rock that overhung, a compact line of bundles, then they lifted the long birch-bark canoe and set it upside down over the goods.

"Nothing can hurt the things now," said Averil; "will that do, Kid dear? See, I've got the cartridges, and here's the tarpaulin; how's that?"

Doll stood still and gazed around with an air of uncertainty.

Then she said:

"Oh, all right—I suppose."

"How d'you mean? What's wrong?" demanded her sister, rather puzzled.

"I don't know, Ave." The Kid tried to laugh, but hardly succeeded. "I feel kind of queer about it, as if something was going to happen. It's ridiculous of course, but I do."

Averil refused to allow it was ridiculous.

"I'll tell you what it is, it's the thunder," she said in a soothing tone. "Come along, old girl, you carry the tarpaulin; if we don't hurry we shall get caught at the worst."

They made for the forest at the back of the banks, and entered where Charlie had crashed through past the massed clumps of balsam trees and into close-growing underwood. Not only was the darkness of the storm above them now, but the sun had gone down and evening shadows heightened the mystery of the woods.

"Can you see his trail?" asked Averil anxiously.

"I think so, yes, here's a moccasin print by the stream—brink is all soft; look for trampled leaves, Ave—he was just going ahead."

So advised Dorothea, stooping as she picked her way, while observing every sign possible that could reveal which way Buzz had gone.

But in fifteen or twenty minutes they had lost every trace of the trail, and seen no shack. During that time the rumblings of thunder had drawn nearer and nearer, till heavy crashes seemed to be right over their bewildered heads, and the lightning split the horrible darkness, showing up the black boles of the endless ranks of trees with a weird effect.

"What shall we do?" Averil gave a little exclamation, as a peal of thunder rolled above the trees and they heard the pat-pat of big rain, not a shower.

"Sit down, here, close by this trunk, it's fairly huge, and pull the tarpaulin over our heads," urged the Kid. "It won't hurt us under that. But be careful to shelter the cartridges. Gosh! Just look at the lightning dancing over the pine needles floor—isn't it creepy? Where on earth can Buzz have got to—hope he won't come out and look for us!"

"Why? I hope he will—how are we to find him? Just think, hundreds of miles of forest, and all alike! I'm not sure of the way back either; are you, Kid?" questioned the elder girl.

"Oh, that's easy enough. Soon as this clears we can follow our own trail *back*, but I want the shack, and a shelter —my word!"

This last exclamation was caused by the noise, the winking glare of dazzling light, and the weight of the rain that hit the sheet under which they crouched—dry, but rather uneasy.

For ten minutes, more or less, they were quiet, awed into silence as they leaned against one another.

Suddenly Doll gave a little start.

"What?" asked Averil.

"Awfully funny," murmured the younger girl, "I could have vowed——" she paused.

"Vowed what? What's the matter?"

"I thought I saw someone, a person, I mean," Dorothea's voice hesitated.

Averil made as though to get up; her sister pulled her down.

"But, Doll, perhaps it's Buzz," she expostulated.

"Oh no, I swear it wasn't Buzz. Ave, look here, I don't know if it was anyone. There was just *something*—a tallish figure, I thought it was an Indian. I thought I saw—when the lightning flared out—a face that looked at us; I'm sure I saw long black hair and a feather stuck in the head band like an Indian."

Averil paused and considered this, trying to be very matter of fact, though her heart-beats hurried along rather fast.

"Oh well, there might be an Indian," she said; "there are plenty in the woods, I suppose. If only he would come close we might make him understand; lots of them talk a little English."

Dolly said, "Perhaps he will come," just to satisfy Ave, but she did not think so in the least, and oddly enough had a queer feeling about this shadowy shape, as though it were not real, or at any rate not quite normal.

As the thunder rolled away towards the west over forests, ridges, and wild wastes, and the flashes died in far-off glimmers and flickerings, the rain came. Under their tarpaulin the two girls clung together and laughed, for the

torrents streamed over them, and the rush of rain on the fir trees made a loud hushing sound.

Altogether, they had been held up about an hour when they were able to roll up their shelter, and try to find that hopeless trail again.

Then suddenly Dolly gave an excited cry:

"Oh, Ave, look, *look*!"

CHAPTER III

Who blazed the Trail?

Averil stared uncertainly at Dolly's outstretched hand, but her eyes, following the motion, saw nothing in particular but trees, trees, dripping rain, and dusk lightened every few seconds by those far-away glimmers of electric flame.

The Kid ran forward and Ave sprang after, seeing her sister check in front of a fir tree that stood some yards from the place they had waited at.

"The lightning just showed it up," said Dolly.

"It" was a neatly cut chip on the dark bole, cut as the trappers do with a couple of flicks with a little sharp axe. It was quite fresh, in fact it was a "blaze" to mark a trail.

"For us, see, Ave," cried the younger girl joyfully, "you bet it's Buzz, only we missed it before. Perhaps he got a notion about here that we might stray, seeing the whole place is alike—nothing to go by in this confusion of shadows. Jolly of him! Good old Buzz! Look for another, Ave!"

They both looked for another, and found fresh chips here and there, every few yards, all at the same level of height, leading inland, south but with a trend towards west—much farther than they'd expected, as Ave pointed out, not realizing

that she and Dolly had wandered round and round as lost people usually do in a confusing country.

Then suddenly the ranks of spruce became merged in mixed wood up a hillside, tangled brushwood, rocks, moss, lichen, and a rich harvest of ripe berries on bushes. There was a cleft in the hill, a little ravine, and there, backed up against a towering wall of rocks topped by spruce firs again, stood a log shack—the kind that trappers knock up in a few days to use as a rest-house on trail, and where they often cache a small supply of stores which anyone may use as long as the user puts something else back in place of it as soon as he can.

From within came a cheery whistle, and the noise of Buzz building up a stove fire.

Dolly sent out a cheerful hail. Her brother appeared in the low doorway.

"Thought you'd lost the trail," he said, with a grin that showed fine teeth.

"We did," Ave told him. "We lost it, then the storm got bad and we took cover under the tarpaulin. We sat out the rain, but we'd never have found your shack if you hadn't blazed the trunks. That was great. Led us here straight."

Buzz leaned against the door-post and stared.

"Blazed! What trunks?"

"Why, the firs of the wood. Clean as a whistle. A regular high-road for us," cried the Kid, pointing a brown finger back in the direction from which they had come.

"You're sure dizzy," Buzz told them; "I never came that way. See, straight ahead, and a lean to west'ard—that's where the canoe is, and you get to it in ten minutes or a bit over."

"Ten minutes!" echoed Ave, opening her soft dark eyes wider than usual; "but, Buzz, we've been about an hour and a half."

"All that," allowed Charlie gaily, evidently not perturbed—it took a great deal to "rattle" him, as he always said. "Well, girls, now you are here, see what a fine lodge you've come into. I didn't get a drop of rain on me, or the packs. Come along, sit down—yes, all that, a bench, and stools, and bunks—it's a real crackerjack of a home. Why not stop here a week?"

"Oh no," Averil said hastily, well knowing her twin's way of upsetting previous well-laid plans; "no, please, Buzz, don't get fresh notions now. Let's stick to the plan we made. Do let's get on the trail. But to-night it will be fine to sleep in this hut. My word, Kid, see these bunks, aren't they fine?"

The Kid was standing in the low doorway, staring back down at the cleft in the hillside to the ranks of firs in the dark forests; she turned her head at this appeal, but did not answer it; what she said was:

"Who made the trail, then?"

"Trail, what trail?" asked Buzz, who was showing the "cunning" stove to Averil.

"Why, the *blazed* trunks—whole way along, at least a mile. We'd never have found you else, brother Buzz."

"Oh, some trapper, or chap on the trail. Did it out of Christian charity—real kind act for somebody. See, Ave, let's cook something; it's sure a sin to waste this stove."

Charlie was charmed with his new find.

"But, Buzz," persisted Dolly, "the blaze was cut with an axe, just a chip nicked out of the tree as a man walked, and it is fresh—oh fresh—as *now*. Don't you see, just done. Well, who did it?"

Her brother looked at her a second, rubbed his hair up, shook his head, then remarked:

"You got me guessing, Kid," and returned to his new excitement. Ave was busy satisfying his need for sympathy, and making tea also, lest Charlie should waste the precious store.

"Got any bacon?" he demanded eagerly.

Ave said it was with the other things under the canoe:

"It won't hurt," she added, "there's no one about."

"How d'you know?" flashed Dolly. "There *is* someone. Whether he steals bacon is another question, but he's

somewhere."

"I do wish we'd brought along the canoe," said her sister, with a recurrence of uneasiness; "supposing——"

Buzz refused to allow any supposings; he was very busy making a sort of night-light out of deer-fat and some cotton wick he had fashioned from the frayings of an old shirt. He was very clever at contrivances, and kept a little bundle of bits, odds and ends that might help in emergency. You can't carry candles on the long trail, of course, or oil, nothing—you go to bed at sundown and get up at sunrise, which is quite reasonable. When you happen to spin out your day, you do as Buzz was doing, make a night-light out of fat.

The shack was thus dimly lighted and the three enjoyed it more than a fine lamp. They had made it themselves. Then they drank tea, and ate the flap-jacks left over with a little more deer-meat. Dolly was not hungry; she hated to be worsted by a puzzle, and she could not forget the shadowy shape she thought she saw during the storm. The unexplainable part was—*why* had this mysterious being made a blazed trail to help her and Ave?

Presently they went to rest in the bunks, feeling safe and cosy if the storm should return, as storms do. They had got their blankets and were used—to a certain extent—to sleeping hard. It was very warm, the stove flickered out and they did not build it up—they slept.

In the middle of the night the storm came round again. The Kid wakened, sat up, and gazed fascinated at the rapid

alternations of pitch dark and vivid flames in the wood outside. There were two windows (covered in winter by stretched parchment as the frost would crack glass), now open frames; there was one each end of the shack, rather high up, so that one could see out well from the bunks on the side walls.

Once she heard a splitting crack, and then the tearing fall of a big tree beyond their close ring of massed undergrowth. The storm was over them, and Dolly wondered if rocks drew lightning—all these coasts were rocky, of course—men built shacks near rocks too, because of the fresh water, beautiful little clear streams—she thought about lots of things, then lay down again, her head on one of the packages, and with wide-open eyes watched the window.

Presently there was a little noise of snapping twigs, and it came into the Kid's mind that there might be animals of all kinds around. Lynxes—wicked fiends!—coyotes and wolverines trailing the scent of meat from the shack; not that they'd be hungry in August—still, weren't they *always* hungry?

Also, what about the man who'd blazed the trees—could he be watching? Why not? He'd be a friend, of course, but still——

She heard more faint rustlings in one of those breathless pauses that occur between thunder rolls, and then—she saw the outline of a head against the night outside—a head with a cap on, and the face was looking in at the window—the window at the end that looked out west.

The Kid held her breath, and watched. At that moment, a glitter of lightning shone in the shack from the window at the *east* end, and so showed up the face for one instant. Dolly saw the narrow black eyes pucker up into slits as the flash dazzled them.

Besides narrow black eyes, she observed a largish hooky nose, a ragged black moustache covering a mouth with a good deal of under-lip. She noticed these things, also big ears and a skin so dark that it looked Indian. As a matter of fact it was quite half Indian, as she knew later.

CHAPTER IV

"Black-faced Mink!"

Perhaps five minutes afterwards there was a knock on the door—then a pause—then the door was shaken a little, and a voice called:

"Holà, M'sieu Hanbury—M'sieu Charles—ouvrez! Ze rain it ees ze devil!"

Buzz was on his feet in an instant, and unbarred the door even while Ave demanded who it was.

Then the two girls heard:

"Hello, Gaston, get inside, you're sure wet. So you caught it outside! But what in fortune's name brought you along, *here*? Have some coffee—stove's hardly out yet, see. I'll put some wood on. We're on the trail, funny you coming along, who'd have thought it! What's your trail—porterage or water? Canoe, I suppose."

Buzz talked and boiled coffee. The surprising visitor dried himself, and the sisters sat up in the bunks and looked on—both decided that they felt no welcome for this interloper.

"How'd you know it was me?" demanded Buzz cheerfully.

"I look in ze window, see your face—light ver' plain—hein. I come canoe trail, and mak' remember ze shack—so I cache canoe and run for heem—when I come door is lock—I try——"

"H'm," thought the Kid, "that's a lie, you never tried the door, you black-faced mink—you knew we were here, but how?"

That was a flashing brain wave! Dolly had powers of intuition rather rare at sixteen years. Gaston was still talking, still explaining how he was bound east down the lakes on some special mission and meant to get on, but the storm drove him ashore and so he ran for the shack of which he had knowledge.

"When I look in ze window see who mak' trail—I fin' M'sieu Charles, an' I say—here ees ze luck! La bonne fortune! So I call."

"Yes, great luck," agreed Buzz gaily. "Much the same with us, you see. We saw there was a big noise coming along, so we turned our canoe over and put the grub-stake under it, came off here, and made camp. Glad you found us—no sense sleeping out in this. It'll be all over in the morning. Here, you have my bunk; I'll roll up on the floor—it's good enough, we've got a tarpaulin, I'll have that."

Gaston pretended to hesitate, but he took the bunk, of course, much to Averil's fury. She objected to Buzz being turned out, but couldn't well protest, as it was not their shack, nor did they or anyone pay for sleeping room. Dolly, leaning

on her elbow, was watching every move of this "black-faced mink" that she had taken a dislike to, and she saw a movement, an action, that made her think—as the lie had done.

Buzz was bending over the stove. Gaston, with a sort of studied carelessness, dropped his hand on the other's back between the shoulders, then shifted the hand with a quick stroke towards the waist, and off. It was done with such deft quickness that no one could have vowed they saw it. Even the Kid wasn't *sure*, afterwards, and probably Buzz never felt it—that is to say, he would feel the hearty slap on the shoulder, but not the odd way in which the hand was removed.

Then Dolly's attention was drawn to Averil speaking.

"Look here, Buzz, you have my bunk, I'll go over and share Dolly's. We'll do. The floor's so dirty."

"It's all dirty, come to that," said her brother. "Folks don't spend happy hours with pails and scrub brushes in this shack! Who's grousing? I'm not. All the same, as you say, if the Kid doesn't mind."

The Kid did not mind in the least; she wanted to unburden her feelings to Ave in the shortest time possible.

Presently, half an hour afterwards, when the two men were asleep, or seemed to be, anyway, Dolly pinched Ave with cautious fingers, and was reassured when Ave returned the signal; then she set her lips to his sister's ear, and whispered:

"That's a skunk—he lied about the door—he *knew* we were here, that's why he came."

"Why?" came a breath in answer.

"*Dollars!*" returned the Kid in a voiceless whisper.

"Couldn't know. Secret." There was a faint emphasis of assurance in Ave.

"Hu-s-s-h," very soft. "Are you *sure*? Buzz talks."

Silence on Averil's part. Well she knew her twin's open-hearted way of confiding.

"I *saw* him feel his shirt—back."

Averil stirred uneasily, grasping the inference.

"You couldn't see—sure not."

"I *could*. Stove made light enough."

For minutes the sisters lay still, the Kid as cool as frost—any emergency always made her cool and alert—Averil unhappy and nervous. Presently came again the murmur at her ear:

"We can't *do* anything, Buzz would simply ask him—and believe what he said. No good. Watch. Keep guard all round. Get away soon as we can."

Again a pause, then Averil whispered:

"D'you think he followed us—on purpose?"

"Yes."

"How horrible!" sighed Ave.

"Don't worry, old girl. Keep your eyes skinned. If he plays mink, we'll be the wolverines. Jolly sight more knowing."

The Kid gave a tiny gurgle of laughter and Ave marvelled how she could laugh, but she was like that; she seemed to grow more alive in the face of danger.

Neither of them slept much. The thought of that rat-faced "mink" in the shack was disturbing. So in the misty grey before dawn they both got up and went off down to the little stream that ran among the rocks and splashed in tiny falls. It was very full after the rain, making a tumble and clatter, very cool, very sparkling. They washed themselves, combed their short curls—one doesn't carry brushes on the trail—and discussed plans in low voices.

The foremost object was to get Buzz away from the mink, and the Kid questioned:

"Have you ever seen the beast, Ave?"

"No, but I believe he's Gaston Lachine, a breed, you know, Doll. He's half Indian—Cree tribe—and half French Canadian. Sure I heard someone say he was a clever trapper, but no one is keen on the breeds, are they?"

"Not if they look as much like minks as this one," answered her sister promptly. "Oh, I say, isn't the forest fine? Down there with the mist sort of floating among the trees, oh look, Ave!"

"I know, it's a dream. Wait a moment, Kid dear. I'll run up and fetch the kettle—we'll want a good deal of water. Pan too. Guess I can make some flap-jacks on the stove. If you can find any dry wood, all the better, but you bet it's soaked—never mind, we've got some dry as tinder in the shack."

Off went Averil, busy on her housekeeping. She was first-rate at cooking. As Buzz said admiringly, "Give her a pan and a pinch of flour and she'll make you A1 pancakes and a wedding-cake, besides mince pies."

The Kid stood waiting at the foot of the tiny ravine. She was gazing into the mysterious misty depths of the spruce woods—green and dark, ranks and ranks of straight boles—and she saw something move.

Coming through the mist with a swift even stride, the curious loping step of the Indian, was a tall figure. It passed from one tree to another—not each tree, but some, one here and there—in a line towards the shack. Pausing at the chosen trees, it seemed to touch each one at a certain height—then it turned and disappeared as it had come, swallowed up by the greyness and the trees.

The Kid drew in her breath. "W-e-e-ll——" she breathed, and stared, rather dazed.

Averil appeared with the kettle and pan.

"Lost in a dream?" she asked gaily.

"Yes—I suppose so," allowed the Kid, who was feeling a sense of dazed inquiry. "Why? Who?"

As they filled the kettle and pan Averil said she thought the newcomer was rather good-natured.

"He *is* Gaston Lachine," she informed her sister; "and he's a scout and trapper. I don't care much about breeds as a rule, but he's rather handy and kind. Says he knew Dad well, and remembers us. Besides, Buzz has met him pretty often. Oh, by the way, *he's* gone down to fetch up some bacon—he wants it for breakfast. No deer meat left."

They went back to the shack, boiled water, and waited; waited till the girls got restless and uneasy, in spite of Gaston's assurances that all must be well.

They started off at last to find Buzz, and at that moment saw him coming. He was hurrying, and his face looked anxious and pale under the tan. When they appeared he stopped, and called out:

"We're done. Awful luck—canoe *gone*, and the whole grub-stake with it!"

CHAPTER V

The Mystery of the Blazed Trees

Averil gave a little wail of distress, the Kid thought of the shadowy shape she had twice seen. Not a shadow, but an Indian, and all the world knew that Indians were as a rule rather light-fingered. A canoe would be of small value, perhaps, as they made them so easily with birch bark, but the "grub-stake"! Bacon, flour, extra clothes, beans—all sorts of things they long for—tobacco and tea especially.

"We were mad to leave it," said Averil, and her lips trembled a little. "Oh dear!"

"Well, you're sure not going to give in without a try," expostulated the Kid. "We've not begun looking yet. Come along and have breakfast. We've got flap-jacks still, and we can shoot rabbits."

There was something cheering always about Dolly; even her face was a comfort, and Buzz, from the depths of despair, sprang to the summit of hope. He rushed up the rocky trail to the shack and bounced in on Gaston, who was apparently bringing order to the bunks by folding up blankets and so on.

"Canoe's vamoosed," announced Buzz shortly; "gone, floated, stolen, vanished—all-fired bad luck for *us*. I'm going to get rabbits."

As he spoke he seized his rifle and fled. Gaston stared after him, his narrow slits of eyes appearing to snap in his amaze.

"Mille tonnerres," he muttered; "the disposition so gay ees ver' fine—" then he laughed and his teeth looked like yellow fangs. Gaston Lachine was not in the least pleasant when he smiled.

The two girls came in talking, and Averil told the breed what her brother said; she wanted to know what Gaston thought. Who had done this, or could the water have risen through the storm and washed away the canoe?

"Oh no, Ave—stolen, stolen!" put in the Kid impatiently.

"But, who?"

"Injuns, Mees Ave, who but Injun—all ze same savage! Oh no, you never can come by ze canoe or goods no more—never. But let us be gay—why not make canoe, ver' simple. We can do it, two three day! *mos'* easy."

"We can't get the bacon back," remarked Dolly shortly. She was feeling a growing hatred and distrust of this man. Why had he foisted himself on them? Why was he so fulsome about "friendship", and being with them?

The Kid was sixteen and immensely shrewd, as beforesaid, so it passed across her mind whether Gaston Lachine might possibly be in love with Ave, who was so pretty and gentle. But she dismissed the idea from her mind after watching him for a while. She was sure he cared

nothing for Averil; his eyes were cold as a snake's, when you could see them. Besides, he was quite an old man from their point of view, forty-five if not more—about the same age as their own father, Weston Hanbury. The point that kept on puzzling the Kid was, why did this old man want to be with them—unless he knew about the money? And if it was the money, he must want to try to get it. And what then?

All this went round and round in Dolly's quick brain like a squirrel in its cage. All through ran a sense of danger. She heartily wished they could get away from this man.

She felt irritated when Averil tried to cheer her up by saying: "Anyway, we've got this dear little shack; we can live here till we've made a canoe;" and then added, "You sew the birch bark with that root the Indians call wàtab, don't you, Mr. Gaston? Where do you get it—how do you sew?"

And of course Gaston said:

"It will be for me to show Mees Ave. Ze root we find là-bas—an' ze bark of birch in ze forest—mos' simple."

"He means to stop and stop—horrible mink," thought Dolly.

Then Buzz arrived with rabbits, which he proceeded to skin outside the door, talking cheerfully all the time.

"I say, Kid, you know about that *blaze* you came by last night? I saw it—just about every few trees—I found it because I looked for it, but I'm sure amazed you saw it in the dusk. It's not easy to see unless you're on it."

Both girls stopped their work to gaze at him in surprise. Buzz brought in a rabbit, which Averil quickly cut up in the pan and set on the hot stove to fry.

"Not easy to see!" repeated Dolly sharply. "Why, Buzz, we caught sight of it, because it was a *white* gash when the lightning lit it. Wasn't it, Ave?"

"Oh, quite white. Each one was white," agreed her sister as she added the second rabbit; "but why, Charlie?"

"You go and look when we've done. That blaze must have been put *weeks* ago. It's not fresh. It's all faded brown and sort of lost in the bark colour. There's nothing to see."

They argued about it while they ate, Gaston listening with such odd interest that once more the Kid was set puzzling.

Of course Buzz appealed to him as learned in all forest signs.

"Could a fresh blaze turn brown in one night from rain? No, it would fade very slowly. Therefore," this was Charlie's argument, "it must have been an old blaze."

Averil was ready to be convinced by her twin, of course. Buzz was so clever! Yes, it must be an old blaze, and in a way that made it much more possible. She was willing to think her eyes must have deceived her.

Not so the Kid. She remembered exactly the effect of that little white cut on each tree. She glanced at Gaston and

realized that *he* was very curious—or something. If he was curious he could not have done it himself.

The plan arranged for the morning was this. All should make an exhaustive search for the canoe within a reasonable distance of the place where it had been put. And if there was no sign whatever of it, and no trail of the thief they were to set about making a new one at once; but it would take some time, as only Gaston had actually made canoes, and paddles —no small part of the business.

"Oh, our bacon—and things," lamented Ave to her sister after this was decided.

Dolly grunted, she was rather irritable. People were so stupid sometimes.

She went to look at the blaze by herself, simply because she guessed it was better for Ave to stay with Buzz—her reason given was:

"What's the good of two going? I can tell Ave. Besides if she did go and look it wouldn't convince her against what you think, Buzz. I shall remember what I saw."

And she certainly did. The cut which had been white and sharply cut—so quickly nicked out of the trunk that tiny scraps were sticking to its edge and bits of frayed wood attached—this cut was now brown, worn and smooth, as though time and weather had ground it.

"H'm," muttered the Kid, her reddish brown eyebrows drawn together in a frowning line; "looks as if someone had

come along and chafed it—sort of rubbed it down with stain."

Why such an act? And was it Gaston, she wondered; it was difficult to see what reason he could have had for taking all that trouble!

As Dolly returned homeward thinking deeply, her mind glanced back to the figure moving in the mist that morning, which had seemed to her like an Indian. And if he had been a real man and an Indian he might also have been the thief and the person who stole the canoe, yet it seemed weird indeed that he should make off with the canoe and all those treasures, yet come back to rub out the newness of the blaze!

She shook her head at her own thoughts, supremely befogged, then looking ahead became aware of Gaston coming towards her—and not only coming, but noting the fir trunks with his slits of eyes.

"Here you blaze?" he asked, stopping by the first mark he came to.

Dolly nodded.

She saw him making a very careful examination. Then he passed on to another, and yet another. The Kid walked homeward, glancing round every now and then; she saw him moving on, and at last was in time to note this——

That he was wetting his finger on his tongue and rubbing it on the blaze, then he put his finger to his mouth.

CHAPTER VI

The Kid declares War!

They started off and began the search with great energy, and a certain amount of hope. One thing the Kid impressed firmly on Averil—she was to stick to Buzz. She was not on any account to let him go off hunting canoes, or anything else, with Gaston Lachine.

She reminded her sister of their talk in the night, and boldly said:

"How do *we* know that mink hasn't stolen the canoe himself?"

"Oh, Kid dear—*no*—why should he?" protested Ave, rather shocked.

"Don't ask me why, old girl, I can't tell you now; perhaps some day I'll spot it. But what I say is this: Buzz is so awfully honest himself and so blind to mean doings—he can't think folks are not on the square, even—that he'll likely as not go and tell that chap he's got a belt on, or even show it. No, don't say he wouldn't, because it's like as not. He's that kind. You stop with him. You might just as well search together."

Averil had to admit the truth of much that was said. Buzz was like that. She admired him for it, but of course there

were times when one had to be careful, so she and he went east, along the shore and inland, while Dolly herself went up west, and Gaston said he'd trail around at the back of the shack farther inland.

The Kid felt very sceptical about his offer. For her own part she searched diligently, going to and fro on the chance of a foot-print, but finding none, though the ground was swampy with the heavy rain. She saw Gaston's canoe cached upside down across two branches of a tree, with the paddles slid alongside. It was no more than twelve feet, perhaps.

Dolly looked at it and thought to herself that it would serve him right if they took it.

"I'll bet he took ours," she thought; then by a sudden impulse she gripped the branch at the end and pulled it, making the canoe shake and roll a little; something fell to the ground with a bump, and lay hidden in the coarse grass and reeds. The Kid sprang forward and stooped to look. She found—a two-pound tin of tobacco, the same brand that they carried as a trading asset for Indians, or perhaps to entertain a friend with, if they met one. Buzz smoked very little, only once in a way when he was not absorbed in something else. Dolly remembered that they carried three of these tins in the "grub-stake", that one of them had been opened, and a little tobacco taken from it.

As she held this tin in her hands she saw first that it was the same brand as theirs, second, that it had been opened.

She pulled the lid off and looked. The resemblance was complete, just a little had been taken out.

Now the Kid was very level-headed, and she realized at once that this was not proof entirely, because Gaston would have stocked his tobacco from the same place they did, and he had not been long on this trail; also he might have only just begun the tin. At the same time it was a coincidence, and it strengthened her conviction that the man had a good deal to do with the loss—*all* to do, probably.

Then it rushed into her mind that, supposing there was really an Indian about, this canoe might be his, and he might have stolen the tobacco. There was really no proof either way, and the only satisfaction would be to find the lost canoe and the food.

She tried to and fro till she was tired out and hungry, then she went back till she reached the remembered landing-place and sat down on a rock, hoping for the others. No one came, so she went up through the undergrowth and made for the ridge where the shack was; she knew her way now, besides which they had made a trail by passing.

It occurred to her to go and light up the stove for dinner. Averil had a watch, but by the sun, which was hiding behind very thick banks of clouds most of the time, the Kid guessed it to be midday.

When she came near the rocks Dolly stopped short, for she beheld an odd sight, and one which might, or might not, be dangerous. Quite near the little log hut, sitting up on its

haunches, was a black bear, and not far off a small one, still rather woolly of coat, standing on hind feet pulling at a bush to drag down ripe berries. They were both eating blue berries, and Dolly was fascinated by the queer human way in which they did it.

She had heard that bears—brown and black—are incalculable. That is to say, they may be perfectly harmless, but once in a way very dangerous. Summer was the best time of year, she knew, because they have plenty to eat, but when a mother bear is with her child you can't be certain of her temper. The worst time is in the very early spring, when they come out of the winter sleep with a baby that can hardly walk, are desperately thin and hungry, while there is nothing to eat.

Grizzly bears and polar bears are, of course, *always* devils of savagery and terribly difficult to fight, they are so strong. All those bits of knowledge sprang into Dolly's mind as she gazed at the sedate mother sitting up and feeding herself with blue berries till her black face was smeared with juice. It was awfully funny! But, dare she go up by them and into the shack? In any case it would be no use at all trying to shoot the mother with her automatic, it would only enrage her to madness and make serious trouble.

Dolly advanced a step at a time, and the bears heard her, of course. The young one sat down and turned its juice-smeared face to have a look at the intruder. As it stared it licked its nose, and rubbed its paws over ears and eyes. The Kid giggled. Anything more quaint she had never seen, and

she would have liked to go and play with this little bear person who probably would have loved to play with her.

But the mother was not sure. She stared and let herself drop slowly to four feet. Dolly thought there was a spark of red light growing in her small pig's eyes, and decided it was time either to go or dart into the shack. Only a moment she hesitated, then she sensed another presence and, turning quickly, found Gaston Lachine standing close behind her; it seemed as though he were just about to stretch out a hand and check her advance—perhaps only because of the bear, who shall say! Anyway she sprang aside and made up her mind instantly. No one was around, she was alone, and she did not like this person. Sooner the bear almost. Without a pause she darted for the shack, leaped through the door, shut the door and barred it.

Then she listened.

No sound. So she set about lighting the stove, as she was hungry and tea would be welcome.

It must have been ten minutes after that when she heard Gaston come up to the door and shake it.

"Holà, Mees Doll," he called, "ouvrez, ze bear she ees depart. No fear now. Let-a me enter."

"Sorry," answered the Kid in a tone she tried to make very careless, "but I'd sooner stop by myself till the others come. I'm busy."

"Oh-là-là—you weel not bar me, hey? I can help you for dinner. Here ees rabbit—I will mak' him ready—" the voice was persuasive.

"Oh, thanks," answered Dolly, feeling more confidence, "but you can hand me the rabbit in through the window, can't you. Then I'll do it."

"You are not polite," said Gaston, his voice becoming very rasping.

"I'd sooner stop by myself," repeated the Kid. "Of course you can make a fire and cook your own food outside, M'sieu Gaston, if you like, can't you? Our grub-stake is not your affair. You've got your own, haven't you, *tobacco* and all?"

An impish inspiration made her give that dig about the tobacco. Having spoken, she listened close to the planks, and heard a muttered oath. Gaston was venomous!

For reply, he did not speak, but went round to the window and looked in at her—his face was wicked, and his eyes hard, like a bit of onyx stone, just as opaque.

"Oho, Mees Doll—it ees war, eh? That is pity."

The Kid shrugged her shoulders and turned her back. In a few seconds she heard him go.

About an hour afterwards, when she was becoming really uneasy, she heard Ave calling and laughing, flung the door open in breathless joy and saw her sister racing up the bank, waving something—surely a cut of *bacon*!

"Oh, Kid darling—heavenly news—mad, amazing, fairy tale news! Too astonishing, you'll never believe it!"

CHAPTER VII

Perfectly Inexplicable!

Averil rushed into the shack and hugged her sister, breathless and giggling.

"Oh, Doll, wonders will never be ended. Miracles! Buzz and I can hardly believe it *now*. What do you think?"

"Well, I see bacon," answered the Kid, "and I'm dying of hunger. Where's Buzz? I guess you've picked up some of our losings. Where, Ave?"

"Some! My dear child, the canoe has come back to the old place, and the whole grub-stake except *one* tin of tobacco. I suppose the surprising thief kept that as his reward. We don't mind; Buzz declares he'd give him another, and tea, anything. People do have consciences, but really ——" Averil sighed in content, and then began slicing bacon into the pan.

"Where's Buzz?" demanded Dolly again, her eyes grave and frowning as she tried to piece together these strange happenings.

"Sitting on it. He won't move. I'm to eat my dinner and rush down and watch while he comes up, see? We simply daren't leave it. Oh, I'm hungry, Kid—have yours. I'll make

more flap-jacks to-night." Averil sat on the bench eating bacon and beaming satisfaction.

"But look here," said Dolly slowly, "I want to know when you found it, and how, and what, and every single thing, because *I* was close by there about—well, not two hours ago," she calculated.

"Just about *half* an hour ago, Buzz and I came along back feeling about all in. Awfully disappointed, not a sign of luck. And there before our miserable eyes was our own canoe—same place—lying upside down, grub-stake cached underneath, all but one tin, as I said. We nearly choked with joy; I'm sure I cried, and Charlie did an Ojibway dance. Then we cut some bacon and I rushed, guessing you'd be here. Naturally you saw nothing?"

"I—" Dolly hesitated as she thought of the one lost tin, but a sort of caution held her from confiding, and she simply said: "Oh, I went along west, and—and saw Gaston's canoe cached off the ground on a branch. I tried around all I knew—no go—came back, along the shore, nothing at the old place, so I ran up here hoping you were back. There were two bears eating berries—*ducks*—at least the baby was; the mother got a bit huffy, so I got inside and waited. Gaston came along so I told him to go and cook his own grub outside. He'd got a rabbit—he went."

"Oh, poor thing—you might have let him cook his rabbit, you could have had some." Averil opened her pretty eyes in surprise.

"Well, I felt I'd sooner not. I sure don't have affection for that breed," declared the Kid firmly.

"Oh no, I haven't," agreed Ave, "but still there's no harm in him."

"How d'you know, Ave?"

"Well—what?"

Ave was on her feet, the two girls stood facing one another, both looking very earnest, Averil puzzled also.

"Ave, let's go off *now*, catch up our things and take the trail at once before he comes back. Do let's! He won't know we've got the canoe, or guess we're off down the lake. For any sake let's be quit of him; he spoils the whole joy of everything."

"Sure," allowed the elder girl; "still, if Buzz——"

"We've got to over-ride Charlie, Ave, we must. Now look here—I found, dropped out of Gaston's kit, one two-pound tin of tobacco, same brand as ours. It had been opened, and a little taken out, same as ours. You say one has gone—well, what about that?"

Dolly looked into Ave's eyes, and saw her take in the suspicion. Then she said what Buzz would have said:

"I see, it is funny, but, Kid, he's bound to have tobacco; mostly all of them smoke that same. Why shouldn't some be taken out? It doesn't *prove*——"

"Of course it doesn't, old girl, you can say it's natural as breathing. All the same we have lost one tin—just like it—haven't we?"

Averil considered again. Finally she shook her head.

"Buzz won't suspicion Gaston. He'll say, why to goodness should Gaston thieve our canoe and grub-stake and then put them back? It's not sense, is it, Kid?"

"How do we know Gaston put it back?" asked Dolly, thinking aloud after a fashion, for she had no answer to her own question.

"Well, who could?" Averil laughed. "It's not sense. Some thief took it, and kept one tin, then put it back."

"But *that's* not sense," retorted Dolly warmly. "I'd bet you no thief, once off, would come back and put the whole thing as it was. Now, would he?"

"You've got me guessing, old girl, I'm in a cloud," said Averil, "but one thing is reasonable, to get clear of Gaston if we can. It's much better fun alone. Now I'll go, and send up Buzz. You feed him and try and get him to start right away. I'll take half the stuff down, that'll hurry up things. We ought to get on, there's no call to hold up here."

She went, and in twenty minutes Buzz came up, bubbling with joy and excitement, also hungry as a bear after winter sleep. The Kid found her task of persuasion easier than she expected and rejoiced thereat.

"I call it waste of days and good weather," she argued. "Besides, we can't leave the canoe down along shore now, can we? And think of the toil of porterage—getting the whole load up here, for one night! What's the good of stopping? There's nothing doing here." Her voice was rather scornful.

"That's right enough," allowed Charlie, wolfing bacon; "but where's old Gaston?"

"Oh, he was around—and went off to make a fire and cook his rabbit for dinner."

"Why not in here?"

"I didn't want him any," said Dolly firmly. "I don't like Gaston, Buzz, and that's flat. He's like a mink. He's sly. I'd sooner we three took the trail alone."

"Well, I dare say," allowed Charlie easily. He was too delighted to be angry. "We sure get along all right."

"And he's got his own canoe and kit, he can take the trail when he wants to," added the Kid.

"That's so. Yes, I guess we'd do wisely to get on, we've got some way to go," said Buzz, standing up and stretching. "Come along then, Kid, let's clear the shack—no time like the present."

Dolly rejoiced; she could have danced, only it was lost time, so she skipped as she packed up the tarpaulin and the pans. Her one aim now was to get off as soon as possible and

leave Lachine "guessing". She simply prayed that he did not know the stolen canoe had come back; but as *she* reasoned, he was bound to find out pretty soon, because it would be gone from the place in which he'd hidden it.

It was all so amazing—so perfectly inexplicable. Who was the ghostly friend who had cut the trail—blazed trees for her and Ave—and had now discovered and put back the very precious canoe and kit? Why should some unknown person do it for nothing?

The time in which the pair of them broke camp was a record; in perhaps ten minutes they were speeding through the rocks, down the slope and away among the undergrowth to the wet mossy shore.

There was Averil sitting on the canoe, humming a little song.

"We've got four good hours before we look for a camp," she said, jumping up. "Oh, it's great. I do feel good. Why, we can get down twenty miles at least—look at the water. Oh, it's just fine!"

On all three of them was an exaltation of joy. Laughing together they ran the boat down lightly, then they packed it with the goods—careful as to balance—finally they were all in, the paddles dipped, and early afternoon saw the long canoe skimming away down east like a shadow on the silver ripples. The sun was behind them, the piled-up forest by their side, and they planned to sleep perhaps twenty miles on their way.

A bend of the bank had hidden them some time when Gaston Lachine came down through the underwood. He had been to the shack and found it empty, muttered "Tonnerre!" in his throat, and searched around, finding footprints to and fro, many, in fact. It had not occurred to him that they *could* go off. Had not he done the one thing that could stop them—stolen their canoe and cached it where they would never dream of looking, because they knew nothing of that cave among the rocks back of the shack? He would go up at once and look at the canoe, also get some of the bacon he had hidden; he was hungry.

CHAPTER VIII

The Black-faced Mink vows Vengeance

So he tramped away up again to the shack, went around and in by a hidden way he knew to the place where he had put the canoe and the grub-stake. The cave was empty—not one thing out of all he had stolen was left.

Gaston Lachine gritted his teeth in rage that would have made him kill anyone at the moment. It seemed they had found the cave, taken their property, and gone. No doubt they suspected him; anyway, the little red-headed Kid was his enemy. He was mad, he was furious. All his trouble for nothing. He had intended to stay with them till he had got them quite off their guard, and he was able to find out *if* they had the money with them, and where.

Any sensible person would have sent it by one of the Government Couriers, or put it in the hands of the North-West Mounted at the depot, but he guessed the Hanburys to be too simple; they would stick to it, and carry it. He had intended to go with them till he got what he wanted, and now they had gone.

He went back into the shack, lighted the fire in the stove that was hot and stuffed with wood embers, and then remembered he had not got his billy can, so with a curse he got up and started to tramp along to his own cache. Hitherto he had been sharing with the Hanburys. Better to have some

tea and then he would start after the three again and catch them, as he travelled much lighter than they did.

As he went he invented the story he could tell so easily. Of course he had not stolen the canoe. The thief who took it had put it in the cave where they found it, and before all he must remember not to let them know that he knew it was in the cave, or that would be a give-away he could not explain. Innocence—that is, complete ignorance—must be his cue.

As he thought all this over he began to feel less mad. All was not lost yet. He could catch them in two days, and Buzz would of course be delighted to see him again. Their trail was so long—all the way to Churchill—that they could not escape him; in the long run he must win.

Presently he came out through the dense undergrowth on the shore far west of the place from which he had stolen the Hanburys' canoe. Here was the trail the Kid had gone on her weary search, and it was not long before this astute woodsman found the "spoor" of her small moccasins. He followed with skill, came to a tree he thought was the one where he had cached his canoe, but it could not be, because there was nothing there.

He kneeled down and examined the ground under the tree with immense care. Here was coarse grass, moss, and scrub —but the footprints, very light and faint, seemed to have passed across. Later he found one outside the shade of the tree. Surely one of the girls had gone this way, but he must have made a mistake about the tree.

Back and forth he went, hunting—hunting. He found no other tree beyond on the westward trail that answered to what he looked for, nor any trace whatever of his own canoe or his own kit and the tobacco tin he had annexed and put with it. Nothing.

Gaston Lachine sat down on a log, grabbed his head in both hands and ground his yellow teeth.

How they had managed it without leaving a trail he did not understand. They were sure cuter than he gave them credit for. They had paid him back by stealing *his* canoe and kit, and gone off with both, leaving him absolutely stranded in the forest. Of course he had his gun and cartridge belt, his knife, his pipe and tobacco pouch, but beyond oddments of string, nothing else at all. He had not even a cup. He must drink from his hands or a leaf.

Never before had Gaston Lachine been left in the woods in such a destitute condition, and what was he to do? Not without money—he always had that; he could buy a canoe, perhaps, if he happened on Indians going either way. Otherwise, his only plan was to take the trail *on foot* the whole way back to the Chippewyan Fort, and get a new kit and canoe.

The thought of this condition of affairs made him more like an enraged bear than a man. Nothing was to be gained by going back to the shack, so he started off and tramped west, keeping as near the shore as the formation of the ground would allow, because there might be a chance of a canoe. He did think of making one, but the stripping of

winter bark, the immense labour of sewing with the wàtab root—which he had got to find—the shaping of paddles, would all take many days, weeks, in fact, and when he had done he would have no kit, and ammunition running short. So he made up his mind that the land trail was his best plan.

That night he shot a hare, cooked it by igniting the pith of a dead birch stem with his revolver, and so making a fire. He was clever enough for most things. Then he lay down by the little pile of warmth and slept.

When you come to think, it was a most amazing tangle of events. And the three Hanburys making *their* fire twenty miles east of the old shack were so entirely innocent of any thieving! *Their* canoe had been given back to them from heaven, it seemed. The miracle of a good angel! As for stealing Gaston's, such a thing never came into their minds, as we know, and only Dolly suspected him of touching the big canoe and the Hanbury grub-stake.

No one had found him out. That was the queerest part of it. He was neither found out, nor robbed by the three on the trail. Always in the background lurked the mysterious force that haunted the trail.

They, the three Hanburys, went ahead with clear consciences and joyous hearts; they were happier without Gaston, but had done him no ill, as we know, and while *he* was vowing vengeance against them for his discomfort, *they* were taken up with all sorts of new happenings and new scenery, new wonders and beauty.

A fortnight passed and they had worked some way up the river that connected the long lake and Wollaston Lake. The easy work was left behind, for here they faced a strong stream, and very often rapids—steep woods and wild rock-bound shores.

It is no light labour fighting rapids upwards, and when you have a loaded canoe it requires immense judgment and muscle-vigour. One plan they tried. Where it was possible, Buzz and Averil walked by the bank, towing the canoe by a long rope made of moose-hide, commonly called a "babiche". Westerners make harness and dog muzzles of babiche plaited; it is intensely strong.

On this, then, the twins hauled, stubbing it round stones or stumps of bush for a rest, when they had to get a breather. The Kid stayed in the canoe and warded that craft off rocks and dangerous eddies. Dolly was a past master of canoeing; she always had loved the water and her quickness of eye was wonderful.

But it was desperately hard work, and the weather was hot and heavy, though sometimes at night came the strange nip and thrill of autumn—presently. When they felt that pinch they said: "Never mind! At this rate we'll get through in time—we'll get through before the trail shuts down."

They entirely believed this would be so, not for a moment dreaming of all they had got to face before they should hope to see the houses of Churchill town and port. Indeed it must be doubted if they realized the immense distance they had started to travel. Well, on a night, or rather

afternoon, when they had been hauling nearly all day and were pretty well tired out, they pulled inshore when the sun dipped behind the massed forests to westward, and made camp. They were not in the least dispirited, but they were tired, and for this reason made a good meal of the bacon—that had lessened considerably—because no one wanted to shoot rabbits or hares. Bacon was easy, so was coffee, and beans were fried with the bacon.

Well fed, then, they rolled up by the fire and slept as folk do sleep after such a day. There was a clear sky and a first-quarter moon that climbed up over the wooded heights and looked down at the sleeping three. The light shining on her face, perhaps, woke Dolly, and she shifted, turning towards the bank of brushwood alongside. She gazed at the bushes and became wider awake. Something moved! Had she dreamed it, or had she seen the base, mean face of the mink watching her with a stare of malignant triumph?

CHAPTER IX

The Danger Returns

The Kid said nothing; if she gasped, she did it noiselessly. When she sat up presently to put wood on the fire, gazed round at the silent woods, listened to the gurgling rush of the tumbling river and felt the beauty of that shining moon, the thumping of her heart sank into ordinary beats and she decided that she had dreamed that horrid face.

Why not? She had thought of it so often that it was but natural to dream it.

"I wasn't awake, really," Dolly assured herself, and tried to go to sleep again.

At dawn they were all busy over breakfast. Buzz went along the shore to see what the stream was like ahead, in order to decide what form the trail must take that day. Could they canoe or must they go on pulling up-stream? Also, how soon might they expect to reach Wollaston Lake and the easy swift advance of paddling across on smooth water?

The sisters were busy breaking camp and stowing the kit on board as usual—both of them were prepared for another day of haulage—when suddenly above the noise of the river they heard a shout. Not of fear, it sounded like a joyous hail, a friendly call. They checked labour and looked at one another.

"Buzz," said his twin confidently.

Dolly knew it was her brother's shout, and for no obvious reason her happiness went out like a snuffed candle, and her heart sank.

"Oh, *please* not that," said her heart, praying against a dread.

Averil wondered, but was undisturbed, of course.

"If he's found we've reached Wollaston—how great!" she suggested.

That was possible and the Kid's brave heart cheered up a bit.

In a little time they knew, and it was not that cheering discovery.

Came Charlie, beaming with good temper, his eyes looking like bits of sky and his white teeth showing in smiles. With him, the shortish stocky figure of the man whose legs were a little bowed, and whose narrow head, receding forehead, and opaque slits of eyes reminded Dolly of her special dislike—the blood-sucking mink.

Both girls stood motionless. Then Averil said to her sister:

"Fancy Gaston catching us up! I'm sorry. However, Buzz is pleased and he will help with this hard work. Kid, we must remember we don't *know* that he stole that tobacco tin!"

Dolly said nothing. She had the keen vision of intuition, her eyes were not clouded by vague good-natured impulses. In a flash she realized that they were up against a horrible danger—a persistent, remorseless enemy. If this man could not get the dollars without, he would just as soon kill them all as leave them alive. Sooner, in fact. That was what they had got to face!

She set her firm little mouth, and the grey-green eyes looked steely grey as she watched the pair coming along the shore, Buzz of course as friendly as an admiring schoolboy. As soon as the two came close enough to be heard he began to shout bits of information to his twin.

"Ave, just hearken to this—poor old Gaston got *his* canoe stolen. Kit and all. Every last stick. He hadn't a pinch of tobacco or a sock. Only his clothes on him and his gun."

"My word!" exclaimed Averil, her big eyes opening wider; "oh, Gaston, what rough luck! Did Buzz tell you ours came back? Yes, just so. Sort of fell out of heaven in the very same place. We found it. All the grub-stake there except one tobacco tin. We were so scared of losing it again that we just packed up and came away that minute."

"Tonnerre!" exclaimed Lachine, his sly eyes darting glances from face to face. Even he realized that these three young people were sincere, were even transparently honest. They were surprised at his loss, and the return of their own canoe and precious kit was not a discovery on their part, but seemingly a miracle.

Had there been one spark of light in the black heart of the breed he would have admired their simplicity and the absence of any suspicion of his attempts against them. As it was, he only laughed in his mind to think how stupid they were, and how easy would be his work of swindling them.

They offered him food, but he said he'd eaten already, and then he told them that he was making this trail on foot—porterage—carrying his canoe on his shoulder and his kit on top. It appeared he'd passed their camp without knowing it, as he'd cut across the woods, thus avoiding a big bend of the river. He'd made camp a little farther on and was just off when Buzz walked into it.

"Then you got your canoe back?" suggested Averil.

"Ah no—not the same—my own canoe. I mak' ze trail backward for Chippewyan many days—zen come ze beeg bateau—ze *raft*, wit many woodsmen for ze Fort. Ze men hav' canoe aboard—one, two, tree canoe—sell me one and grub and tabac. So I come again on ze trail. Eh voilà!" Gaston hunched up his shoulders and his yellow teeth showed in the old way. "Eet ees ver' well—hein? Now I can assist you on ze trail. We mak' zat in company."

"Awfully fine of Gaston, isn't it, Ave?" said Buzz joyfully. "He says he can haul and I can have a turn at the paddle, then you girls won't be so tired. It's too hard for women, this job."

"It's not," contradicted Dolly sharply. "Much better have a light person, like me, in the canoe. More to haul if you

have a heavy paddler. Does this bother go on for long? Are we near Wollaston, M'sieu Lachine?" she asked Gaston.

"Near? Oh yes—say ten, twentee mile at mos'. We shall do ver' queek. Now we come soon to Wollaston and mak' trail more an' more queek." Gaston grinned again, and the Kid felt every scrap of force in her awaken to action against what she knew to be the evil in this man's mind. He should not win.

Half an hour afterwards they were on the way, taking in turns the paddling and hauling and the porterage of Gaston's canoe and kit. They held up for dinner, and things had gone so well that even Dolly's eternal anxiety began to be the least bit soothed—on the surface, anyway. The thought that Wollaston was drawing nearer was so comforting; this business over, it might be possible to get on ahead in their own canoe.

The afternoon passed. Dolly had been paddling when the hail from the haulers signified that a camping-place was found. Gaston, carrying his own canoe and kit, mounted a rock that formed a convenient landing-place, and stood by Buzz who was hauling on the babiche to get the craft in-shore. It was a bend of the river, densely wooded, and the stream rushed along its course between the forests with wild force, round the curve in swirling eddies of water that sent foam flying over the rocks.

Just as the canoe came in alongside the rock, which was slippery with the ever-rushing water, a terrible thing happened—one moment and it was done.

Buzz, rising suddenly from his stooping position, struck his head against Gaston's canoe, overbalanced and pitched headlong over the edge of the slippery rock into the whirling river.

Gaston shouted "Tonnerre!" and ran ashore, threw down his burden, and seizing the other canoe heaved it up with a strong haul.

Averil gave one cry, and ran away back—back—keeping so near the rock-bound banks in her agonized effort to *see*, that the Kid had to grip her arm and shake it.

On her own part the Kid was quivering in every nerve with horror and fury. She only, just stepping from the canoe, had seen Gaston swing round as Buzz rose, and knew that the "accident" was in no way unintentional, but a deliberate attempt to knock the boy off into that mad whirlpool of racing water.

It was attempted murder—at any rate!

For the rest, her brain was seething like the rapids, and the wild words with which she tried to comfort Ave seemed to be uttered by somebody else—even the voice did not sound like her own.

Following the bend, the two girls ran on, stumbling, jumping, scrambling, with eyes on the water, trying to see what was happening to Buzz.

CHAPTER X

The Mysterious Guardian Acts

If a person has the bad luck to fall into the rapids of one of those rivers up north, there is only one thing to do by which to win even a remote chance of coming through alive, and that is to let himself go muscle-loose, making not the slightest effort for salvation.

Now Buzz did not know this. He was not experienced and had not heard of this way of saving one's life—in any case, it was but a hope, because rapids are a fearsome force indeed. The awful rush of the current and the rocks on every side, torn and beaten by the mad water, can break up a man's body as they would a branch of dead wood.

But mercifully for Buzz the canoe had given him a hard hit on the temple, taken the sense out of him, and he had gone down the rapids unconscious and limp as a wet rag. Undoubtedly this saved his life.

His being alive was almost a miracle, but there was a still greater one of which there was no explanation whatever.

When the frantic girls had arrived about a mile down-stream, without seeing the least trace of Buzz, they came to a place where the shore ran out in a long spit of stones and sand. It was a broad spit too, banked with rocks in many places, and against it the stream swirled, and was then

deflected with a rush around its point and away down by another bend.

Lying on this spit, upon sand between rocks, was the body of Charlie. He was stretched flat as though he were asleep—very ghastly, but not dead.

Now this was amazing enough, because the rush of the rapids swept round the curve with force enough to carry anything like a human body with it. There was no reason why the boy should be lying out straight, either; he should have been flung in a crumpled heap. That was the first amazing circumstance, but the second was inexplicable.

A piece of drift-wood was set against his leg—from knee to foot—and lashed there by a long strip of moose hide such as is used to make the plaiting of a racket snowshoe. Lightly but firmly the leg was held in the right position.

The sisters, kneeling down beside Buzz, gazed at one another.

"Ave," said Dolly and pointed, "it must be broken—but ____"

"I know." Averil's eyes were dazed and serious; "but, Kid —who—*who* is it?"

Then desperately they consulted how to move him. He was heavy, of course, and the ground rough.

"Perhaps Gaston——" began Ave.

"If you want him finished off," said Dolly with tense bitterness; "he swung the canoe around so as to knock Buzz into the river. I *saw* it. I was looking."

"Not on purpose—Oh, Dolly!"

"Yes, on purpose. I tell you, I saw him do it, Ave. I tell you he is wicked, he meant to kill Buzz, of course, only—only some angel is taking care of us—something *magical*." The Kid gave a little dry sob of agitation. "All I can say is, please God He'll go on taking care of us, because we shall want it most awfully now. Look here, you stay with Buzz, but don't try to wake him, because it'll hurt him to be moved. I'll get the tarpaulin sheet, we'll pick away the stones and bunchy stuff, make a smooth way and pull him up the bank and along there to the edge of the wood, then we'll build a shanty—you know, poles stuck up and leaning together—and we'll strap on thatch and simply wait till he mends."

Averil, listening, nodded agreement.

"What about our canoe?" she asked.

"Oh, we must carry it back with the kit in it, if that brute will let us. If he tries to stop us I shall shoot him. I don't care, Ave, I *shall*! I shall kill him just as I'd kill a mink."

Averil's face, which was white, turned whiter.

"I've a notion that he won't try and stop you," she said in a low voice. "He'll want to help—that's the worst of it, because I'm not blind, Kid darling; I wanted to think he was all right, but if he really is all wrong, it must be the money he

wants, and then of course he'd want to keep on being near, and—and helping, wouldn't he?"

"He sure would," agreed Dolly, her lip twisting in contempt. "Ave, there's only one hope for you and me and dear old Buzz in this wilderness, hundreds of miles away from human beings."

"I know," and tears gathered in Averil's eyes; "you mean God, of course."

"Yes, I mean this extraordinary—someone—who is being *sent* to help us all the way through, who blazed the trees to guide us to the shack, and fetched our canoe when that mink stole it, and took away his. And now, just think, that same person has pulled Buzz out of the river and just fixed up his leg for us to see. We'll have to set it properly, and make pads of the blanket bits to prevent it getting rubbed—thank goodness Dad taught us first aid and we can nurse."

So they talked, in disjointed sentences, as they cleared a broad strip upwards to the bank and made a little highway towards the shelter of the fir trees that came down fairly close to the river.

"Pine needles will be lovely and dry, and so springy," murmured Ave hopefully, looking at the belts of wood. "Oh, we shall do, Kid."

"Well, I'll go now. Don't leave Buzz, Ave, and don't hesitate to kill that snake if he tries to do harm."

Thus ordered Dolly, feeling full of iron resolve. She would have done it, too. She was wound up and very desperate.

Back she went at her best speed, and round the turn met Gaston coming with his own canoe on his shoulder, and various packages suspended.

"I come to fin' ze poor Buzz," he began. "Eet ees a misfortune ze mos' vile—nossing can be more bad. Tonnerre! How can we help—I will leave ze canoe an' grub—I bring eet for you an' Mees Ave. Zen I will go far down and fin' ze body—you cannot come, Mees Kid—eet ees not good for you."

Gaston chattered and blinked his eyes, he endeavoured to appear overcome and "desolated", but the Kid was not deceived in any way; she looked at him full in the face.

"Do as you like with your canoe," she said. "Buzz is all right. He's very wet and bruised and we are afraid he's broken his ankle, but Ave and I can nurse. I'm going to fetch the tarpaulin and a few things and we can pull him up on it, and make camp by the wood till he's better. I'd strongly advise you to go on, Mr. Gaston. We don't want your help and we're better by ourselves."

She walked on, and Gaston Lachine stood staring after the trim alert little figure. Then he cursed. His plan was to persuade the bereaved girls to camp while he went on down the river looking for the "body". He would remove that belt, which he knew was round the boy's waist, come back and

say there were no traces, and poor Buzz had been smashed to pieces. The girls would be so distracted that he might make friends and put them off their guard. Anyway he had promised himself the rest of the money without much difficulty—if there was any more.

And here again was the whole plan upset. Buzz was not dead, and the sisters were keeping watch—and would continue to do so. It was a case of more waiting, more watching, instead of instant success.

However, by the time he reached the bank near the spit of sand he had recovered his mood of apparent sympathy and his dark face was as usual. He wanted to lift Buzz and carry him up the bank, but Averil was like a lynx with her young one.

"Thank you, no," she said with a flash in her brown eyes. "My sister and I aim to do all this by ourselves. We'd be glad if you'd take the trail, M'sieu Gaston, for we don't want any company. It's only a rest for my brother that's needed," added the girl with emphasis; she was making herself believe that.

"But—eet ees lonlee. I mak' hunt for ze——"

Averil stood firmly, looking back into the cunning slits of eyes, and here she interrupted, saying something that came to her mind with conviction—so that she looked security.

"We are obliged, M'sieu Gaston, for your kind intention, but we would rather manage by ourselves. *Perhaps we are not so lonely as you think.*"

CHAPTER XI

In Which Gaston Goes

"Now we can breathe," sighed the Kid, as the two girls sat in the dusk by their little red fire and ate a meal after long and arduous toil.

They had done, to a certain extent, what they proposed. That is, they had dragged up Buzz to the edge of the wood on the tarpaulin sheet. Then with axe and hands they cleared a place that seemed to suggest more ease, and made a thick bed of balsam boughs, overlaid with heaps of fern and big leaves, spreading a blanket over all.

With care they lifted him on to this, putting a bundle of spare garments as a pillow and another blanket for coverlet. Then they ran up a little shelter over him—upright poles either end, one laid across and boughs slanted up resting against it, and over the pitch hung the tarpaulin sheet. By the open foot they made the fire.

Buzz had recovered consciousness when they put him on the bed, lost it again when they set the fractured bone just above the ankle, and then woke up to drink tea and ask questions.

The girls had set the leg in fine style, wrapping the inflamed part in balsam leaves and padding the inside of their neat splints with strips from the blanket. It was done

very well indeed and they were both so pleased at their success that misfortune receded into the background, and the horrible shock with it.

They told Buzz that Gaston's canoe had hit him on the head and knocked him into the river, and he'd been washed over a mile down the rapids, but when he demanded weakly: "Who landed me, then?" they could not answer.

Averil, sitting by his side, put the mystery in the only way possible.

"Kid and I ran, and we found you lying quiet on the sand spit that runs out where the river swirls. *Someone* had lashed your leg to a bit of drift-wood with a babiche cord."

"Someone?" echoed Buzz, turning his head to look at her with feverishly bright eyes.

"Just that. We saw nobody, but we think it must be the same person who brought the canoe back. Buzz, we've sure got a friend."

"Seems like," allowed Charlie, considering this amazing information.

"D'you have a recollection of anything?" asked the Kid, elbows on knees, chin on palms.

"Well—I sort of fancy—I have. Someone, but lord, I couldn't tell you who. I kind of remember bumping against that bank—awful smash, all of a heap—the water was all about. Then I felt my arms pulled and I was flat on the sand,

and saw the sky. I'd a notion of a face—Injun face, and a feather. Then he shifted my leg and I went out again. Can't recollect any more."

"There *was* someone," said the Kid joyfully.

"An Indian! And *why*?" breathed Averil. "It's sure just like a fairy tale."

"Where's old Gaston?" asked Buzz after a pause.

"Gone on," Averil told him.

"Oh, he might have stopped to do chores for you. Cut wood and hunt. I rather wonder——"

"We asked him to go," said Dolly promptly. "We two can handle all the chores of *this* outfit. We can trap. We can shoot at need. And we can build a better cabin over you, just to pass time till you mend. Don't worry about Lachine—*we* don't want him."

"I know you're set against him some," allowed Buzz, talking fast, a flush on his brown cheeks. "I sure can't get hold of all that business about canoes, but I can see *he* didn't steal ours, because he wouldn't naturally steal his own. No sense in the proposition. I grant you he isn't sort of good to look at, but he's real strong and such a handy woodsman. I'd be glad if he was around to help you girls."

"P'r'aps your Injun will happen along and help us if we're put to it, Buzz," Averil laughed. "And now see, I'm nurse, you've got to go to sleep, and we're going to sleep—in turns.

If you feel thirsty you ask, because one of us will be alongside the fire to keep it up and give you some water or tea—anything."

Three days went by in which poor Buzz was extremely feverish and talkative, only sleeping in snatches. The girls divided the time into watches and seldom left him. They set traps within a short distance, wires, and caught rabbits. And the only thing that worried them was the fact that their canoe with the flour and bacon must be up there by the unlucky rock—unless, of course, Gaston had stolen it a second time.

On the third day—Buzz being better and himself again, weak as a kitten, but beginning to clamour for a good meal—on the third day in the morning the two of them decided to leave Buzz and fetch their property. After all, it was only a mile—they could run there, "and if we find it's gone, we can, of course, run back, too," capped the Kid quite cheerfully.

"And if it's gone, we'll just sit tight till the kind fairy brings it along," added Averil, also beaming.

The fact was that they were both so immensely "bucked" by the mending of Buzz and the placid way that life went on in spite of that ghastly misadventure, that nothing came amiss! They did not worry over time, or the future. Truth to tell, neither of them realized the dangers and difficulties of winter's approach with September, which the Indians called "Many-caribou-in-the-woods" month. They were saving up the rabbit skins and meant to line the blankets and their own buckskin shirts and leggings, but the days were lovely and they were not worrying—yet.

The canoe was hard by that place where the trouble happened. It was up on the edge of the wood, turned over on the piled-up grub-stake, safe and sound.

"Gaston had some remorse, then," said Averil, instantly putting down this decent act to the credit of the breed.

The Kid grunted. She could not believe any good of Lachine, and as usual she was right.

Gaston's intention had been to destroy the large canoe, and carry off the food, as some small revenge for the sisters' refusal to let him stop at their camp. But he *could not*.

It sounds a remarkable statement, but the fact remains that when he started to shift the packages an arrow passed through the crown of his dilapidated hat.

This was such excellent shooting, so obviously *just* a miss on purpose, that Gaston Lachine realized the canoe was protected, and left it, feeling decidedly uneasy. He did not go far, for reasons of his own, but returned on the second evening to find it moved up under the fringe of the fir wood and turned over as described.

Then he knew it was being watched and cared for, so he cursed as usual and left it. The value of the grub-stake was not sufficient to be worth a serious collision with a person who could shoot like him who had aimed at the hat!

Besides, that second time Gaston was more cheerful, he had got something that he wanted. So he passed on up towards Wollaston Lake, chuckling to himself—but all the

same trying to calculate who had frustrated his aim about the canoe. He put it down to the act of an Indian who had found it, and meant to keep it. Some of them were experts with bow-and-arrow shooting—it saved ammunition. No trapper, white or half-white, would use anything but a gun. Of course, then, it was an Indian, some lone hunter!

Gaston never gave a second thought to what Averil had said; he considered that "bluff" of course—as he always lied himself he expected other folk to lie, naturally.

So the girls started back to the camp carrying the precious canoe and the goods. They were well content, and did the work in quick time, meeting no one, seeing nothing, hearing no sound but the roar and rush of the wild water.

"What is it the trappers call bad luck?" asked Averil suddenly.

"Hoo-doo," the Kid told her.

"Well, Hoo-doo has departed from us, Dolly. I do feel great. Buzz going to mend, and Gaston gone, and we safe—we are lucky, we *are*."

They called when within hearing distance, and Buzz lifted up a weak voice, and shouted in answer. The fire was burning and a pleasant smell of stewing hare reached their senses.

"We've got it all," shouted Averil cheerily; "all well, old lad?"

CHAPTER XII

Misfortune and—Fortune

Joyfully and with triumph the girls came up to the fire and set down their burden. Then they began getting out some of the precious flour and bacon, for a feast was proposed as soon as Ave could cook flapper-jacks.

Buzz watched them lazily, then he said:

"What did you do with the belt, Ave?"

"Which belt? Oh, mine you mean; I've got it on." Averil slapped a hand each side of her waist.

"Have you got mine on?" questioned Buzz rather irritably. "'Course I don't mean yours. Mine's gone, so I supposed you'd taken it off."

A dead silence held the sisters for a minute quite. Then they both stooped under the shelter and bent over the bed.

"It was sure there yesterday," said Averil; then she added: "*Was* it, Kid?"

"It was there when we pulled him in and set his leg, I know," Dolly told her, "but I forgot about it after that. I never gave it a thought even, as Gaston was gone and we were all so safe and quiet."

Now they both of them knew that Buzz had been very feverish—light-headed, in fact, for two days, though sleeping fitfully at times. The girls had not been always present after that first night and day—nor had they been awake the whole time. They were very tired, and what was the need after Lachine had departed?

They stared at one another, as they sat back on their heels, vaguely confused about hours of "watches", rests, and so on. Neither could remember in all those three days and nights of terrible anxiety exactly when things had been done. And if you think over what the strain must have been, and how long the hours, it is easy to realize that it must be so.

One thing occurred to Dolly's keen mind as a solution, this.

Had Buzz in his feverish restlessness *felt* the chafing of the belt, pulled it off and thrown it out of the little "tepee" behind his head? It was open both ends. He had been terribly fidgety, no doubt in the world of that, his arms never still and his fingers all the time restless. With renewed hope the girls hunted round every yard of ground, they searched the fringing boughs that swept the grass at the sides of their erection—with no luck. The belt was gone. If Buzz had dragged it off because he was hot and unhappy, he must have thrown it out and it had been picked up by a watcher.

But who? Gaston had gone off on the first evening, they supposed.

"Well," said Dolly at last, "it must be the mink. He didn't go. He was prowling around and either took the thing off Buzz or saw *him* take it off. When you come to think, why should he go when it was the money he wanted?"

"This spoils everything," wailed Averil, "it's enough to ____"

"Oh no," the Kid caught her up, "Buzz is getting well, he might have died. The canoe is safe here."

"How do we know Gaston isn't close by," Averil went on despairingly, looking at her sister.

"He may be. But I'd guess he'd make off with the belt, if he stole it. Well, of course he stole it. He's worse than a mink, he's a true human wolverine," declared Dolly almost savagely.

You can't have a worse animal than that anyway. Even a lynx is simple by a wolverine, the fiendish ingenuity of its tricks being a proverb among woodsmen, as all the North knows.

Well, there was nothing to be done. The belt was gone, and presumably Gaston with it. The only thing left to do was to rejoice that two thousand dollars still remained in the other belts.

Buzz said little; he was confused by his weakness and pain. He did not realize quite either the loss or what his sisters thought of Lachine, so, after all, the dinner was more cheerful than might have been expected, and in the afternoon

a brilliant bit of luck on the part of Averil caused actual joy again.

They were sitting curing the pelts (skins) for use, and doing it Indian fashion, which is by scraping the skin at the back of the fur with bone scrapers, rubbing and rubbing till gradually the dry stiff pelt becomes soft as a glove. It is hard work, but they had got a pile of them and planned to set to work lining everything as time went on. They realized the need, but what they did not understand was how very soon now they would want all the protection possible.

As they worked some wild duck flew over the water and away—to the lake, no doubt. Averil picked up the rifle which lay by Buzz in the shelter, went down on one knee and fired at the "Neenee-Sheebs", as Indians call the ducks, and one fell—on the shore, fortunately. This was a triumph; it showed she had not lost her cunning, and Buzz rejoiced greatly.

They ate duck for supper; it was toughish and rather oily in flavour, but Ave had shot it, and they were tired of rabbits.

"I'll take the rifle and shoot something else," declared Averil, her cheeks rather pink with pride. "What about a caribou to-morrow? Or a deer?"

The Kid agreed, but suggested that the tepee must be strengthened a bit. They had got to remember that a storm would play havoc with the present erection, and Buzz would not be able to walk for a month. A month would bring them into October—the Indians' "Whitefish Moon"—and that would mean snow, any day of it. Once the snow began it

would be winter and the whole fierce horror of the Northern ice grip.

That evening just at sundown another little event came off. It gave more food of a new kind and made them all laugh too, which was useful.

The weather was very still, the sky clear with a thread of silver moon floating in it just visible. Buzz was dozing, and the two girls sitting very still near the fire, where, in the pan, stewed that cut-up duck. They were scraping pelts as usual, and talking in whispers not to disturb Charlie in what was a healthful sleep.

Presently from the forest stepped a half-grown fawn, a young spotted deer, and with nervous feet it went in the direction of the water. The girls knew that the curve of the rapids against the land spit was quite a favourite place for the evening drink among the forest creatures, but hitherto they had been too busy to sit and watch them. Now they signed to one another, and Dolly motioned towards the rifle, but Ave shook her head with a gesture in the direction of the boy's quiet face. The fawn must pass, they could not startle poor Buzz back to the weary pain.

So they watched, silent, as the light faded into soft evening colours, and the glitter went off the racing water.

First the fawn went down on the tips of its dainty toes; and then close to the camp the sisters heard a curious little chattering noise with a whimper in it, rather fretful. This was a porcupine, they knew—no other animal makes a sound so

ridiculously like a baby child talking to itself before it can speak.

Presently the little creature hove in sight, trotting along its run to the water for the regular evening drink, with all its amazing armour of spines rattling. Everyone does not know that a *porcupine* is practically lord of the forests—not even a lynx or a bear will face it—because when it rolls up the spines form a defensive armour; they stick in the nose and lips of the enemy and cannot be dislodged. They will kill the most powerful and savage beasts, because they work through into the tongue and throat, and the sufferer starves. A wise animal thus pierced by an angry porcupine will rush off and rub its muzzle in earth and sand to dislodge the spines. Wolves will *pull* them from one another's noses and jaws! Probably a mother bear or lynx would do that for her child—animals being wonderfully clever.

Anyway the porcupine rules, and trots on its way straight as a die, never goes from its path for anything or anybody.

The fawn heard it coming, and backed nervously aside, staring at the intruder. Then, crawling forward on its belly, from around a rock just beyond the fawn, appeared a lynx. No doubt it had been hiding because it knew something would come to drink. The horrible wicked face was distended in a grin which showed the long fangs, little tufted ears jerked forward, and great powerful hind quarters hunched high to spring, the bunchy bob tail quivering.

The curious round pale green eyes seemed to glare, shifting from the fawn to the girls at the fire and back—the

fawn stood paralysed.

Then an amazing thing happened. From the forest shadows came an arrow and struck the fawn in the side—it gave a mighty leap upward, and the lynx, unable to check his spring, went *beneath* the fawn's leap on to the porcupine! A moment after he was tearing away into the wood, screeching with agony, while the porcupine drank at the river, and went placidly home again. No one came for the fawn, so the girls took it for food.

It was a gift from the mysterious guardian. They did not miss that, but felt almost awe-stricken as they whispered to one another about it.

CHAPTER XIII

Again the Magic Hand!

Nearly four weeks had gone by, and Buzz was practising every day on crutches made by himself with much care and pains. It was all a horrible effort, but he bore it like a Spartan. It had got to be done, because move they *must*; things had become serious.

Food they had in plenty so far as meat and rabbits went, but flour and bacon were reduced to very little, and tea was short. However, that was not the real worry. It was the *cold* that was beginning to make the three ask an anxious question. How were they to answer it?

Every day in the early morning a rim of ice showed along the bank. So far it had not held up the tumbling rapids, but it would as soon as the real *grey* cold seized on forests and rivers—even waterfalls would be put into a strait waistcoat; once held, they would be solid till spring.

Therefore you can understand that the water trail must close, and the only way to get forward would be snowshoes, and a small toboggan sledge, usually drawn by dogs.

They had no sledge, no snowshoes, and did not know how to make these important things; lastly they had no dogs and did not know where to buy them, or how to manage them, alone.

As for "stubbing" their way up the rapids again, they simply barred that. The girls would not allow it to be risked.

The Kid suggested rebuilding their tepee in a much more solid form, stuffing the cracks with moss, and living in it till spring. For five minutes it sounded a good idea, but after consideration the notion was dismissed, for as Averil said, they did not know enough to keep themselves from starving —when the worst cold sets in, and the sun is invisible for months, even Indians may die in hundreds. The caribou go south or disappear in a mysterious way, and the wolves become ravenous and horribly dangerous. With frozen rapids for miles both ways there would be no fish; near a lake you can make fish traps by breaking a hole and setting a net through. No, it would not do, they must get on, on, somewhere—as far as they could, and then, supposing they got held up, pray for some lone shack on a lake, or perhaps an Indian village near enough to buy dogs.

Anyway, they must get on now.

After serious consultation they decided to cache their beloved canoe, and so, exploring back in the forest, they followed Gaston's plan and cached it in the boughs of a big low-growing cedar tree, a plan that saves a canoe from the tearing claws of big cats like lynx or catamount—"Lucifee", as the hunters call it. They divided the whole grub-stake into three and made it up in packages, also they planned to carry it Indian fashion, that is, on the top of the shoulders, supported by a broad buckskin band across the forehead. It eases the weight immensely and leaves both hands free for carrying guns or various articles.

Just as they had arranged all these details, and sewed up their blankets in bags, fur-lined bags for sleeping—everything was fur-lined now—two things happened. The one, natural enough, but giving them a queer uneasy shock, was *snow*, falling in thin powdery flakes at dawn on a bleak bitter morning from a dense grey sky. Horribly suggestive of what was before them!

The other by no means natural! In fact, just one of the weird happenings that had startled the three travellers at irregular intervals all through.

It was the mysterious *hand* at work again. They had seen nothing since the evening that the lynx, the porcupine, and the fawn acted the odd scene by the water. The arrow that killed the fawn for them had been discussed for days, but no conclusion came from the talks. The meat was good and just what they needed to strengthen Buzz—but an arrow! Who would use a bow but an Indian? Which was of course just what Gaston thought when an arrow went through his hat!

"It's *the* Indian," declared the Kid, and she had said the same many a time since. She had seen him more than once, Ave never, Buzz once in a hazy dream when he had been pulled up the bank. But neither had seen a face, only a vague shape.

Well, when the snow began to fall on that bitter morning, the three were not happy. To trail on foot in snow with moccasins means sinking in, therefore twenty times the effort. They had better be off before it got deeper; waiting would do them no good.

All three walked down to the river—which was still tumbling in rapids—and gazed up north, and south, and at the bleak dreary sky. No hope of sun, the clouds were full of snow, it was coming in earnest. They went back to the camp, and in an instant all three saw something hanging to the pole of the tepee, a large bundle depending from buckskin straps. It had been put there since they walked away about ten minutes—little more—earlier.

The Kid seized on it, and gave a gasping squeak of joy and amaze.

"Oh—*Oh!* Ave, see! Oh, Buzz—are we mad? Is it magic? See—snowshoes! And look!"

The "look" was awestruck, and with reason indeed. For attached to the snowshoes was the webbing belt that had been stolen from Buzz, in which they could feel the wads of dollar bills.

"If we don't sit down, I shall fall," said Ave seriously, and her voice shook; "it's all very well to laugh, Kid, but, my word——"

She could not get any further, and stayed silent.

The snowshoes were the kind worn in the woods by Indians—rounded in front and with a long tail out behind, just as though you took a long strip of whalebone by the two ends and lashed them together; the wide part where the foot stands is meshed across like a racket, and the wood is tamarack, called *mashkigiwateg* by the Indians. It is cut in long strips, and you have to choose the wood carefully, so as

to have no knots. It is cut when green, and steamed over hot water to make it still more pliable. When bent it is kept stiff by two cross-pieces, bound in place by strips of rawhide, and the webbing threaded through holes bored by a rifle cleaning-rod made red-hot in the fire.

It is obvious then what the work is.

The Hanburys knew something about it, but had not made any; they had bought them from Indians in old days and knew the right kind when they saw them. Now snowshoes for all were given them by the fairy hand that apparently could make first-rate rackets as well as shoot arrows, return stolen goods, and save lives.

The consultation that night was a joyous succession of plans. You see, they did not start, but decided to wait for the snow to cover the ground, while Buzz practised hard to get his muscles in order, and the girls made rough parkas—or coats with hoods—out of the bigger hides they had collected during that month—like the fawn and caribou skins, for instance. They would not be smart! Some parkas are fine, and trimmed with squirrel tails all round the face to keep the wind off and save the features from frostbite—but that was not necessary *yet*. They expected to be home before the worst came.

They told one another stories they had heard about men going seventy miles a day on snowshoes—and often fifty. They knew of a half-breed who took his young wife two hundred miles on a sledge, in four days—she had got appendicitis and the nearest doctor was two hundred miles

away. He did the journey under difficulties too, because he had to choose the smoothest trail. He won a triumph, for an operation was performed the hour he arrived at the Settlement, and his wife got quite well.

"But of course," said Buzz, "they had dogs, all of them, a good sledge, and a good team of huskies. We've got to carry our kit."

Both girls with one voice decided that you could go as fast without a sledge—and dogs. Indians going light went amazing distances—which was true; Indians seem to be made of steel wire and leather! However, the three were so enormously happy and content that all trouble was over, and they expected to reach Churchill in ten days. Why not?

Because they had not done with *Matchinito*, "The-evil-one-himself."

CHAPTER XIV

The Nameless Fear

The end of that week saw the little camp deserted. Begun in desperation, ending with triumph, it was buried in drifting snow, and that small tepee that had sheltered the pain of poor Buzz was a haunt of squirrels.

Regardless of people still, "Kak" the porcupine trotted to the water up and down his little footway, and would trot till the iron hand gripped the rapids, after which he would be driven to snow water and much sleep. In the very depth of the real cold nearly all the small animals disappear, which is why the unsleepy ones like wolves and lynxes are so often on the verge of starvation.

The three who had dwelt in the camp were now on the banks of Wollaston Lake and awkwardly placed, because the wide water was not frozen hard enough for them to cross it, and they were on the wrong side. The east side was short. The west, on which they had arrived, stretched away miles to the westward and round about a hundred miles of curve till it met the east again at the river that ran into Deer Lake.

They ought to be on the other side of their river, and had they been experienced they would have crossed at the narrow end of Lake Athabasca, coming up the opposite side of the rapids. Then they would have had a straight and comparatively short trail.

This was the first blow since that day of triumph, and resolved itself into this question. Should they go back and fetch the canoe, using it to cross to the east shore, and then cache it again—or should they wait till the ice would bear them? A few days?

Here the Kid interposed with one of her wise conclusions.

This end of Wollaston would not freeze so fast as the centre or the western curve, because of the pull of the rapids. They might have to wait several weeks; better go back for the canoe, or brave the distance and start round the western curve—couldn't they cut across as soon as the ice bore?

This plan, the last one, seemed good in the eyes of all three. They would start at dawn and follow the west shore until the ice was strong, then across. Lake ice is usually very fair; only in rivers do you get the wearing obstacle of heaped-up broken hummocks that even dogs cannot tackle, and where sledges must be carried over by main strength.

So they planned to make camp here and now, to eat and sleep, and start at dawn along the western shore.

You will understand that they were at the point where the river diverged into the lake, and the woods massed at the corner. Everywhere was forest. From a height, vision would have taken in miles on miles of pointed pine trees clothing the country; the lake lay like a looking-glass in the heart of this dark green and white, for snow covered most boughs in masses.

At the corner of the wood then, the travellers shed their bundles. Ave lighted a fire with the first bit of dead birch they found, Buzz took the axe to fell some dead wood, and the Kid started scraping a clear place by use of snowshoes to pile up the snow in a sort of sheltering bank. They heard their brother strike a blow, then came silence, and presently a low whistle from Buzz, who appeared within the family circle carrying something long and dark which he set down by the fire.

It was a canoe. Ave gazed at it. Then she said:

"Now don't say the fairy has read our wishes, or thoughts, and planted a canoe handy, because I shan't believe you."

"Sure no. I don't ask you to believe that," answered Buzz, grinning cheerfully, "it's a cache. There was a deadfall out there, just a plain dead spruce, and a lot of brushwood about. I thought it would save cutting down, so I started to clear away the brush, and breaking it I nearly sliced *this*. Well, what about it, old girl?" He looked at Ave.

"We'll cross," said she promptly.

"That's what I thought. You bet some Indian cached this to use next year, perhaps. Well, we'll put it back if we can—or buy it if we hear of any owner. And anyway they make these birch-bark canoes by the handful! Well, when? Now, or in the morning?"

"Oh, now," cried Dolly with almost fierce decision. A thought had occurred to her which she did not intend to

impart till later. At present the other two were unsuspicious! They hurried eagerly. Something in the grey dusk drove them on to feel that they *must* escape. Ten minutes ago it had been the most natural thing to make camp as cheerfully as the cold would admit, and eat their monotonous fare as usual. But now that Buzz had brought that canoe the Kid's hands shook, not with cold, and Ave found herself wondering how far off that blow of the axe could have been heard.

The only unconcerned member of the party was Buzz. He quite agreed to the going over, but he really did not see cause for this desire to whisper and hurry desperately which seemed to have seized on his sisters.

Within fifteen minutes they were packed and crossing. Very "packed", because the canoe was small—indeed there was a question of leaving one girl behind and making two journeys; but as Ave would not let Dolly stay alone, and Dolly would not let Averil, it had to be given up.

There was no *ice* exactly, but a perpetual movement of thick slush, a stiff substance carried from the wide centre of the lake towards the rapids, frozen water that was not yet hard as real ice. One more day, and granted the same or more cold, they could not have dared the half frozen surface.

"It was lucky," whispered the Kid with a long sigh. "Ave, it *was* lucky. I didn't want to wait there, did you?"

Averil shook her head. Her gaze was fixed on the shadowy shores ahead, woods, woods again. Ranks of pine, and apparently brushwood, and at the back the inevitable

hills, also clothed in spruce—miles of it; but they were on the right side—on the *east*—they had got this short—comparatively—trail to the river linking up Wollaston and Deer Lake, then ice trail to Indian Lake; very far indeed, but they pictured it straight forward—three hundred miles of river at least from the foot of Deer Lake to Churchill, with Indian Lake in the middle of it.

It was an immense comfort to Dolly that they left no trail. She turned her head and saw the steadily drifting mush ice, as it is called, pass over the passage made by the canoe and wipe it out.

They paddled without noise, pushing and shoving through the pressure, aware that all the time they drifted sideways with the current.

That crossing took about half an hour, because the prow of the canoe had to be kept southward to the lake, not in a direct line across. They had to make as much way south as east to counteract the pull of the river current. But all went well; with no hitch or accident they landed under the pines on the east shore, and put the goods on the bank.

"We'd better just leave the canoe where it is," said Charlie. "The chap it belongs to will hit on it easy enough."

"Shall we make camp here?" Averil asked. "There's a bit of dead wood about." She looked at the Kid, who was trying to see the shore they had left through the gloom. After a pause she answered them both.

"Oh no! Cache the canoe—up in the wood. We don't want to give notice to all and sundry that we—crossed. And don't let's camp just here, Ave—let's get on for an hour, anyway. I'm not tired, are you?"

"No, but Buzz has got awful cramp; if we make a fire here, I can work the muscles with a forked stick like the Indians do."

"Oh no, I'm all right," protested Buzz, refusing absolutely to be an invalid. "The Kid's right—let's get on a bit. After all, there's a moon."

So they shouldered the kit, and fled on and on before that haunting fear.

CHAPTER XV

The Howl at Midnight

Sometimes winter begins in the North with great force. The thermometer falls rapidly, and in a day or two the whole country is buried under snow—light powdery snow that squeezes up through the mesh of snowshoes or flies up over the round toes, making them difficult to lift.

Snow began to fall that night. The moon Buzz looked for was clouded over, and from a leaden sky fell thick ice-cold flakes. Still they kept on, Kid saying she was glad, because the trail would be hidden inches deep. But after an hour they had had enough of it, and moved up into the wood for a camp less exposed. All three were silent, for they were facing the hardest effort of a very long hard day with a short allowance of food—no chance of getting any that night—and far the worst weather conditions they had ever experienced in the open.

But no one complained. With numbed fingers they worked, so tired that nothing mattered but sleep, yet it *must* be done. A fire built, snow banked up as a wind-screen, moccasins changed for night ones and stockings dried by being set up round the fire on pointed sticks. The change of socks was great gain—they never missed doing that; presently they drank weak tea, very hot, and ate beans and the last of their bacon.

"We must have some meat to-morrow, truly, Buzz," urged Averil as they ate; nearly everything was gone. Beans for breakfast, and about the last of the coffee!

"Not so much to carry, anyway," said Dolly, refusing to be disheartened, and they all laughed.

They rolled up in the fur-lined bags, and within their snow-bank close to the jumping fire they slept. Fell asleep on the instant and slept as people do not often sleep in easy beds. Every muscle had done hard work all day.

In the night Averil was awakened suddenly. She lay listening, sure she had heard something in her sleep.

It came again—on the north-east wind, from up in the forests above them, a *howl*, the terrible desolate cry of a wolf. In a moment it was answered by another, then another. There must be several, perhaps many! Averil shrank down into her fur. She knew that cry, but she had not been near it in the open before. In old days they had a cabin on the Mackenzie. The open is a different proposition.

She found herself reasoning that as the wind was blowing from the wolves, their camp could not be scented. Yet she stayed awake listening, and presently heard a different note —the howl of the hunting call—followed by the answer of many, then silence, and she knew that the pack had got on the trail of a caribou, or something big, and were following hard.

Then she dozed off, thinking the episode closed, but it was not! Perhaps ten minutes or more after that she heard the

Kid's voice, in an urgent whisper calling her to wake, and became aware of crashing sounds in the wood above. Snow was still falling, and the cold intense; on the icy wind came sounds as of some large animal breaking through forest at top speed.

Both the girls got up. They felt defenceless in the bags! Both of them took their small revolvers from the holsters. Then Buzz sat up.

"Moose, you bet," said he. "Wonder where he'll lead off."

The words were hardly spoken when a big shape showed up on the snow, tearing along between the trees. It was coming down and across at the same time, making almost direct for the little camp. In a minute the girls could distinguish the huge branching antlers and strange heavy-nosed head. It was coming full speed and they felt a qualm at being almost directly in its frenzied course.

Buzz was on his feet now, and, rifle in hand, waited.

"Oh, poor moose," cried Ave, in a distracted voice; "Buzz, do shoot the wolves!"

Her brother laughed.

"No cartridges to spare, old girl. We can't spend ammunition taking the part of moose and caribou in winter. Shucks, look at him!"

The moose was indeed a grand beast. He was almost on the camp when he saw it and swerved with a tremendous

bound. They could see his small eyes glaring red and the steam from his wide nostrils. The antlers were huge and much more massive than a stag's.

"Guess he'll give them what for, if he stands," said Buzz again. He was desperately excited over the coming contest.

They had a glimpse of the splendid creature as it realized the camp and swerved, half mad with fear; then it plunged on, and tore away southward, neck outstretched and great antlers carried high.

Down the long slope on the scent came seven or eight gaunt shapes, loping along at a tireless gallop. It is next to impossible to outrun a wolf, of course.

"If only the moose had the sense to go into the lake," cried Ave; "oh, poor old thing!"

"Nowhere to swim to," Buzz suggested. "He couldn't last out the distance across. At least I don't think so—he might try."

The Kid was acting, boldly as usual. Seizing some burning wood off the fire, she jumped over the snow-bank and rushed headlong in front of the wolves just as they checked at the human scent. With little sharp shrieks she sprang at them, dashing the branches to and fro. Instantly the gaunt grey beasts swerved aside, and fell back.

For a few moments Dolly was conscious of the staring green eyes, wild strange treacherous eyes, and the tongues lolling out of long-fanged jaws. She felt intense excitement

at facing wolves on her own, and took no heed of Averil's call. Her feeling was that she'd *make* them stop and lose the big bull; she wanted him to escape, couldn't bear to think of him torn and bleeding—so she ran at them again. They cowered back, then sat down on their haunches like dogs and glared at her with their terrible eyes.

It occurred to the Kid that their next move might be awkward, so she retreated, still beating the flame up and down and round. One after another the creatures slunk aside, made a detour, their shadowy bodies gliding over the snow, then one howled, the others answered, and in a moment they were gone on the track of the bull.

"D'you think I put them off?" asked the Kid, as she helped heap wood on the fire. "Oh dear, I *am* hungry. I could eat most things and we've got nothing but beans for breakfast."

"I expect we'll get something in the morning," Buzz told her with rather a meaning tone in his voice.

And after a bit they went to sleep again, unconscious of the great battle that took place several miles to the south.

They ate the beans and drank thin hot coffee at dawn, then off they went again, swinging along in brave style without a word of complaint, the powdery snow flying up and around the track of the shoes, and the snow falling from that drear leaden sky to cover the trail.

They saw no animal but a "snowshoe" rabbit, and that was gone before they could kill it. Then, about the time of

the midday stop, they came upon one of the many swamps that are made by beavers damming up a creek, the mouth of a small river running into the lake. Windfalls lay this way and that, gnawed through by industrious beavers, who had built up a regular town right across what had once been the outlet of a small river. These amazing creatures were in winter quarters, no doubt, built in by the wonderful cement they make out of twigs and mud. There was no sign of them.

The three travellers checked here. Crossing when it was not frozen hard might lead to misfortune! Snow covered dangers. So they made their way inland up the side of the stream, and where it began to narrow into passable and frozen condition they came on the dead body of the great bull moose. Plainly he had shirked crossing low down; knowing the swamp a pitfall, he had made along the bank to cross and the pursuers had caught him.

Around the torn carcass were four wolves, dead and dying, broken and trampled. *They* were paid out anyway, and the ill wind for the moose was amazing advantage to the hungry party, for moose meat is excellent.

CHAPTER XVI

"Jootin Wetikoo!" [1]

[1] "Wind devil", Indian name for hurricane.

Without let or hindrance the three travellers reached the south end of Wollaston and came to the linking rivers. They were all changed in appearance, and anyone meeting them would have thought them older than they were.

All were very thin, and their faces seemed narrower and keener, rather pinched at the nostrils, while the eyes, both dark and light, were sunk a little, with a quiet steady gaze in them unlike the old laughing gaiety. They were beginning to realize now what the Long Trail meant, and how it feels to do without everything that makes life easy and comfortable. But don't imagine there was the least regret or fretfulness about their feeling. The most absorbing thought was to *do* it, and the second, a looking forward to being able to say in future that they *had* done it. It was not conceit either, but the love of achievement and pride in experience; all people worth their salt want to do things and also to feel they have done them.

The weather was getting colder and colder, but when they got to Deer Lake they were not sure if the lake ice would bear them; there is always the danger of uncertainty where the small rivers join—they may have swift currents, in which case there is danger of weak ice in the early weeks of winter.

So the three travellers pursued their plan of following the eastern shore. There was always the uncertainty of direction—that can be understood—and the possibility of getting lost altogether in this enormous world of forests and snow. The line of the lake, Deer Lake, was over a hundred miles long, and twenty-five to thirty miles wide! It was a case of "dogged does it"; moreover, they did not understand that by cutting across through the forests from the top of Deer Lake to Indian Lake they could save two sides of a triangle. Patiently they were starting on a trail that more than doubled the distance they had to go—that was because they had no guide but the rivers.

All through the second day the wind rose. It was not a wind they were used to, for in it there was a queer moaning wail. The snow had ceased, but the cold was so keen that towards late afternoon they decided to strike a little way inland for the benefit of shelter, to keep something between themselves and the wind. They held a little consultation, and then turning aside into the forest bent their course east, meaning to keep alongside—that is to say, parallel with—the lake but not close to it, while they hoped to come across some cleft or ravine—even a cave, as the hills were rocky. Few things are impossible in such a country.

Had they only known it they were now on the line for Indian Lake, just about one hundred and fifty miles south-east across country, while the way they had planned, due south to the lake end, and due east by the river would be quite a hundred miles more trail.

They had got meat—a heavy weight of it cut from the moose, already frozen as they carried it. It was the first they had eaten, and of course very good stuff, though the girls would far rather have had a nice lot of bacon and coffee. However, they were lucky to get it, and thankful. Presently they found what they looked for—a steep cleft in the hillside, densely grown with balsam clumps and underwood. All kinds of trees there were, too, of a more sheltering sort than firs, for instance, cedars and maple.

There was something so terrifying about this wind voice now, that all three of the travellers rejoiced when they opened up the ravine, and without hesitation they started the climb down the side, looking for a reasonable plateau or wide ledge with room for their small camp.

Some way down they found all they wanted, a level bit of ground with projecting bits of cliff to one side and overhanging masses of brushwood. Quite a snug habitation as times went! They had to clear the ground, of course. Bushes and snow. The first they cut away with the axe, the other they scraped aside with their snowshoes; then they started to seek dead wood, and Buzz found a dead young birch tree which he quickly felled and cut up.

In a wonderfully short time they were sitting round changing stockings while they thawed and cooked a moose steak. So hungry were they and so tired, that they did not talk much, only sat leaning against the cliff side watching the meat cook, and feeling very thankful for this lodge in the wilderness.

The wind was not quite so noticeable here *close*, but it seemed to scream in the tree tops with a most unearthly sound, and they could hear the swishing thud of masses of snow which fell from the tree tops down into the gorge. There was something uncanny about the night.

"There's one thing to be said," remarked Dolly to Ave, "this wind will blow our trail away, won't it—mix up all the snow."

"Why are you always thinking about our trail, Kid?" asked Buzz, who was rubbing that leg which never quite ceased to ache.

The girl laughed rather consciously.

"Well, I'd sooner we left none," she allowed.

"So would I," agreed Ave, who was looking from one side to the other and then above with a questioning expression. "What's that?" she asked, "don't you smell something?"

The Kid's little sharp nose was already scenting the air.

"H'm," she grunted. "I hear a noise like—like a machine —no, like a *cat*, it's up in the air."

"Shucks!" this from Buzz, who was reaching for the rifle. "Eyes left, Ave—look up at the rock—don't move. It's the meat he's after—we mustn't miss this, they're ugly customers."

Ave looked up sideways, and saw by the light of the fire a tawny yellow body crouched, flat head, flat furry ears, and the wild shine of strange yellow eyes as they gazed down at the coveted meat and the human beings by the fire. She knew it for a cougar, not common, and only found sometimes in the eastern forests. It was rather like a puma, but smaller; about the size of the beast that hunters in Alaska and the northern Rockies call a mountain lion. It is not so large as it looks, but most horribly savage.

It was purring and snarling in one unpleasant mixture of sound, opening and closing the powerful jaws as it scented the savoury meat. The fire, however, was daunting—it shifted its lissom long body, crawling forward and down.

Buzz rose, very quietly, on one knee, and raised the rifle to his shoulder. Instantly the cougar noted the movement, shifted its gaze to him, stared at him and opened its wicked mouth in a menacing growl. It was just what Buzz wanted, he fired plump into the open mouth and horrible red throat. There was a coughing screech, a leap, a plunge, and down into the ravine headlong went the tawny body. They heard a crash of bushes as it landed—somewhere. After that, silence but for the high-up wail of the wind.

"Well," said Dolly, "no one can say we have no adventures! That was a good shot, Buzz."

Charlie disclaimed "good shot", it was so close, he said, and the fire showed up the brute's head—one couldn't miss.

"He'd have jumped without waiting," remarked Ave, "if there'd been no fire. Just think! I vote we keep it up all night; probably this one had a mate somewhere, and all the beasts seem to be hungry now."

So they kept up the fire industriously, and ever the wind grew and grew till the air was full of that shriek and of blinding snow whirled from the miles of forest trees. It did not fall, it spun in one blinding veil. The trees bent, and swayed, sometimes splitting with a crash. All the air was full of rushing things, driftwood, boughs, dead leaves and snow, and the ravine seemed to be filling up.

Close under the rock face, deep in their bags, the three did not sleep much—the sense of furious movement and danger was upon them. They rested, they dozed fitfully too, but never seemed to lose consciousness of the position. At times the fire was nearly blown away; burning wood was whirled into the air and spun round in sparks; then they had to make it up, and set it going again strongly—the thought of more cougars was unpleasant.

At dawn the wind dropped, and Buzz went to the top to look about. When he came back he seemed rather serious.

"It's all different," he said, "awfully queer."

CHAPTER XVII

"Kistayetak!" [1]

[1] "Quick, quick!"

At first the three did not realize the implication. Perhaps Buzz did, in a way, but he was so cheery and hopeful always that he would not face expectation of trouble. He refused to see it.

They had been through one of the wind hurricanes that come up over the great wilds and make havoc, changing the face of things. Not a tornado, which smashes a strip—a path for itself perhaps a mile wide—across a country. Just the *Jootin Wetikoo*—the Indian Wind Devil—that creates havoc, changing the forests in a night to new appearance. And the trouble was, of course, that when the three Hanburys started off again after a breakfast of moose steak, they did not know which way to go.

It is true they had a little compass, but it was something of a toy, not very reliable, and the needle kept on jumping about in a disturbing manner! However, they decided not to go west hunting for the lake shore yet, but to round the top of the gorge and make straight south.

It was not unpleasant going—wind dropped and no snow falling, but a thermometer twenty below, which is very cold for autumn. They went on till midday stop, and felt rather

pleased with themselves on the whole. After eating, again moose and weak tea, they decided to go west and pick up the lake shore. One knew where one was, following that. The geography of it all was known to them roughly, they *wanted* the lake as a sure guide.

So they broke camp and went off west. For a couple of hours they drove along with no sound but the crunch-swish, crunch-swish of the snowshoes. Buzz was unusually quiet, the girls thought he was feeling bad aches from his leg, so they fell silent; it could not be helped, no one could do anything.

They were expecting to come out on the lake borders; surely they could not have got so far inland. It was disturbing rather.

Presently the Kid, seized with a sort of nervous anxiety, made a spurt and swung ahead. The others saw her pause, stop, and stand gazing. Then she turned and came back to them, her small face looking strained.

"There's a trail out by those firs," she said; "snowshoes, more than one person. Could it—it be——"

"No. He'd be alone." Averil understood her meaning. "But, Dolly, it's great! If we could join up with someone going east—let's look!"

All three of them raced on, and came to the broad trail of snowshoes, running apparently like three travellers in a line.

Silent and hopeful they followed the trail for perhaps ten minutes, and then Averil stopped short, bent down and examined the outside of her right shoe—as she stood upright again she said in a voice that shook a little:

"It's us. It's *our* trail. See, my strap has been dragging just a bit—there it is."

She pointed to the trail they followed. There was the smear of the dragging strap on the snow.

The Kid sat down promptly, and remained silent for minutes. Ave looked at her twin.

"The compass must be all wrong," she said.

"I rather guess it was," allowed her brother, "but—awful bad luck—I dropped it. Where, I haven't a notion. When we were looking at it, I just held it, see. An' I didn't put it back in my pocket, thinking we'd be needing it—suppose I forgot and opened my hand. Anyway when I thought about it, it was gone. I didn't let on, because it seemed as though we'd be sure to hit the lake any minute. Then it wouldn't matter—but now——"

Buzz sat down in oppressive silence and chafed his shin.

"You two must *not* sit, unless we camp," said Averil, assuming a sort of elder-sisterly air. "Look here, I vote we follow our own trail back to our ravine, and camp in shelter—dead wood plenty; then take a line west from the foot of the ravine—see now, Buzz, you *bet* there's a stream that goes to the lake. There always is in those gorges. Follow the

stream, see, and after that we needn't bother about the silly compass; we'll have our lakes."

"Ave, you're great," said Charlie, and his blue eyes shone as he looked round, all appearance of weariness fallen from him.

Dolly, too, beamed admiration and joy, and was off on the back trail in grand style. They absolutely refused to lament over that long weary day wasted in covering miles of snow for nothing.

They reached the ravine and made camp at the upper end, fear of the cougar's mate keeping them from the first camping-ground. There was not much moose meat left, only enough for breakfast—or two meals more if they rationed themselves—so the Kid suggested setting some wires that night in the hope of rabbits; there must be rabbits in the gorge. She said she'd go out and put some at once, while the others made camp. Though uncomplaining, Buzz was surely feeling his leg.

As the blown snow covered all runs or tracks, Dolly had to guess the possible rabbit paths and set her wires with judgment, feeling sure that both hares and rabbits must have haunts in the ravine and would leave it at the upper end. Rising after setting the last wire, and looking around into the shadows with courage, even though she was tired and a bit apprehensive, the Kid saw a trail. She was sure it was a trail —snowshoes—just the single trail.

With caution she went ahead a few yards and gazed down at the broad flat prints. Racket-shaped shoe—like her own—not the very long torpedo shape used by the men of the Barrens and great plains in the Arctic country.

Dolly stood and considered. At first she was only surprised, but presently a wave of uneasiness crossed her mind, because, owing to the "Jootin Wetikoo", all trails had been smoothed out completely. Therefore this one was as new as this morning! And who would be the one man to come this way—the way they three had worked up from the lake!

Of course the old uneasy fear woke, but she crushed it down. Absurd! It seemed so long since Gaston had persecuted them that he must be far away now. She declined to believe it could be the breed, and after all it might, of course, be anybody. Numbers of trappers must be in their districts now, for this was the trapping season; now till March.

So she went back on her own trail and found the fire going and a little camp as cosy as the terrible conditions would allow, in the broken ground among brushwood at the top of the ravine. As they ate sparingly Ave said:

"Did you see anything, Dolly? Any trouble?"

The Kid mentioned the snowshoe trail in a casual way.

"Plenty of trappers about," she added.

"Oh yes—sure," agreed Ave. "Wish we could cross a kind one. He'd give us some grub."

"Rabbits to-morrow," Dolly told her; "at least I hope so. Only bother is that their runs are covered. I set a regular maze of wires—one of them must catch something. Wish we could get a hare, though. Rabbits are so small."

By that you can understand that the poor Kid was hungry. That supper had amounted to about half what she wanted.

However, they were utterly tired, and soon crawled into their bags, thankful to lie still; the last thing Ave said was:

"Buzz, d'you know, if a cougar was to come and lick my face I sure believe I wouldn't stir! Nothing will make me move till morning."

Buzz said no word, he was asleep already.

After such a statement as that you would think dawn at earliest would see them moving, but the most startling thing that had happened on that adventurous trail was upon them.

It might have been an hour later, hardly more. The night was very dark over the white snow floor. Then it came.

Buzz was shaken by the shoulder, awoke and stared up into the dark hatchet face of an Indian bending over him.

The deep-set black eyes were full of something—a sort of urgency. Buzz stared without moving.

"Kistayetak," said the Indian in a guttural whisper.

Buzz knew this meant "quick" or "hurry", so he dragged himself from the pit of sleep, and called Ave—in a few moments they were all three on their feet trying to break camp in an orderly manner, but feeling as though they were in a nightmare.

The Indian helped, also he lifted at least half the kit.

"But look here," began Buzz, "why?"

"Kistayetak—black heart, *nipa hao*," said the man, and swept ahead.

CHAPTER XVIII

It was Kisamunito

The three followed their weird guide without hesitation, because they were instantly under the impression that he was the invisible friend who had helped them from the beginning. Obviously he would not talk, but you do not expect a ghost to talk, so it was not surprising.

They had to make their best efforts to keep up with him, but gradually warming to the work and waking more thoroughly they began to realize better what was happening.

They had crossed the top of the ravine and were, seemingly, going back, not the way they had chosen the previous morning. Into the forest and upward, hard work, and, of course, the Indian was tireless, they always seem to be that! No doubt he accommodated his pace to their powers, but to them it seemed very fast going indeed.

The ground was rough and rocky, the woods thicker, but their guide led them by a possible route and they began to realize that he was very likely confusing the trail by coming through a more difficult track.

As the first faint greyness and terrible cold of dawn began to creep through the immense loneliness, they arrived at a rocky ridge banking what had been a small river before it was frozen. It seemed to spring from the mountainous divide

higher up, and pass through this country of rocks and ridges, firs and cedars, going away towards the south—if it was the south!

The three were all feeling shaky and done. They had come about ten miles—a small matter to an Indian—but when you think of the travel the day before and many days, the poor supper, the sleepless night filled by intense exertion—it was not surprising.

The Indian looked back at them, then stooped down and slipped off his snowshoes.

"Right-o," muttered Buzz, "good chap," and the three followed the example, actually laughing a little in spite of weariness.

On foot they climbed among the rocks till they came to the mouth of a cave that looked out upon the deep cutting where the river ran. It was all grand and inexpressibly lonely, the great trees standing dark green among the clefts and on the slopes, and the range of the "divide" backing up higher and higher beyond.

A great surprise awaited them as one after the other they went into the cave, which was large, lofty at the rear, and with an uneven stone floor.

There was a long sledge—quite eight feet long—and attached to it, in harness of babiche or moose hide, five exceedingly savage-looking husky dogs. They reminded the girls of the wolves which had hunted the moose, only they were rather more broad and less tall. They had short pricked

ears, long bushy tails, and narrow oblique wicked-looking eyes; each and all had their long noses strapped into hide muzzles. Not tightly at all, but to keep them from barking or making any one of the fifty different kinds of noises that huskies indulge in. That of course is one of the marked differences between huskies and wolves. The latter cannot bark, and except for the hunting howl move in silence. The former bark, snarl, growl, and howl in every possible range of note. An Indian village or a settlement is hideous with dog noises.

But obviously these dogs were not allowed to make a sound. When the Indian entered they all sprang up, and began a sort of tumbling struggle among themselves, luckily unable to clinch it with fangs.

The man kicked them apart, and started at once to build a fire.

"*Joy!*" exclaimed Dolly fervently, "I'm dead. Buzz—dare I touch those dogs, or what?"

Buzz suggested they were muzzled.

"You'd be blind silly to touch them if they weren't," he added. "I've seen one snap a man's hand clean off. They're none too friendly."

The Indian had deer meat and sourdough bread, tea and beans. The joy of eating a good meal was great, and when it was over Buzz fished the tobacco tin out of their own thin kit and offered it.

"Huh," said the man, and filled his black pipe; then he smoked awhile in silence, and presently began to make short informative remarks, trying to explain matters a little in English.

"Me great Chief," he announced in his deep guttural voice; "Mistastin—white brother call Skeeter Joe—fetch 'um white sister along trail—that fellow black heart—"

Dolly could not resist a question, she wanted to know so desperately.

"Chief," she said, "did you follow all the way, make blaze on trees—by Athabasca Lake—and find canoe for us?"

Mistastin shook his head. He seemed in a way puzzled, yet there was a gleam of intelligence in his deep-set eyes.

"Kisamunito—that time," he said, and put his pipe back between his straight lips.

The Kid looked at Buzz.

"What does he mean, exactly?" she asked.

"*Kisamunito* means 'God of all things', I think," Buzz told her. "Jolly good answer, by the way; he doesn't mean to tell us who it is."

"No," put in Skeeter Joe placidly, "that so. Chief mak' no talk."

"Wise Chief," said Ave, smiling. "All same I do wish we knew, because that friend of ours was great. We'd have lost all our money and been nowhere, but for him."

"Huh," ejaculated Mistastin; "Lachine very black heart—him *Siwash* (savage). Red man have good heart—*not Siwash*. Better finish Lachine, mak' him *namma tao ookimow* (end of all things), but Government not lik'—red coat catch 'em."

The sense of this was plain. Skeeter Joe was informing them that Lachine deserved to die, and would certainly be finished off but for fear of the North-West Mounted Rifles, the splendid corps that kept order in the North and did not allow men to take the law into their own hands. If a man behaved like a *Siwash*, he was to be handed over to justice, but not killed out of hand by protesting Indians. The Red Men had begun to understand that and were more careful than in old days. They had great respect for the "Mounted", who were very good to them, and just.

After a bit Buzz asked when they were going on, and was rather astonished to hear, not till night.

Mistastin held up a long brown finger.

"One sleep," he said, "then mak' long way."

"You two had better roll up and sleep all you can, then," Buzz told the girls. "I shall, but I want to talk to the Chief. Wish I knew who put him on this job. It's downright *queer*."

"Who sent you to find us, Chief?" asked the Kid promptly. She wanted to make friends with the watchful dogs

and the Red Man.

Mistastin paused with the pipe stem between his fingers; then the faintest possible trace of amusement seemed to twitch the corner of his grim mouth.

"Kisamunito," he answered, speaking to Buzz, only the most casual glance flitting over Dolly. It is not etiquette for a Chief of any standing to notice a woman, such a matter being looked upon as weakness and only allowable in the "young men".

Plainly Skeeter Joe meant to keep his own counsel, so it was no use asking questions. All they knew was that he meant to help them, that they were to travel with this fine dog team and at night. Also, though there was trouble in the idea that Lachine still followed and that he was undoubtedly of "black heart", yet there was comfort in the knowledge that this man *knew*, and was out to help them through the business.

They rolled up and slept the whole morning. At midday came another meal of deer meat and flat, unleavened bread—evidently Mistastin was a first-class sourdough, making bread in *Saganash* or "white man" style.

About the end of the afternoon at the usual camping time the dogs were fed. Each dog received two dried white-fish, which were first thawed by the fire; their muzzles were loosened by Skeeter Joe, but though they leaped and snarled they could not make the usual riot.

Ave and the Kid were immensely interested in this; they had seen dogs, they had had to do with them in the mining camp of course, but it was some time ago, and now, meeting with them again brought great pleasure.

They quickly learnt that the names of the five were Polly, Greyboy, Yao, Marga, and Billee, but which was which would take a little time to learn. The curious thing was that they were not an Indian team; the names showed Settlement owners, so they had been lent, or bought.

When night closed down these were harnessed, and with Mistastin breaking trail and Buzz at the gee-pole the party swept off into the dark forest.

CHAPTER XIX

The Mink Persists

Now, if the three travellers had known what was afoot behind them they would not have felt quite the same joyous sense of security on that wild flight south-east through the forests.

Mistastin was taking them the direct route that they should have followed—one side of the triangle instead of two; they were making across valleys and divides, through miles of forest and over numerous rivers straight for Indian Lake and the Churchill River which was the end of their long trail.

When Gaston Lachine, robbed of the belt he had stolen, dug himself in, as it were, at the head of Wollaston Lake, and waited hidden in the wood at the point for the passing of the three travellers, he had made up his mind to stick at nothing any more, to have no scruples—he called them "scruples" hitherto, but they were simply fears of consequences—and if no easy way offered, to put these young people out of the way for good and all.

He was getting desperate when he tried to drown Buzz. But after the belt disappeared one day when he was bathing, he came to the conclusion that he was watched by the Kid. How else could anyone know that he wore it round his waist, and had put it beneath his heap of clothing for fear the paper

dollars should get wet and ruined? There was no one around, he believed himself to be scores of miles from human settlement. It was a bad shock, then, when the belt was spirited away, suddenly, after nearly a month of perfect security and loneliness which he had spent in trapping fur and watching always for the appearance of the three on the trail south.

When the frost came he had cached the canoe close under the windfall, expecting to follow on the ice trail. They came a little sooner than he expected, when he was in the woods hard by setting traps for the night.

Supposing they *had* made camp that evening when Buzz found the canoe, he would have caught them! But, as we know, they left the partly made fire and crossed straight away. Next day, when Gaston found his canoe was gone, he was helpless, could not get over to the east shore, because the mush ice would not bear!

Furiously he set to work and made a new canoe. By the time it was made he found the ice trail would bear him—so he was still more enraged. It was sheer *Hoo-doo*—as the Indians call bad luck—and put Lachine into a state of mind that boded ill for those he wanted to catch.

As a rule trappers and hunters—white, red, or both—are not willing to risk murder, because of the brilliant work of the Mounted Police, but Gaston was past that now. He wanted to be revenged as much as he wanted the money, so the state of things was serious indeed for the Hanburys—most fortunately they did not know.

When he got over he followed the way he knew they would go, but there was no trail, because the snow had covered the shoe-prints. He went on by the shore for a long way. Then remembered that the three might possibly have had the knowledge and address to take the trail across the forests to Indian Lake. So he went up and sought for evidence—going to and fro for miles and days.

Then came the "Jootin Wetikoo", and again all trails were wiped clean. For that fearful night Gaston had housed inside an enormous forest tree that was hollow. He saw the hole, realized space and hacked away bark enough to allow of climbing in—there he made a tiny round fire as the Indians do and slept the storm out.

He was now quite close to the three, but did not know it.

After the storm was over, he had crossed the top of the ravine and gone away south-east on the straight trail, at the end of the day coming on to their new snowshoe-prints. Almost too dark it was to discern, but at the very time Dolly happened on shoe-prints—Gaston's—when she was setting snares, Gaston, many miles south, came upon the track he wanted.

Then again he was baulked; the night was very dark as we know, and to pick up a trail like snowshoe-prints without light was impossible. No moon, no stars, and thick trees all around. So he camped, just about the hour that Skeeter Joe came to the ravine and removed his prey, going away north in that long tireless run that took them by a roundabout track to the cave on the rocky divide.

You might think that Mistastin and his party would leave a broad trail. So they would have, perhaps, but one came on behind them, a tall lithe young Indian with a grave hawk-like face, and this man, in the darkness, with infinite care obliterated the trail to the north-east, and at dawn, while the fugitives were asleep in the cave, he made another trail, leading by many confusing turns back again towards the shore of the lake and away down south.

At the time when the sledge was speeding away south-east, with Buzz at the gee or steering pole, the two girls racing alongside, lightened of their kit loads, fresh and strong with sleep and food, and Skeeter Joe breaking trail ahead of the team, Lachine was camping once more after a maddening day.

He had come back to the ravine on the trail made by mistake, found the trace of a camp, and tried up and down, round and across for hours. At length he hit on the false trail made by the hawk-faced Indian, and went away north for some hours, finally losing it among the rocks of the "divide".

You would think that this might be enough to choke off any hunter, but Gaston Lachine was so very like a wolverine! You cannot shake them off—if possible they are more persistent even than wolves. He camped again, sat over his fire with sullen eyes red with anger, ate what he had killed, slept till dawn, and then *again* took up the trail he believed was the true one, making for Indian Lake thirty-six hours behind the fugitives and starting from many miles north, of course, for he had been going back all the previous day.

For the three Hanburys that race was sheer joy. They had read and heard of the dog sledge trail at top speed, but never done it so far, and the utter joy of successful experience was theirs at last—and after so much hard work and privation borne with the most cheerful pluck. In three days they did what would have taken them certainly eight, perhaps ten, with porterage of the kit; while as they had no compass they would have been now at least a hundred and fifty miles farther west, making for the Missinnippi junction of the rivers and the turn east of the big stream—banks, banks all the way, with the roughness usual to a shore—while now they flew down miles of slopes, passed through miles of spruce forest over smooth snow, and camped at night on the pine needle carpet when it was scraped clear.

Dolly remembered that single trail that had startled her when she was setting snares! Also she did not forget for an instant the energy of Skeeter Joe in removing them from danger and his opinion of Lachine's "black heart"; but Charlie as usual had thrown anxiety aside, and Averil was so happy in seeing her beloved Buzz stronger and so interested in all that Mistastin could tell and show him about trails, traps, hunting, and fur—that both he and she had ceased to calculate chances about Gaston. To them he was out of it—for good!

When they swept down on Indian Lake it was a notable triumph, so few days and so many miles. Also, here was frozen water with a fair surface, no rapids, and a light freezing wind off-shore from the northern ice-fields. Ideal conditions they seemed to the young ones, also to the dogs. Skeeter Joe would sooner have had snow, at least enough of

it to smother the broad trail which was, of course, obvious to anyone used to the north.

They made a good many miles then, before choosing camp, which they made in shelter on the bank, well protected by dense undergrowth. There they started to cook the flesh of a small spotted deer that Mistastin had shot on the way down. Not much was left, but no one worried at that—was not Churchill River within easy reach? Two days, three days, and they would be on the home stream, making straight for the port.

CHAPTER XX

Averil's Dread

During that night the snow began to fall again and the short day seemed definitely shorter and darker. All daylight began to be subdued in tone to the sombre shadow of the bitter northern winter.

Never had the girls felt the cold as they did when breaking camp in the bitter dawn. It required an effort of will, a call upon all powers and resolution to face another day of strain and work. When you come to think of it, this very effort is what goes to make greatness, and splendid women!

The three young Hanburys, however, thought little about greatness. They were just getting through and trying to laugh over difficulties.

Averil said:

"Kid dear, I feel as though something is going to happen! But it can't, can it?"

"Well, when one comes to that, old girl, I suppose it can, any time, but honestly I don't see why it should. We're getting jolly near home as distances count in this big world," Dolly answered.

"Oh yes—yes, we are getting near," allowed Ave, smiling all over her thin brown face. "I'll keep on telling myself that all the time; perhaps it will drive off these nasty imaginings. I often wonder why one has these queer dreads when there is nothing to fear—nothing real."

At this point the talk was interrupted by Buzz shouting for Ave to come and see how grandly he was getting along in friendship with the dogs.

"Look," cried her twin, "first time old Yao allowed his nose to be touched. I've been trying to get at him every day—he's a bit of a savage; dare say someone has knocked him about. Skeeter's all right, but most of the trappers, let alone Indians, have no notion of treating dogs but clubbing them into matchwood. See now, Ave, he lets me wrinkle up his long nose, then you bat the end of it very gently with your other palm, like this—Hullo, old chap, made you sneeze, didn't it? Look, Ave, look at his eyes, he's pleased. Wish I could give him some fish, but old Skeeter only feeds them once a day, at night. Doesn't seem much."

Averil gave warm sympathy, but suggested that they had better be starting. Buzz did not notice that she cast uneasy glances at the wild shores ahead, at the overhanging ramparts of cliff, the massed green of the fir forests, and the bleak stretches of snow on the frozen lake. Over all was falling a veil of fine dry snow—falling like white dust.

After the morning meal, which revealed how short was the store of food, they broke camp and went off at a fine pace. It was only then that the Kid's keen eye observed a

change in Ave; she became more cheerful without effort; she seemed to cast aside the shadow and her brown eyes lost much of the uneasy expression of secret trouble.

Keeping the shore on their left hand the party sped onward, Buzz or Skeeter Joe ahead in turns to break trail, the two girls racing along by the sledge.

All the while it snowed in a fine fall, and the cold increased, but without wind. The branches of the spruce woods gradually whitened, and every bush along the wild banks got its load, till the last semblance of autumn disappeared and the fact that winter was upon them, early perhaps, but very real winter, was impressed on the minds of the three.

They made the usual halt at midday, scraped the snow aside, anchored the dogs by tipping the sledge up, and sheltered close under a low cliff of rock. Dead wood lay at hand, and in spite of snow there was a certain comfort. Just enough meat left for a small portion each. Skeeter Joe intimated his intention to get more that evening, so they made the best of it and drank tea thankfully.

There was no doubt that Averil was still haunted by her sense of impending evil. Dolly noticed that she listened every now and then, her head tilted, her eyes on the piled-up woods ashore. The open lake she did not fear; it offered security in its snow-covered field, but the banks with their deep ragged gorges, their mysterious shadowy creeks, and their dense belts of fir trees seemed to be keeping back something that haunted Averil. Again she rejoiced when they

started, for it appeared that she wanted most to keep on the move, to get on—on.

They had made many miles when the Indian chose the night camp where dense forest came close to the banks of a creek that cut its way between hills of fir trees. Here was shelter, and heaps of dead wood to hand—also a pine needle floor, balsam boughs, and hardly any snow beneath the green shade.

They cut a water hole, and the girls started to boil tea and cook beans, while Skeeter Joe went off up the banks of the creek for some unwary deer, young caribou, or even a hare, for forest creatures were not so scarce now as they would be when the hard times set in.

Buzz had been anxious to go too, but the girls begged him not, there being small doubt that supper would arrive quicker if Joe went alone, an Indian having the gift of moving as softly as a lynx when he does not intend to be heard.

It was perhaps twenty minutes before they noted any sound. Then one shot broke into the silence.

"Got him," rejoiced Buzz, and started off towards the wood, calling over his shoulder that he would help Skeeter bring the meat back.

The girls were pleased, and Dolly hurried to and fro picking up wood by the light of the jumping fire—they would need a good pile for the cooking and for night. Averil stood still, her face turned towards the direction in which her

twin had disappeared. She realized two things at that moment: her heart was beating like a trip-hammer—she could hardly breathe, indeed, from sheer nervousness—and she knew, actually felt certain, that something awful had happened and the dread of these last days was taking shape.

How long she stood so neither girl counted. The Kid was just about to call to her when they heard a cracking of twigs, and their brother burst from the wood and bounded forward.

"You've got some water, right," he said in a flurried way. "Awful bad luck, Ave—poor old Skeeter's wounded. I'm pretty sure he's not *dead*—but if we don't do something pretty quick he might go out——"

"Why—why——" began Dolly.

"Oh, shut up, Kid. Don't clamour questions. I don't know a thing except that he's lying on the ground with blood on his head. His gun's close by him, so he may have had an accident and hurt himself. Come on, Ave, look alive, bring some water in the kettle—we'll wash it and see how bad it is, and wake him up. It *is* rotten luck, but I'm sure he's not dead."

As Buzz seized a pan Ave rushed to the kit for a bandage.

"Stay here, Kid," she cried over her shoulder as she ran after Buzz. "I'll coo-ee if we want you," and in a few seconds the forest swallowed them both.

Dolly in her turn stood still and listened. She was shocked, certainly, but not afraid, the conclusion she arrived at being that Joe had tripped over some buried root and the

rifle—which belonged to Buzz—had gone off and hurt him —not dangerously, she prayed.

Her active mind reviewed chances, and she quickly decided that Indians were proverbially difficult to kill, that he would be well enough to walk back directly, and that if not, Buzz could take the sled along and carry him on it. Equally possible was the idea that they could put him on the sled next day rolled in the blankets, and get off on the trail without delay. Why not? Buzz could manage the dogs. Food? Oh, they'd get that somehow; besides, the dogs' dried fish would serve; had they not been hungry before?

A rush of thoughts passed through the Kid's busy mind, and her glance lighted on the dogs. Their loose muzzles of babiche prevented them from barking, but each and all of them were standing in an attitude of angry attention, pointed ears alert, red eyes glaring, fangs visible, and as they weaved to and fro tangling the harness over one another they all looked across the little creek at the shadows that the forest brought to the edge of the frozen water. Dolly looked in the same direction, and her heart seemed to freeze as cold as the creek.

CHAPTER XXI

The Blow Falls

As Ave looked back before she plunged into the wood behind her twin, she gathered a distinct picture of her sister standing very alert and capable in the firelight, her bright curls clustering from beneath the close cap and her keen little face attentive. She was fingering the long clasp-knife which she had taken out from her shirt pocket inside when they heard Buzz come, and supposed he was bringing meat. All three of them carried those clasp-knives—the most useful article in the world when you live on the trail or in the wilds.

Averil was conscious at that instant, in spite of the excitement and anxiety, of a big wave of love for that plucky little sister, and a moment after an acute wish that she had not been left behind at the camp.

"Back in a few minutes, we *must*," rushed through the elder girl's mind, and then she raced on after her brother.

Buzz was kneeling by the prostrate body of Skeeter Joe, who lay on the ground unconscious, with blood staining the snow-sprinkled moss under his head. Obviously the wound was in his head, and as far as the girl could judge there was no other wound.

As before said, Averil was a good nurse, with some knowledge of first aid, and so she quickly concentrated on

the head trouble. Skeeter Joe wore a bead-embroidered headband in which were stuck three eagle's feathers; his black hair was thick and straight. After cautious bathing Ave found a big swelling, a terrific bruise, and on it a red scar; sitting on her heels she looked up at Buzz, who leaned over anxiously.

"He'll be all right—see, Buzz. You bet a bullet glanced off a tree trunk and hit him a sort of skidding shot—you know, what they call a ricochet. He's got a touch of concussion but he'll be all right in a little while. I say, we've got something to be glad about."

Her large eyes shone with pleasure.

"We sure have, old girl, but who d'you suppose tried to shoot him?"

"Oh!" gasped the girl. "Oh, Buzz—that's bad! I never thought——" her face grew pale as milk.

"Some other Indian," suggested Charlie in his hopeful voice. "Nobody else about. You see, these chaps have all sorts of private grudges with other tribes, always trying to go one better—awfully jealous and all that. It's all right, Ave."

"Try to find out where it came from," urged the girl. "I'll see if I can get some tea down his throat."

Even the keen eyes of Buzz found difficulty in discovering the graze on a slender spruce bole. When he did he called his sister in a low voice, and she, joining him at once, whispered as she saw:

"Buzz, the bullet came from over the creek—look, it came through the wood and that's why it hit the tree trunk and glanced off. Then the man—his enemy——"

"Yes, he was over there—across the stream. Expect he's gone now he thinks he's done for poor old Skeeter! Cowardly brute! Well, he'll get all right within a day or two. Ave, did you make him swallow any tea?"

"I think so." Ave's attention wandered as she stood trying to pierce the dusk, while the cold seemed to bite into her body and her heart to stop beating. She tried to concentrate on Joe's condition, but couldn't—there might be something worse! Suddenly she went on:

"Buzz, hadn't we better get the sled? We can get him on to it, pull him to the camp, and make him a balsam bed. And, look here, don't bring the dogs. You run back, tie up the dogs, and bring the sled with a blanket. We can pull it home more smoothly; the dogs are sure to jump around or fight or something. We mustn't shake Skeeter, you see. But do hurry."

Buzz agreed at once, but he went back to look at the Indian and lift him on to some moss they collected. Altogether minutes passed quickly, and they had been in the wood quite three-quarters of an hour before he gathered up Skeeter's gun and went off.

It was then that Averil found the little dead deer, and saw that the Indian had thrown his long knife—the one he always wore in his belt, a sharp weapon with a well-balanced handle. Hidden back of a pine trunk, he had cast the knife

and caught the little creature in the neck. Stepping out to fetch it he had been shot.

She considered this, and saw that this killer, whoever he was, had not come across to get the meat, so perhaps he was gone away for good! That was cheering. She tried her hardest to think into this trouble a spirit of hopefulness such as the Kid would have started.

"First and foremost, no despair," murmured Ave, and lifted poor Skeeter's black head to give him a few drops more of the tea, now cold.

Very soon after that she heard footsteps crashing recklessly through the wood. Someone was coming regardless of caution or possible enemies, and, she realized, *without* the sled. She sprang to her feet and stared into the shadows.

Her brother came in sight with the same hurry as he had burst on them before. Poor old Buzz had no notion of real caution when he was startled out of his usual easy-going enjoyment of life, so he came along like the moose bull with wolves after it!

"Ave, Ave—" he almost choked over the name, "I—we ____"

"What, Buzz?" demanded the girl, bracing herself for bad news.

"She's *gone*!" His hands were shaking as he laid them on Averil's slim shoulders.

"*She!*"

"The Kid—Dolly."

"Gone!" Averil gasped the word with a little wail, and then, "Charlie, you're *sure*?"

The boy looked into her eyes and nodded; he was biting his lips, but his expression seemed to stiffen into the face of an older man.

"I've got to pull my gun on somebody for this," he said.

There was silence for full a minute; then Averil remarked:

"You didn't bring the sled?"

"Couldn't. It's gone, and the five dogs and the sack of fish and the kit—all we had, every bean, except the little kettle and the pan you got over here, and the guns with us."

"Oh," murmured Ave dully, then she turned her head at a sound from the unconscious Indian, and they saw him slowly raise himself on his elbow, and stare about with dull questioning glances.

"Oh!" said Ave again in rather a different voice.

"Something to the good," suggested Buzz. "I say, old girl, perhaps he can get on his feet! Give him a drink of tea."

It was a long job, and certainly an hour passed before the three came into the deserted camp and faced the full desolation of this awful blow.

Like all fine healthy Indians, Skeeter Joe was as tough as a wolf, made of leather and steel, in fact, with the nine lives of a wild cat.

Therefore all was not despair, as Buzz impressed on silent Averil. Most men would have been unconscious for days, and helpless for more days. Skeeter slept by the fire like a bear under snow, with neither blanket nor bag! The two who could not sleep sat close together conferring in whispers.

Another advantage was that they had meat, a big supper of cooked deer meat. That was much. And they had the kettle in which they boiled water to drink. Hot water was not tea, but it was something.

They kept the fire up and waited all through that awful night, suggesting thoughts—bad or good—to one another.

"He'll be all right in two days," from Buzz.

"Two *days*," echoed despairingly by his sister, and then as though ashamed of crushing out his hope: "Buzz, shall we see the trail?" She was thinking of the snow.

"We shan't; Skeeter will."

Averil considered this in silence, then she said:

"I believe it will be an easy trail."

"Why?"

"Because I'm sure it's that mink Lachine, and he'll *want* us to follow, so that he can pick us all off and get our belts. That's what he's after, the money and just to pay us out."

"But Skeeter?" suggested Buzz.

"Oh, don't you see he thinks he's killed Skeeter; he's counting on us two picking up the trail alone."

CHAPTER XXII

Beware the Broad Trail!

Skeeter Joe said nothing and did nothing for thirty-six hours from the time he was hit.

He simply slept, roused up to eat, drink hot water, and sleep again. Averil comforted herself with this—at first it was stupor, his eyes were glazed and he noticed nothing, but after one whole day she realized that he saw and understood, also that he *slept*, which was a different thing from lying unconscious.

The horror of it was that they could do nothing but wait and watch the snow fall. They collected quantities of dead wood, boughs, and grey moss which is high, thick, and springy. It is the stuff the caribou eat in winter, and the colder the atmosphere the more it grows. Working hard was their only comfort, and by doing it they made quite a decent camp, enclosed in snow walls, with beds of moss and boughs.

Not many of us would consider such a sleeping-place comfortable, or warm, with nothing to eat but deer-meat without beans or flap-jacks, and not even tea! But the twins were getting very tough nowadays, and grateful for anything. Besides, one thought superseded every other—the Kid. Who could worry about food while she might be in the hands of a deadly enemy?

That second night the twins slept because they were worn out. In the grey dawn Averil sprang up, tense with nervous fright at a sound, to find Skeeter Joe making up the fire. He looked much as usual, except for an added haggardness of expression. He was gaunt, and the bandage round his head made him the more battered in appearance; otherwise he was the same silent efficient Skeeter.

"Huh," he said, when Buzz impressed on him that all was stolen, "that Lachine very bad heart."

The twins looked at one another, Charlie uncertain, rather surprised still—Averil with a flash of her tired eyes.

"I *felt* it!" she gasped.

"That Lachine, he finish soon, one day," announced the Indian gloomily. "Mistastin he great chief—he shoot—that finish."

This was a very distinct threat of vengeance. "Mistastin" was, of course, the Skeeter's own name in his tribe. It seemed that he knew who had shot at him, and an Indian never forgives; his tribe would look down on him unless he punished the aggressor.

It was some comfort to Averil to realize that Skeeter was as fiercely angry as an Indian could be. He would never fail them *now*. So far he had apparently been acting under the direction of someone else, but since his wound he added personal bitterness—dreadful perhaps, but it might help them to find Dolly.

After they had eaten—they had to thaw the meat first, by the way—the twins made small packs of what was left with the kettle and cooking pan. While they did this Skeeter went off, merely intimating that he would come back soon. And in about an hour he came.

"That fellow mak' 'em trail Bald Mountain," he announced in a decisive manner. "Hide out up there Moakwa Gorge. Bad place."

"*Moakwa* means mad," explained Buzz aside; "the Indians think it's haunted or some bally rubbish. Perhaps he wants to frighten us away."

"Who—Lachine? Of course not," urged Ave. "I'm just positive that he means us two to follow and thinks Skeeter is killed. He wants to get us right away into some awful place and he took Dolly as a sort of bait. I'm *certain* of that."

The Indian, standing motionless and grim, turned his deep-set eyes gravely on Ave. She had spoken with gestures of her hands expressive of what she wanted to enforce. He understood.

"That so," he agreed and grunted approvingly; "trail mak' 'em strong. This fellow think catch 'em white brother too. Mistastin, he put out. White brother come on fetch little white sister. Bad heart, that fellow—he pijacker."

"You bet," growled Charlie, "he's a pijacker and a few other things I could mention. Well, Skeeter, what about it? I suppose we pick up this coach and four trail and run down Lachine quick as we can?"

A faint look of amusement seemed to pass across the dark seamed face of Mistastin.

"Not at all cute that way," he said in a tolerant tone. "White brother come, Lachine he shoot, soon kill that way. Skeeter's mak 'em trail small—snowshoe rabbit trail! Lachine look back, he see only big trail, then Mistastin finish."

It was all very clear, the Indian's plan, and Averil, with a sudden rush of gratitude to the plucky man who had ignored his own pain and weakness so completely, said warmly:

"Chief, you're very clever."

Skeeter, gazing over the snowfield of the lake with grave eyes, remarked:

"Huh! Mistastin he very big chief." That was the Indian all over, vain and simple, with all the natural cunning of a forest creature.

Presently he showed them the start of Lachine's trail and it was obvious even to them—so of course what Charlie had called "coach and four" to Skeeter Joe.

Falling snow had obliterated the track of sled dogs and shoes, of course, but underbrush had been trampled and way broken through the wood on the opposite shore of the creek. The trail struck inland after passing out of the fir covers, and away back towards the divide they had so lately come from with such joyous security. There, away to the north, were piled up the fir-clad slopes, the precipitous cliffs and the

great gorges of the mountains. Into those wild places had the Kid been carried off—and they were nearly two days behind!

All that day they travelled, following the lead of Skeeter, who held on in a marvellous manner, considering what he had been through. In the evening their meat gave out but they dared not fire a shot, not knowing how close they might be to the pursued. They did not mean to give Lachine the least idea of their whereabouts, for the scheme of the Indian was to make a detour and come down on his camp from the north. Certainly he had not made that very obvious trail without a reason.

As they dared not fire a shot Mistastin undertook to get something, and disappeared into the ravine, carrying with him a long slip of babiche made into a running noose at the end. The wires were gone with the rest of the kit, and they had only the ammunition carried in their belts. This shows how serious the position was!

Averil was very silent; she was facing the limit of anxiety, and she was older in mind than her twin. But if she felt more keenly, she had a very living faith. From somewhere, somehow, help would come, she believed, as she gathered dead wood and scraped snow around to help shelter their tiny camp from the wind. Her twin wandered away collecting wood, and on the anxious look-out for small game of any kind, hoping against probability that he might bring food into the camp before the Indian found it.

"I'd like to score off old Skeeter," thought Buzz, as he grinned a cheerful smile.

Averil was not cold, and, as we have said, she was faithful, but often as she laboured her lips quivered and a tear squeezed from under her lids and froze on her pale cheeks. It was so awful—*awful*—to think of the Kid suffering alone and in the hands of such a soulless fiend as Lachine the Breed. Averil called up that mind picture of her standing by the fire fingering the knife. Had she been able to keep that knife and her little automatic? If she *had*!

"Dolly's the cleverest of us three," thought Ave. "She's a little wonder. She always was so cute."

Then the thought of their mysterious guardian came back. Not for the first time, but till now she had hardly had the courage to count on that queer mystery.

"If he only knows," sighed Averil; her fear was that when they were given in charge of Mistastin, the Haunter had departed into the wilds for good, thinking they were safe on the road to Churchill. "He'd sure help if he *knows*, but he'll expect Skeeter Joe to do his job. Sure as fate Skeeter knows something and it's been a plan between them—but he went when the Indian came along. He's not been around since. Oh dear!"

As she murmured the last "Oh dear!" with a little sob in her tired voice, she crouched down by the small round fire set between stones and kept *very* tiny like an Indian's cooking fire. Nothing to cook yet, so she warmed herself as well as she was able and boiled snow water.

Suddenly she was conscious of being watched. Then she thought she heard the snap of a dead twig as though stepped on.

It might be Mistastin returning, or Buzz, but surely neither of them would be so supremely cautious when they knew she was alone in the camp!

CHAPTER XXIII

"I'd Swear it's a Lie"

Averil kept her wits, and though her heart made quick thumps that seemed to shake her, she moved her head in a perfectly natural manner, glancing over one shoulder, then the other, into the shadows that seemed so menacing.

Conscious of something near with every nerve in her sensitive frame, the thought flashed through Averil's mind that it might be a dangerous animal ready to spring, seeing her humped up by the fire. A lynx, a catamount—that is one of the immense wild cats that French-Canadians call a "Lucifee"—a wolf, worse even, a puma, though they were rarer on this Indian Lake district. Here was a danger they had not thought of, a very real one too! She began piling more wood on the fire. If the creature saw the fire it would probably keep its distance.

As this last conviction recurred to Averil she chose out a biggish dead branch, and pushed it into the fire. Here was a weapon to hand; she had only to light up the dry twigs of it and beat the flame about, and no animal would approach; from a wild cat to a bull moose it would fly.

The girl's heart ceased to beat as she remembered this fact; then, in a moment began to pump again as she thought of one creature that did not fear flames—*man!* Why should it not be Lachine himself?

Averil clenched her fingers on the hard wood. Well, suppose it should be the detestable "breed"? Dolly would be near—there was some comfort in that.

By this time she was screwed up—wound up to a pitch of tension. She threw more sticks on the fire, and turned her gaze straight upon the broken ground behind, where the steep hill of the ravine made a wall broken by rocks and clothed in patches of underbrush, balsam and berry bushes.

Motionless she gazed carefully along, reaching the shadows beneath overhanging snow-laden branches, and suddenly met the gaze of two spots of green light. They were the distance apart that *eyes* would be set in the head of an animal, and as she met the curious eager stare she was no longer afraid. Wolves were not pleasant companions, but this one would not attack her, she felt certain.

As she looked, the eyes disappeared, and presently, her own sight becoming used to the shape of the bushes, she was sure that a body was moving through the undergrowth. It slipped along, and in a few minutes she became aware of it close against a rock, lower down and still shifting nearer to her and the fire. She held her branch in the flame, and watched, much more interested than frightened.

Soon a grey slinking shape appeared lower down still, and a moment after had slid behind her piled-up snow wall. It was actually coming down to the camp.

With her branch snapping sparks in the fire and her automatic "pulled", as the Frontiersmen say of a drawn

pistol, Averil waited, listening with all her hearing.

The next surprise was a shock as well. A long grey head rose from behind the snow barrier, then the shoulders, and a wolf reared itself up above the bank, standing with one foot lifted, sharp ears pricked forward, and those strange green eyes fixed on Averil herself. No fang was shown, and to the girl it appeared as though the animal *asked* to be allowed to approach the fire.

"Come then—hey? Come then, old thing!" invited Ave in a whisper, and she laid down the half-consumed branch, while she made little sounds of encouragement.

The wolf slid over the snow bank, landed within, and came crawling around the fire towards Ave. Then she understood. Here was no wild wolf, but one of Mistastin's sled husky dogs, which, the girl did not know, as she had never yet been able to distinguish them when they were apart as they were very much alike, and all with their roughest winter coats.

As the poor beast crept nearer, Averil saw that it had part of the harness still on the collar, trailing. It looked terribly gaunt and there were dark patches on the matted hair of its coat. Very gently she made friends, the dog crouching close to the ground as she stroked its back. She dared not touch the head, as you never know with huskies, they snap with such lightning movement.

"No grub yet, poor boy," murmured Averil.

She knew the beast was half starved; she could see the heart beat in the sides of it where the ribs showed. Also she could see that it had been fearfully beaten and kicked. Yet she had no food to give and the only thing she could think of to offer was some water, slightly warm. She wanted to wash the wounds, but could not, as she had no rag, or anything to wash with.

However, the dog seemed contented to feel the fire and to drink. It lay still, long muzzle on paws, and stared at the flames with blinking green eyes, ears very alert indeed.

Before Averil heard a sound, those pricked ears warned her of someone coming, and she understood also by the way the dog behaved that no enemy was at hand.

Buzz appeared, in his hand a hare he had killed, his triumph so great that Averil had to "hush" his joyful announcement.

"Here's *luck*, old girl. I came on the thing all in a moment, and it was so startled that it just sat and crouched. I didn't waste a shot, but hit it over the head."

"Poor hare," murmured Ave. She never could get over her dislike of these killings.

"Well, you're hungry just about, aren't you?—I say, Ave, what you got there? One of the dogs? My word, this is news for the Skeeter! Which is it?"

Averil said she wasn't sure. "You'll know," she added.

Buzz sat down on his heels and began coaxing the dog. In a minute he exclaimed "*Shucks!*" and before his sister could get out her question as to why he was surprised, he showed her a bit of birch bark attached to the husky's collar and half hidden in the rough coat of his chest. The slip of bark had a hole bored through it big enough to pass a scrap of babiche which was attached to the collar.

The boy unloosed this and turned it about in the firelight. On the smooth inside was burned—probably with a hot tool of some sort, or a piece of wire, maybe even charred stick—a few untidy words.

"Shack up devil's gorge, help—Kid."

"I *say*," gasped Buzz. "Ave, she's sent the dog! Look here, it's plain as Bald Mountain. See how she cut through the trace? You bet Lachine left her alone and she managed to get these words on to the bark and cut the dog loose—just on the chance that the poor brute might pick up our trail, as he might, considering he's the Skeeter's dog and is bound to be jolly hungry. Well, how's that for luck? I call it *great*. Where's the Devil's Gorge? Mistastin will sure know, anyway."

At first Averil gave a little sob of joy; she almost stroked the bark, holding it as though it were part of poor Dolly; she murmured "Oh, darling Kid," under her breath, and gazed fixedly at the scrawl of words.

Then, suddenly the joyful impulse left her, and her face, grown so much thinner in two days, took on a more intense

look.

"Buzz," she said, "I don't believe Dolly wrote this."

"You *don't*! Why, Ave, who would, then?" Her brother's tone was amazed.

"Why, Lachine."

"What for? Why should he tell us where the Kid is?"

"He tells us the name of a place he wants to draw us to. It doesn't follow Dolly is there. *She* may be *dead*—" Averil blurted out almost wildly. She was receiving shock after shock in her exhausted state, and a feeling that she must scream or faint kept on gripping her.

Buzz grunted, rubbed his face all over with his mittened hand as though to clear away cobwebs—then he said:

"Seems rather roundabout, don't you think?"

"No. Skeeter declares he made the trail a staring track to catch us. Why shouldn't he try this trick? Well, we were taken in first off. *I* was. You are now. I'd swear it's a lie," whispered poor Ave miserably.

CHAPTER XXIV

From the Devil's Gorge

The two were so intent on this question that they never saw Skeeter Joe rise like a shade from the rocks below and enter the circle of firelight.

"Huh!" greeted the Indian softly, and if the Hanburys had not been entirely absorbed they must have noticed the slightest possible twist of amusement at the corner of Mistastin's grim mouth, as though he said "nice fashion to keep guard!" It certainly was inadequate. In that moment he had seen the dog, as he saw everything.

"Pollee," he announced in his deep guttural tone. "Huh! Lachine he cut 'em loose. That so."

Buzz stood up, holding the bit of birch bark.

"See here, Skeeter," he urged, pointing to the black scrawl. "It's not Lachine. It's my sister. She wrote this, here's her name to it. She says: 'Shack up devil's gorge, help—Kid.' Kid is what we call her for short—you know. Well, she writes this and ties it on the husky, hoping the dog will pick up our trail. It's jolly plain, don't you think?"

The Indian took the bit of bark, felt it all over, smelled it, touched it with his tongue, examined the writing with infinite

care, and finally placed the thing within the pocket on his shirt.

"Skeeter mak' long think," he announced, and instantly began to cut up the carcass of the young caribou he had flung to the ground as he entered the camp. It had been caught by his babiche noose, silently choked, and carried back without a sound. Certainly Mistastin was an A1 scout, what the trappers call a "hi-yu-top-chief", as slippery as a wolverine, and shrewd as "old man beaver".

Averil wondered what he really thought. But she dared not ask, as she objected to being snubbed by an Indian, and knew Skeeter would simply ignore a question from her! Her instinct suggested that he was of her own way of thinking, but she was keen to know on what grounds. Her own opinion was not founded on reason, it was just one of her "feelings".

That was an excellent supper. All they longed for was *bread*. No one knows how difficult it becomes after a while to eat just meat only, without bread or beans—other things would be rare as gold, of course. Nevertheless they were all so hungry and the cold was so bitter, that it was doubtful if they had the least desire to grumble this time.

Charlie's hare was cooked quickest, but what with Mistastin and Polly the husky dog, and the appetite of Buzz himself, there would not have been enough to satisfy the whole party without the caribou steaks that followed.

When all had finished, Averil returned to the charge, speaking to her brother, and the pith of it all was that she

wanted to go off at once, that night, without sleep or rest. She suggested that they obliterate all trace of their fire, carry the meat cut up, and go off in search of the Devil's Gorge to see for themselves who sent the message.

"Even if it's Lachine, we shall find *him*," urged Averil. "We are three, he is one. We've got fire-arms! Considering he thinks that Skeeter is killed it would be an extra shock. *Do*, Buzz, do! Why not! I couldn't rest thinking it's our dear old Kid praying for us to come—while supposing it's Lachine and she—she is—is not there, poor little soul, we could take him prisoner, and carry him to Churchill to pay for her murder. We are witnesses."

Averil's big eyes, sunk in her head with the long privations of this strange trail, seemed to flame at her brother as she put her opinion before him. And Buzz was shaken. He looked grim and anxious as he turned a questioning gaze on the Indian, who was chewing a bit of tobacco because he thought it unwise to smoke.

"What about it, Joe?" asked Buzz uneasily.

Mistastin took out the bit of bark, looked at it again in a more cursory manner, and then answered:

"No Kid mak' writing. That Lachine he very bad heart. He say 'Mak' writing this away—that *Saganash*[1] come along quick, fetch little white sister. Then catch 'em all same everyone.' That so. Lachine he mak' write on bark."

[1] White man.

Buzz hesitated. It was entirely against his opinion. You see Buzz always took evidence on the plain face of things. The obvious was to him the truth. Here was a piece of bark written on, and signed 'Kid', therefore it appeared to him that it must be what was written!

"Look here, Chief," he said, after a respectful pause, "I'd like to know *why* you think it's Gaston Lachine. Seems to me a bit roundabout. Of course I can see *now* that Gaston would stick at nothing. He's proved himself the rottenest scum in the North and only fit for bait in wolf traps, but honestly I don't quite see how you nail it to him."

Mistastin tapped the bit of bark with one long brown finger.

"Lachine he smoke tabac he call shag, when he mak' write so he smoke—same time. That shag he put 'em on birch bark—very warm that—he so strong mak' *feel*—" and the Indian touched the tip of his tongue with his finger. "Little white sister she no mak' smoke like squaw. No shag there. Lachine he fix bark on Pollee—she collar mak' em smell too. All shag. Mistastin Great Chief, he wise scout, find smell all time. That Kid she mak' shag not once."

Averil bent her head low. She felt a wild desire to giggle till she wept! The bare idea that little Dolly could "mak' shag" seemed so utterly incongruous and mad at that terrible moment. Yet, funny as Skeeter's description was, the cleverness of it and his shrewd powers of scent convinced Buzz once for all. He knew Mistastin could not be wrong on

such a point; his powers of scent probably equalled those of a trained bloodhound.

There was a pause again, then he said:

"What you say *goes*, Chief. Well—and about our next move, then? What's your notion?"

"We mak' one sleep. Much better," answered the Indian.

Averil drew in her breath and murmured:

"*Oh*, Buzz!"

"I know, old girl, but truly Skeeter knows his job. He's sure a crackerjack on forest dodges; besides, we got to remember he's only just on his feet. He ought to get sleep and a good breakfast."

Averil nodded drearily. Every word was true, but she was aching to get to Dolly—sitting still was torture.

"There's another thing," continued Buzz in a gentle voice. He saw her suffering and was desperately sorry for her. "Don't you think it's fairly likely that Lachine might *show* up in his anxiety to catch us two, as well as Dolly? When he sees we don't jump at his bark trick he may think Polly's dead, or something, and come looking for her, or us, or something. You *bet* your bottom dollar we win this game, Ave. I've a hunch we're going to finish Gaston Lachine."

The Indian, making a bed of balsam boughs and moss, glanced up at the boy.

"Yes," he said distinctly, "Lachine, he *finish*."

Then he curled up feet to the fire, and slept like a dog.

Brother and sister sat close together, feeding the red-hot heap of embers with sticks, unable to sleep, at least in the case of Averil, who kept on thinking of new questions—as one does when desperately anxious—like, Why didn't we do this or that? or, I wish we'd asked Skeeter such and such things. It was cruel to awaken the Indian, who slept the sleep of exhaustion really, though he had never admitted weakness, so she had to content herself with Buzz.

"Charlie, where on earth is this Devil's Gorge? What does it mean—why 'devil's'?"

Buzz said he'd heard of the place from time to time, but forgotten it till now. It was the Moakwa gorge on the "divide" of which Bald Mountain was a feature. They were on the "divide" now, he supposed.

"What is 'Moakwa' then?" asked Ave; "does it mean 'devil'?"

"Rather worse, I've a notion," answered Buzz sleepily. "The Indians are awfully keen on haunted places—in a mortal terror of them. A 'Moakwa' is a *mad* devil, a sort of lunatic ghost that makes fearful noises and keeps folk away from a district when he haunts it."

"Everything seems to be getting more and more dreadful," murmured poor Ave sorrowfully.

Presently, leaning against one another, the twins slept fitfully till dawn.

CHAPTER XXV

The Kid

A person might argue that when the Kid stood frozen with fear at the something she saw across the little creek, it would have been easy for her to take to her heels and bolt after the twins. At any rate she could have rushed into the woods on their trail.

But the fact was that she was covered by a Winchester rifle, in which case you simply have to put your hands up, if you wish to remain alive. It is one of the laws of life in the wilds where a certain kind of character often has power—for a time!

The short square figure that came out of the brushwood and levelled his rifle on her was not one to be defied.

Here was Gaston Lachine, in his worst mood, and she alone with the dogs and the fire! She knew that Mistastin had just been shot, perhaps killed. She could not reach the other two without risking her life, while there was in Dolly Hanbury's nature a sort of unquenchable pluck and faith in herself. Her impulse was not to run, but to face it out and beat Lachine by clever trickery.

That was a fine idea, but as a matter of fact the Kid was really too young to understand how utterly bad and how entirely apart from human honour this man was! Instinctively

she hated and dreaded him, but she was ready to pit her wits against his and believe she might get the better of him—which was not wise.

She thought of freeing all the dogs and trying to set them at the man. That was a fleeting impulse, her sense told her in a second it would be futile. Lachine was not the kind to fear huskies; he would shoot them, or kick them into insensibility; this trapper would stick at no cruelty where animals were concerned.

Her own little automatic and the knife on its cord would be toys, unless close quarters gave her a chance to defend herself. They were better hidden away at present, so she stood, her arms up, trying to look as careless as possible.

She looked fearless anyway, simply because, bad as the position seemed, she was *not* afraid.

Lachine came across the ice, still keeping her covered, kicked at the snarling, cringing dogs as he passed, and did the last thing the Kid expected. Indeed she knew nothing about it at all, because he simply struck her a blow on the side of her head that knocked her unconscious—without warning or even a word—so there was an end of any scheme or hope of trickery, any expectation she might have had of spinning out the minutes till the others came back!

All the girl knew was Lachine's wicked face, then a shock and stars! After that, merciful blackness and profound silence.

How long this lasted, of course, she could not know. She awoke with a horrible headache, and a sense of being frozen solid from her neck to her ankles. She could just move her aching head, but so far could not think with it.

Minutes went by and slowly she began to find out things about herself, one at a time, and to reason about them and piece them together.

She was being shaken and bumped, yet she could not move. She was lying flat on something, was rolled in a blanket and tied down with babiche cords. This knowledge came by degrees, and she realized that she was fastened on the sledge among the food bags and the kit—everything, in fact, that belonged to the three of them, and it was characteristic of Dolly that her first reasoning thought was:

"What will poor Ave do without her blanket? And the beans, and tea, all the kit?" The idea was full of horror, for the Kid knew what a night was like with no blanket! Her awakening mind dwelt on details, like the snowflakes on the blanket close to her nose. She wanted to brush them away and discovered her hands were tied—her feet too.

Slowly, slowly came the knowledge that she was tied up, a prisoner, that she was on the sledge with the kit, that the dogs were running fast; she could hear the noise of them, and also she could hear a growling voice that seemed to curse and to swear every time it uttered a sound.

Having realized all these things, Dolly's shrewd mind began to put all together and face circumstances.

Gaston Lachine was carrying her away a prisoner. That was a sure thing—but why?

He hated her, and never stuck at killing a person—then why had not he killed her outright? She was clever enough to guess. He meant to use her to catch the other two as well.

"He knows they'll follow this trail," thought the Kid. "He'll just fish for them with *me*, same as though I was a bit of bait on a fish hook, or honey on a bear trap."

She grunted to herself as all her old pluck began to recover. "My word, two can play at that game—we'll just *see*! I'd jolly well sooner die than trap Ave and Buzz."

She strained her neck up in the endeavour to see their whereabouts, and presently brought on herself a furious curse from the breed.

"Be still *you*," he hissed at her; "ver' soon I keel you."

"All right, do!" retorted the Kid. "Do you suppose I care half a dry white-fish? When *I* die I shall go to Heaven—where'll *you* go to?"

This was a thrust, as she shrewdly guessed. Lachine, of course, was a Roman Catholic, and though a really bad man, still retained in the deep of his cruel nature not only a belief in religion but a very real *fear*. Just as he would have been in awe of one of the priests of his Church, so was he in mortal terror of death and what should come after! He had been taught it in his childhood, no doubt, and though he had long forgotten how to behave like a decent man, he had not

forgotten that he would have to die some day and be punished for his evil doings—which was a very curious thing, when you think it out.

As for the Kid, she saw the effect of her challenge, and said no more for the time, simply concentrating on the trail all she could.

It was night. It was dark and it snowed. She could not see the stars, and only guessed from the bumping of the sledge and the *uphill* trend of the trail that they were going inland and back towards the divide—not down the river east, or west to Deer Lake.

Presently she began to feel very sleepy again and told herself that she might be dying. What with the cold and the cords, why should this not be the drowsiness of the frost-death?

"I don't mind," murmured Dolly to herself. "It'd be a fine swindle for this brute if he found I'd frozen."

So she went to sleep again—for she was not dying—and waked up a great deal more alert in mind when the sled stopped and Lachine began to make camp for some hours' rest. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, she supposed.

The first idea that occurred to Dolly was, to pretend she was freezing. So when Lachine proceeded to get the fish sack off the sledge and drag out food for himself she remained stiff and motionless. She knew she was white and suffering from the pain of the bonds, but she did not know how very ill

she looked, or how extremely pinched and drawn was her small face, with the terrible bruise staining the right cheek and temple where the man had struck her.

Now, the breed did not want her to die. The abduction and death together would bring the North-West Mounted Police on his trail in extremely quick time. He was doing a very dangerous thing indeed—as he knew—and had acted largely in a venomous spirit of revenge. He meant to get Charlie's belt, and his plan—vaguely—was to get the twins to follow and then say to Buzz: "You can have your sister in exchange for those dollar bills." There was no *proof* that he'd shot Skeeter; he could easily deny that, and he believed that the Hanburys would be so glad to get the girl back that they would depart and leave him with the money.

He expected them to catch him up in about two days. He was leaving a broad trail, as we know. Then he would barter the Kid and go his way, extracting a promise from them with threats. Lachine loved money, he dreamed of money, and aimed at money only. But he was rather afraid to kill—openly. Well he knew how the Police followed up such things and always caught the culprit in the end. It was not worth while to get hanged, anyway, thought the breed.

CHAPTER XXVI

The Kid uses her Wits

Therefore, when Gaston Lachine realized that the Kid was stiff and ghastly white, and that calling and shaking did nothing to rouse her, he loosed the cords from her hands and ankles and put her down by the fire he had just lighted, and where he was thawing two white-fish for each dog, the usual allowance on the trail.

There was no need for poor Dolly to pretend stiffness. She felt as though she were made of wood, her limbs useless, absolutely unable to act for herself, and the pain of returning circulation was terrible. Yet she was not in despair, nor was she cowed. Dolly Hanbury possessed a deep reserve of power, and now was the time to call on it.

Very slowly and weakly she recovered enough to move and drink hot tea, while, without appearing to do so, she observed the man and was glad to feel sure that he was worried as well as savage, and pretty well tired out. He did not interfere with her, but asked questions of her now and then which caused her to realize that her conclusion was the true one, and he expected the twins to follow because of his capture of Dolly.

He asked her point-blank if Buzz had money.

"I don't know that my brother's dollars are your concern, Mr. Lachine," answered the Kid cautiously.

"I make this a concern for myself. It is better for *you*, Miss Kid, that you tell ze trut—much more better for certain."

"Well then, I think he got his belt back. He had some money—father's money. It was stolen and then it came back ——" she hesitated as a brilliant idea began to take shape in her clever brain.

"You mean you find ze belt?" Lachine wanted to get at the secret of that disappearance. While he was prowling around the little camp on the rapid river watching for chances, Buzz, in his restless delirium, had actually taken off the belt which no doubt irked him in his pain and weariness. He had simply thrown it out with a sigh of relief, and slept—while his nurses slept also—and Lachine, hardly believing his amazing luck, had made off with it. Then he had lost it again one day when he was bathing at the lonely waiting place where the rapids joined the lake. It disappeared. To this moment he had no idea by whose agency, but naturally supposed one of the girls had found it.

Now he asked point-blank.

Dolly shook her head wearily.

"*We* find it! How could we? It went, and one day it came back. We found it hanging on the tree with the new snowshoes. It was one of the mysteries."

"Mystery! So you theenk you fool Lachine. Hein? That is pity—worse for you too. I am not ze personne to be fool—mille tonnerres—what you theenk?"

"I think there wouldn't be much sense in my inventing fancy tales this time of day," answered Dolly, with a sigh. She spoke in a weak voice. It was all a mystery. *Lots* of things happened, and that was one bit of it. "Well, our canoe went, and came back. Charlie's belt went, and came back. He fell in the water, and we found him pulled up on the sand with his leg set! Crowds of queer things happened, and we felt perfectly *sure*—certain as fate—that someone was close by taking care of us. Now you got the simple truth. Someone *was*."

Slowly the Kid shifted her position, as though she could hardly move, and stared across the fire at the scowling man. Her big eyes looked very large and hollow, her pinched face ghastly white and deadly earnest. She whispered hoarsely:

"I dare say you're surprised that I'm not afraid of you—well, I'm not. And the reason is that I *know* I've got a mystery guardian. I believe he's a spirit, or something of that kind"—here she became vague—"but he's very powerful, he can do anything—and he's—not far off. It's as much as anyone's life is worth to interfere with any of *us*. Now you see."

The Kid threw this warning at her enemy in a manner calculated to rouse dread. She was capable of acting very cleverly when she chose, and the present dreadful crisis had put her in an attitude of self-defence. The man was very superstitious, very ignorant, and desperately afraid of

supernatural things. All this she had grasped quickly, and was now making use of that weakness to hold her own in this practically helpless situation.

"What one can't do with one's hands, one might do with one's brain," reasoned Dolly, and therefore she set to work to surround herself with a mysterious imaginary fence.

She felt a leap of joy in her poor little thumping heart when she noticed Lachine glance uneasily over his shoulder and shrink nearer to the fire.

"A bas," he snorted. "I despise me of your fears." He snapped his fingers. "So you theenk to turn Lachine off his purpose, because you mak' ze mos' foolish tale—" Then suddenly came to his mind that queer little happening on the rapid river when he intended to do away with the Hanburys' canoe and met with *arrows*! Yes, there was something. He recalled that his own canoe and kit had been abstracted. In his mind he had accused the brother and sisters, only to feel convinced he was wrong afterwards!

There was some mysterious business afoot. Yes, there was. It's all very well to fight against earthly folk—to shoot them from behind trees, and strike girls—but you cannot overcome spirits or messengers sent by a Higher Power.

Lachine grew more uneasy as he thought, or rather as he became influenced by an emotion of superstition and terror.

"I sometimes think," said the Kid in a low thrilling voice, "that it might be dear Dad—helping us—or—or someone

very wonderful sent by him. I'm *sure* God would let Dad help us."

"I weary myself of your talk," snapped Lachine savagely. "I sleep now. You theenk I am fool—you shall discover mistak'."

So Lachine, full of terrors, rolled up in his blanket and slept.

The Kid did not sleep. She was worn out, but too anxious now, over-excited and suffering from a stunning headache. In spite of her courage and her assertions to the trapper, she did not see much hope of getting out of this fix. She was not tied up at the moment, simply because Lachine knew she could not walk far. Her weak dizziness was obvious. What could she do alone in this wild region without snowshoes. Besides, he was alert. When she moved he stirred and growled at her; in fact Lachine was like a very dangerous dog, kept in check for a time by being awed. But who could say how long that would last, or when he would break out in his natural savagery?

They went on at dawn, and as there was no meat they had to eat the dogs' white-fish. The Kid walked for a time, with her hands tied, but she got on so slowly and fell so often that Lachine ordered her to sit on the sledge, rolled in a blanket. He did not untie her hands, and in her heart she grew more and more despairing.

Snow fell in fine drifting showers, and Lachine was angry, because the trail was covered. He *wanted* the twins to

follow, and began to fear that he'd better have stopped at their camp in the first place and attacked them there—supposing, of course, that Skeeter really was dead. He began to think he'd gained nothing by stealing the younger sister, and that made him madder than ever when she could not walk.

Altogether the situation grew more and more tense and Dolly felt the strain acutely.

In the afternoon they came to higher slopes clothed in miles of spruce fir woods. It was colder. Evidently Lachine was making for some place quite desolate and away from the trapping districts. He was, and presently they came to the cliff top of a deep gorge that cleft the hill, down and down into a depth of rocks and close-growing copses of dark woods.

He followed a track that he evidently knew, a very rough but possible trail zigzagging downwards into the gorge. The snow, driven into drifts, was piled up in masses where it had collected, forced by the wind that howled and wailed up and down through the dreary ravine.

On a more or less level place, with the high steep at the back and the precipice in front, was a tumbledown shack, built for trappers once on a time, but deserted now because of the evil name of the gorge. For *this* was the home of the *Moakwa*.

CHAPTER XXVII

In Extremity

Dolly felt her heart sink when she looked at this place, and thought of waiting here with the trapper. The walls were of rough logs, the roof a sort of thatch made of boughs and caribou moss held down by great stones. Within, three bunks and a rusty stove, also a bench, but no table. It was fearfully cold, because the walls of rough wood let in bitter wind through cracks as the stuffing of mud and moss had worked out.

Lachine was in a very vile humour.

When the girl offered to make the fire in the stove he showed his yellow teeth and said:

"You wish ze hands free—hein? Lachine is not ze fool."

She waited, aching and exhausted, while he made a fire; then she sat on the edge of the bench and tried to be glad of the warmth, while the man brought in wood, and food from the sledge. He was sulky, because there was no meat—he would have to get some. He kicked the dogs and seemed absorbed in thoughts of his own.

Presently this came out.

Suddenly he announced to Dolly that she was to write a message to her sister, telling them she was at the shack in Moakwa Gorge and begging them to come to her rescue.

The Kid stared at him in amaze.

"Why?" she asked faintly.

"I wish that, so. 'Tis my affaire. You do it when I tell," answered the trapper.

"You want them to come so you can rob Buzz of his money, I suppose," said the Kid with dry lips. "Should you let us all go, then?"

"That also is my affaire," and Lachine laughed, while his curious opaque eyes, that looked like bits of black onyx, seemed to squint at her. "No one come to ze gorge of ze *Moakwa*," he added.

"Why not?" asked Dolly vaguely. She was thinking of other things and asked in order to spin out the minutes.

"It is haunt of a mad devil, Indian say, so no one trap in ze gorge."

"I thought you were afraid of haunters, and devils, let alone mad ones," retorted the girl.

The trapper tapped himself on the chest.

"Gaston Lachine 'mad devil' this time, hein—he do not fear when he mak' *Moakwa* of himself! This gorge ver' fine

place for trap—silver fox, black fox—too many Indian know of it. Well, Lachine no fool, ver' fine treeck to mak' scream and scare off Indian trappers! Ver' simple. So I keep ze gorge a long time now—fine treeck, hein!"

The Kid stared at him. She had not heard, as far as she remembered, about the haunting of this particular gorge, but, of course, she knew how terrified Indians were of so-called haunted districts. She knew that sometimes miles of forest might fall under suspicion of being haunted by a *Windigo* or spirit that screamed, and would at once be deserted by all Indians and even by trappers. Naturally then, the creatures of the wild found it was a safe place, and the consequence would be that it became far richer in game and rare fur than other districts.

"Gaston Lachine ver' cute," boasted the trapper as he tapped himself again on the chest.

So that was why he was not afraid to come to this shack in the haunted gorge! She was stunned at the discovery.

Lachine returned to his aim and once more told her she was to write to Ave.

"How can I write?" she answered drearily.

He told her, with burnt wood on a strip of bark.

"But you can't send it. How can you?"

Would he go? A wild hope made her heart leap.

"That my affaire," came the answer.

A few seconds the girl thought, then she said:

"No, I won't do it."

"You weel not?"

"No, I won't try and fetch them here."

"Oh ho, you ver' brave, Mees Kid, hein? I do ze writing myself—and you pay ver' soon. I mak' you pay."

"D'you suppose I care whether I die or not?" the girl flung at him. "I'd much sooner die than let you hurt Ave or Buzz—after all, what's dying?"

Lachine laughed. He did not ask again, but wrote the message on the inside of a smooth bit of bark, digging into the surface with pointed slips of wood that he heated in the stove and let burn in. All the time he laboured he was smoking the coarse tobacco that he used, and it took minutes, because the wood cooled so fast.

When it was done he burned a hole through and went out to where the dogs, anchored to the sledge, were whining, yelping, and scuffling outside.

The door was open and Dolly saw him fasten the bark to Polly's collar, then he tried to send her off, and, of course, she would not go—only running a little way, and then sitting down to bark and howl.

Lachine got mad with temper, but it was no use killing the dog, so he contented himself with driving her, with kicks and blows, along the track they had come. The noise grew fainter in the distance, and poor Dolly stood shaking all over and trying to think of any way of escape. She had got her knife tucked away inside her leather coat, but could not get at it with her wrists tied, struggle as she might.

Then she did a thing she had heard of but never seen done; she leaned her lashed wrists against the hot stove, to char the cord through. Had it been string, perhaps this would have been effective, but babiche cord is the strongest possible material, moose hide in strips, desperately tough.

The result was a bad smell of burned leather and horrible torture of blistered wrists. The Kid bore it as long as she could, her teeth biting into her lip and her face twisted with pain; then suddenly she gave up, sat down on the old bench, and began to sob bitterly.

Her weeping was checked by a sound.

Somewhere, just outside it seemed, there was a rasping, a knock or two, scraping noises. Dolly sprang up, forgetting her pain, and stared around. The noise came from the *end* of the shack which backed against the steep side of the gorge. It was perhaps twelve feet wide, and, of course, made very roughly of logs of unequal sizes, the cracks stuffed up with moss and dirt, and showing the gleam of snow in places where the big drift behind pushed against the wood. From this, water oozed here and there as the heat of the stove thawed the snow.

All these details the Kid saw as she stood watching, listening, her poor little burned hands held against her mouth, damp with her tears and smarting terribly.

Then she saw more. One log, about three feet from the floor, began to move along towards the right—behind was a wall of snow, solid and glistening. Still the wood shifted jerkily—always sideways—and then she saw a *space* in the snow, and from within came an arm clad in a buckskin sleeve, and a brown hand with long powerful fingers. The hand beckoned to her in a quick imperious manner.

Without hesitation the Kid sprang to the gap. The only thing she thought of was escape, and the one idea she grasped was that here was *help*. At last—at last human aid.

After that followed the squeeze of a lifetime, but the girl was slim and active as a cat, and the brown hands pulled her through. She found herself rolling in snow, buried in it, but coming to life again in a wonderful way from sheer relief at these amazing events.

The cord round her wrists was cut—when, she did not realize. Then she knew that the Indian—for it was an Indian, and she jumped at the idea of Skeeter, of course—was shoving the log back into place. As she lay gasping, trying to understand the situation, she saw the cavity close—three minutes after she was in the dark. Then something was pushed into her hands, and feeling it she knew it was a bag of pemmican—that is pressed deer-meat packed tight—and a cold flapjack.

"Thank you—*thank* you—whoever you are," whispered Dolly, with a little choke of gratitude; then she knew she was alone and lay still to collect her wits, the while with a heart full of joy and thankfulness she chewed the cold heavy flapjack which is the unleavened dough bread of the "oldtimer".

CHAPTER XXVIII

The "Moakwa" Comes

It might have been ten minutes after, when the Kid was eating pemmican, that she understood three things with sufficient clearness to realize her position exactly.

The Indian who had pulled her through the log wall into the big snowdrift at the back of the shack had disappeared. No doubt he had a passage of his own.

Before he went he had scraped down the snow so that a wall of it stood between her and the logs.

Also he had closed her into the drift. That she was sure of, because crawling a few feet either way she found herself shut in by the snow. She was warm, she was safe, she had food.

Last and best of all, she had a friend who knew where she was, and could save her from Lachine.

"I suppose," thought Dolly, "when he went he pulled the snow down to shut me in."

Then she remembered the drift at the back of the shack and how she had noticed it as they came up—or down—the trail in the afternoon. Falling from the hill above, blown along by the wind, and caught in an angle, the drift was

above the roof of the shack, and formed high walls at the side.

"He knows," thought the Kid restfully, and she stretched herself at ease.

As she recovered from misery and collapse she remembered that Lachine would come back soon now, and she instantly became overpowered by the wish to see what he would do! The thought that there would be but a log wall between them made her wriggle with excitement—which, of course, was very like the Kid, and proved how much better she was!

With great care she felt the snow all along in between her nest and the wall. Then, cautious, she scraped a place as thin as she dared—a patch about the size of a saucer. She could see the reddish glow of the red-hot stove in one small crack between the logs. That had to suffice, she dared not risk an open crack, especially as the air from within the shack was warm.

With an effort she kept herself awake. Weary limbs and the long strain kept at bay by her invincible pluck, now began to tell. She thought of Lachine's face, his evil eyes and his laugh. When she remembered him she cowered down in her snow nest, she even forgot the pain of her hands that badly needed doctoring.

"That Indian won't let him get me," said the Kid to herself, and then fell to wondering whether it had been Skeeter Joe.

Truth to tell, when she was pulled through the gap she was so utterly done, what with weariness, pain, terror, and hunger, that she had not been able to take note of things. She had just let herself go in a dream of relief, and *thought* of nothing.

While she lazily considered these matters, and came to the conclusion that this Indian would know all about Buzz and Ave anyway, she heard a sound that made her start and quiver.

A cry—the most terrible shriek of despairing woe. Part scream, part wail, and altogether dreadful.

"Oh shucks!" gasped the Kid, then she remembered the nearness of the logs, put her hands over her mouth, and listened.

In about a minute it came again. Just as horrible, but apparently not from the same direction, quite. It seemed to be high in the air and echoed through the gorge.

Dolly was not so startled, for the thought came to her it was Lachine himself. He was making the shriek of the mad devil, the *Moakwa*, to frighten Indians and keep the place free of hunters.

"If ever I meet any Indians when we get back, wherever I see them I'll just tell them that it's Gaston Lachine," decided the Kid vindictively. "Selfish brute—they might sure be frightened though, poor souls! What screeches!"

Then she listened with renewed interest for more, rather wondering why the trapper should be making his throat sore with this unnecessary noise when there could be no one to hear him.

Once more she heard the *Moakwa* cry—from the gorge still, but the wail appeared to float, coming from the north and passing south between the cliffs till it died away.

If the Kid had been asked she would probably have admitted that nothing now could surprise her any more. The trail had been fairly exciting, but the last day and night, with the very sensational climax, quite astonishing. However, there was more to come.

As she listened intently to the last weird echo the door of the shack burst open, while a chorus of yelpings came from the dogs. She heard Lachine's voice cursing them, and then she realized that he was *in* the hut and had slammed the door. He was muttering wildly to himself. And—this was the strange part—even as he stamped and swore within the shack, that terrible cry rose again, cutting the freezing night, the drifting snow, and the lonely silence with a piercing ring of pain.

"Shucks!" gasped the Kid, again pressing her lips against the snow. "Why, it's sheer horror and then some! My word—then it wasn't Lachine! That mad devil is on his own!"

In a moment she realized that the trapper himself was finding it "sheer horror, and then some", she could hear him within a yard or two of her snow nest, groaning aloud,

cursing, swearing, and whimpering in his blind terror. Indeed, he was so mad with fear that he did not seem to realize that his captive was gone. He was talking in his French-Canadian patois, also Cree language, tramping up and down—indeed he had lost his self-control and apparently his wits. It was perhaps a question of an exceptionally bad conscience. From his broken words Dolly gathered that he believed this voice came from the spirit of a Cree hunter killed by him in this gorge, shot from behind a rock when Lachine wanted the trapping for himself, before he started the plan of playing at the *Moakwa*.

He believed fully that the dead Indian had returned to pay him out, and his terror was in proportion to his superstition.

Presently the cry ceased, and after a few minutes of peace it seemed that Lachine suddenly realized the disappearance of his captive. He gave a shout that made Dolly start, and burst into a storm of fury; then she heard him open the door, fling out among the howling dogs—the poor beasts had had nothing to eat—and probably look for her trail in the trampled snow outside.

The Kid could not hear what he was doing, which made her anxious. There awoke in her mind a creeping fear that he might think of the drift behind the shack, or stumble on it by accident. Her faith was in the mysterious Indian. Then she began to consider all that over again, and into her dazed mind flashed the conviction that he must, of course, be the Haunter of their trail—the mysterious guardian.

Having suggested his existence to the trapper, it was odd she had not considered the possibility of his presence *here*. With a wild thrill she sat up—or tried to—bumped herself on the snow shell and lay down again, piecing events together.

Her mind flew back to the blazing of the trees when she and Ave got lost, and she recalled the tall Indian figure she had seen touching the blazes afterwards. Then the friend had been an Indian. Why had he kept out of sight with such persistent cleverness? Was he afraid of Lachine?

She suddenly saw light. Probably he went in fear of the trapper, yet wished to help them—herself and the twins! That was another mystery. If you've nothing to do but think, in the dark too, you do a good deal of thinking, and Dolly presently decided that this Indian friend would manage to warn the twins. If he saved her, he could save them.

She seemed to herself to have spent hours in this spinning of threads, when she heard the cry again—far away, coming nearer. Almost directly after it began Lachine once more broke into the cabin. Apparently he came for shelter, desperate with fright. She heard him slamming here and there, muttering and groaning, and realized with a leap of her heart that he was breaking camp, that is to say, he was actually packing what he had brought in.

Nearer and nearer came the desolate warning cry, till it seemed to be right over the shack. The trapper rushed out, she heard him lashing and shouting at the dogs, and the noise of them died away down the trail.

CHAPTER XXIX

"That Lachine, he Finish!"

After a few hours of fitful sleep Ave and Buzz were anxiously alive, eating as much caribou-meat as they could manage—they were far too troubled about Dolly to be hungry; at least it was so with Averil, who looked like a shadow in the dark bleak dawn of that November morning.

Skeeter Joe was apparently himself again. On his physique of leather and steel the wound seemed to make small impression. And as daylight began to turn black into grey the three were off again north, the store of meat packed, and the husky Polly on a leash; not that she was inclined to stray, perhaps, but they would not risk losing her.

Mistastin led the way, and the twins every now and then talked.

"I've a sure hunch Skeeter's right about that message," said Ave.

"Well, may be," allowed her brother.

"Charlie, you keep the guns loaded. We don't know what he'll do. You bet he's a murderer," reasoned the girl.

"You bet. Anyway he thinks he's finished Joe. He *meant* to shoot him."

"I expect he'll jump out on us with a 'hands up' order. He wants our money, you know, and thinks it's only you and me. He knows you *got* a belt."

"That's so—but see, Ave, when he finds Joe's alive perhaps it'll shake him to meet two, and you're a good hand with a gun."

"Buzz, suppose he's got Dolly tied up and says, 'if you touch me I'll shoot *her*,' what will we do?"

"Wait till we meet him, old girl. What's the good of running to find trouble? Anything may happen, and remember we're in fine luck about old Skeeter. We might have been alone."

"Oh, Buzz, I know," murmured Ave, and her face cleared a little.

Miles of weary travel were covered, and latterly all uphill into wilder wastes, before they held up for a midday rest. They could see the crags and cliffs of a great gorge far above them, the black patches of pine forest marking the steep sides. Somewhere, far off, they heard the yelping howl of a husky dog, to which Polly promptly responded till Skeeter tied her muzzle with a bit of cord.

"Bald Mountain," Skeeter told them; "that place mak' em Moakwa Gorge. Soon we catch 'em that feller Lachine."

This last bit of information was given in an unmistakable tone, while the Indian's face seemed to harden as he spoke. He was looking towards the gorge, and suddenly it appeared

that he saw something, for he sprang to his feet and stood in a tension of watching, like some wild thing of the woods that scents mankind.

Buzz got up too, gazed, and then sat down again by his sister and went on eating.

"What is it?" demanded the girl anxiously.

"Indian. Some pal of Skeeter's, most likely. I'm jolly glad, because he'll sure know something about Lachine. These Indians are sharp as minks, they can see like the harpy birds any distance, and hear miles off. Guess he'll tell Joe what he wants to know."

In a short time this Indian was visible to all three, coming down swiftly through the firs and broken ground. Averil noticed that he was tall and agile, but better-looking and younger than Mistastin. Indeed as he came closer she realized that he had a superior type of features, a wide brow and serious deep-set eyes.

Skeeter turned to Buzz.

"Ahték," he explained, "this Indian Ojibway—white heart, great chief."

Ahték, so called no doubt from his swift movements, as *Ahték* means a caribou, came up to the fire and greeted Mistastin, then he looked at Buzz and said "Bo'-jou'" in a deep musical voice.

"Bo'-jou', Ahték, Chief in the great Ojibway tribe," responded Buzz with courtesy.

"My paleface brother seeks the little white sister," said the Indian, speaking in Cree language, and using the stately phraseology of the tribes. "Ahték took her away from the man who was very evil, and hid her as the squirrel hides the nut when the many-caribou-in-the-woods moon shines in Heaven. Lachine looked and looked," the Indian turned his head from side to side as though searching, "but his eyes were darkened and knowledge was kept from his black mind. Then the mad devil came and cried, asking for the soul of Mistapoos,[1] the friend of Ahték, who was shot in the back by Lachine, because he coveted the good trapping grounds in the gorge. When Lachine heard the scream of *Moakwa* he ran away; he ran like the rabbit with blind eyes, he did not see that snow covered over the cleft on the trail, so presently—" Ahték made a vivid gesture with his hands, a twist as though breaking something and a fling outward, then he lapsed into grave dignity again. "*Moakwa* has said, let this man with a bad heart be eaten by the foxes, and it is so—he is finished."

[1] *Mistapoos* means "The Hare".

"*Great!*" exclaimed Buzz explosively. "Ave, did you hear all that? Ahték says Lachine pitched down into the gorge and smashed himself—seems he was running away and didn't look to his footing; thought it was solid ground when it was snow over a hole. Jolly good thing too, and thank God, the Kid's safe!"

Buzz pulled his cap off, put it on again, and shook hands with Ahték.

"Strikes me you're a hi-yu-top-chief," he said. "How are we going to thank you for saving our sister? Chief, you're a white man."

"Many moons ago—when Ahték was a young man—Weston Hanbury, the father of my white brother, was good to him. Ahték was very sick—Weston Hanbury took him a long long way to the settlement, and gave the medicine man gold to take away the devil which had bitten a young chief."

Ahték put his hand on his belt, and Averil instantly called to mind her kindly father's interest in a young Ojibway who was terribly ill with appendicitis. So does kindness shown to the tribes come back to those who do it, for an Indian never forgets!

Skeeter, having listened to the story with attention, made no further remark. Whether he *believed* that Lachine had fallen into the gorge, or been "finished" by Ahték, who can say? Probably he was disappointed that he'd not had a chance for revenge on his own account. Certainly his face seemed to set more grimly, but he said no word.

Then they started up the steep winding trail, but it was dusk before they got to the shack, where they found the Kid, also a warm shelter, and a red-hot stove.

It was characteristic of the three that they made no more fuss than they did when Buzz smashed his leg in the rapids. Ave gave one stifled cry, and the two held one another in a bear-like hug.

"Look out for my hands," warned Dolly.

"What's wrong?"

"Burned them trying to scorch the cord in half last night."

"Cord! Your *hands*—Oh, *Kid*! Are you all right—*sure*?"

"You bet. That crackerjack Ahték hid me in the big drift back of this shack."

Then Dolly told the whole story of her capture, all that happened, what Lachine said and did, and how she was saved by the Ojibway.

To tell the truth the Kid was a little feverish, and strung up, so to speak. She talked fast and her little face now wore a bright pink patch on either cheek.

"And, Ave, d'you know who he is? I mean this new Indian? Why, he's our dear old 'ghost'! He started on our trail with us, because he thought he'd keep guard—we being tender-feet on the trail, don't you know. He kept himself out of sight, because he was certain sure Lachine meant evil to us and was after our money. You see, he *knows* that Lachine shot his friend in the back, because he wanted the trapping in this gorge—and afterwards Lachine made the mad devil screaming *himself* to keep people away. It's true, because he told me he did. When I was hidden, Ahték started on and made the *Moakwa* shrieks with a buffalo horn. Never in all your life did you hear such a cry! Honestly, it was jolly well the maddest devil possible to imagine. Lachine got fits over it, he took the sled and dogs and bolted down the trail—I heard him go—full lick. And when you think it was dark ____"

"Oh, poor creature!" murmured Ave, her eyes shrinking as she thought.

"*Poor* creature! Ave, he's sure one of the wickedest ever was! We don't need him about the North. And look here, just think how we can get on home now—*really*. No more fears, no bothers. Well, I was going to tell you all the rest of it. The dogs came along back pulling the sled all side up. They were scared and so hungry, they just came back to the shack. Ahték fetched me out of my drift—he can push the log along. See, this one, it shunts. I can't do it, I'm not strong enough. I was so afraid Lachine would see it's a scrap loose, but he was in such a state that he never looked."

Dolly stood pointing out the identical log with excited gestures, and Averil gazed with awe. Then Buzz called out "supper", and five minutes later the whole party were eating caribou-meat, the two dignified Indians sitting on the ground together rather aloof, talking in their own language when they spoke, which was seldom.

Afterwards they went away together to look for the body of Lachine, and the only thing the girls heard about that, at dawn, was from Skeeter.

"That Lachine he finish—neck break 'em."

Often did they talk about that strange haunted trail afterwards, when they got back—all three belts safe and the money paying for the training of Buzz as an engineer. One thing was always unexplained: that Lachine never seemed to suspect that Dolly had a belt as well as Buzz. The money, in

his mind, was with the boy; it was a mercy that he thought so, and what Ave said about it was, they'd sure got more guardians than Ahték the Ojibway.

With regard to him, they fulfilled their wish and intention in all ways.

Both Ahték and Mistastin came down east with them on the happy trail to Churchill. No need to hide or fear any more. It was a great run along the frozen river.

Then out of their funds they gave each Indian a Winchester rifle, which is about the topmost height of ambition to any and every tribe, for as a rule they have to content themselves with trade guns, warranted to kill at three yards, as the old sourdoughs used to say.

This story goes to prove one thing, anyway. Always be decent to an Indian; when the time comes, then he'll be decent to you.

[Transcriber's note: Inconsistent hyphenation is as printed.]

[The end of *The Haunted Trail* by E. E. Cowper]