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WOOLLY OF THE WILDS

Robert Leighton





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WOOLLY OF THE WILDS





“ With a quick start of alarm he realized that he was
surrounded by a vast pack of wolves.”
(Chapter VII).

Woolly of the Wilds]

[*Frontispiece*

WOOLLY OF THE WILDS

• Story of Pluck and Adventure in
North-West Canada

BY

ROBERT LEIGHTON

Author of "Dreadnoughts of the Dogger,"
"Rattlesnake Ranch," etc.

FULLY ILLUSTRATED

ARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED
LONDON, MELBOURNE AND TORONTO

1917



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CHAPTER I

WOOLLY'S BEARSKIN

“FIF’Y-EIGHT, fif’y-nine, s-sixty.”

Woolly coaxed the soft beaver skins into a compact pile on the rough floor in front of him and bound them round with a stout thong of moose leather. He rose to his feet and carried the bundle to a dark corner of the store-room, where he packed it neatly on a huge stack of similar bundles.

“Tha’s the beavers, anyhow,” he said, standing back with his hands on his hips, contemplating his finished work. “An’ as prime a lot’s ever I seen. Every one of ’em sound. Gee! what a lot!”

He did not trouble himself about the market value of the furs or attempt to follow them in fancy to their destinations in distant cities of the civilized world. What appealed to his boyish mind was the joy of weeks and months of adventure expended in the capture of so many hundreds of fur-bearing animals.

Each separate skin represented a trap well laid by cunning hands in the waters of some shady creek or placid lake in the silent places of the north, where the Indian fur-hunters lived their free lives and all nature ran wild.

All about him in this dark loft where he was at work were the evidences of desperate adventure and of fierce perils overcome. The musty smell of peltry filled his nostrils. Every rafter of the sloping roof was festooned with bundles of rich furs—the snow white skins of ermine and arctic fox, the warm brown of marten and mink, the deep black of bear and musquash. There were stacks of snowshoes and moccasins, arrows of maple wood and bows of hickory ; and the shelves were piled high with bunches of medicinal herbs. Everything here had been laboriously brought to this lonely trading fort by the woods Indians, in their birch bark canoes or heavily laden dog-sleds.

It was Woolly's duty this morning to clean out this store-room and take stock of its contents. He had been at work since day-break, and the place was beginning to look extraordinarily tidy. He turned from the beaver skins to pack a row of chests and boxes closer together against the wall under the eaves. One of these boxes he overturned, and

from it there tumbled out a strange medley of Indian implements and clothing—a broken tomahawk, a rusty scalping-knife, a chief's war bonnet heavy with eagle plumes, and a buckskin shirt richly decorated with bead-work, porcupine quills, and bears' claws.

Most boys of sixteen would have revelled in the chance of overhauling such a store of curiosities ; but for Woolly the things had no especial interest. They were such articles as might be seen and handled any day in any of the Hudson Bay stations. But as he was dusting and packing them into the box he came upon a small parcel with a wrapping of fragrant sweet grass bound round with threads of coloured silk. He carelessly opened the parcel and discovered a pair of doeskin moccasins, the smallest, daintiest and most beautiful that he had ever seen.

“ Huh ! ” he exclaimed in astonishment, gazing at them in admiration. “ Never set eyes on anythin' so pretty in all me days ! Where'd they come from, I wonder ! What're they doin' here, among all this lumber ? Boss must ha' forgotten all 'bout 'em, sure.”

Very delicately he covered them in their original wrappings and laid them aside while he shoved the row of boxes against the wall and proceeded to examine one by one several

heavy bear skins which lay in the middle of the floor.

His trained eyes noticed that one of the bear skins was not so good as the others. It was very large; but the fur was ragged, and in places the badly dressed skin had been slit as with a knife.

“The silly caribou as flayed that bear didn’t know a whole lot ’bout his business,” he ruminated as he turned it over. “Boss would say ’tain’t equal ter sample. ’Tain’t good fer nothin’ but to make a doormat ter wipe yer feet on. Gee!” he cried with a laugh of recognition. “Blamed if that silly caribou wasn’t just meself! ’Tis the skin of the same grizzly as I killed las’ spring alongside of Musk Rat Creek, the time my fin was damaged!”

He glanced ruefully at his left hand. It was maimed and out of shape. The little finger was missing, the second finger was stiff and crooked, and there was an ugly red scar across the knuckles.

He yanked the bear skin along the floor, and while he went on with his work he called to mind the occasion when his hand was hurt.

He had been out in the forest, following in the wake of a young bull moose. His

chum Otter Joe, who was with him, had gone far up the creek to cut off the bull's retreat. Woolly was creeping slowly and cautiously along the leeward side of the tracks when suddenly he heard a movement behind him. He rose to his feet and leapt aside just as an immense grizzly bear overshadowed him, standing upright to fling its mighty weight upon him. In leaping aside, Woolly slipped on the damp moss of a tree root, and before he could regain his balance the bear's rancid breath came hot upon his face, and a ponderous arm with great hooks of claws at the end of it had fallen upon his side with the force of a sledge hammer. Woolly's hand had not lost his grip on his gun, and his finger was on the trigger. As he fell, he fired the weapon, almost aimlessly. But the bear had hold of him and he could not escape without a struggle. Dropping his gun, he wriggled and twisted himself free from the weight of the paw that held him. He was now lying on his back between the brute's front legs. Writhing round, he plunged his left arm into the bear's open mouth, catching firm hold of the slimy tongue and digging his nails into it. With his free right hand he seized his hunting knife and drove its long, sharp pointed blade with a strong up-

ward thrust deep into the grizzly's ribs. The bear swerved round, lifting its head with a jerk that pulled the boy over upon his knees.

What happened next, Woolly never clearly remembered. When he came to himself again there was a fearful pain in his side, his left hand was torn to rags, and some one was pouring cold water between his lips.

"That bull moose escaped," Otter Joe was saying. "Your gun scared him off 'fore I could get near him."

"What about the grizzly?" Woolly asked. "Guess he escaped, too, eh?"

"Why, no," Joe answered. "He's lyin' alongside you, dead. An' I'm real vexed an' disappointed as you'd the whole show to yourself. What's happened along of your hand?"

"Bear got hold of it in his jaws," said Woolly, sitting up and looking at the ragged wound. "Say, Joe, jes' take your knife an' hack off what's left er that little finger. I got no more use for it. And then, I reckon, we'll quit."

They left the bear where it had fallen, to be soaked with rain and nibbled by ants, and had not returned to secure the skin until Woolly's hand was almost well. And now here was the same skin, packed with others

that were ready to be sent along the trail to Fort Garry and sold for the Company's profit.

"'Tain't no good," Woolly decided, "I've a notion it was Black Pete as planted it here, in place of a better one. 'Tain't playin' fair by the Company."

He dragged the skin to the open loft door and let it slide down the chute into the yard below. Then he closed the lower half of the door and stood leaning with his folded arms on its support while he gazed outward upon the sunlit glory of the maple trees and the wide expanse of Silver Lake.

As he stood there in his fringed buckskins and beaded leggings you might have seen that he was not handsome. His body was well proportioned, with the broad back and powerful limbs of one accustomed to hard work in the open. His bare, sun-tanned neck was thick and strong, and his head seemed uncommonly big under its mop of rough red hair. Perhaps you would have thought his face even ugly. His nose was thick and turned up at the end, showing wide open nostrils; his grey green eyes were small, with fair lashes, and his skin was marred by the marks of smallpox. The one feature not disappointing was his mouth, with its delicately shaped lips and strong white teeth.

Woolly himself, however, never seriously considered his personal appearance ; neither for that matter did anybody else. He lived in a remote outpost of civilization, where good looks are of less account than a good heart and fearless courage, honesty, and unselfishness, and these qualities he certainly possessed.

From where he stood he could survey the whole area of the fort, enclosed within its high stockade. The main building was the factor's house of squared logs sheathed with whitewashed boards. Its roof was steep to resist the weight of snow in winter, and widely overhanging to cover the deep verandah. Round about it there was a flower garden and a plot of grass, from which rose the tall flagstaff. Near the flagstaff a young cinnamon bear was chained, unmolested by the many dogs of wolf-like breed that lay about in the warm sunshine.

Beyond the factor's house were the men's bunk houses, the trading-room and office, and the sheds where the canoes and sleds and camping outfits were kept. Outside the palisade, beyond the four brass field pieces which guarded the entrance, were two or three smoke-browned Indian teepees, the homes of wandering Redskins and half-breeds

who came to Fort St. Agnes to do trade.

Woolly's sight was directed dreamily to the far-off peaks of the Rocky Mountains, lying like white clouds against the blue of the sky, to the dark wooded slopes of the nearer foothills and to the rugged shores of the yet nearer lake. Far away on the calm surface of the glistening water he could see something slowly moving—five tiny black dots that crept like ants in procession. He leaned out over the half door. Down below him a boy—obviously a full-blooded Indian—was busy tarring the felt roof of a lean-to shed on which he stood.

"D'ye see 'em, Joe?" Woolly called. "Injuns!"

"Yep," Otter Joe nodded, going on with his work. "Seen 'em a while past. Chipewyans, I figure. Pity they wasn't hostiles on the war path comin' to make a raid on St. Agnes. What? Say, I'm just pinin' fer some excitement."

Woolly drew back from the door, picked up the parcel containing the doeskin moccasins, and made his way down the steep ladder stairs to the room below and out into the yard.

"Here! What's that you're runnin' off with?" a gruff voice called out to him.

“ Suthin’ you don’t want me to see, I guess, by the way you’re hidin’ it. What is it? ”

Woolly stopped abruptly and glanced round at the tall black-bearded man who had accosted him.

“ ’Tain’t anyways necess’ry that you should see it, Pete,” he answered quietly. “ It’s somethin’ I’m takin’ to the Boss.”

“ The Boss? ” echoed Black Pete, striding forward menacingly. “ Yes, you’re allus fawnin’ around the Boss, same’s a pet dog. You’d lick the mud offen his boots ter gain his favour. Here! What’s the meanin’ er this? ”

Black Pete had caught sight of the discarded bearskin lying at his feet.

“ What’s this? ” he demanded to know. “ What’s that pelt doin’ thar? ”

“ ’Tain’t no good,” Woolly explained, “ ants have been at it. It’s all cut an’ matted an’ mangy. But it ain’t a trade skin, anyway. It’s the skin of the bear I killed meself, time me hand was hurt.”

“ Pity it wasn’t you ’stead of the bear as was killed,” Pete growled savagely. “ Pick it up an’ carry it back where you found it.”

Woolly stooped and received a kick that sent him sprawling. In an instant Otter Joe had jumped down from the shed. He went

up to the man and stood boldly confronting him. His dark, Indian eyes flashed, the olive of his cheeks had gone ruddy, his right hand gripped the haft of his hunting knife.

“You’re goin’ too far, Black Pete,” he cried. “Strike Woolly and you strike me as well, an’ you’ll pay for it. That pelt’s no good. It was you as put it up in the loft, in place of a better one as you sneaked away an’ hid in the secret cache where you keep the rest of the things you steal.” He drew the knife half out from his belt, but already Black Pete had turned away with an uneasy laugh.

CHAPTER II

THE DOESKIN MOCCASINS

THE factor, a big, grey-bearded man with a kindly face, was seated at his writing when Woolly entered.

“Weel, Woolly?” he said, without looking up. He was a Scotsman, and it was his way of pronouncing “Willie” which had given the boy his name at Fort St. Agnes. Woolly’s real name was William Hercus. He, too, was Scotch; or, rather, Orcadian, for he had been born on one of the Orkney Islands and brought out to Canada whilst still an infant.

“There’s a party of Chipewyans comin’ down the lake, Mr. Sinclair,” Woolly announced. “There’s five canoes of ’em, heavily loaded.”

Mr. Sinclair laid down his pen but continued to smoke his pipe.

“Ah,” he nodded. “They’ll be the last or winter, I’m thinkin’. Pete will see to them—with your help. What’s that ye’ve gotten in your hand? A bird’s nest of eggs?”

Woolly laid his parcel on a corner of the table.

“It’s just a pair of moccasins I found in the store loft,” he explained. “They’re not or’nary moccasins. I thought you might like to see ’em—perhaps do somethin’ with ’em, instead of leavin’ ’em up there all winter, ter git mildewed an’ spoilt.”

He unfastened the silken threads, and, drawing forth the moccasins, held them out on the palm of his game hand, which they barely covered.

They were made of the finest and softest doeskin, exhaling the perfume of the scented grass in which they had been wrapped. The tongue-shaped piece over the instep was of pure white fawn skin, richly ornamented in six colours of silk, with flowers worked in coloured glass beads. Where it joined the foot of the slipper it was worked over in a narrow cord of blue and white silk. The edge about the ankle was turned over, deeply scalloped, and bound at the top with a broad band of blue silk, stitched with tiny white stars. A blue silk bow at either side of the ankle decorated the front. The needlework was marvellously beautiful.

“Bonnie—real bonnie,” pronounced Mr. Sinclair, puffing meditatively at his pipe.

“ The bonniest pair of Indian slippers I have ever seen.”

“ Didn’t you know they was there ? ” Woolly inquired.

Mr. Sinclair nodded slowly.

“ I had wished to forget them,” he answered. “ I had meant to mail them home to Scotland for a wee lassie whose feet they would hae fitted. But before I could send them I heard that the wee lassie was gone to a place where shoon are not worn.”

“ She was dead ? ” questioned Woolly. He began to wrap the moccasins in their covering of scented grass. “ Guess you had ’em made on purpose fer that lassie,” he conjectured. “ Some Indian squaw made ’em, sure.”

“ Sure,” acknowledged the factor. “ But no’ for me—no’ for me. And I didna buy them in the way of trade. So they’re not the property of the Hudson Bay Company, and ye can do with them what ye please—keep them under a glass case, hang them as a totem on your lodge-pole or above your bunk, gie them as a present to one of the Indian girls. Do what you will wi’ them, only—dinna sell them ; dinna barter them.”

Woolly took up the parcel and the loose threads of silk.

“ If you never bought ’em, Mr. Sinclair,”

he paused. "if you didn't have 'em made for you, or have 'em given to you, how did they come here at Fort St. Agnes?"

"Aweel," returned the factor, taking up his pen, "if ye're wantin' to know, I just found them, Woolly—found them lyin' on the trail, halfway between here and Minnewanka Crossing. I'd say it was half a dozen years ago. You'll not mind it, maybe. It was at the time when you had your illness, and I was away to get the advice of a medicine man at the French Mission. There were signs of Indians along the trail—hoof prints and the scratching of travois poles, and I was ridin' in sic haste that I had overpassed the thing before I could dismount to see what it might be. Whether some Indian women had dropped it by accident or planted it there wi' secret feminine purpose, I canna tell ye; but by the state o' the trail I judged that the parcel had lain there for fully a week, and that it had simply been lost; so I brought it home wi' me, see?"

Woolly strode to the window and looked out upon the lake. The five Indian canoes were already approaching the landing place, watched by a party of men and a pack of noisy dogs out of the fort. He made his way down the verandah steps and across

the courtyard to the trading-room, which he entered, dropping the parcel into the drawer of his desk as he passed the counter to get to the inner room.

This inner room was large and dimly lighted, smelling strongly of groceries and cloth. There was very little open space in which to move in the midst of the bales of red and blue blankets, bolts of bright-patterned gingham and heavy chests of sugar and tea. Everything that the place contained was intended to attract the calculating eyes of the forest people ; boxes of beads for decoration, skeins of brilliant silk, mirrors, red and parti-coloured worsted sashes with tassels on the ends, tin and earthen cooking utensils, steel traps, stacks of long brassbound trade guns, leaden bars for bullet-making, kegs of gunpowder, and bags of tobacco.

These products of civilization were to be bartered to the Indians in exchange for their products of the wilds. No such thing as money was known in the Hudson Bay trading forts. The beaver skin was the measure of value. A horse might be worth sixty beaver skins, a gun fifteen, a blanket ten ; everything was estimated by its value in beaver skins. When an Indian came in to do trade he began by placing a bundle of beaver skins

on the counter, and the trader gave him in return a similar number of castors, or wooden tallies, to be used in the place of coins. The Indians were admitted in small batches, each batch being disposed of before another took its turn. The business often occupied many days of wrangling and bargaining before the last of the visitors was served and satisfied.

Woolly had become an expert salesman. He knew exactly the relative values of the different pelts; how many otter skins should equal an ermine, how many pounds of tea should be given for a wolf skin, what quantity of pemmican or maple sugar should purchase a gun or a beaver trap, and how many ounces of glass beads should be given in return for a pair of snowshoes.

Sometimes the Indians showed a strange ignorance of the common methods of trading. The use of measures and scales was a perpetual mystery to them; they were the white man's medicine which no brave could understand.

A young Chipewyan objected to Woolly measuring out a yard of gingham, explaining that the quantity he wanted was only the length of his forearm. Woolly cut off the lesser quantity and added half an ounce of beads to make the transaction fair, at which

the Chipewyan rubbed his hands in satisfaction. Woolly was scrupulously honest in his dealings, and for this reason he was popular; so popular that he earned the embittered jealousy of the foreman, Pete Collyer, who was always ready to cheat whenever he saw a chance.

One of the braves, named Tawabinisay—the Man who Travels by Moonlight—was the cause of some trouble on this same day. Leaving his companions at the doorway, he had advanced into the trading-room alone, carrying with him a magnificent silver-fox skin, which he spread out with great ceremony on the counter in front of Black Pete.

“Heap good,” he grunted in recommendation.

Black Pete handled the fur critically. He saw that it was an exceedingly valuable skin; but he shook his head deprecatingly and said, speaking in the Chipewyan tongue:

“It’s worth thirty beavers, no more.” He counted thirty of the wooden tallies and pushed them across the counter. “You can have a gun and powder,” he suggested.

But Tawab. signified that he did not need a gun. He wanted a supply of tea for the winter.

Pete was accordingly preparing to weigh a scale full of tea when the Indian objected.

“No,” he said, snatching the iron weight off the scale, “you put on this side my silver-fox skin; tea on the other side. When the two sides stop swinging, you take the fox skin, I take the tea. Heap good.”

“Oh, all right,” laughed Black Pete in agreement, knowing that the skin of a silver fox was worth more tea than any scale that ever was made could hold.

At this moment Woolly drew near. He had been at his desk to get the doeskin moccasins and take them to his own private room.

He had removed the slippers from their covering of scented grass and laid them together on the counter. He glanced at the silver-fox skin, now resting in the scales, and quickly understood what Black Pete was doing. For a moment or two he stood silently watching. Then he went nearer still.

“You’re tryin’ ter cheat that poor Injun,” he said. “A rare pelt like that ought ter be made a special deal. It’s worth heaps and heaps. You couldn’t buy a skin as good’s that in Montreal fer less’n six hundred dollars. In London it would easily fetch two hundred an’ fifty pounds; an’ you’re aimin’

at givin' Tawabinisay a mis'erable handful of tea for it! That's cheatin'—downright wicked cheatin'."

"Clear out of this!" scowled Black Pete. "Clear out and mind your own business. You ain't wanted here with your interference. Quit!"

"It *is* my business," Woolly boldly declared. "I've got a right to see that the Injuns ain't swindled."

He laid his hand on the fox pelt to draw it away. But in the instant Black Pete had lifted his fist and flung out his arm, hitting the boy a vicious blow full in the face.

Woolly reeled and fell to the floor, the blood streaming from his nose.

Through the maze of his half-stunned senses he became even at this instant aware that a curious change had come over the Indian. The stalwart brave was no longer looking at the silver-fox skin in the scale. He was staring fixedly at the pair of doeskin moccasins on the counter, while into his keen eyes there had come a dangerous light whose meaning Woolly knew only too well.

The boy who lay helpless on the floor felt his breath come hard and short as, in spite of the singing in his ears, he caught an ugly sound that came from the Indian's throat.



“Woolly reeled and fell to the floor.”

Woolly of the Wilds]

[*Chapter II*



Woolly staggered up, bracing himself to face the peril.

He knew it was a danger call, and with all the strength that Black Pete had left in him he tried to struggle to his feet, even as a dozen gleaming-eyed Chipewyans crowded in at the doorway and the air of the place became thick with a fierce muttering that came from their throats, boding sharp peril.

CHAPTER III

BLACK PETE

THE trade-room was quickly crowded with muttering, menacing redskins. Some of them had drawn their knives, some had gripped their clubs and tomahawks; one carried a gun, another was fingering a newly-bought revolver. Their gleaming eyes were directed towards Black Pete, who stood, still threateningly, over the boy whom he had struck.

“Come interferin’ here,” Pete was saying angrily, “an’ the next time I’ll *hit* you.”

Woolly staggered to the support of the counter, across which he was watching the advancing Indians, seeing that Black Pete was the prime object of their offensive intrusion.

The Chipewyans had discovered that they were being systematically cheated. They had supposed that the thing that swings—the steelyard scale—was at fault, that the white man’s iron weights were bad medicine; but, on comparing their various purchases, they had

come to the conclusion that it was always when they had been served by Black Pete, and not by the factor or Woolly, that the quantities of goods received were short.

Yet none of the Chipewyans had positively detected Pete in the act of cheating. Before anything could be done against him it was well to have proof by putting his honesty to a direct test.

In an earlier season one of these same braves, named Big Crow, had brought a silver-fox skin to Fort St. Agnes and offered it to Mr. Sinclair. After much deep thinking and questioning, Mr. Sinclair had given in exchange for the rare skin a whole chest full of tea, two guns, many blankets, and a large bag of tobacco. Big Crow's fox skin had not been quite as good as the one now brought by Tawabinisay—the Man who Travels by Moonlight—and if Black Pete should offer less than the factor had given Big Crow, then it was clear that Black Pete was a cheat who ought to be punished.

Tawabinisay therefore was deputed by his fellow braves to present his precious fox pelt in exchange for as much tea as it was reasonably worth. If Black Pete should not deal fairly, then Tawab. was to make a sign and his brothers would rush in to take vengeance.

From the doorway the braves had watched Tawab. They had heard him protest against the use of the mysterious iron weight, and insist upon his fox skin itself being balanced by an equal weight of tea. But one of their number suddenly realized that even still the transaction was being carried out wholly in the favour of the trader, and he knew English well enough to understand Woolly's words :

“ That's cheatin'—downright wicked cheat-in'.”

It was then that Tawabinisay gave his sign and called for help. It was then that Black Pete raised his fist and struck Woolly the blow in the face which felled him to the floor.

With angry grunts and snarls the Indians rushed in. Many vaulted upon the counter and prepared to jump down on the inner side. Before any could do so, Woolly snatched up the factor's revolver from the ledge where it usually lay and planted himself between Black Pete and the oncoming redskins.

“ Stan' back ! ” he cried, confronting the rabble crowd. He was perfectly cool and collected. He knew that it was not himself that they wanted to injure ; but, even though the blood was yet dripping from his nose, he

wished to protect Black Pete, who had no weapon with which to defend himself.

One of the Chipewyans moved to jump, with his uplifted hand gripping a long hunting knife; but instantly Woolly's pistol covered him.

"Keep back!" the boy commanded, his finger trembling on the trigger.

"Shoot!—shoot!" urged Black Pete from behind him. "Shoot the skunks—else give the gun to me!"

At this moment the crowd at the rear swayed apart and Mr. Sinclair strode into the room.

"Hello—hello here!" he exclaimed. "What's all this bobbery?"

He elbowed his way to the counter. The Chipewyans ceased their mutterings and lowered their weapons. It was clear that their anger was not very deep-seated.

"Put that pistol out of sight, Woolly!" the factor ordered sternly. "I'll have no firearms used here. What's the meanin' of all that mess of blood on your face? Was't an Indian that struck ye?"

Woolly swept the back of his hand across his mouth.

"No, Mr. Sinclair," he answered. "No Injun ever done me any harm."

“Then what on earth’s all this disturbance about?” questioned the Boss.

Woolly glanced round at Black Pete for the explanation. But Pete remained sullenly silent.

Tawabinisay pressed forward with his silver-fox skin bundled under his arm. The Indian pointed across at Black Pete.

“Him bad man—heap bad!” he stammered. “Him big cheat, make swindle them brave. Chipewyan man no cheat. My killa silver fox, heap good, bring them pelt longa trail many sleeps. Them no beaver skin. Them fox skin, plenty good for heap tea, heap blanket, heap tabak.”

The factor frowned. He was accustomed to the complaints of Indians discontented over their bargains, but not to hearing accusations of actual cheating. He looked across first at Pete, then at Woolly.

“What is your version of the difficulty, Woolly?” he asked quietly. “You were here. You saw what was going on, I doubt-na.”

Woolly had begun to scoop together a quantity of loose tea that had been upset on the counter.

“It wasn’t my deal, sir,” he discreetly answered. “Tawabinisay offered his silver-



“‘It’s a lie,’ protested Pete. ‘They belong to that Injun.’”



fox pelt and asked in exchange as much tea as the pelt was worth. Pete reckoned it wasn't worth more'n thirty beavers, anyhow, an' I allow Pete ought ter know."

"Thirty beavers!" repeated the factor, glancing indignantly at Pete. "But that is rideeculous. Most certainly it was swindling—unless, indeed, the pelt is an unusually poor one."

"It's by a long way the best I've ever set eyes on," returned Woolly. "Jus' you have a squint at it, sir."

Black Pete had edged himself away, and had passed beyond where Woolly stood when he stooped and picked up something from the floor. Woolly saw that it was the pair of doeskin moccasins, which had fallen there, kicked off the counter by one of the Indians, and he went after Pete.

"Those're mine," he declared, watching Pete thrust the dainty things into the opening of his red shirt. "Say, you ain't figurin' ter take 'em away, are you? They belong ter me. The Boss gave 'em to me."

"It's a lie!" protested Pete. "They belong to that Injun—Tawab. I saw him layin' them on the counter. I'm goin' ter collar them, anyhow, ter pay him out for sayin' I tried to swindle him, the stinkin'

skunk. An' if you don't want me to give you another slap in the ugly face you'll quit."

"Pete!" It was Mr. Sinclair who called. "Come here and deal with this silver fox."

Pete returned unwillingly to his post at the counter. He did not know that one of the blue silk bows of the moccasins was still showing in the opening of his shirt.

"You know the worth of a silver-fox pelt as well as I do," continued the factor. "And this is an uncommonly good one. You will give Tawabinisay the very fullest value for it, and I will stand by and see the transaction fairly through."

"Wough!" grunted the Indian in satisfaction, and, speaking in his own tongue, he added: "Tawabinisay is glad. His white brother is a just man. His tongue is not forked. His words are straight. He will see that the people of the forest are not cheated when they bring to him the spoils of the chase. He is to be trusted, for his medicine is good medicine, and Tawabinisay will not forget. But the man with the black hair on his face is not a good man." He looked across at Pete. "The Chipewyan will do no more trade with him. Ugh!"

He leaned forward, staring fixedly at Black Pete's shirt front, pointing at it.

“See!” he cried agitatedly. “The moccasins! Tawabinisay knows them again. There are none others like them. He knows them and would have them back—even in return for the silver-fox skin. For to him they say more than all else in the world.”

He drew Mr. Sinclair aside and spoke to him in an eager, excited undertone. After a while Mr. Sinclair returned to the counter, obviously affected by what the Indian had told him.

“You will give that pair of moccasins back to Woolly,” he said to Black Pete. “They are his.”

Very sullenly, very slowly, Black Pete drew the moccasins from their hiding place and dropped them in front of Woolly.

“There you are,” he said. “I’ve no use for such trash. But you sure wouldn’t have had ’em back if it hadn’t been for the Boss. You’ve been gettin’ on the soft side of him, and, in spite of the mess I’ve made of your face, you’ve got the better of me to-day. But wait. D’ye hear? Wait! I shall get my chance one of these times, and then—well, then you’ll be sorry for yourself.”

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN WHO TRAVELS BY MOONLIGHT

THE visiting Indians had drawn their empty birch-bark canoes up on the beach, and erected their teepees under the sheltering pine trees on a level stretch of grass overlooking the lake. At the end of the timber-built landing stage were five separate piles of merchandise ready to be loaded into the canoes and taken up the lake and, by difficult portages, through trackless forests and over mountain trails, to the lodges of the Chipewyans, hundreds of miles removed from Fort St. Agnes.

The trading and bartering and bargaining was at an end. The Indians were satisfied. In exchange for their furs and caribou hams and pemmican they had received a rich store of the white man's goods, with pork and flour and tobacco and soft, warm blankets to keep them in comfort through the coming winter. And now they were only resting for a night before beginning their long homeward journey.

The sun went down behind the jagged peaks of the mountains ; the red maple trees behind the fort faded to a sombre crimson, and the giant pine trees stood out dark through the evening mists. The twilight deepened into night, and then the autumn moon rose big and bright into the indigo sky, shedding its radiance across the calm surface of the Silver Lake.

All was very silent when Woolly went out into the courtyard to close the heavy gates of the stockade. He had put the draught dogs in their kennels and tightened the chain of the cinnamon bear, and seen that no spark of fire remained in the cookhouse stove. Soon he would turn in to his corner in the bunkhouse and forget in sleep the pain that still throbbed in his injured nose.

At the gate he stood awhile, looking through the dark shadows of the pines to the glistening lake, and the black conical shapes of the wigwams where the Indians slept, unconscious of the beauty of the night. The air was filled with the warm, delicious smell of the pine trees and of the ripe, scented grass. Presently he became conscious that with these odours there was mingled the aroma of tobacco smoke. He sniffed and looked about him searchingly, and soon discovered

the darkly indistinct form of a man, seated against one of the nearer trees. He strode forward a few steps. His tread made very little sound on the carpet of soft pine needles, but the man moved at his approach and he saw that it was an Indian.

Woolly went nearer. The Indian's face was hidden by a strand of his long black hair, but his blanket had fallen from his right shoulder and arm, and Woolly recognized the band of filigree gold that he wore about his wrist.

Tawabinisay touched the turf beside him to signify that there was room for another seat, and held out his hand in friendly greeting.

"How!" he said, and then was silent for a long time.

Woolly seated himself beside him. The Indian passed him his pipe, but the boy shook his head and only touched the mouth-piece with his lips and ceremoniously handed the pipe back. Then, after a long spell of deep thought, Tawabinisay spoke.

"Tawabinisay is heavy of heart," he began. "His heart is as a stone. For many winters he has been alone. He has tried to forget his sorrows, but they still are as a sharp-pointed knife within him. This day

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his heart is bleeding ; for in the lodge of his paleface brothers his eyes have seen what he did not think to see ever again, and his wounds have been opened. He is sad."

He paused, smoking at his pipe, waiting for Woolly to speak. Woolly said :

" It is the pair of doeskin moccasins that Tawabinisay has seen. They mean something to him."

" They have spoken to him," the Indian resumed. " They have said many things. They have whispered to him of Maple Leaf, the daughter that he loved more than his life. But they cannot bring his child back to him, for she is lost. She is gone like a flower that is faded, like the light from the sky when the sun has gone to sleep beyond the mountains."

Woolly listened in silence while the Indian, speaking in a softly crooning voice, proceeded to tell the story of his lost daughter and the doeskin moccasins.

Maple Leaf was exceedingly beautiful, Tawab. explained, the fairest of all the flowers of the prairie, and as brave and good as she was beautiful. Not many of the sons of the forest were more clever than she in riding and swimming, in throwing the lariat and shooting an arrow ; no squaw could equal

her in dressing a buffalo robe or tanning the delicate skin of the mountain goat ; but she was famous mostly for her skill with the needle.

Many a great warrior watched her as she grew from childhood to girlhood, and desired her as a squaw for his son. But Maple Leaf did not wish to be the squaw of any Indian, even though he were a mighty chief renowned in warfare and the arts of the chase. She had given her heart to a handsome young French *voyageur*.

This young Frenchman came often in the hunting season to the lodges of the Chipewyans, bringing presents of beads and silk, and once he asked Maple Leaf to make for him a pair of moccasins which, as he said, he wished to give to the most beautiful woman in all Canada. Maple Leaf supposed that he intended them for some great white lady in far-off Montreal, but all through the long winter she worked at them. When she had finished them, she wrapped them in scented grass and put them away against his return, and behold, when that time came it was to herself that he gave them, and she was very happy.

Soon afterwards, Tawabinisay and the warriors and braves of his tribe went off on a

great hunting expedition beyond the mountains, taking the young Frenchman with them. They were absent during two moons. When they came back to their camping ground it was to find that their wigwams had been destroyed, their cattle and horses stolen, and their women and children massacred or carried away. No one was left alive to tell the tale of cruelty, or to say to what tribe or nation the ruthless enemy belonged. There was no sign of Maple Leaf or of anything that had been hers. Tawabinisay went to the secret cache in the hollow tree where she had used to keep the doeskin moccasins and other girlish treasures. The moccasins were gone, and by this he believed that Maple Leaf had escaped, taking them with her.

For days and weeks and months Tawabinisay and the young *voyageur* had searched and searched for the missing girl, or for any clue which might lead to a discovery of her fate, but no trace of her could be found, and they had given her up for lost.

And now, to-day, at this lonely trading station on the Silver Lake where Tawabinisay and his fellows had come to barter their furs, he had come upon the doeskin moccasins, still with their covering of scented grass in which Maple Leaf had kept them. It was

no wonder that Tawabinisay was heavy of heart. What did his discovery of the pretty things portend? Was it possible—could it be possible—that Maple Leaf was still alive? It was a dark mystery.

Woolly explained what the factor had told him of the finding of the moccasins on the mountain trail. Then he rose to his feet, bade the Indian a good-night, and went away, little dreaming of the important part he was destined to play in the solving of the mystery.

Long before he got into his bunk he had resolved that the moccasins should be restored to their proper owner, to whom they meant so much. He waited and kept himself awake until the moon had sunk behind the mountains, leaving the earth in darkness. Then he got up and stole out of the sleeping fort, with the little parcel under his arm. One of the dogs yapped in greeting as he passed the kennels; the bear rattled its chain. Woolly opened the gate noiselessly and made his way down to the landing pier. He knew which of the piles of merchandise belonged to Tawabinisay, and he went up to it, opened one of the blankets, and wrapped the parcel within its folds.

He slept later than he had intended, and

in the morning, when again he went out, it was to see that the loaded canoes had already started and were showing as tiny specks on the far-off reaches of the ruffled lake. Mr. Sinclair stood at the end of the landing pier, watching them as they grew smaller and smaller in the blue distance.

* * * * *

Some three days afterwards Black Pete and a crew of seven half-breeds, with two Cree Indians, Crooked Horn and Otter Joe, set forth with the autumn harvest of furs and pemmican on the long eastward trail to the Hudson Bay headquarters at Fort Garry.

Woolly was offered his choice either of accompanying Pete on the adventurous journey or of remaining at St. Agnes with the factor. He decided upon the latter course, knowing well that Pete Collyer did not want him and that Mr. Sinclair wished him to remain and share his loneliness.

The men started in canoes while the lakes and rivers were still open, and the great Saskatchewan could be navigated from its sources among the Rocky Mountains to Lake Winnipeg. After eight weary weeks, when the waterways were held in the icy grip of winter and the portages were buried under a blanket of deep snow, Black Pete and the

two Crees came back in a couple of dogsleds. The seven half-breeds had been left behind for the winter at Fort Garry.

Pete was not long in discovering that eight weeks of close companionship had had their effect in drawing the factor and his apprentice nearer together in sympathy and friendship. The two, indeed, had become as dear to each other as father and son. And Pete was jealous.

“It’s as well fer your own good as you reckoned on stayin’ at home here,” he remarked to Woolly on the day following his return. “You’ve made consid’rable progress, what!”

“Yes,” agreed Woolly, “the Boss has taught me heaps of things. All the same, I’m some sorry t’ have missed that int’restin’ journey.”

“If you’d gone along with us,” returned Pete, “you and me would sure have quarrelled. There’d have been ructions. And I give you my word for it, *you’d never have come back.*”

Woolly paid little heed to this implied threat, and the words passed from his mind. But weeks afterwards he remembered them, and then it was too late.

CHAPTER V

STALKING THE MOOSE

EVERY morning at the time of sunrise Woolly went out, clothed in his thick furs, to haul up the colours to the peak of the tall flagstaff, so that perchance they might be seen from afar by any traveller or wanderer in weary search of food and shelter. But such visitors were very rare. Standing lonely in the great wilderness of the north, St. Agnes was many days' journey from the nearest habitation, and during the eight dark months of the year the place was entirely cut off from communication with the outer world.

All around, the whole earth seemed to sleep in savage desolation; the snow lay deep upon the ground, the wind howled dismally through the ragged pine trees, and over the frozen lake the fringes of the forest loomed dimly through a mist of driving snow.

There was seldom any reason why any one should go beyond the gates of the stock-

ade. All the animals were kept in the warm shelter of the byres. All fuel and food and water necessary for the winter was stored close at hand within the pallisade, while indoors the logs crackled and flew, and the table was always set with moose steaks and good white bread and steaming coffee.

The days were short, the evenings monotonously long and dreary. For occupation the men smoked and mended their clothes, cleaned their guns, or knitted stockings and mufflers, or did odd chores about the cook-house and store-rooms. Woolly learned to read and speak in French, with the factor as his tutor.

On very fine days, when the red sun shone above the mountains, or the aurora spread its flickering, rosy light across the sky, Woolly or Otter Joe would indeed sometimes harness a team of dogs to a sled and take a spin along the frozen lake, or go out with his gun to search for the track of a wolf or a grizzly bear ; but there was no great enjoyment in hunting when the thermometer registered perhaps twenty or thirty degrees below zero.

On one occasion Woolly returned, after a longer absence than usual, and announced to the factor that he had come upon the trail

of moose, some ten miles down the lake, and he suggested a day's hunting.

"Aweel, then," said Mr. Sinclair, "we'll go and try to get a shot. Fresh moose meat is aye a welcome addition to our larder, and I'm wearying to get out by and get the stiffness out of my legs."

So on the following morning before daylight they got out eight of their best draught dogs and harnessed a team to each of their two sleds. Taking abundance of food and their guns and sleeping bags, they set off along the level ice of the frozen lake. The strong-limbed, well-trained huskies ran swiftly, guided only by the voices of their drivers and an occasional crack of the long-lashed whips, and the busy hum of the sled runners on the crisp surface kept tune with the merry jingle of collar bells.

On and on they went on their smooth way until, towards noon, Woolly began to look for signs of moose. Nor was he disappointed.

They found the tracks well marked in the snow, and followed them for miles up one of the frozen creeks and across the land back to the lake; thence through a belt of forest, where the trail was lost in the early darkness.

Mr. Sinclair decided to make camp and wait until morning.

They pitched their tent under the sheltering pine trees, fed their dogs with dried fish, made their bivouac fire, and after a good meal, curled themselves up in their sleeping bags.

In the morning, when Woolly was gathering fuel for the camp fire, he came upon signs which told him that the quarry was not far away. The moose had doubled on its own track to the windward of the camp.

Woolly went back, treading very softly in his moccasins. The dogs were still asleep in their burrows under the snow. He wakened Mr. Sinclair.

“ We might get a shot at that moose now,” he whispered. “ Best have a try before we make a smoke with the fire or rouse the huskies.”

The factor lifted his head from the opening of his sleeping bag.

“ Have a try at it by yersel’, Woolly ! ” he advised. “ I shall be real proud of ye if ye can manage it without help. I will bide here quiet until I hear your shot. Away with you ! ”

Woolly needed no urging, and he took his gun from one of the sleds and crept off.

To hunt the moose and get within gunshot

of him is extremely difficult. He is one of the most wary of animals, with marvellous powers of hearing and of scent. He feeds on the tender sprigs of the willow as he walks, always making his way through the glades where his wide-spreading antlers will have room. When he wants to lie down he carefully chooses a spot to the leeward of his feeding track and amongst herbage where he can take cover. He goes past this spot for a considerable distance, then turns and retraces his footsteps, breaking off suddenly and making a direct line for the spot he has chosen for his resting place.

By leaving his scent and his footprints in both directions to windward of him he knows that he will be able to detect the approach of any enemy following on his trail.

Woolly marked the direction of the track, and, keeping well to the leeward of it, made a wide detour. When he thought he had gone far enough, he approached at right angles to the trail, searching for it cautiously. When he found it, he saw that there was only one track of hoof marks. This meant that he had overpassed the moose, and he went back to leeward, and again approached the track from a point nearer to the spot from which he had started. Once more he

found only a single track ; but he was narrowing the area in which he knew the moose to be lying. The next time he went back for a greater distance, and on coming again to the track saw that it was double. His heart began to beat faster. In spite of the intense cold of the morning air, he was perspiring in his excitement.

Now, instead of keeping to the trail of the moose, he returned by his own footprints, and began to stalk backward and forward in parallel lines, searching all the time, and moving very cautiously lest he should make some disturbing sound. Suddenly he came to a standstill. In the midst of a clump of hazels he had seen a pair of antlers, scarcely recognizable amid the surrounding tangle of brushwood.

Noiselessly he cocked his gun. The moose did not move. Woolly was ready, but he wanted the animal to rise. He reached out his hand and bent a twig until it snapped. Instantly the moose, hearing the twig break, leapt up and made off. Woolly took steady aim and fired. The moose swerved, striking one of its antlers against the low-hanging branch of a fir tree ; then swerved again, staggered, and fell with a heavy thud, kicking up the snow and bellowing loudly.

Woolly went forward, taking out his hunting knife. But there was no need to use it. The bullet had entered the giant beast's side just behind the shoulder, and in a very few minutes the monster had ceased to move.

Mr. Sinclair, having heard the shot, disentangled himself from his sleeping bag and proceeded to make breakfast. Everything was ready by the time that Woolly returned to the camp.

"Weel," said the factor, "ye managed it, I ken weel. I heard the stricken beast bel-lowin', and there was but one shot. If you'd failed wi' the first, there'd have been a second."

"Sure," nodded Woolly, "I didn't mean him to escape; but one bullet was enough."

After breakfast they broke camp, and had the two sleds drawn through the forest glades to where the dead bull moose lay. With the help of the hauling dogs and their traces they had no great difficulty in turning the heavy carcase over from side to side in the operation of removing the valuable hide. Afterwards they cut up the meat and packed a large quantity of it in the sleds. But still the better part of it had to be left.

"You'll maybe come back for the rest of it another time," suggested Mr. Sinclair.

“ We’ll cover it to keep the wolves from takin’ it.”

When this was done they set off on their return journey, arriving at Fort St. Agnes a little after sunset.

Over the evening meal the factor spoke in high praise of Woolly’s cleverness in having successfully and single-handed stalked the bull moose and killed the great animal with one well-aimed bullet.

Black Pete listened in silence, and no one noticed the look of jealous hatred that had come into his face. He tried to disguise his feelings.

“ Say, Woolly,” he proposed, with a forced smile as he loaded his pipe. “ I guess you an’ me may as well go along to the end of the lake to-morrow an’ fetch in the rest of that meat. No use in lettin’ it lie thar fer the wolves. And thar’s the head, too. You didn’t bring the head. You oughter make a trophy of it, what? ”

“ Yes,” agreed Woolly. “ It’ll make a fine show, hung up against the gable end of the bunk-house, with the antlers spreadin’ out like a pair of wings.”

“ Suppose we makes an early start, then,” pursued Pete.

“ All right,” Woolly innocently assented,

forgetting Pete's threatening words of a few weeks earlier. He had forgotten his suspicions. Had he known what was in store for him he would not have agreed so willingly to venture out alone with the man who was seeking in every moment to injure him.

CHAPTER VI

THE BLIZZARD ON SILVER LAKE

THEY started after an early breakfast, each well wrapped up in furs, and seated with his legs stretched out in front of him under the boxed-in cover of his sled. Each sled had its team of four powerful Esquimau dogs harnessed to the traces in tandem order, one behind the other. The dogs were shod with tiny buckskin moccasins, to keep their feet free from frozen clots of snow. The best dog of each team was the leader, or foregoer, whose business it was to keep the track, however faint it might be, on lake or river. The steer dog, at the rear, guided the sled, preventing it from striking or catching in tree or root or icy hummock. With an ordinary load and a fairly clear track of hard snow a team of Hudson Bay hauling dogs could easily cover from thirty to thirty-five miles in a day and keep up this pace for weeks together.

Woolly drove his team at their highest

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speed over the snow-covered ice of the Silver Lake, cracking his long-lashed whip with the sharp sound of a pistol shot, and the dogs enjoyed the run no less than himself. Black Pete sometimes kept level with him, but usually he lagged behind.

“There ain’t no occasion to hustle,” he objected.

“Still,” Woolly reminded him, “we may as well aim at gettin’ home ’fore dark. Seems ter me there’s a big wind comin’ on, by the look of the sky.”

Even before they reached the far end of the lake, light squalls of bitterly cold wind caught up the dry powder of the snow and sent it drifting like dust along the surface and whirling in ragged tufts. In the woods the tall pine trees were beginning to creak and moan as their topmost branches swayed in the rising wind.

Woolly led the dogs by their old trail through the woodland to the place where the moose-meat was hidden. As soon as he reached the place he saw that the cache had been disturbed.

“Ah!” he cried, examining the snowy ground, “thar’s bin a lynx prowlin’ around. A big one, too. Wish I could get a shot at him!”

“ Why don’t you git yer gun an’ go along on his trail, then ? ” questioned Pete. “ Thar’s heaps of time. And I’ll load the meat on the sleds. I reckon that lynx ain’t very far away—the marks bein’ fresh. Guess he heard us comin’, or got scent of the huskies, and scooted off inter hidin’ ter hang around till he c’n git back to the meat. He’ll sure come back.”

“ Sure,” nodded Woolly, taking up his gun and following the direction taken by the lynx.

He was away for perhaps a couple of hours. During his absence Pete fed the dogs, and then lay at his ease under the furs in one of the sleds, smoking. He allowed himself to fall asleep, and when Woolly returned the work of loading the meat had not been begun.

“ Say, I thought you was goin’ ter pack the moose meat ! ” Woolly complained. “ You ain’t started ; and thar’s a bit of a storm comin’ on. Look at the clouds ! ”

“ Heaps of time,” Pete tried to assure him. “ Heaps of time. Where’s your lynx ? Didn’t you track him ? Didn’t you get a shot at him ? And you so almighty clever as a hunter ? My ! ”

“ I got a sight of him,” Woolly returned quietly. “ And I’d have got a bullet into him if I’d waited ; but I figured as you’d

be gettin' kind of uneasy, my bein' away so long, and I came back." He was rubbing the lid of his right eye as he spoke. "I got a scratch from a spike of devil's club," he went on, removing the mitten from his hand, and stroking the inflamed and watering eye with a naked finger. "I b'lieve the sting's still thar."

Black Pete showed no especial sympathy, although he well knew what agony the boy must be suffering from the poisonous scratch. Instead of offering to extract the thorn, he turned to the work of loading up the sleds. Woolly helped him.

It was already long past noon when they had packed the last chunk of meat, but Pete was in no hurry to leave. He even piled more fuel on the fire, and proceeded to boil a kettleful of snow, with which to make tea. But at length, when the tea was finished, he covered the remains of the fire with snow, buckled his snowshoes on his feet, and prepared to start.

The teams had now to be led instead of driven, but their loads were well packed, and when they left the woodland and got on to the level surface of the frozen lake their work was easy. Whilst they had been in the forest, however, the wind had risen and

swept away or covered all traces of the trail. A fine, gritty snow was swirling like dust in a sandstorm, filling the air with a white mist that curtained the shores of the lake.

Pete trudged on in advance, with the foremost dog labouring at his side. Woolly kept close behind with the second team and sled. His eye pained him fearfully, he could not keep it open, and the tears that ran from it froze into ice on his cheek, so intense was the cold. Fortunately, his four huskies did not need his guidance. The foregoer, a powerful and well-trained Esquimau called Muskeymote, sought shelter in the rear of the piled-up sled in front of him, while Woolly strode on behind his own sled, with his mittened hands clinging to its high back-board, and his head bent down to shield his face from the fierce whip of the icy particles that swirled unceasingly about him. He kept his eyes close shut, but the inflammation in the injured one was growing more and more painful, and the water running from it turned into a hard crust of ice, difficult to dislodge.

The wind seemed to be coming from all quarters at once, twisting and twirling and blowing the harsh snow from the ice into dense whirling clouds. In places the frozen lake was piled high with snowdrifts ; in places

the black ice was swept smooth and clear like a sheet of transparent glass. There was no shelter for man or dog on the wide expanse, and the finely-powdered snow found its way into every fold and crevice of the clothing. The dogs' ears and eyes and nostrils were full of it. Pete's beard was a mass of ice about his mouth, where his breath was frozen. Woolly had pulled the hood of his fur capote down over his ears and face, but still the snow penetrated to his neck and gathered round his cheeks in hard cakes. He gasped for breath.

The huskies were no longer running with their easy trot, but were labouring heavily, and the merry tink-tink of their collar bells had ceased. There was now no trail for them to follow, and they were bewildered. Black Pete sometimes called them to a halt, to give them a rest. On one such occasion he walked back to the rear of the train.

"Where's that compass of yours?" he asked. "Let's have a squint at it, to make sure."

Woolly thrust his hand into the opening of his fur coat and drew the instrument out.

"And your matches," pursued Pete. "Mine are all finished."

He laid the compass flat on the back edge

of Woolly's sled, and, shielding it under his capote, struck one of the three loose matches that Woolly handed to him. By the momentary flicker of light he saw the needle.

"That's all right," he said, pocketing the two remaining matches as well as the compass. "You take charge of both the trains while I go on in front to give the huskies a lead. Follow close behind me, keep me in sight—see? If you stop to spit you'll get lost."

"Why don't you take a leadin' string and lead the dogs by it?" Woolly asked. "I ain't able ter keep watchin' you with me sore eye. It's gettin' worse. I can't keep it open."

Pete did not seem to hear. Without answering, he strode on in advance of the dogs. He increased his pace, and the dogs pulled after him, with Woolly at the side of the foregoer of the leading sled.

"Say, you're going too quick!" Woolly shouted. "We can't keep up with you at this rate."

The strain of keeping Pete's dim figure in view through the dark swirl and swish of stinging, biting snow brought an added flow of tears into the boy's eyes, and he could only trust to the huskies following the trail.



“The angry blast caught him and flung him to his knees.”



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But soon even the dogs became confused. They were crossing a stretch of ice swept clean of snow, where Pete's snowshoes left no impression. Pete himself had quickened his pace and had gone so far in advance that there was no sign of him.

"Pete, Pete!" cried Woolly at the top of his voice.

He listened for an answer, but all the answer that came to him was a vague, uncertain sound that was like the echo of a mocking laugh.

Woolly repeated his cry, but a blast of ice-laden wind, fiercer than any before, deadened his voice. He covered his face with his hands to shield it from the sharply-cutting sting of the gritty particles. The angry blast caught him and flung him to his knees in the midst of the dogs. The leading team swerved, and the four bewildered animals bunched themselves together, panting audibly. The second team joined them, and the sleds came to a halt side by side. Two of the dogs lay down under the shelter of their load. Woolly caught hold of Muskeymote by the collar and drew him out to the full stretch of the traces.

Calling to the other team to follow, he led Muskeymote onward in the direction which

he believed Black Pete had taken; but in attending to the dogs he had turned round and round many times, and now there was nothing to tell him which way to go. He had no compass, the wind was blowing from all quarters at once, the darkness of night and the swirling clouds of drifting snow shut off all landmarks. Even if the throbbing pain in his eye had permitted him to see, he could not have known which was north and which south. He was lost—utterly, helplessly lost—in the trackless wilderness of the frozen lake, without shelter from the fierce wintry wind and biting frost, without fuel to make a fire, without food excepting the raw, uneatable moose meat, which was already frozen hard as blocks of solid ice. And he was blind.

* * * * *

Very late on that same night of storm, Black Pete arrived alone at Fort St. Agnes. He pretended to be astonished that his comrade had not already returned.

“Woolly not back!” he exclaimed. “Gee! That’s queer! He raced on in front of me with the two teams. I figured he’d be home hours ago. Say, we’d best light a flare to show him the way.”

Flares were lighted, rockets were sent up;

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but Woolly was too far away to see them, even if he had not been blind. Search was made, but the night went by, and the next day and the next long night, and still he did not come back.

CHAPTER VII

A DESPERATE SITUATION

IT was no wonder that no trace of Woolly could be found.

Mr. Sinclair had thought at first that the boy could not fail to see the bright flare of the wood fire that was kindled as a beacon on the high ground behind the fort, yet even if the glare of the fire should not penetrate the thick veil of snow-filled darkness, the couple of sky rockets which the factor had sent up must have been visible for many miles down the open lake, where no woods or mountains intervened.

Trusting that Woolly had seen these signals, and that he would return to the fort very soon, Mr. Sinclair waited for many hours. Still there was no sign of the missing boy.

“He has met with some mischance,” said the factor. “Maybe he has sprained an ankle; but in that case, he would sure ha’e liberated one o’ the huskies, and sent the animal home. It’s not possible he can have

lost his way. Woolly has come home through many a worse storm than this, and he aye carries a compass wi' him."

"Yes," nodded Pete, "a compass and matches to light and see it by. Guess he'll turn up right enough. Dare say one of the huskies got lame. That's what's keepin' him back."

"If one of the huskies were lame," ruminated the factor, "Woolly would hoist the animal on to one of the sleds. It beats me to un'erstand how you didna see him, Pete, when you came along in his trail. Even on a dark, snowy night you could hardly fail to see so big an object as a train of two loaded sleds and their teams. What? And did ye not search for their trail on the ice?"

"I never seen it, anyhow," returned Pete. "Must ha' missed it someways, sure."

The factor stared blankly into the glowing logs in the stove.

"I still fail to un'erstand why Woolly pushed on in front of you—or why you lagged behind, which amounts to the same thing," he said, looking round into Pete's face.

Pete did not meet the old man's inquiring glance.

"I'd a touch of frostbite," he faltered

awkwardly. "An' I hung behind ter rub a handful of snow on the end of my nose. By the time I'd done, Woolly an' the sleds was swallered up in the driftin' snow. Say," he added, "if you want—if you reckon it's anyways worth while—I'll go out an' have a search for him, takin' a lantern. Crooked Horn'll go along of me. He's a demon at trackin'."

Crooked Horn was one of the Cree Indians in the service of the Hudson Bay Company at Fort St. Agnes. He willingly agreed to accompany Black Pete on the search, and they went out, leaving Mr. Sinclair and Otter Joe to attend to the beacon fire. But, of course, Black Pete did not intend that the search should be successful. He had told the factor a pack of plausible lies, making out that it was he and not Woolly who had been deserted; he had said no word of the hurt to Woolly's eye; he had allowed the factor to believe that Woolly still had the compass in his possession to guide him homeward, and it would be awkward indeed if Woolly should now come back to expose the cruel, deliberate act of treachery which had left him abandoned in the widest part of the frozen lake, at the mercy of the darkness and the bitter cold and fierce anger of the blizzard.

At first Woolly did not fully realize that Pete's desertion of him was deliberate; but when Pete failed to answer his call, and went on and on, his intention was unmistakable. Woolly now recollected Pete's declaration of weeks ago, "If you'd gone along with us, I give you my word you'd never have come back."

And now Woolly realized too late that the threat had been carried out. He was lost—helplessly, hopelessly lost.

Lost! Yet there still remained the chance that the huskies might be able to find the way home. Even though it was impossible to suppose that they could pick up Black Pete's scent on the ice in the wind-blown snow, their instincts might still lead them aright. Woolly decided to trust himself wholly to the dogs.

Muskeymote was the wisest of them all, and he tied the lash-end of his long whip to Muskeymote's collar. He spoke to the dog caressingly, while, as well as he could, he cleared its ears and eyes and muzzle of the snow that had gathered in them. Groping his way back, he marshalled the other team behind the first sled, then returned to Muskeymote, and took up the whip by its handle.

"Mush!" he called out, and the foregoer

started off, followed by the other dogs, straining at their traces. They seemed to be going splendidly, needing no urging. Woolly began to believe that after all they had picked up Pete's trail. He did not know that Muskeymote was making direct for the shore at a right angle from the desired course.

He could not always be sure that the second team was following, and he was afraid to go back, lest, dropping the whip, which was now his surest guide, he should get separated from the dogs and be left behind. He remembered that there was a coil of rope lying with his gun in the front part of the nearer sled, and, drawing Muskeymote round with him, he felt for and found the rope, and tied an end of it to the whip handle. This longer leading line enabled him to go backward and forward in safety between the front and the rear of the two teams.

They were going at such a steady pace that he began to hope that they would overtake Black Pete. Once he went in advance to the full stretch of the line, taking his loaded gun with him ; he might perhaps fire it and attract Pete's attention. Wiping the moisture from his left eye, he looked searchingly in front of him through the swirling drift of snow ; but he could see nothing but black

darkness, and was glad once more to shield his face from the stinging, glassy grit of flying particles.

It was shortly after this that Muskeymote became strangely restless and intractable. He pulled and tugged from side to side, stood still and growled, then tugged madly at his collar, and drew both Woolly and the three other huskies round towards the sled, against which he crouched as if seeking its shelter. This stoppage of the sled brought the four dogs of the other team nearer. They, too, were curiously restless, and unwilling to obey when Woolly shouted his commands.

Suddenly all eight of the dogs bunched themselves together in confusion, tumbling over each other, yelping and growling. Woolly could not distinguish one team from the other ; he only knew that they were becoming inextricably mixed. Were they trying to get at the moose meat ? It was very likely that they were hungry. But never before had he known them to disobey him or to turn so suddenly wild for food. He could not bring them to their senses by cracking his whip, for the whip was still tied to Muskeymote's harness.

For many minutes he laboured to get the teams disentangled and into order, now shout-

ing an angry command, now softly coaxing ; but still the brutes paid no heed. Laying his gun at his feet, he coiled the line round his wrist, shortening it until he could seize Muskeymote by the collar and drag him forcibly out from the confused crowd. But this only added to the tangle of dogs and traces.

His brain whirled in utter despair and helpless wretchedness. Would he never get home ? Was he doomed to spend the whole long, dark, stormy night here on the frozen lake, battling with a pack of obstinate dogs ? Some of them were growling fiercely now and snapping at one another angrily. It seemed to Woolly that they had multiplied in number, that the snow-covered ice was thronged with huskies, all fighting to get at the moose meat. Dimly he could see some of them leaping upon the loaded sleds, tearing at the coverings ; he could hear them ravenously crunching at the hard, frozen meat. Those nearest to him were quarrelling, snarling, snapping, yelping. He could hear their jaws at work, and the sharp cracking of bones, and with every moment the fighting grew more desperate.

In the meantime, Muskeymote was dragging with all his great strength at the collar

which Woolly held ; dragging him, not toward the meat or into the midst of the clamour, but away from it. Once the faithful creature even turned and seized a fold of his fur coat in its teeth, and tugged at it insistently, as if to draw him apart from the madness of the fierce battle that was going on.

At the same moment, Woolly was almost flung off his feet by the heavy weight of one of the savage animals, that leapt upon him with a vicious snarl, and fell back to take a second spring. In the darkness the boy saw the animal's grim shape outlined against the mass of snow beyond. He vaguely distinguished its wide-open mouth and lolling tongue, the whiteness of its fangs, and the glistening green of its eyes, and he knew at once that it was not one of his sled-dogs ; not a dog of any breed, but a monster timber wolf.

With a quick start of alarm he realized indeed that he was surrounded by a vast pack of wolves !

He groped about for his gun, and quickly found it. In spite of the torturing pain in his eye, he forced himself to glance around and survey the terrible situation that faced him. He could make out the black, moving mass of wolves tearing at the food on top

of the sleds. Unhesitatingly he levelled his gun, and fired both barrels into their midst.

He did not pause to discover the effect of his shots, but again seized Muskeymote's collar. The dog had remained close beside him, although, in fact, he might have escaped alone, for the traces which had held him to the load were hanging loose from his harness.

"Mush!" cried Woolly, and the huskey broke into a run, pulling the boy with him along the slippery ice.

Woolly knew that, however much he wished to save the other dogs, it would have been madness for him to attempt to rescue any of them. Apart from the probability of being himself worried to death, he could not even distinguish them from the wolves that were so nearly like them in size and shape. But the fact that the traces had been broken in the scabble gave him the hope, nevertheless, that one or two of the huskies might have escaped with their lives and made off for home.

While he followed Muskeymote at the end of the leading line, he could hear the wolves yapping and yelping as they fought over the loads of moose meat. There were so many of them that it would not take them long to devour it all; and then they would turn

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upon the dogs that they had killed or maimed, and even upon those of their own kind which the dogs had overcome, and there would be very little left but a mess of bloodstained wreckage amid the drifting snow.

CHAPTER VIII

LIKE BABES IN THE WOOD

“ **M**USH, Mush ! ” Woolly repeated, urging the dog forward.

He believed that Muskeymote was making a course by instinct along the middle of the lake, and that a run of a couple of hours or so would bring him to St. Agnes. There was no heavy load to drag now. Woolly could keep pace with the dog, holding him in if he should run too fast. When they should come near land, he would put a cartridge in his gun and fire a shot as a signal, and the factor or Pete or Otter Joe would come out and find him and lead him into the fort, where there would be the warmth of a good fire, and food, and a long, sweet rest.

Just now the wind was blowing fiercely and the cold was terrible. Fearing frost bite, Woolly gathered snow from the top of his fur cap as he ran, and rubbed it on his nose and cheeks and chin. His inflamed eye was

still watering freely, and as his impaired sight was of very little use to him in his extremity, he wrapped his muffler over his face and trusted wholly to the dog's sure guidance.

Muskeymote seemed to be making a straight line for home, led, no doubt, by some extraordinary instinct which was independent of sight or scent. But suddenly there was a pause; the dog swerved to one side and slackened his pace to a quiet, loping stride. Woolly knew that they were still miles and miles away from St. Agnes. It occurred to him that perhaps their way was crossed by a particularly high wreath of snow, and this impression became almost a certainty when the line grew taut, and Muskeymote began to drag it up a steep ascent. The toes of Woolly's snowshoes came in contact with something hard. He stumbled and plunged forward, and his gun, slung across his back, struck against a substance that gave forth a dull, soft sound. Recovering his balance, he swung his arms to and fro, but touched nothing. He stood still, feeling about with his snowshoes. He was no longer standing on ice, but on solid, rocky ground. He drew the muffler from his ears, and heard the unmistakable wailing of the wind among

pine trees. He was conscious of the resinous odour of spruce and balsam, mingled with the earthy smell of dead leaves.

“Where’ve you brought me to, Muskey?” he panted. “We ain’t anyways near home. Where are we?”

He shortened the leading line until he came to the dog’s side. Muskey was lying down by the roots of a stout tree, licking at one of his forelegs. Woolly knelt and patted the dog affectionately.

“That was a close shave fer both of us, eh?” he crooned. “What’re you lickin’ at, old man?”

He felt along the animal’s furry back and head, then drew off a mitten, and, with his bare, cold hand, touched the place where the dog was licking, finding it wet and sticky.

“Hurt your arm, have you? I didn’t notice you was limpin’ any. Did one of them timber wolves get hold of you? The varmint! Wish I could have put a bullet inter him! Say, I’m hopin’ you haven’t laid a trail of blood along the ice! They’ll sure follow on our tracks if you have. Wish you c’d tell me where we are! Seems ter me you made a bee line for the shore. What? Which side of the lake are we on, anyway? My, that’s a nasty tear you have on your

arm! Best not allow the frost ter git into it. You're lickin' the skin the wrong way. Ah! Hurts some, does it? Wait."

Muskey winced when the wound was touched. Woolly opened his capote and felt in his undercoat pockets for something that might serve as a bandage. He found a pair of knitted mittens, and he put one of them between his teeth while he buttoned his capote and again covered his hands, already numbed by momentary exposure to the frosty air. There was a leather lace in the wristband of the mitten, and with its help he managed with difficulty to tie a protecting bandage over the dog's wound.

In searching his pockets he had taken stock of their varied contents. In one pocket there was a hard, forgotten biscuit, with an equally hard slice of caribou ham, to which was sticking a piece of maple candy. In another there were some matches, which he had not counted, but which were now to be valued beyond everything else in his possession—beyond his watch or his hunting knife or even the cartridges in his belt or the scout's woodchopper at his side.

It was only now that he realized to the full what it meant to him that Black Pete had gone off with his compass; for without

it there was no way by which he could take his bearings. If he had been able to discover his directions—if there had been a moon or the stars to guide him—he might have gone back upon the frozen lake and made an attempt to reach the fort ; but to go out now into the dreary desolation would only mean losing himself more completely than he was already lost, and if he were not frozen to death, he yet might wander for days and days upon the barren, shelterless ice and never get a glimpse of a landmark that would guide him. Muskeymote had at least brought him into the shelter of the trees, where the wind was less fierce, the snow less sharply cutting, and the cold less bitterly severe. No ; it would be wiser to remain here until the coming of daylight. And perhaps it would be possible to kindle a fire.

The making of a fire was his first thought. But he knew that this would be no easy matter. To begin with, his inflamed eyelid was so intensely painful that it would be difficult for him to gather fuel even in daylight. If he were to go blindly amongst the trees and cut or break off twigs as he passed, he could not carry enough in one journey to make a fire that would last for many hours ; he would have to take the dog with him for

guidance, and how could the dog be expected to lead him back again and again to the same place? Even if sufficient fuel were gathered and a suitable place were chosen, there remained the difficulty of lighting a fire of green twigs on a snowy ground in a high wind, and with fingers so numb and senseless with the cold that they had not strength to strike a match. Woolly knew that he had not more than half a dozen matches, and he could not afford to waste them. He must be certain that the fire would burn before attempting to strike one.

“No,” he decided, with a shiver, “it ain’t to be done, Muskey. We can’t make a fire to-night, that’s sure. We’ve just got ter find a snug corner somewhere under the trees an’ lie thar together, like the babies in the wood, till mornin’. Dessay by then, if I ain’t froze to death, this yer eye o’ mine’ll be some better, an’ I c’n see where we are, and know what to do. But we’ve got ter find that snug corner first, so come along, old man. Mush!”

He coaxed the dog to rise to its feet, and Muskey threaded his way amongst the tree trunks. Trained as a Hudson Bay hauling dog to lead a team through difficult places, he chose the wider gaps, and Woolly, keeping

near him, seldom even brushed against a tree. Once the dog paused and began to paw at a deep wreath of snow. Woolly lengthened the line and went aside, feeling at the branches that came within his reach. He caught at a heavy, overhanging bough of balsam. It was weighted with snow, and its tip touched the ground. He lifted it and crept under it, drawing the dog after him.

“Guess this’ll do,” he said, removing his snowshoes. “We’ll lie here in shelter, close together, an’ keep one another warm.”

Muskey appeared to understand, for he crouched low and curled himself into a comfortable position. Woolly sat up and tried to wind his watch, but failed. He could not turn the tiny key with his senseless fingers. He broke off a piece of biscuit and shared it with the dog, then, munching his own share, he lay down with his feet against Muskey’s warm body and his head pillowed on a cushion of moss between the roots of the tree.

He lay awake for many hours, shivering with cold, his teeth chattering, his injured eye throbbing with pain. Up above him the wind howled and shrieked in the rocking treetops, the snow-laden branches creaked and moaned, and the loose, dry snow swished

along the frozen turf with the sound of a seething sea.

“ What’s happened ter the other huskies ? ” he wondered. “ One or two of ’em must sure have been killed, with all them timber-wolves around. But some’ll find their way home, an’ then Joe an’ Old Man Sinclair’ll sure come out ter look for me. Pete’ll make out as it was me own fault. He’ll never allow as it was himself as deserted me. He done it on purpose, though. He meant to do it. He started to plan it all, soon’s he knew about me eye. That’s why he took me compass an’ the matches. That’s why he never turned back when I called him. He meant to desert me, so as I should git lost out thar on the trackless ice, in the blizzard. P’raps he even meant me t’ be frozen to death !

“ An’ yet—no, he couldn’t have known about that pack of wolves. He couldn’t have known but what the huskies would bring me safe home. Dare say it was just an accident. An accident, that’s all.”

Suddenly Muskeymote moved, lifting his head. A low growl rumbled in his throat.

“ What is it, Muskey ? ” Woolly raised himself on an elbow, feeling for his gun. “ What is it—the wolves—comin’ on our tracks—the wolves ? ”

CHAPTER IX

THE SONG OF THE SLED

BLACK PETE and the Indian tracker had returned frozen and breathless to Fort St. Agnes after their short and fruitless search for Woolly.

“ ’Tain’t no use lookin’ for him in a ragin’ storm like this,” Pete told the anxious Boss. “ He’s taken shelter somewheres ; that’s how ’tis. No occasion ter worry.”

Dave Sinclair shook his head gravely. He had serious doubts of Pete.

“ Shelter ? ” he repeated incredulously. “ Where could he find shelter on the wide stretch of the open lake ? His nearest shelter would be here at the Fort. Woolly’s no’ the one to let himsel’ be side-tracked. He’d force his way through a worse storm than this. No ; he has met wi’ some mischance. It’s likely the huskies ha’e become unmanageable. Ye see, he’d the two teams to handle, without your help.”

“ Teams was pullin’ along all right ’fore I

dropped behind," Pete muttered sulkily. "They was swallered up in the fog in no time."

"Even so," argued the factor, "there was the track of the heavy sleds for you to follow. How in creation did ye miss seein' them? Ye were na' blind."

Pete offered no answer, and the factor became more and more suspicious.

"Ye're hidin' somethin', Pete," he declared accusingly. "Ye're no' tellin' me the truth. Ye're deceivin' me. But I'll get to the root of the mystery—I'll go mysel' in search o' him. And if I find you've been dealin' falsely, you shall quit the Company's service right away. I'll ha'e no more truck wi' you, d'ye hear?"

"Oh, I ain't deaf," retorted Pete, warming himself at the stove. "Thar's no occasion fer you ter git crusty. Woolly's all right, somewheres. He'll be home come daylight."

Pete was now secretly hoping that Woolly was not "all right," that he would not come home to disclose the treachery that had been practised upon him. And as the anxious hours went by, bringing no sign, he began to believe that his hopes were to be realized, although, in truth, what had actually happened to the missing boy was just as much

a mystery to him as to the factor. Pete was particularly puzzled over the absence of the draught dogs. Why had not Woolly let them run loose, abandoning the loaded sleds?

After a night of sleepless anxiety, Mr. Sinclair prepared himself to go out and search the lake from end to end. But at dawn the blizzard was raging more fiercely than ever—so fiercely that it would have been madness to venture outside the shelter of the Fort. It raged incessantly through the whole day and the next night. But on the following morning the wind lost some of its force, and the best remaining dogs were harnessed to a two-seater sled. With the first gleam of daylight he set forth on his hopeless quest. He was accompanied by Otter Joe, in whose skill as a scout he had the utmost confidence.

Joe could find no explanation to account for his chum's absence. He had had long experience of Woolly's resourcefulness in situations of difficulty and peril. They had been close companions since their earliest childhood; they were like a pair of brothers, each knowing exactly what the other would do in given circumstances. They had gone trapping together on the far-off creeks, they had made month-long canoe journeys on the lakes and rivers, and lived together like wandering

Indians, camping in the woods, learning the secrets of the wilds, and becoming greatly skilled in woodcraft. Woolly was especially clever in breaking a trail and finding his way.

“Thar’s suthin’ main queer ’bout all this,” Otter Joe said to the factor as they were starting. “Why didn’t Woolly bring the teams to a halt when he found as he’d left Pete behind? How could he lose hisself when he had his compass an’ knew his bear-in’s? If he couldn’t manage the two separate trains, why didn’t he string the eight huskies in a double team to one of the sleds, leavin’ the other where it was? Thar’s suthin’ queer about it all.”

Directing the leading dog by voice and whip, the factor made a diagonal slant across the frozen lake. Otter Joe, seated behind him, swept the beam of a bull’s-eye lantern along the ice as the sled hummed its way through the mist towards the opposite shore. They found the tracks left by Black Pete and Crooked Horn in the area which had already been searched, and the track, less distinct, made by Pete alone on his homeward journey after his separation from Woolly. But neither in the layers of crusted snow nor on the

patches of clear ice did they discover a single mark of sled-runners or of dogs' feet.

"What d'ye make of it, Joe?" Dave Sinclair turned to ask when they had twice crossed the ice in their zigzag journey down the lake.

"Pete has told us a big lie, sir," Otter Joe affirmed decisively. "It was him that left Woolly an' the dog teams behind. Woolly sure never deserted him. It was Pete as deserted Woolly."

"Ay, without a doubt," agreed the factor. "And if we now follow Pete's back trail it ought to lead us to the spot where he quitted the sleds. By the look of it, Pete was in no doubt of his direction. His trail doesna' waver any."

"Couldn't have made a straighter line if he'd gone by the compass," added Otter Joe.

In many places the trail was lost under a deep covering of new drift; in places it was cleanly swept away from the glassy surface of the ice. Sinclair determined to drive his team towards the forest where Woolly's moose had been killed. He had abandoned altogether Black Pete's version of the adventure.

With the coming of the grey, uncertain daylight the force of the wind lessened, and at moments the thickly-wooded crags of the

nearer mountains showed faint and unfamiliar through the clearer air.

"We can't be far from the mouth of Musk Rat Creek, sir," Joe conjectured. "Peter reckoned it was abreast of the creek that they got separated. Thar's a cavern at the foot of the cliff, where Woolly could shelter, with the huskies an' sleds an' everythin'. Big as a fort it is."

"Could ye find it, Joe?" the factor asked eagerly.

Otter Joe shook his head.

"Not much good tryin' 'fore we've located the trail of the sleds," he answered. "If Woolly didn't come along this far, he sure never went to the cavern. Quickest way ter hit the trail is to cross the lake right now, searchin' same as you'd search for the trail of a moose."

This plan was adopted. Starting from the eastern shore, the team was driven due west. Joe strode in advance of the foregoer, searching for inequalities on the snow's surface, trying to discover some scratch or mark on the smooth ice. He had gone on the same line for a distance of about three miles when he stopped abruptly, waving an arm.

"Found it, sir!" he shouted back, and the factor drove up to him.

The trail was marked by the deep parallel grooves of sled-runners, the impressions of dogs' feet and the curved edges of snowshoes.

"See!" Joe pointed out, exercising his scoutcraft, "the two sleds were close up, one behind the other. Pete's team was leadin'. He walked alongside the foregoer. Woolly was at the rear, behind the second load; his shoes crushed down the tracks of the huskies. He was wearin' his new snowshoes, with the rounded toes."

"Why should he walk behind?" the factor questioned.

"Muskeymote wouldn't need any leadin'," Otter Joe readily explained. "I'm figurin' as Woolly took shelter behind the high backboard of his sled. Dare say he an' Pete took the sheltered job in turns. Say, we'll follow the trail now, an' I'll go in front to scout fer more signs."

A little farther on from where they had hit the tracks Joe again called a halt.

"They stopped just here," he said. "See how the dogs' footmarks is all mixed up? Pete came back on his tracks. Hullo! here's a dead match! Look if thar's any more lyin' round. Pete couldn't light his pipe with only one, middle of a blizzard."



“ ‘Listen!’ he repeated, ‘Bells—dog bells!’ ”



“ He wouldna’ seek to smoke a pipe in a blizzard, Joe,” the Boss told him.

“ Then it was Woolly as struck the light,” Joe conjectured. “ One match would be enough, likely, if he only wanted to look at his watch or his compass. But Pete was alongside him at the time. Wanted ter make sure of his bearings, mebbe. Then he went on again, Woolly followin’ at the other side of the trains. Listen! What’s that? D’ye hear? ”

He gripped the factor’s arm agitatedly.

“ Listen! ” he repeated. “ Bells—dog bells! An’ the singin’ of sled-runners along the snow! It’s Woolly, sure. Nobody else’d be out on Silver Lake in a storm like this. It’s Woolly. Listen! ”

CHAPTER X

HENRI PARDONET

THE sound came nearer and more distinct. The dogs grew restless, pricking up their ears. Otter Joe snatched up his gun and fired two shots into the air. An answer came in the crack of a whip, twice repeated, and the humming song of sled-runners and the tink-tink of collar bells came closer.

“It’s Woolly, sure!” cried Joe, going forward a step apart and standing to listen.

All around there was a heavy white cloud of swirling snow powder. Again from afar there came the crack of a whip, accompanied by the sled driver’s muffled cry, “Mush! mush!”

Then a shadow loomed slowly and ghost-like through the gloom, taking the form of a dog, then another and another dog.

“’Tain’t Woolly,” Joe faltered, with a shiver. “It’s a team of six, an’ a covered sled. It’s a stranger’s outfit.”

Old Man Sinclair rose to his feet, tightened

his snowshoes, and strode out across the ice to meet the stranger, who drew his panting team to a halt and got out—a tall figure, muffled up in furs, which gave him the appearance of a great brown bear. He wore snow goggles beneath the rim of his bearskin cap, and the collar of his immense fur coat hid his face.

“Ha, it is you, then, Monsieur Sinclair, whose trail I follow!” he cried, advancing with gloved hands outstretched in greeting. “You ’ave been trapping, hein? Trapping, even in such terrible weather? How!”

The two men shook hands. The stranger unmuffled his face. It was the face of a young, handsome man with clean-shaven cheeks and chin, a small black moustache and laughing blue eyes.

“And you, Monsieur Pardonet,” returned the factor. “What in creation brings you into this outlandish wilderness in mid-winter?”

“Parbleu, my sled,” the other answered lightly. “My affairs tek me to your own shack—to de Fort of St. Agnes. If you ’ave finished your trapping, it will be ver’ agreeable to ’ave your good company.”

“Trappin’?” repeated the factor. “No; it isna’ trappin’ that would get me out into

a storm like this. We're out searchin' for one of our household, who got lost in the blizzard. It's Woolly. You mind Woolly, I've no doubt."

"*Tiens!*" ejaculated Monsieur Pardonet. "In such case naturally I join in de search."

"We've just hit his trail, Henri," interposed Otter Joe, coming up and gripping all that he could feel of the Frenchman's hand under its cover of thick sealskin. "We was follerin' it up when we heard your outfit comin' along."

While the two teams were being broken out, and Sinclair was explaining how Woolly had been lost, Otter Joe ran on ahead, searching as he went. He was quickly out of sight in the mist of swirling snow. But presently he ran back, panting in excitement.

"I've seen the two sleds!" he cried. "Suthin's happened. I can't make it out. Woolly ain't thar; nor any of his dogs."

The two men, again in their seats, urged their teams to a quicker pace. Before they came abreast of the deserted sleds they had seen something on the surrounding snow which gave unmistakable signs of what had happened.

"Wolves!" cried the factor in agitation. "They ha'e been at the moose-meat!"

“And at the huskies!” added Otter Joe. “Thar’s none of ’em left.”

Monsieur Pardonet ordered his dogs to lie down in their traces, and then stood with his hands deep in his coat pockets calmly surveying the scene of wreckage and confusion.

Both of the sleds had been overturned, and round about them the trampled snow was stained with frozen blood. No scrap of the moose-meat remained, excepting here and there a gnawed bone or a strip of half-masticated skin. Of the great animal’s splendid head, all that was left was the antlers. In the midst of torn blankets, broken harness, and tattered canvas were the dismembered fragments of dead wolves—heads, legs, tails, and splintered bones.

“Looks like it was a big pack,” said Otter Joe. “Many of ’em must ha’ vamoosed when they’d had their fill; an’ yet I’ve counted over a dozen heads. An’ the dogs! Huskies sure got the worst of the battle.”

He went to and fro, identifying each dog in turn by a fragment of fur, a head, a foot, or other recognizable remnant.

“Here’s poor old Thunder,” he decided, standing over what remained of a dog’s white and black head. “An’ thar’s Mackinaw, an’

Kushinee. What one's this? No. 'Tain't Muskeymote. Believe it's Jacko, by the white blaze up the face. That's all that's left of Dick—just his bushy tail. Don't see nothin' of Muskeymote, nor yet Old Quebec."

"It is apparent that our friend Woolly escaped from the *mêlée*," observed Pardonet, stepping out upon the ice. "He 'ave left no trace, absolutely."

"It's no' verra like Woolly to desert the poor huskies, however," said the factor. "Why did he not set them free? And where in creation was Pete Collyer when this happened?"

"Pete wasn't here," declared Otter Joe. "I jus' figure he'd gone off 'fore the wolves came along. You c'n see his trail, out yonder. He was walkin', not runnin'. Guess he never reckoned thar was wolves prowlin' around, or he sure wouldn't have left his gun behind him in the sled. Say, I don't see Woolly's gun anywheres; nor his snowshoes. Wolves couldn't eat 'em."

Henri Pardonet walked round and round the wreckage in widening circles, searching for signs. He turned something up with his foot, picked it from the snow, and strode back.

"Voilà!" he said, revealing an empty cart-

ridge case. "It is at the least evident that Woolly fired a bullet into the midst of the ravenous pack." He pointed out to the spot where he had found the cartridge.

"Woolly went off that way," Otter Joe nodded. "Wolves follered him."

"True," signified Pardonet. "It is therefore for us—you and I—to follow on de trail of de wolves. Come, then. We take our guns and my compass. Monsieur Sinclair, you will perhaps keep de two teams apart in case of disagreement, and, if darkness arrives before our return, you will find in de locker of my sled a very good lantern to serve as our beacon."

Before starting, he opened the locker and thrust into his pockets various things which might be of use, including matches, a flask, a portable spirit stove, and a handful of biscuits.

He led the way beyond the spot where he had found the cartridge, never stopping ; but searching with busy eyes along the ice as he went, taking the long, swift strides of one accustomed to travelling in snowshoes. When he saw anything unusual he pointed to it, even though Otter Joe also had seen it. Once it was the impression of a dog's foot, distinguishable from the tracks of the wolves by

the fact that the huskey had worn foot-bags. Once it was a groove made in the loose snow by a trailing rope ; and again it was the faint impression of a snowshoe. These marks were never very far apart, and Otter Joe drew his inferences from this fact.

“ Woolly took one of the huskies along with him,” he conjectured. “ Guess it was Old Quebec. Seems they made a bee line fer land. We’re goin’ due west, ain’t we, Henri ? Keep yer compass handy. We shall want it if the trail leads inter the woods.”

Snow was falling heavily now, threatening to smother the tracks, and the wind was less boisterous, coming from the north-east.

Assuming that Woolly had been leading the dog in a fixed direction, and that the main pack of the wolves had pursued him shoreward, Otter Joe and his companion needed only to watch the track of the wolves. But as they went on, the trail became less and less distinct under the deepening cover of falling flakes, and the marks of Woolly’s snowshoes could no longer be found. The wolf-tracks became scattered over stretches swept clear by the blizzard, but came together more compactly where the snow had remained deep.

At one such place the searchers came upon the stiffly-frozen body of a huge wolf. Joe

stopped to examine it, and saw that one of the animal's hind legs had been broken.

"Just a wounded straggler," he declared, and pushed on.

They came at last to the shore. Here the new snow was banked up high and all tracks were lost.

"Flummoxed!" ejaculated Joe. "Seems we'd best quit lookin' any farther."

"*Tenez*—wait!" said his companion, slinging round his gun. "Suppose Woolly is in there among de pine tree, he will 'ear a shot. He will mek answer."

He discharged the two barrels in quick succession. The echoes rattled like a volley of musketry among the crags, and died away in the far-off mountains; but no answer came back.

While he stood very still, holding in his breath, listening, Otter Joe's eyes searched along the edge of the high drift, and presently he strode forward and began vigorously to burrow in the snow.

"Thar's suthin' here, sure," he muttered. "Snow's got blood in it!"

He was on his knees, scattering the snow aside with his mittened hands. He caught at a tuft of bristly hair, and then drew forth a strip of dog-harness from which hung a

tiny brass bell. Digging further, he came upon a large piece of blood-stained dog skin, frozen hard as a board, and a dog's hind foot, over which was tied a little shoe of moose leather.

"It's Old Quebec," he announced, "all that's left of him. Wolves sure followed on Woolly's trail. Woolly couldn't do a whole lot against a pack of 'em. Don't figure as he c'd escape, do you?"

For answer, Monsieur Pardonet plunged into the bank of snow and clambered over the boulders and in amongst the trees. Otter Joe followed him. The pine trees grew so close together that their spreading boughs mingled, holding the snow. The bare ground beneath was hard frozen, but there were many patches of drift, and in one of them the frame of a snowshoe was clearly marked. On another there was a smear of blood. Henri Pardonet stood still, searching for further signs. He caught sight of a fresh sprig of balsam lying on the ground, and looked for the tree from which it had been broken. The tree was close at hand, and he crept in under the shelter of its heavy boughs. Otter Joe was at his side.

"Woolly slept in here," said Joe, again exercising his scoutcraft. "He lay with his

head on the moss. His gun was propped against the trunk. Thar was a dog with him. They slept close together. They ate biscuit, an' dropped crumbs, see! Woolly'd taken off his big snowshoes ter git his feet under the dog's warm body. Guess that dog was Muskeymote. We've accounted for all the others. Looks as if Muskey'd been hurt. Thar's blood on the ground where he was lyin'. Wolves didn't come in here, though there wasn't any fire ter scare 'em. Why didn't Woolly make a fire, I wonder?"

"Ah, you forget," said Pardonet. "It is not so easy to strike de match with ze frozen fingers—when ze blizzard is raging around. What I myself cannot compre'end, it is why Woolly prefer a sleeping-place here in de open, when there is so much better accommodation in the 'ollow tree which he passed."

"Tain't a bit like Woolly," ruminated Otter Joe. "He missed that hollow tree; he never blazed his trail; his track was like the track of a drunken man; he made no fire. He didn't even build a screen of balsam boughs ter keep out the wind. And, say! Here's his watch-key! Couldn't he see it? Was he—was he blind?"

"It is curious," returned Pardonet, "but de same idea was in my own 'ead—that he

was blind. *Tiens!* But come, my friend, while you have use your eyes to ver' good purpose. I also use my nose, with the result that I catch ze smell of burning wood. Hein? You also?"

Otter Joe sniffed the cold air, and started to his feet. He, too, detected the resinous odour of burning wood.

"That's plum sure!" he cried. "Quick! Come along!"

They went farther in amongst the forest giants, searching, searching. And at last they came to an immense pine tree, from whose lower thickness there issued a thin blue film of smoke. Low down, near the ground there was a hole in the trunk. Otter Joe crept into it, followed by Monsieur Pardonet. They crawled within on hands and knees.

"Woolly?" Joe called, gazing into the hollow darkness.

But there was no response. All was silent as the grave.

Henri Pardonet struck a match and lighted a stub of candle. The flickering light illuminated a lofty chamber, large as a room, in the middle of which there was a tiny, smouldering pile of white ashes. Beside the embers lay a dead Esquimau dog. It was Muskeymote.

Beyond it was stretched at full length a figure covered in a thick fur coat. Pardonet knelt and turned the coat aside, disclosing a pale, pinched face with a swollen, inflamed eye, and a tuft of red hair that came from beneath a closely drawn fur hood.

“ He still breathes,” he murmured, taking out his flask. “ Woolly?—Woolly? ”

CHAPTER XI

WOOLLY'S AWAKENING

“ **M**USKEY—Muskey! Wish you c'd tell me where we are—which side of the lake we've landed on? ”

Woolly came by very slow degrees to a consciousness of his surroundings. All his senses had been numbed by the intense cold and the incessant anger of the blizzard. He could not think clearly. It was as if his brain as well as his limbs had been deadened. All wish to live had gone from him. He only wanted to sleep, and to forget his misery of shivering cold and gnawing hunger. He wanted to sleep, even though he believed that to do so in the midst of a Canadian blizzard meant that he would never again awake upon earth. When he had cast his last remaining handful of fuel upon the fire and covered himself in his furs, he had struggled to keep himself from falling into the fatal sleep.

But sleep had come to him.

And now he was slowly waking. His dazed brain was beginning to work, and to tell him that he was not dead. A strange wonderment was coming over him. He was no longer stiff with cold. There was a tingling sensation in his arms and legs ; his feet were even comfortable ; the ground on which he lay was softly yielding. He drew a deep breath of contentment, and the air was not icy cold, but warm with an aroma that was not of his wood fire or the resinous scent of the pine forest. His lips were moist, and there was a taste as of rich milk in his mouth.

He tried to look around him, to distinguish the inner walls of the hollow tree in which he had taken refuge ; but all was dark. He could not even see the reflection of the snow through the hole that had given him entrance into the tree. He drew his hand from under the heavy fur that enwrapped him, and snapped his fingers to the dog that had been his faithful companion across the frozen lake and through the storm-swept forest glades.

“ Muskey ! ” he called feebly. “ Muskey ! Wish you c'd tell me where we are—which side of the lake we landed on ? ”

There was no pain now in his eyes ; yet he could not see. He remembered that he had tied his muffler across them, and he put up

his hand to untie it. His muffler was not there. Instead of its woollen folds, it was a linen bandage that his fingers touched. What did it mean? What had happened? Where was he? Could it be that he was only dreaming that he was warm and comfortable?

He lay still and listened for the shrieking of the tempest in the trees outside. There came to him the sound of a crackling fire—surely a larger fire than the one he had so painfully built and lighted with such infinite labour! And with it there came the sound of a human voice, an unfamiliar voice, speaking words which he understood.

“Yes, *mon ami*,” the voice was saying, “believe me it will mek de grand difference to our Canada. To ’ave a railway stretching from ocean to ocean, across ze desolate prairie, across de Rocky Mountain, one long line of shining rails joining Atlantic with Pacific—imagine one moment what it mean, what it signify! In place of de vast desert waste, unin’abited, unexplored, *voilà!* you ’ave immediately a golden land of promise and plenty, rich in grain, in fruit, in cattle, in timber, in metals, in everything which humanity can desire; you ’ave towns and cities springing up lak’ flowers along ze trail. Veritably, Canada will at once become the

mos' glorious, the mos' prosperous country in ze 'ole world!"

There was a pause, and then another voice which Woolly vaguely recognized chimed in.

"Ay, aye, Monsieur!" said Old Man Sinclair; "I'm e'en willin' to allow the change it would make, if it were humanly possible. It's a proposition that I ha'e dreamed of for years past. Nothing opens up a country like a railroad. It would link Canada and British Columbia in one great dominion of the Empire. It would be grand—just grand! But there are difficulties. Ye can extend a railway frae Lake Winnipeg across the prairie provinces to the foot-hills; that's easy. But how in creation d'you figure that any railroad can come up against the impassable barrier of the Rockies? Ye canna' get a locomotive to climb the side o' a mountain; ye canna' bore a tunnel through the Great Divide."

Woolly, lying comfortable and contented in a warm bed in the factor's room, at home in St. Agnes, began to find interest in the conversation. He knew now that the first voice he had heard was that of Henri Pardonet, a young French Canadian engineer of Montreal, who had more than once come out

West on long trapping expeditions. Woolly and Otter Joe had often accompanied him on these expeditions, and they had fallen into the habit of addressing him familiarly by his first name of Henri.

What was this that Henri and Mr. Sinclair were discussing about the building of a railway through the Rocky Mountains? A railway! Woolly knew very little about such things. He had seen herds of buffalo roaming wild over the plains; he had hunted the moose and the grizzly bear in their native woods: he had visited Red Indians in their wigwams; but he had never seen a railway train.

"The thing's impossible," pursued the factor. "The Rocky Mountains will allus be an insuperable obstacle. Why, there's not a dozen men alive who ha'e crossed them. Ye might just as weel think o' drivin' a locomotive to the North Pole."

"*Ecoutez.* Listen!" rejoined Monsieur Pardonet. "You are yourself, if I mek no mistek, one of ze few men who 'ave accomplished ze journey across de Rocky Mountain. Yes? *Et bien.* Where a man can adventure so also can a railway line go. It is necessary only to discover ze way of least difficulty. Here, then, is de big problem.

Which is de bes' route? Already they commence de work; but at ze moment it is question whether they shall mek ze attempt to follow ze course of ze Peace River or discover another and an easier way."

"The Peace River?" Sinclair repeated. "Say, but that's hundreds of miles too far north. If they've set their minds on the scheme—if they've got the capital an' the labour—why do they no' make a bee line through from the Bow River level to the Columbia? If I know anythin' of the Rocky Mountains, that's the course they'd best follow. Let me show you on my map."

Woolly heard him rise and walk towards Henri. Near the bed he paused.

"Say, Monsieur, Woolly's changed his position," he whispered. "He's sure gettin' better. Come and ha'e a look at him."

Woolly turned on his pillow and held out his hand.

"How did I come here?" he asked. "Here at home? I don't remember. I was lost in the blizzard, out on the frozen lake. Then the wolves came—a whole pack of 'em—an' made for the moose meat, an' the huskies. How many of the huskies have come back, sir?"

"Nane o' them, Woolly; nane," the factor

answered, taking the boy's hand. "They were killed and devoured by the wolves."

"Not Muskeymote!" Woolly cried. "Muskey was with me—led me away off the ice an' inter the timber. Muskey wasn't killed an' eaten by the wolves. He was along of me all the time. 'Twas him as found the hollow tree, where I made me fire. Guess he'd been thar before. Must ha' been thar before."

"Ay," returned the factor, "he'd sure been in Black Fox Forest before—wi' Monsieur Pardonet, two winters ago, though I'll no' say that he knew that same tree."

"And who was it that found us?" Woolly questioned. "Pete, I suppose. Must ha' been Pete, sure. Where is he? Here in this room? I ain't heard him speakin'."

"Na, it wasna' Pete that found ye," Dave Sinclair told him. "It was Henri Pardonet and Otter Joe, who got on your trail an' tracked ye to the tree."

"Gee!" exclaimed Woolly. "Good track-in', that. An' I never blazed me trail neither. Couldn't see with me eye bunged up. Say, I was blind. Got a thorn of devil's club inter me eyelid, that's how 'twas. But thar ain't no pain in it now. Can't I have the bandage took off? I'm hankerin' ter see

Henri Pardonet an' Joe an' tell 'em what I think of their scoutin'."

Henri Pardonet removed the bandage, and Woolly was allowed to sit up. Otter Joe presently brought in hot food for him, and he ate hungrily.

"Where's Muskeymote?" he asked of Otter Joe, gripping the Indian boy's wrist.

"Dead!" Joe told him bluntly. "Wolves had tore a gash in his throat. We left him thar in the tree, where the wild critters can't get at him. Hadn't no time ter bury him. Wanted ter get you right away home, see?"

"An' how did yer bring me?" Woolly questioned anxiously. "I don't remember nothin' 'bout it—nothin'."

"Oh, we jus' made a litter of our guns an' your snowshoes an' carried you on it," Joe explained, making light of what had been a most difficult undertaking. "Carried you outer the forest an' across the ice to where the Boss was waitin' with the sleds. Tell us how you got lost," he added quickly, not giving Woolly time to express a word of his gratitude.

"Guess Pete told you how it happened," Woolly responded. Now that he was safe at home he did not wish to accuse Black Pete of treachery. "We got separated somehow

in the blizzard. Couldn't find each other no how. Dogs got out of hand, me bein' blind; an' then the wolves came along, follerin' on the scent of the moose meat. An' thar was ructions. Say, I'm glad Pete got back all right. Shouldn't have worried half so much if I'd known he was safe."

"Then you ain't blamin' him any?" pursued Otter Joe. "You ain't sayin' as Pete deserted you—left you behind in the blizzard, an' you blind, an' with all them dogs to handle?"

The factor and Pardonet exchanged meaning glances and waited for the reply.

"I ain't blamin' anybody," Woolly faltered. "I'm only glad to be back home an' comfortable. It was only the blizzard an' me bein' blinded that was to blame. If it hadn't been for the thorn in me eye, I could ha' managed the huskies. I could ha' strung 'em all into one team, or else let 'em run loose. Dessay I should ha' bin back as soon as Pete."

"Ay, I warrant ye'd ha'e managed somehow," reflected the factor.

Not then nor afterwards did Woolly utter a word of accusation against Black Pete. Not even to Pete himself did he betray by speech or sign his full knowledge of the act of treachery. Nevertheless, Pete was well aware all

the time that the boy knew, and had some secret reason for not at once betraying him. What did such silence mean? Did it signify a sweet and noble forgiveness, or did it not rather imply that Woolly, nursing a deadly vengeance, was only quietly awaiting his opportunity to inflict a terrible retribution?

Pete, believing this, passed his days in jealous watchfulness and haunting suspicion, his jealousy growing day by day into a yet more bitter hatred.

CHAPTER XII

THE CAMP IN GREY WOLF FOREST

IN the far north lands winter is very properly the season for hunting and trapping. It is in winter that the protecting coats of the fur-bearing animals are in their best condition ; in winter, too, the animals' tracks can best be seen and followed in the snow-covered ground, where every footprint of bird or beast tells its own tale.

Henri Pardonet had come to Fort St. Agnes prepared for sporting adventure, with his large sled well loaded with firearms and ammunition and steel traps ; and as soon as Woolly was well enough to accompany him, he organized a trapping excursion into the wilds of Grey Wolf Forest. Nothing was forgotten in the equipment of his outfit, for he was an experienced woodman, who knew exactly what things to reject as superfluous, and which to include as absolutely necessary. His outfit consisted of two light sleds and eight hauling dogs, with four persons—him-

self, Woolly, Black Pete, and Otter Joe ; and when the weather suited they started.

Going northward up Silver Lake, they crossed to the farther shores, and made their way, still travelling on ice, up Grey Wolf Creek, to visit a line of traps which Black Pete had baited a few days earlier. Many of the traps were empty, but some had been sprung, and from these they got a young lynx, two cross foxes, a skunk, and several ermine and marten. These animals they skinned, using some of the meat to re-bait the traps, and giving the rest to the dogs—all but the skunk, which, of course, no dog would touch. Indeed, none of the trappers would have touched it either, if the fur had not been so valuable as to overcome their repugnance.

In the evening, camp was made among the pine trees on the bank of the creek.

As the camp was to serve as headquarters for a couple of days and nights, Henri Pardonet chose his pitch with a woodsman's care on a piece of flat ground between two trees, and he made all ready before he would allow the sleds to be unpacked.

"Now I show you de bes' way 'ow to mek camp," he said, with the air of an expert, as he went about with his axe, clipping away

the saplings and brush, and levelling down the roots. "Pete, you will attend to ze 'uskies. Woolly, you will tek your axe and cut down ze birch sapling there. When you 'ave clear it of twigs, you mek our tent-pegs—twelve-inch long, no less, and sharp, to go in de frozen ground, you know. Joe, suppose you find from ze maple tree be'ind you a crotched stick, ten feet long."

The ground was cleared of refuse and snow, the tent-pegs were cut and the crotched stick was ready before he unpacked the tent. Then he ran a stout line through the eyelets of the canvas, and strung it across between the two trees, drawing it taut, and propping it with the long crotched stick, while Woolly drove in the tent-pegs. In less than a quarter of an hour the shelter was up.

"Now we cover ze floor very nice," said Henri, going aside with his axe towards a young balsam tree.

With a few vigorous blows he felled the tree, and the two boys began helping him to tear off the fans of evergreen, which they carried in bundles to the tent. On the floor of the tent the fans were spread in layers, always with the harsh butt ends thrust under. Over this deep, soft, aromatic mattress, rubber blankets were neatly laid, and held down

round the edges with strings lashed round the tent-pegs. The sleeping-bags would go on top in their due time.

There was next a fireplace to be made in front of the tent. This was built of two green logs, with space for the fire between their converging sides, and a tripod erected above them to hold the kettle. There was abundance of fuel to be gathered near hand—birch-bark, fir cones, and pine twigs to begin with, and then the larger dry pine branches and heavier logs, which were hewn and piled in a stack at the windward side of the fireplace.

Otter Joe had laid a handful of the light fuel between the logs, and was about to strike a match when Henri stopped him.

“Not yet,” he objected. “It is not yet time to fool aroun’ with matches. First we mek everythings ready ; we unpack our cooking utensils, we get out our food, spread our table, fill our kettle with clean ice from ze creek. Everythings will then be within easy reach before we squat on our ’eels. We shall then ’ave no occasion to quit our fireside. Compree ? ”

It was he himself who lighted the fire at last. And he did it with art, first holding a shred of bark in his hand, and kindling it at

a well-sheltered match flame. When the bark flamed he laid it in the fireplace, assisted it with more bark, with a few light twigs, then larger twigs and dry fir cones, finally adding billets of resinous pinewood, which blazed up hot about the kettle and the stewpan. And very soon a hot meal was ready, and could be enjoyed without disturbance.

The eight dogs, having already been fed with dry fish, had curled themselves up to sleep in their burrows in the snowdrift under the bank, which they seemed to prefer to the warmth of the camp fire. Low growls came from them once or twice when the shrill howl of a timber-wolf broke the silence of the forest, and during the night, when the four trappers lay in the warm comfort of their sleeping bags, one of them came prowling round the tent, sniffing audibly.

Black Pete, whose place was nearest to the flickering light of the fire, sat up, listening.

"It's only one of the huskies," Woolly told him.

"I ain't so sure," returned Pete, crawling out of his bag. He stood up and went out into the open. Woolly heard his moccasined feet crunching in the frozen snow; heard him scolding a dog as he chased it away towards the creek.

Pete was absent for a long time. Woolly wondered why he should choose to stay out in the cold darkness when he might be in shelter from the biting frost. But presently the smell of tobacco smoke was wafted into the tent. Woolly reached out a hand and drew aside a corner of the door flap. Beyond the ruddy blaze of the fire he could see the tiny, intermittent glow of burning tobacco as Pete puffed at his pipe, and behind it the blackness of the man's beard. Pete was seated with his back against a stout tree-trunk with his arms folded across his chest, and his head bent. It was only the glow of his pipe which told that he was not asleep.

The night was very dark. Even the patches of snow lying on the ground and on the black tree branches could only be distinguished where the reflections from the fire fell upon them. Woolly wondered if any stars were shining. He drew himself nearer to the door-flap, raised it higher, and gazed outward. He could see no stars. But he saw something else—something which sparkled for a moment and then disappeared in the black shadows above where Pete was sitting, unconscious of danger—a pair of shining green points of light.

Woolly kept his sight steadily fixed upon

the spot. The two points of light reappeared, larger than at first they had seemed, shining bright and round and green as grass ; shining as only a puma's eyes shine in the darkness of the forest. They were staring down at Pete, hardly a yard's distance above him. Woolly knew those sinister eyes. By the light of the flickering flames he could see the animal's lithe body lying along the overhanging bough ; he could see the long tail swaying from side to side. The puma was preparing for a spring ; he could see the movement of its tense, muscular shoulder. Silently but quickly he drew his loaded revolver from his belt, and took a long, deliberate aim at the narrow space between the glistening eyes.

He had not noticed that Pete Collyer had raised his head. Pete looked at him across the fire, and saw the shining barrel of the revolver, levelled, as he believed, at himself. With a sharp cry of alarm he flung himself forward to escape the dreaded bullet. In the same instant Woolly pressed the trigger. The night silence was broken by a loud report, an unearthly, piercing shriek, followed by a heavy thud and a yet louder shriek as the puma fell with all its weight to the ground, kicking and scratching at Pete.



“The night silence was broken by a loud report.”



The astonished man and the mortally wounded animal struggled together in confusion for some moments. Pete was quickly uppermost. He raised himself to his knees, snatching at his knife, and threw himself bodily upon the puma, stabbing at it time after time with the sharp-pointed blade.

"Figured you'd put a bullet inter me, did you?" he panted.

The puma gave a last spasmodic kick and lay still. Pete drew back in amazement, only half realizing that he had made a stupid mistake. He looked up and saw Woolly and Henri Pardonet standing over him in the fire-light, and Otter Joe crawling out of the tent.

"What happened?" Pete questioned of Woolly. "I kinder figured it was at me you was shootin'."

"At you?" cried Woolly in amazement. "Why, it was at the puma I fired, up in the tree. It was sure ready ter leap down on you. Gee! Why should I be shootin' at you, Pete?"

"Dunno, quite," Pete stammered awkwardly. "Unless in revenge for what happened in the blizzard—me desertin' you, knowin' you was blind."

"Oh, then," cried Otter Joe, "you're ownin' up to it now, are you?"

Pete scowled, conscious of his error, and turned to look at the dead puma. Henri Pardonet was in front of him. Taking up a flaming faggot, he held it aloft while he knelt at the beast's side.

“Admirable, Woolly!” Henri exclaimed. “Absolutely admirable! *Voilà!* You 'ave send your bullet clean between ze heyes!”

CHAPTER XIII

WHAT HENRI FOUND IN THE GUNNY SACK

THERE could be no denying that Henri Pardonet was an expert trapper and woodsman. He had studied the habits and lives of the wild animals and knew where to look for tracks, and neither Woolly nor Otter Joe nor even Black Pete could teach him anything of the art of baiting and setting a trap or a snare or of building a dead-fall. He knew an animal by its track in the snow as well as if the animal itself had been confronting him, and could tell to within an hour how long the footprint had been made.

His sense of smell was developed by exercise to an extent which often surprised even Otter Joe, who was a full-blooded Indian. He was always sniffing, always testing the impressions of sight and hearing by his acute sense of smell.

“ I am much astonish,” he remarked over breakfast on the morning after the adventure with the puma.

“What’s astonishin’ you, Henri?” inquired Woolly.

“Why,” returned Henri, “that we none of us mek discovery of ze puma in our neighbourhood.”

“He didn’t come prowlin’ around until after we’d turned in,” Woolly explained. “I’ve looked at his tracks. They’d crushed out your own footprints that you made when you went down last thing to cover the sleds. But Pete’s tracks went over ’em when Pete was roundin’ up the huskey. I’m figurin’ as the puma got up inter the tree jus’ after Pete went out, an’ before he lighted his pipe an’ sat down.”

“Assuredly,” nodded Monsieur Pardonet. “I ’ave discover so much. But our puma, nevertheless, was not very far away when we were all awake, when de smell of our cooked meat was still in de air. Presently, when you are ready, I propose to follow his back trail.”

Leaving Pete and Otter Joe to clean up the camp, Pardonet and Woolly went out, taking their guns with them.

They followed the back trail of the puma for a long distance into the depths of the forest, until it was lost in the midst of thick brush. Woolly stood still while his com-

panion searched further. When Henri came back to him, Woolly said:

“Th’ ain’t a whole lot of good in our trackin’ a beast as we’ve killed. Guess we’d best push back ter camp now, and then visit the line of traps. Might be somethin’ in ’em.”

Henri took a cigarette from behind his ear and put it between his lips.

“Possibly,” he said, “but it is better we do not disturb them for a day or two. We give them so much more chance, you comprehend. No, for the present, we go on—unless you ’appen to ’ave the wish to rejoin your friend Pete?”

“Was it to keep me away from Pete as you fetched me out on this silly trail?” Woolly asked with a smile. “I ain’t any afraid of Pete. He’s more afraid of me. Queer, him havin’ the notion as I was aiming at him when I was only savin’ him from the puma!”

“You mos’ certainly save him,” nodded Pardonet. “Also you brought from him ze confession for which we ’ave waited—ze acknowledgment of his treachery, hein? Ah, *mon ami*, you keep a secret lak de steel trap, so that Pete imagine you save up de bullet for ’im.” He lighted his cigarette. “Now,” he added, “we go follow once more on ze track of our puma.”

“ D’you reckon you’re goin’ ter locate his mate, then ? ” Woolly questioned.

“ Not at all,” continued his companion quietly. “ You see, before de puma visit our camp, he was engage in stalking a bull caribou. We now pick up de trail where he leave it. We follow ze caribou. Why not ? Come, then ; we start at once.”

He led Woolly round to the rear of the entanglement of brush and pointed out a spoor of cloven hoofs clearly defined in the snow.

“ Huh ! ” exclaimed Woolly, “ that’s caribou, sure. And not so old. Passed along here gettin’ on to dusk, I’d say. Must have lain down for the night not far from here. Guess that puma reckoned on comin’ back an’ pickin’ up the trail afterwards, bein’ led off by a fresh scent. Wind was in the right direction ter carry the smell of our camp as far as this.”

They pursued the tracks of the caribou down to the creek and across the ice, where Henri dropped his finished cigarette. On the farther side they came upon signs that the animal had had a feed of moss before lying down in the shelter of a bluff of birch saplings. Henri Pardonet went upon his knees, feeling the ground and sniffing.

“It is as I judged,” he decided, rising to his feet, “Monsieur Caribou would go out for ze evening promenade, leaving madame and bébé at 'ome. Two hours ago they all three march away in company. I think we overtake de family ver' soon.”

He started off, taking such strides that Woolly could only with some exertion keep up with him. They had no difficulty in following the tracks in the snow. They took an irregular course through the wider gaps between the trees where the male caribou would have ample room for his antlers. Here and there the family had paused to browse on the moss or to nibble at the fine twigs of willow and birch. Now and again Henri Pardonet would go down on all fours and sniff inquiringly at the bare ground.

“One hour ago they were here,” he would say, and later, holding up a hand to enjoin caution, he whispered: “We approach them,” and went forward, treading very softly with his moccasined feet. Finally he crouched and crept silently, slowly onward, holding his gun in front of him in the crook of his arm. Suddenly he stopped. Woolly looked over his shoulders into an open glade. The bull caribou was barely forty yards away, pawing the ground to get at the moss. Be-

yond, in amongst the farther trees, the cow walked on with her calf at her side.

Woolly caught at a twig and broke it sharply. The bull threw up its head in alarm and turned to run, but he had gone only a step or two when Henri Pardonet fired. The caribou lurched, fell on its knees and rolled over. Woolly ran up with his hunting knife ready; but the bullet had been well aimed.

"Fortunately, we are near de creek," said Pardonet, as he stood contemplating his prize. "We can, therefore, bring up one of ze sleds for carry de meat."

When they got back to camp they found Otter Joe alone, making up a new pile of fuel at the side of the fire.

"Where is Pete?" inquired Henri.

"Gone along ter have a look at the traps, I believe," Joe answered. "Went off just after you'd quitted camp."

"But it was not arranged that anybody should visit ze traps," objected Pardonet. "It is not de affair of Pete. He was forbidden to touch them."

Black Pete was observed at this moment approaching from the direction of the sleds. He was rubbing snow on his hands to clean them.

"It seems you 'ave been to de traps,"

said Henri Pardonet, not disguising his vexation. "For what?"

"Jes' ter have a look around," Pete answered sullenly. "Th' ain't much in 'em—nothin' worth bringin' home. Had any luck yourself? I kinder fancied I heard a gunshot a while back; but I don't see you carryin' anythin'."

He was told about the caribou and was requested to give help with the sled in bringing the carcass in.

"Sleds is frozen in the ice," Pete demurred. "It'll take time ter break either of 'em out. But I'll git one unloaded, right now."

He strode down to the creek with unusual, almost suspicious, haste. Otter Joe presently followed him, and then Woolly also went down, leaving Monsieur Pardonet at the fire, boiling a dipper of ice with which to make coffee.

The larger of the two sleds was unloaded and the dogs were harnessed to it. Pete had exaggerated the difficulty of breaking the sled out of the ice, for when the team began to haul, it was drawn away quite easily.

Pete, Otter Joe and Woolly were to do the work of flaying and cutting up the caribou and bringing in the hide, the head, and the choice pieces of meat. Monsieur Pardonet

watched them start, standing by the remaining sled. When he had seen them disappearing round a bend of the creek he turned to go back to the camp fire.

As he did so, he happened to glance at the remaining sled and to notice that some of its contents had been disturbed. He was perplexed. His quick, observant eyes caught a red smear on the edge of the white canvas cover. He removed one of his mittens and touched the smear with the point of his finger and saw that it was moist. It was obviously a smear of blood.

“So?” he said to himself. “It seem Pete ’ave cut himself, meddling up there with ze steel traps. And yet, why was he so careful to wash his hands in de snow? And for what reason did he mek himself busy with this sled?”

He turned back the canvas cover and saw another smear of blood on the white surface of one of his own neatly-folded towels. Under the towel there was a gunny sack, which had held dry fish for the huskies. The sack had been empty in the early morning; but it was not empty now. On the contrary, it was bulky. Monsieur Pardonet probed at it gently and found it very soft. He opened the mouth of it a little way and discovered

the scraggy end of an animal's furry skin, wet with blood.

"*Tiens, tiens!*" he exclaimed. "What have we here, then? Somebody's secret cache?"

He drew out the gunny sack, opened it more fully and turned out its contents. The skin lay at his feet, carefully folded with the flesh side outward. Already he had seen that the fur was black, and he had become strangely excited in anticipation before he opened it out and discovered that, as he had guessed, it was the pelt of a black fox.

"Magnifique! Splendid!" he cried, going down on his knees on the ice and clutching the deep, soft fur in his naked hand. It was a superlatively beautiful pelt, unusually large in size and in excellent condition. There was not a single hair in it that was not richly black and long and silky. It was worth more than its weight in gold, he knew. For the black fox is the most valuable and rare of all Canadian furs.

"So ho, Monsieur Pete," Henri went on, stroking the fur in boyish admiration, "you 'ave visit de traps, and you protest that you find nothing in them, eh?—nothing worth bringing 'ome? Well, well!"

An hour or two later, when the sled party

returned with the caribou meat to find a hot dinner awaiting them, Black Pete was in a surprisingly affable humour. He talked incessantly, told how well the dogs had worked, how cleverly the two boys had done their part in flaying the caribou and cutting up the meat, referred to Henri's skill in tracking and to Woolly's lucky shot last night in killing the puma. And to all that he said Henri Pardonet listened in complete silence, saying never a word, but only watching.

At length, the meal finished, Pete stood up and turned as if to go down to the creek.

"Where are you going?" Pardonet then asked.

"Down t' the sleds ter get a tin full of 'bacca," Pete answered very nervously. "I've finished what I had; been smokin' so much this morning!"

This was Henri Pardonet's opportunity.

"But it is not necessary you go so far," he said quietly. "There is an abundance of tabak in ze tent. You 'elp yourself, of course. In camp we share and share alike. Is it not so?"

It was his object to send Pete into the tent to be confronted with the black fox skin which was now properly cleaned and hanging stretched over a line to dry.



“‘ You've seen a ghost—a phantom?’ smiled Henri Pardonet.”



Pete hesitated awkwardly. He did not need a new supply of tobacco. He only wanted to hasten down to the sled and remove the purloined fox skin to some safer hiding place ; for he was well aware that each of his three companions possessed keenly observant eyes. He did not for an instant suspect that his trickery had already been discovered. With his empty pipe between his teeth he strolled casually round the fire and approached the tent. He lifted the door flap and bent his head to enter, but flung himself back as if from a physical blow, dropping the door flap. A cry that was half a snarl escaped him, his pipe fell unheeded at his feet. He staggered round, doubling his fists in impotent rage. His dark eyes flashed with the anger of a wild beast.

“ You ’ave seen a ghost—a phantom ? ” smiled Henri Pardonet. “ That is droll. It mek me to laugh. What was de colour of it, for example ? In ze day tam a ghost should be black, not white—black as ze pelt of a black fox. What ? ”

Pete could say no word in his own defence. He knew that his dishonesty had been found out, that his prospects were ruined. Dumb with vexation, he strode sullenly away towards the creek and gave vent to his anger by illtreating the huskies.

CHAPTER XIV

VAMOUSED

DURING the rest of the trip, and, indeed, for weeks afterwards, Black Pete was in disgrace. He was shunned and mistrusted, even by the dogs and the Indians, and the more he was shunned the more sulky did he become. In so small a place as St. Agnes it was, of course, impossible for his companions wholly to avoid him. They endured his presence at meals, they never denied him his share of the comforts and warmth of the living room ; but they could not be cordial and friendly with him. There was always the restraint which came from the knowledge that he was not straightforward and honest.

Every one at the fort knew now that he had wilfully deserted Woolly in the blizzard, just as they knew of his theft of the black fox skin. For it was nothing less than deliberate theft. The trap in which the fox had been caught belonged to Henri Pardonet, who had baited and set it. Pete had been for-

bidden to visit the traps ; yet he had gone to them secretly, and, finding the black fox in one of them, he had killed and flayed the animal and concealed the precious pelt with the intention of keeping it for his own private profit.

“ Technically, the pelt belongs to you, Henri,” declared Old Man Sinclair, when the matter was being discussed on the evening of the trappers’ return to St. Agnes. “ For although, like mysel’, ye’re a servant o’ the Hudson Bay Company, yet ye came here on a kind of jaunt and werena, strictly speakin’, on duty when ye laid the line o’ traps.”

“ Pardon,” Henri objected, “ you make mistake. As Commissioner, I am servant of ze Company even when I sleep. I am on duty all ze tam. All de peltry which we ’ave now brought in is, therefore, absolutely the property of ze Company. I mek no claim to it, you understand.”

“ Don’t see exactly how Pete figured he was goin’ ter turn that fox skin inter money,” observed Woolly. “ Don’t see how he could sell it, anyhow.”

“ Don’t you ? ” interposed Otter Joe, “ I do.”

“ How ? ” questioned the factor.

Otter Joe moved uneasily in his seat beside the stove. He glanced around to assure himself that Pete was not within earshot.

“Dessay you’ll blame me, sir, for not tellin’ you long ago,” he began to explain. “But I was kinder afraid ter say anythin’ when I’d no sure proof. Say, ’tain’t just nice ter go prowlin’ around, spyin’, on the track of a mate. Somehow it don’t seem fair. It’s takin’ a mean advantage, same as lookin’ at your opponent’s hand at cards.”

“But, *mon ami*, suppose you suspect your opponent is cheating?” pursued Monsieur Pardonet. “It is fair you challenge him to show his hand, is it not?”

“Sure,” agreed the Boss. “If he’s dealing square he’ll ha’e no objection to showing his cards. Did ye suspec’ Pete, Joe?”

“Often,” Otter Joe nodded. “But I never challenged him, never follered on his trail ter spy on him. I just kinder noticed things. Couldn’t help it. Noticed now an’ again after the tradin’ Injuns had been around that certain pelts they’d given in wasn’t scheduled in the accounts. They’d disappeared. Gussed as Pete had hidden ’em somewheres.”

“And why did ye’ no’ tell Woolly, or me?” questioned the factor.

“Thar wasn’t need for Joe ter tell me,”

interposed Woolly. "I knew as much as Joe did. An' Pete tumbled to it as I suspected him of cheatin'—cheatin' the Company as well as the Injuns. But same as Joe, I didn't figure it was fair to go foolin' around like a detective behind a man's back. The only time I accused him of cheatin' was when the Chipewyans was here last fall an' he tried ter get the better of Tawabinisay."

"*Tawabinisay?*" Henri Pardonet leaned forward eagerly. "Tawabinisay was here at Fort St. Agnes last fall?"

Woolly nodded in answer to the question, never dreaming that Monsieur Pardonet could have any personal interest in the Man who Travels by Moonlight.

"Even so," pursued Old Man Sinclair, disregarding the interruption, "your suspicions do not account for how Pete could dispose of the pelts. He couldna sell them at Fort Garry when they werena marked and scheduled."

"Dessay not," assented Otter Joe. "But Fort Garry ain't the only place where a man can sell furs. Say, thar's one or two fur traders along the trail that ain't above dealin' in smuggled goods. When I went down with the last canoe outfit things happened."

“Such as what?” asked Sinclair.

“Well,” Joe continued, growing bolder in discovering that it was not dishonourable to reveal his suspicions. “Pete was uncommon careful of a partic’lar bale of goods that wasn’t labelled an’ addressed. Kep’ his eye on that bale all the time whenever the Breeds was carryin’ it over a portage. We was delayed by weather at Qu-Appelle, an’ when we started again that same bale of goods wasn’t any longer in the outfit. Pete reckoned it had slipped overboard from the canoe: said it didn’t matter any: didn’t figure as thar was anythin’ of value in it. Seemed kinder glad to get quit of it. An’ when we got to Fort Garry his wallet was full of bills and English bank notes.”

“*Tiens!*” ruminated Henry Pardonet. “At Qu-Appelle? That is droll. It mek me to think.” He glanced at the factor and added: “Certainly it is good business we put up ze Mounted Police on ze track of Monsieur Pete.”

As he spoke these words Black Pete entered the room, nervously humming the air of a Canadian boat song. He stopped abruptly.

“Rain comin’ on,” he awkwardly announced, striding towards the stove to light his pipe.

Henri Pardonet adroitly changed the subject of conversation.

“ It is arranged, then,” he said to the factor, “ that you and Woolly and Otter Joe act as guides across ze Rocky Mountains to determine the bes’ route for the railroad.”

Old Man Sinclair meditatively scratched his grey beard.

“ Best route’s by the old Indian trail through Sinclair Pass,” he said ; “ I’m ready to go along and show the way. But, meantime, what’s to become of Fort St. Agnes ? ”

“ That is no obstacle,” intimated Pardonet. “ The Company will send capable men to tek your place. In two week—three week time they will be here. We then make a start.”

Black Pete had already overheard many discussions and conversations on the matter of the new trans-continental railway, and more than once he had hinted at a desire to be employed in the great work.

“ Say,” he broke in now, “ where do I come in in this yer railroad scheme ? Ain’t I goin’ ter have a look in somehow ? Guess I c’d do a heap better at railroad construction than messin’ around amongst stinkin’ pelts in a hole like Fort St. Agnes. I bin at it before, you know, in the States. Worked for a matter of two years on the Union Pacific.

If you've got the ear of the promoters, Monsieur, dessay you'd sling in a word for me, what? "

Henri Pardonet only laughed at the suggestion, not taking it seriously.

During the next few days heavy rains fell, the lake's surface became a mass of slush, the snow was washed from the trees and the mountains, and every stream was turned into a raging torrent. There could be no trapping or hunting. It was time to see to the repairing and varnishing of the canoes; for soon the warm chinook winds would blow, the ice on lake and river and creek would break up and open the waterways, and the sun would again shine upon a smiling land.

Black Pete made himself especially busy with the canoes. Helped by Crooked Horn, he worked outside the stockade in a shed down by the landing place, where he often took his meals and sometimes even slept. No one was alarmed if he was absent for days together.

Henri Pardonet, Woolly and Otter Joe were occupied one bright morning in giving a new coat of white paint to the verandah when the factor came out to them from the trade-room looking somewhat flurried.

"Just run down to the canoe shed, Woolly, and tell Pete I'm wanting him," he ordered.

And when Woolly had gone, he added, "Somebody—I believe it can only have been Pete—has been rummaging among the peltry. I canna lay my hands on yon black fox skin o' yours, Henri ; nor the bundle of ermine that was with it. Other things are missing, too, Ye might almost imagine we'd had burglars in the place."

Henri Pardonet drew a long whistling breath.

"But the door of the store-room was locked," he declared.

"Ay," returned the factor, "but I lent the key to Pete, three days ago, when he needed tin tacks and a new gimlet."

After a considerable interval, Woolly came racing back, excited.

"Pete has vamoosed !" he cried, "Crooked Horn has gone off with him. They've taken number four canoe !"

The factor and Pardonet looked at each other amazed.

"Quick !" cried the factor. "We must go after them ! Quick !"

"No use," Woolly told him. "They've got the start of us. They've been gone a couple of days, sure. What's more, they've bored holes in all the other canoes. We're too late !"

CHAPTER XV

RIDERS OF THE PLAINS

TROOPER WHIFFLE drew his mount to a halt and waited for his companion to ride up to him, the while he sniffed at the cool breeze that fanned his weather-beaten face.

“D’you smell something, Quain?” he inquired. “Isn’t there a sting of burning wood in the air?”

“Seems to me,” Quain responded, “that there’s a decided flavour of fried fish. Makes a chap feel quite hungry, eh?” He nodded towards the lake which glistened through the feathery green of the budding larches. “That lake probably teems with trout, and we’re near a Redskin encampment.”

“Might be a party of trappers from Fort St. Agnes,” Whiffle conjectured, touching his mare’s flank with a spur. “Anyhow, we’ll soon find out, if we can get down to the shore. They’ve sure landed from canoes.”

The two riders threaded their way through

the timber, following the downward course of a narrow stream. They were dressed in the winter uniform of the North-west Mounted Police. Each had his blanket neatly rolled in front of him, a carbine at his side and a bulging haversack across his back. They had ridden over hundreds of miles of trackless mountain and forest, with only a vague knowledge of their direction to guide them, and they had reached the shores of Silver Lake with the precision of navigators crossing a charted sea.

Through a gap in the trees they gazed upon a wide stretch of ruffled water, where an Indian canoe could be seen rushing forward over the waves with a splash of white foam under its curved prow.

"That ain't an Indian," Whiffle decided, referring to the man in the canoe. "His bare arms are white, see!"

"Knows how to manage her, though," reflected his companion. "Good as any Red-skin the way he handles that paddle. D'you know him?"

Whiffle shook his head.

"He's too young and active for Dave Sinclair," he answered. "It's not Woolly Hercus either; for he hasn't red hair. Nor Pete Collyer, unless Pete has shaven off his

black beard. But Pete couldn't handle a paddle anyhow with that man's art. Say, there's only one white man I know of who can manage a canoe with such skill. If Henri Pardonet was liable to be fooling around here so early in the season, I'd say it was him."

Quain's mare threw up her head with a jerk. Whiffle's eyes darted a quick glance from side to side and fixed themselves on a mossy boulder, beyond which appeared a head of long black hair and a darkly-tanned face, outlined against the blue mist of fire smoke.

"Say, tillikum, we haven't taken you by surprise, then?" said Whiffle.

Otter Joe stood out from behind the boulder with a gridiron in his hand. He was dressed in fringed and beaded buckskins. There was a white feather in his hair. He looked exceedingly Indian.

"Heard you comin' a while back," he answered. "Mebbe you smelt our wood fire and the fish I've been burnin'. No use eatin' stale trout when you can get 'em fresh."

"Where did you learn to speak English?" Whiffle asked, surprised that an Indian boy should speak it so well. "Are you from Fort St. Agnes? Seems to me I've seen you somewhere else. Ever been at Moose Jaw or Qu-Appelle?"

"I was at Qu-Appelle last fall," Otter Joe answered. "Went to Fort Garry with the last canoe outfit from St. Agnes."

"That's when I saw you," nodded the trooper. "You were with Pete Collyer at Qu-Appelle. Say, is Pete along with your outfit now?"

Otter Joe shook his head.

"No," he answered. "Only Monsieur Pardonet from Montreal, and Woolly Hercus. Monsieur is out in the canoe, bringin' in fresh trout. Woolly's back of me at the camp fire. Ain't you goin' ter off saddle an' have some grub with us?"

The two men dismounted and loosened the cinches of their saddles.

"We can wait to see Pete until we get along to Fort St. Agnes," said Whiffle, slinging his bridle rein over his arm.

"Guess you'll need ter wait a long time," observed Joe. "Pete ain't at the Fort. He's vamoosed. He's bin gone two weeks."

"Oh!" exclaimed Constable Whiffle. "Vamoosed? That's awkward. Say, we've been ten days on the trail coming here to see him. What made him quit?"

Otter Joe suddenly recollected what Henri Pardonet had advised the factor about putting the Mounted Police on Black Pete's track.

“What made him quit?” he repeated. “Seems he’d a notion that he’d like ter change his graft an’ get fixed up in one of the railroad construction camps. I’m not figurin’ as he expected a visit from the Mounted Police.”

“Naturally he didn’t go alone,” the trooper reflected. “Couldn’t manage a big canoe by himself. Who went along with him?”

Otter Joe was leading the way through the trees to the camp fire. He turned to answer over his shoulder:

“One of our Cree Indians—Crooked Horn.”

“Nobody else? There was a third man, wasn’t there—a half-breed?”

“Not as I know of,” Joe answered. “We hadn’t any Breeds at the Fort jus’ then.”

“Ah, then your scouting was at fault,” returned Whiffle with decision. “Do you happen to know a Breed named Batiste Gagnon?”

Otter Joe repeated the name. “Batiste Gagnon? Yes. At least, Pete knows him. They was allus together at Qu-Appelle. Pete made out as he’d won a heap of money from Batiste, over cards. He’d a rare pile of bills an’ bank notes in his wallet when we left.”

“Very likely,” nodded Whiffle. “But the money wasn’t won at cards.”

“Wasn’t it?” Joe asked. “Where an’ how did Pete get it then?”

The trooper did not explain. He dropped the bridle rein at his mare’s feet and strode forward into the clearing, where Woolly was busy over the camp fire.

Woolly stood up and greeted the two Riders of the Plains.

“Dessay you’re some hungry,” he said. “I’ve been gettin’ grub ready, and there’ll be fresh trout soon’s the canoe comes ashore. You goin’ along to St. Agnes? Boss’ll be glad. He’s just pinin’ fer news.”

“Say, Woolly,” Otter Joe interposed. “He’s wantin’ me ter believe as thar was a third man—a Breed named Gagnon—went off with Black Pete. ’Tain’t possible, is it? We never hit on any sign of a stranger prowlin’ around.”

Otter Joe expected Woolly at once to deny the possibility, but Woolly crumpled his brows in perplexity.

“I ain’t so sure,” he ruminated. “Ye see Pete took a bigger canoe than he needed if he was alone with Crooked Horn. An’ I’m puzzled over another thing. Never knew Pete ter smoke a cigarette, and yet thar was

a lot of cigarette stubs lyin' around in the canoe shed." He looked up into Whiffle's face. "Have you come along here on Black Pete's trail?" he asked. "Or is it Gagnon that you're after?"

"As a matter of fact," returned Whiffle, "we want to drop on both of them. They're both mixed up in the same crime."

"The crime of dealin' in stolen an' smuggled peltry, I guess?" said Woolly.

Trooper Whiffle shook his head.

"A crime much greater than that," he answered, turning away.

He went down to the water's edge to meet Henri Pardonet, who was bringing his canoe to shore. Henri jumped out with a heavy basket of newly-caught trout under his arm. He had seen the two troop horses in amongst the trees.

"How do, my friends of the police?" he cried gaily. "You are jus' in tam for a meal of ze mos' magnificent trout in all Canada. Come! I mek fry them myself. You shall ver' much enjoy them."

No further reference was made to Black Pete or Batiste Gagnon. Over the meal the conversation was wholly concerned with the new railroad, which was being rapidly extended across the prairies. There had been

some trouble with the Indians, and Quain told of an Assinoboine chief who refused to move his village of lodges from a place through which the railway track was to be laid. No persuasion or inducement would make him budge. He was ready to defend his rights of settlement with his life and the lives of all the warriors and braves of his tribe. The land belonged to the Red man, he argued stubbornly, and the Red man was going to keep it. Let the White man lay his iron trail somewhere else.

“ Things threatened to lead to bloodshed,” said Quain, “ but at last one of our Mounties came along—a chap named Silk. Silk said, ‘ What’s all the row ? I’ll clear ’em,’ and he went up to the chief: ‘ Chief,’ he says, ‘ you’re goin’ ter quit.’ ‘ Will you make me ? ’ asks the chief. ‘ Why, cert’nly,’ says Silk, and with that he went the round of the lodges and kicked away the key poles, so that every smoke-browed wigwam came down with a run.”

When the meal was finished the two troopers remounted and rode away towards Fort St. Agnes. It was not in their programme to waste time in a lake-side camp.

“ I suppose,” remarked Henri Pardonet, “ that dose two men ’ave travel all de way

from Moose Jaw—'undreds of monotonous miles—for de sole purpose of asking Monsieur Sinclair if 'e 'as to mek any complaints. It is droll."

"They came to arrest Black Pete," Woolly explained, "and you may bet your socks they won't turn back until they've got their man."

CHAPTER XVI

THE PATHFINDERS

DAVE SINCLAIR shook his head gravely as he contemplated the awesome mountain gorge that opened out dark and forbidding in front of the labouring canoe.

“Talk as ye like about the triumphs of engineering, Henri,” he said, “but ye’ll no’ persuade me that any railroad track can run through a wild place like this. We may as well turn back and acknowledge the impossibility.”

“It is certainly a difficult proposition,” smiled Pardonet. “But for de British engineer nothing is impossible. We go on, then.”

Fort St. Agnes had been left far behind in the occupation of a party of Hudson Bay officers and clerks who had been sent to take charge of the station in the chief factor’s temporary absence. For weeks Henri Pardonet had been making preparation for this journey of exploration. In addition to the paraphernalia required for camping out in

the desolate mountain wilds, surveying instruments and map-making material had to be included in the outfit. Much of the journey across the Divide would be performed by water, since necessarily the lower gradients for the projected railway would be found along the rivers and by the shores of the lakes. Sinclair's best birch-bark canoe was not too heavy to be carried over the portages, and it was strong enough to endure a considerable amount of buffeting in the foaming rapids.

The expedition was composed of only five persons: Henri Pardonet himself as captain, Dave Sinclair as his lieutenant and guide, and Woolly, Otter Joe, and a Cree Indian named Little Swan as crew.

They had paddled easily down the open water of Silver Lake and entered the gloomy defile of Ghost Creek with its high precipitous cliffs and mysteries of overshadowing forest. The stream was in flood and there were many perils to overcome in shooting the dangerous rapids and avoiding the sunken rocks. But all five were experienced canoe-men. When they came to a stretch of white, seething water Henri Pardonet would rise to his feet for an instant's searching examination of their way. In that instant he had picked out the passage of safety, and without hesitation

shot the little craft forward, guiding it with skilled paddle past the boulders, taking advantage of the eddies and currents and dashing through a rain of spray to the green water beyond.

When twilight fell they would make camp in the woods and take their evening meal listening to the laughter of the loon and the tinkling chime of the hermit thrush.

From Ghost Creek they entered a wide stretch of the great Bow River and turned westward. They were already in the midst of the Rocky Mountains. Behind them was the Cascade Range ; beyond it, the foothills, and yet farther east the wide stretching prairies. In front of them was a wild confusion of immense jagged heights, streaked with glaciers and capped with perpetual snow. The river, fed by countless tributary streams, came down through deep ravines and winding valleys, now tearing with mad force through narrow gorges, now sweeping sullenly in wider places or expanding in dark and fathomless lakes fringed with giant firs.

For days and days the pathfinders pushed farther and farther into the unknown wilds, often unloading and lifting their frail craft from the water and carrying everything overland to escape the impassable obstruction of

a mighty cataract or a surging rapid. When it was impossible to use the paddles or to drive the canoe by poles a long towing line was used, one man remaining in the canoe to stave it off from rock and cliff, the others hauling from the top of the high banks.

All the while as they journeyed Henri Pardonet was carefully surveying his surroundings, calculating how the railway track should be built ; where a ledge could be cut along the face of a vertical cliff ; where a bridge must be flung across the turbulent stream for the track to pass to the farther side of a chasm ; and where tunnels should pierce the projecting headlands. The gradient of the river was always rising and the ascent was, in places, so abrupt that it would be necessary for the railway to leave the stream and make a wide detour round a mountain to enable heavily-laden trains to climb by an easier gradient. Thousands of giant trees would have to be felled ; thousands of tons of rock would have to be blasted away ; bridges innumerable would need to be built ; but to the practical eye of Henri Pardonet all appeared possible.

“ Here at least ye’ll own that we’re beaten,” declared Sinclair when they reached the entrance of a deep and narrow cañon to

which he had given the name of Crooning Water Pass. "I doubt if we can even haul the canoe through such a wild turmoil of water."

"In ze morning, nevertheless, we mek a good try," Pardonet hopefully resolved.

They went back half-a-mile or so and made camp for the night under the pine trees. At earliest dawn Pardonet and Woolly climbed the height on the left side of the grim ravine. They could hear the prolonged murmur of the unseen water rushing through the narrow gorge beneath them. They crept to the edge of the precipice and gazed searchingly into the black depths of the awful abyss. Only by leaning far over could they get a glimpse of the current sweeping along at the foot of the opposite cliff.

Woolly pointed to a ledge of rock half way down the steepness.

"Might make our way along that shelf," he suggested. "But it's wet an' slippy, an' thar's a lot of loose stones, too. Best haul through from the top of the cliff."

"Yes," agreed his companion. "With our longest rope it can be done. But nobody must occupy the canoe. It is too much risk."

The plan was discussed over the camp

breakfast and the work was begun. Crossing to the farther side, they packed the canoe and covered it with tarpaulin, attaching an end of their longest towing line to one of the forward thwarts. The canoe drifted out into the current to the full length of the warp, and then Little Swan and Otter Joe took up the task of towing her. By easing or hauling on the line they kept the light craft in sight on the farther sweep of the stream, but at many points the gorge was so deep down that they could only judge by the tension of the warp that the canoe was following in safety. Often where the current was especially strong the factor and Pardonet helped with the hauling, while Woolly made his way along the brink of the cliff to give prompt warning of obstructions.

Once when he was lying on his elbows, craning forward over the void trying to see the canoe, there came an abrupt check. The canoe was not responding to the pull upon the warp.

“I’m figurin’ she’s run up against a fallen tree,” Woolly shouted as he ran past to take up a new position. Returning after a long interval he announced: “Canoe’s all right. It’s the rope that’s caught. Seems ter have got wedged between a boulder an’ the wall

of the cliff, half way down. The more you pull the tighter you make it. Turn back an' haul the other way."

They manœuvred to release the line, twitching the bight outward, tugging at it sharply, but it still held. For an hour and more they worked in vain.

"Guess I c'd climb down the cliff an' loosen it," Woolly proposed, throwing off his cap and jacket. "I c'n go down with the help of the rope if you hold it here, jus' above where it's caught. But don't pay out any more of it. I shall need the loose end ter climb up with, see?"

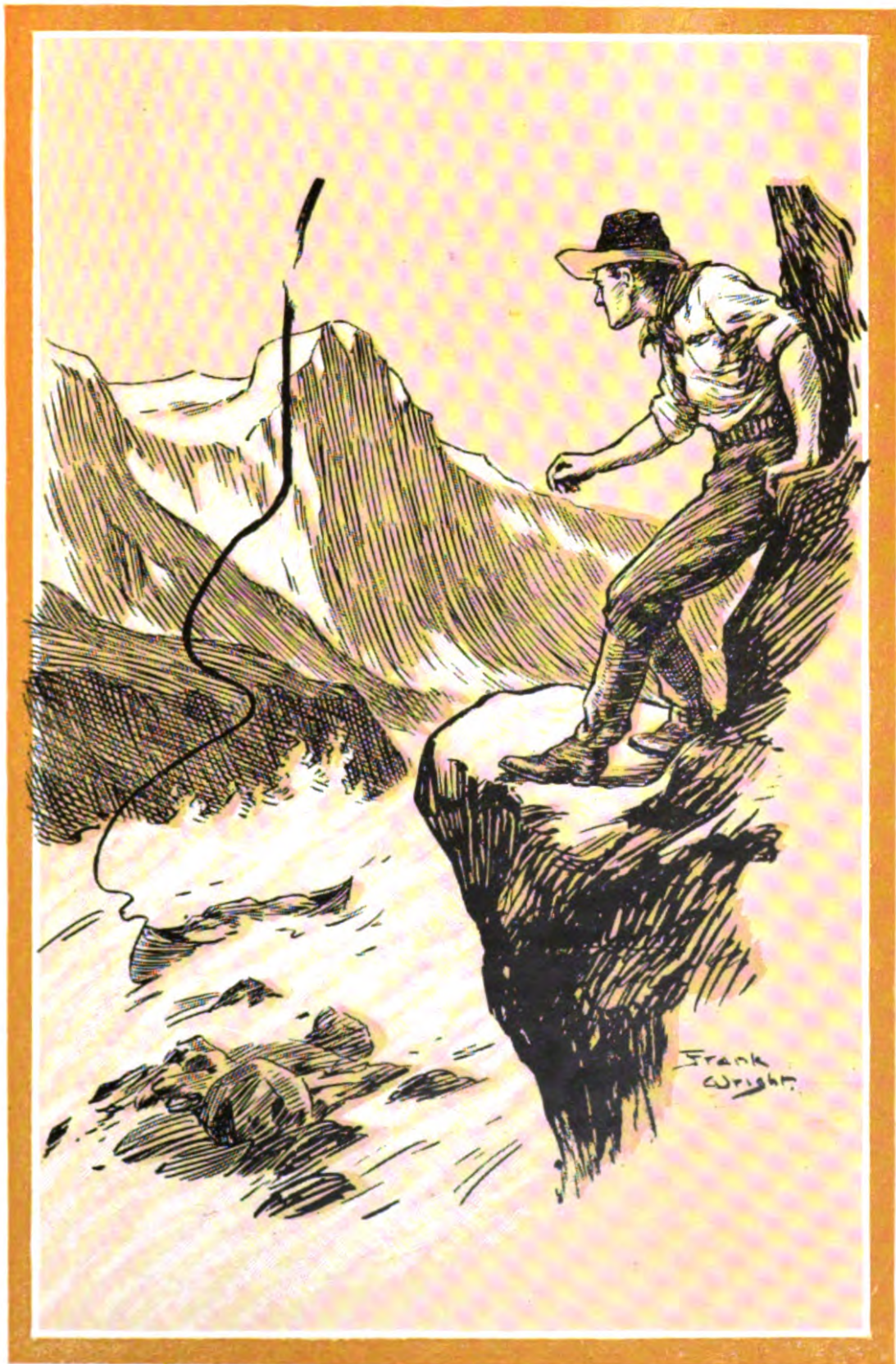
He was a skilled and sure-footed cliff climber and he went down carefully and quickly, not at all appalled by the danger of falling backward to certain death.

When at last he reached the offending boulder he discovered that the rope was kinked, and that the strain of the canoe bearing on the kink and rasping it against a sharp corner of the rock had already worn some of the strands, so weakening them that the sudden jerk which would come when the line was released would surely break it.

What was he to do? If the canoe should break loose it meant that all the camp outfit and provisions for the expedition would

surely be lost beyond recovery. The only possible way to save the canoe was by strengthening the rasped rope before releasing it. He thought he might manage this by hitching a sheep-shank knot with the slack line on to the taut one. But at once a difficulty presented itself in the fact that, risk what he might, he could not do more than touch the taut line with the tips of his fingers. Even if he could have grasped it with both hands he could not have drawn the canoe an inch nearer, for the rope was stiff as a bar of steel, and the pull upon it was so strong that he felt the boulder trembling under the strain. No, he could not strengthen the weakened strands; there was nothing for it but to trust to them holding.

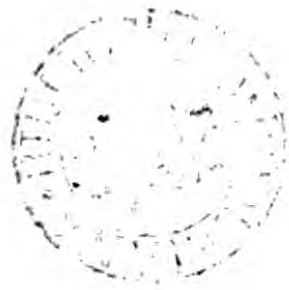
Getting himself in a secure position from which he could without danger to himself release the imprisoned warp, he sounded his whistle to let his friends know when to expect the sudden jerk. Then he gave a dexterous twist to the slack of the rope, bearing upon it with a steady push with his foot, and watching the kink untwisting itself. Again he blew his whistle. Something flashed across his vision as he shrank back against the wall of cliff. There was a sound of a dull explosion, and when he lifted his head and looked



"A cold shiver ran through him as he realized that the rope was far beyond his reach."

Woolly of the Wilas]

[Chapter XVI



outward it was to see a loose, ragged end of rope swaying to and fro in the air many yards away from him.

He leaned forward and gazed down the yawning gulf into the turbulent river, and saw the canoe caught in the mad rush of the current that swept it to swift destruction. Not until it had gone out of sight did Woolly think of his own position of unspeakable peril. A cold shiver ran through him as he realized that the rope—the only means of his deliverance—was far beyond his reach, and that he was here clinging desperately, helplessly to an isolated pinnacle of rock on the face of an awful precipice, with death staring him in the face.

CHAPTER XVII

A PERILOUS ASCENT

THE shrill, warning whistle from the depths of the cañon, followed by the quick running out of the line which they held, told the men at the top of the cliff that Woolly had succeeded in releasing the tow-rope from the arm of rock by which it had been caught.

“Grip tight, all!” shouted Dave Sinclair, planting his heels firmly against the support of a fallen tree-trunk.

Henri Pardonet, Otter Joe, and Little Swan stood gripping the rope ready for the expected jerk when the canoe should have drawn upon the slack. The jerk came quickly. They bore their weight against the fierce strain to stay the canoe, which all at once seemed to have gained the strength of half-a-dozen runaway horses; but suddenly they were all four flung backward, sprawling in a confusion of loose coils.

“Rope’s snapped!” cried Otter Joe, recovering his feet. “Huh! The rope’s snapped!”

He ran forward to the brink of the cliff. Henri Pardonet promptly followed him. They threw themselves on knees and elbows, and crawled to the edge of the precipice, staring down into the dark gorge at the liberated canoe racing unchecked in a smother of spray through the angry surge of water.

“*Parbleu!*” ejaculated Pardonet. “There goes our only means of escape from this trackless wilderness! Now we are lost—absolutely! In one instant everything ’as gone—our precious canoe, our camp outfit, our meat, ze complete equipment of our expedition—everything!”

“An’ what about Woolly?” questioned Otter Joe. “He’s down thar, sure; down thar alone an’ helpless, with hardly a foothold on the face of the cliff! Night’s comin’ on, too! What’re we goin’ ter do about him? Say, d’you realize what’s happened? He’s let go of the rope!”

Henri leaned an inch or two farther over the terrible brink.

“That is certainly true what you say,” he panted. “He ’ave let ze rope go free. There is now no longer a way for his escape. It was bad business we allow ’im to descend down there.”

By craning forward, he could see Woolly

sitting astride of the isolated boulder, with his back to the wall of cliff. The loose, ragged end of the rope was dangling in mid-air above him, many yards outward beyond his level, for the part of the precipice where he was imprisoned caved inward.

Henri Pardonet drew himself back inch by inch until he could regain his feet on the solid level.

“What’re we goin’ ter do?” implored Joe, in nervous distress. “Say, I wish I’d gone down ’stead of Woolly! P’raps I c’d go down now by what’s left of the rope an’ help him, someways. What?”

“Wait!” returned Pardonet. “It is possible we manage, I think. Woolly is all right at present. He ’as got cool ’ead. He will believe also that we shall not abandon ’im. He will ’ave de great patience. Listen, Joe. You will remain here. You keep your eye on him all ze tam.”

He returned to where the factor and Little Swan stood beside their end of the rope. Seizing the rope, he hauled it in, hand over hand, coiling it neatly at his feet. When the end of it came to him, he examined the ragged strands, and judged that they had been worn through by a sharp edge of rock.

Very adroitly he spliced a loop in the rope’s

end, large enough to go over his head and shoulders. In the bight of the loop he wrapped Woolly's jacket, securely tying it round to form a seat or cradle. This he carried back to the brink of the cliff and lowered it down, letting the rope slip steadily through his hands.

Otter Joe saw what was being done, and he shouted directions and warnings, while he watched Woolly, far below him, waiting until the rope should swing to his reach.

"Lower yet, lower yet!" he called. "Now make it swing."

For many minutes Pardonet worked and strove; but still the rope did not swing near enough. Woolly was looking up at it now, Joe could see, and, like Joe, he evidently understood that what was needed was a greater pendulum swing outward and inward.

Otter Joe crawled back from the brink and ran up to the men.

"Say, you want a long, crotched stick ter push it out an' give it a bigger swing," he explained. "It don't go anyways near Woolly yet. Wait a bit till I run and cut a sapling."

Little Swan went with him in among the trees. They both carried belt hatchets, and

they were not long in finding a young birch and cutting it down and stripping it of twigs, leaving a strong crotch at the thin end.

Sinclair took the pole in his strong arms. Getting the crotch under the bight of the rope, he pushed it outward, giving it a gentle backward and forward movement. Otter Joe, back at his post, saw that this was an improvement; the weighted end of the rope was swinging steadily nearer to the cliff.

“That’s right!” cried Joe. “He’ll get hold of it now. Pay out more rope!”

The swinging cradle came many times within Woolly’s possible reach before he attempted to touch it. His position was terribly perilous. He knew that the least error in judgment, the least incautious or hurried movement, would cause him to lose his balance and to fall headlong downward into the raging torrent beneath him, and he was waiting patiently until the right moment came for him to act.

Once he reached out his hand and touched the looped line with his fingers, but allowed it to swing out again. But the next time it came to him he seized it in the crook of his arm, holding it lightly, so that the weight of his jacket on the rope might not drag him over in its returning swing. And now with

great deliberateness he rested astride the boulder considering what he should do.

Obviously his friends up on the cliff intended that he should use the loop as a cradle, sitting within it on the cushion of his jacket. They would then haul him upward, slowly and cautiously, while he used his feet to climb and to fend himself off the rocks.

He signalled for more rope, and in response it was lowered a few feet. Then very carefully he got his head and shoulders through the loop and, holding on by the side lines, seated himself on the jacket, clasping his arms round the double ropes. When he felt himself perfectly secure, he whistled. The rope was drawn taut and he was lifted bodily.

Suddenly he was swung outward into mid-air. His brain reeled when he glanced down at the darkly moving river far beneath him. He felt himself turning round and round, and once his back came with a dull thud against the cliff, and he was shot outward again. But soon he reached a part of the precipice where he could use his moccasined feet, and now his ascent became easier, for he could almost walk up the steep incline, and there was no further danger of striking his head or rasping his knees and elbows.

He knew that the most perilous and difficult

part of his climb would come when he reached the top, where the rope was hauled over the rocky edge, leaving no room for him to work with his hands. But Henri Pardonet had anticipated this difficulty. He had propped the rope on the crooked sapling, pressing it outward, and when Woolly at last came to it he found foothold on a solid shelf of rock across which he could stagger into the outstretched arms of Dave Sinclair.

“God be thanked!” exclaimed the old man. And Henri Pardonet, like a good Catholic, crossed himself. Woolly was saved.

CHAPTER XVIII

A PLACE OF ILL-OMEN

NIGHT was coming on. The pathfinders were without food, shipwrecked in the wilderness.

“ Say, we couldn’t be a whole lot worse off’n we are now,” deplored Otter Joe.

“ As to that,” said Henri Pardonet, “ I do not agree. Woolly is safe. That is great things. It is true we ’ave lost our canoe and all she contain. But what will you? We ’ave still a revolver and plenty cartridge. We can sure get food. Also we possess our matches, abundant firewood and water. Therefore we ’ave no occasion for despair. Nex’ tam we steer clear of this Crooning Water Cañon ; we bring with us three four Indian to mek portage roun’ ze mountain. What? ”

“ We’d better ha’e brought the three or four Indians on this present journey,” reflected Sinclair. “ Ay, and even a second canoe. ’Twas rash to start wi’ so small a company.

But for my own part I'm not disposed to ha'e ony more truck wi' Crooning Water Pass. It's a place o' tragedy and ill-omen."

It appeared that Woolly's perilous adventure had seriously depressed the old man's spirits. He openly blamed himself in having allowed the boy to go down the cliff, even in having allowed him to accompany the expedition.

"Ye see," he said to Henri Pardonet a little later, when they sat apart smoking under the trees that were their shelter for the night. "Ye see," he said solemnly, "it was in Crooning Water that Woolly's father met his terrible death."

"*Comment!*" exclaimed Henri in surprise. "I was not aware—you 'ave never told me. How did it happen, then?"

Sinclair continued smoking in gloomy silence for many minutes. He did not know that Woolly, lying near him, apparently sound asleep, was listening. He resumed, speaking hardly above a whisper:

"Ewan Hercus—that's Woolly's father—and I had been across the Rockies into British Columbia, prospectin' for gold. We had found colour, we had pegged out our claim, and were returnin' to Fort St. Agnes. Hercus carried a leather bag of gold dust under his

shirt. When we'd left the Columbia River we were joined by another traveller, a stranger, who hooked on to our outfit. Whether or no' he got to know that Hercus carried gold about him I canna tell ; but one night, when we were camped at the far end of this same cañon, Hercus and the stranger went out wi' their guns to get a shot at a timber wolf that had been nosing around our meat, leavin' me at the camp fire. I heard a shot fired from somewhere near the head of the cliff, and an hour afterwards the stranger came back alone. He explained that in the darkness Ewan Hercus had ventured too near the edge of the precipice, and, missing his footing, had fallen over. For days I searched for my friend's body, but found no trace of him. In the meantime the stranger had quitted our camp and disappeared out of my life."

"That look suspicious, certainly," commented Henri. "And you 'ave never heard of him since?"

"Not until the patrol of Mounted Police visited us three weeks ago," returned Sinclair. "Trooper Whiffle spoke of the man—a half-breed, named Batiste Gagnon."

"*Batiste Gagnon!*" It was Woolly who repeated the name. He was lying wide awake

not a dozen yards away from the two men. "Batiste Gagnon!" he exclaimed, "the man as went off along of Black Pete? Gee!"

Dave Sinclair gave a nervous start.

"I didna think ye were awake, Woolly lad," he said. "Yes; it was sure the same man. The police patrol were on his track. They'd gotten some new evidence against him. Pete and he were at work together dealing in furs stolen from Fort St. Agnes."

"The patrol'll catch 'em, too, you'll see!" declared Woolly. "Canada's a big land ter hide in, but not too big fer the Mounted Police ter comb out."

A thick white mist rose slowly out of the cañon, and all around was cold and damp and clammy when, the following morning, the five forlorn wanderers got up one by one and shook themselves.

"Who's goin' ter get breakfas' ready?" laughed Woolly. "Guess I'm figurin' ter make a meal of a pinch of grass an' a drink of cold water. Might have a wash, too. Comin', Joe? The others'll foller. We'll make fer the place where we last had a camp, an' see if thar's any crumbs lyin' around."

Otter Joe and he strolled along the rim of the cañon and down the slope of the hillside to where the beetling cliffs gave place to a

low, rocky bank overgrown with spruce and larch trees. Here the river widened out into shallows of broken water, where there was a confusion of boulders and dead tree-trunks brought down by the flood.

“ I’m goin’ ter have a swim down to that thar island,” said Woolly, pulling off his jacket.

They both undressed and plunged into the current, which swept them downward. Woolly was the stronger swimmer, and he soon left Joe far behind. But he had not nearly reached the island when he heard Otter Joe calling him back. He could not swim back against the stream, so he made for the rocky shore and climbed to the upper bank, where the ground was soft to his tread. As he ran he saw Otter Joe perched on a large rock in mid-stream. He went beyond the place and again entered the water, swimming to where Joe waited.

“ See what I’ve found ! ” cried Joe, pointing downward. “ It’s the wreck of our canoe ! ”

Woolly quickened his strokes, and presently he saw a broken fragment of varnished birch-bark projecting above the water at Joe’s feet. Joe was now bending over it, seizing it in his two hands. But just as Woolly got up to him he leapt back.

“ Gum ! ” he cried, in a voice of consternation. “ See that ! Look ! It’s a dead man ! It’s a dead Injun ! See his moccasins ? ”

Woolly caught hold of the ankle above one of the moccasins and pulled the inert body to the rock, turning it over and peering down into the dead Indian’s face.

“ D’ye see, Joe ! ” he exclaimed. “ It’s Crooked Horn, sure ! An’ this isn’t our canoe that we lost las’ night. It’s the canoe as Black Pete went away in ! ”

“ Let’s git back an’ tell the Boss, ” Joe proposed. “ Leave the thing where ’tis ! ”

They returned to the bank, dressed, and ran back.

They were a long time in finding their companions. And great was their astonishment when they discovered them to see Sinclair and Pardonet at work up to their middles in the river hauling their own canoe to land.

Henri Pardonet had found her stranded on a spit of shingle half a mile below the cañon, half full of water, but otherwise apparently very little the worse for her trip.

CHAPTER XIX

THE LURE OF GOLD

THE unexpected recovery of their lost outfit had sent the five forlorn adventurers into transports of joy. They had not believed it possible that their frail canoe and all its contents could escape destruction in its mad unguided career through the rapids. And now they had found it almost undamaged. The buoyant craft had been carried like a floating twig by the strong mid-current onward through the grim cañon and into the less turbulent waters beyond. She had been swept into a swiftly running side eddy and stranded in the midst of fallen trees and other wreckage brought downward by the flood, and with the discovery of her all despair and wretchedness vanished.

Henri Pardonet and Dave Sinclair, helped by Little Swan, were beginning to unload the canoe when the two boys ran excitedly up to them. They were spreading the wet cargo out on the bank to dry in the morning sun.

“*Voilà!*” cried Henri Pardonet. “You can now see ze advantage of de good packing. Our blankets are wet, it is true; de water ’as mek entrance into my precious box of instruments; but what of that? It appears de flour, de tea, de meat, our guns, and ammunion ’ave receive no damage. Presently we see. First we satisfy our ’unger. Come, then; we at once light ze fire for cook our breakfast.”

Otter Joe and Woolly went off with their hatchets to gather fuel, while Old Man Sinclair made himself busy preparing dough cakes. In less than half an hour tea was made and there was an appetising smell of fried bacon in the air.

“We found the other canoe,” Woolly now announced. “Number four, the one as Black Pete vamoosed with. It’s all smashed up, an’ the dead body of Crooked Horn was amongst the wreckage. I’m figurin’ as they tried ter get through Croonin’ Water, an’ all three of ’em got drowned; though we haven’t seen the bodies of Pete an’ Batiste Gagnon.”

Dave Sinclair stared at the boy in amazement.

“What in creation were they doing along here?” he cried.

No explanation or theory could be arrived at until Henri Pardonet, after a long silence, said :

“ Obviously they ’ad not set up an opposition exploring expedition. Their journey can ’ave no connection, absolutely, with de railroad ; they ’ave no authority so to interfere, even suppose they possess de skill. It is clear they came not into ze desolate wilds to sell de peltry which Pete stole from you at Fort St. Agnes.”

“ Sure,” agreed Sinclair. “ Peltry was no good to them here, nor farther west.”

“ Also,” continued Pardonet, endeavouring to make a cigarette with damp paper, “ it is equally clear that they were not trying to escape de Mounted Police, because they were not aware that ze police were on their track. And yet they came here—Pete, Batiste Gagnon, and the Crooked Horn. They risk much. They mek de attempt to paddle or pole their canoe through the impossible torrent of Crooning Water, and they lose their lives. Consider, then, why they are so bold to face all these dangers. Not for pleasure ; not for trapping or shooting the wild animal ; not at all. They sure come for profit. It goes without saying. What ? ”

He succeeded in making and lighting his

cigarette, and he puffed at it meditatively for many silent moments.

"You are much perplex," he went on. "But reflect, my friend. Reflect upon ze story which you tell me zelas' night. Batiste Gagnon knows that you 'ad discover de gold over there in British Columbia. He covet dat gold, but knows not precisely where to lay hands on it. But wait. Batiste is in no 'urry. He is friend of Black Pete, and Black Pete is with you at Fort St. Agnes, where he can perhaps see your plans, your maps, your documents, hein?"

"That is plumb sure!" exclaimed Sinclair with a vigorous slap of hand on knee. "Pete knew everything about the gold find. He saw my marked maps. What is more, he went off wi' the papers registering my claim. I missed them from my desk, after he'd gone. You've hit the solution, Henri, it was the gold they were after. That is why Batiste came secretly to St. Agnes, to join Pete. But they couldna win through Crooning Water Pass."

"No," added Woolly. "They're both sure drowned, like Crooked Horn. An' the Moun-ties'll never catch 'em, after all."

When breakfast was over and the camp properly pitched, the rescued outfit was care-

fully overhauled. The canoe had sprung a leak in the seam of the birch-bark at the cutwater, and Dave Sinclair addressed himself to repairing it while Henri Pardonet dried and cleaned his surveying instruments.

Woolly stood over him as he emptied some water-saturated paper from his pocket book, which he had left in the bottom of the canoe. The pocket book itself was wet, and Henri breathed a deep sigh of regret as he contemplated it. Woolly noticed that it was made of white doeskin, beautifully ornamented with needlework of coloured silks.

"Looks like Indian work," remarked Woolly, admiring the stitching. "Only that pattern round the edge ain't like any I've seen in the wigwams. Say, why don't you put it to the fire ter dry?"

"The warmth of the sun is better," decided Henri, laying the pocket book open on the grass. He appeared to regard it as far more precious than any of his scientific instruments. "And now," he added abruptly, "suppose we go and see what we can find about Pete's broken canoe!"

Otter Joe accompanied them down the river. They brought ashore all that remained of the wreck—a large section of the canoe itself, a paddle, and a tent cover. What they

wanted most was some rope ; for the larger part of their own towing line had been lost. But there was none. Neither were there any stores worth carrying away. Evidently the canoe had been capsized in the rapids and its heavier cargo had fallen out and sunk.

For an hour or so they searched about for the bodies of Pete Collyer and Batiste Gagnon, but finding no trace of them they buried Crooked Horn and returned to their camp, where they held a council as to their further movements before quitting their present encampment and to consider the damage done to their outfit.

Henri Pardonet's written record of his explorations for the railways had not been protected. The paper was saturated and would have to be carefully dried, leaf by leaf, before he could possibly continue with it. This would delay a fresh start. The mending of the canoe was a simple matter. No special tools or material were needed ; but the loss of the better part of their towing line was serious. In any case, it was obvious that there would be more need for carrying their canoe and outfit over difficult portages than had been anticipated, and Dave Sinclair had begun to realize that he was not now so capable of enduring the fatigues of mountain

travel as he had been in his younger and more vigorous days.

“ I’m thinkin’ it would be just as wise if some of us should turn back and get help and a reserve canoe,” he said. “ There’s the village of half-breeds that we passed to the west of Ghost Creek. They’d have a canoe to spare. And we could get some few other things that we’re needin’ from the French Mission at Beaver Tail Crossing.”

He glanced aside at Woolly.

“ Mebbe Joe an’ me c’d go,” Woolly proposed. “ It wouldn’t take many days. We could have the canoe, and some grub. You three’d be all right here till we got back. Dessay I c’d make ’em understand me at the Mission, though I reckon some of the nuns c’n speak English.”

“ Your French is not so bad, Woolly,” smiled Henri Pardonet. “ I think it good business you go—you and Otter Joe.”

When the canoe was repaired, therefore, Woolly and Joe made a list of the requirements, took enough food to serve them for the journey, and set off down the river.

CHAPTER XX

THE VESPER BELL

THEIR canoe was light and easily managed, generally with the use of only one paddle to steer by and keep her in the midstream. This back journey down the Bow River was even a pleasure trip, with warm sunny days and fragrant, moonlit nights. At times there was the excitement of a swift rush along the calm water to where it curved in a glassy green volume over the brink of a shelf of rock, to plunge into the roaring, foamy depths of the swirling pool beneath. Great skill was needed in handling the frail craft and keeping her in steady balance on such occasions, but always she took the perilous leap over the cataract with the precision of a well-trained horse, dropping with a joyous splash into the turmoil of whirling water and snowy spray and going onward as with a chuckle of glee.

There were many rapids and cataracts ; but in places the river widened out into the expanses of a lake whose glassy surface



“She took the perilous leap over the cataract with the precision of a well trained horse.”



mirrored the mountains and reflected every tree and gently swaying reed, and as the canoe glided onward she left behind her two long outstretching lines of ripple that moved like messengers to either shore.

In the early morning when the rising sun dispersed the mists and touched the mountain tops with rosy light, the two boys bathed in the cool stream. In the quiet evenings they fished for trout and cooked their catch over the camp fire amongst the whispering trees, where grey and red squirrels came peeping out and striped chipmunks ran and darted here and there quicker than the birds. They had guns with them, but did not often use them. Otter Joe once shot a jack-rabbit, adding its flesh to the stockpot; and once Woolly fired at a splendid eagle, perched on a point of rock, but got nothing but a couple of tail feathers that floated down as the majestic bird took wing and soared high into the air, disappearing over the snowy peaks of far-off Minnewanka.

One evening they camped at the mouth of a creek where there was a vast, busy colony of beavers.

“Pity we have no traps with us,” regretted Otter Joe. “We might get hundreds of ’em here.”

“ Best leave 'em be when we're not out for pellets,” said Woolly. “ Say, you never heard the yarn as Henri was tellin' the Boss 'bout the beavers an' the railroad men way back in Manitoba. Seems the engineers figured ter build the railroad track through a beaver colony. They made a breach in the beaver dam, to draw off the water. Beavers soon choked it up again. Navvies made a second and a third breach ; beavers filled 'em up. For days an' days the same thing went on. Allus when a breach was made, the little critters found it an' dammed it up. It was a fight between the intelligence of professional engineers an' the nat'ral instincts of a crowd of busy little animals, an' the beavers got the upper hand all the time. The men had to quit.”

All through the sunlit days as Woolly and Joe plied their paddles through the mountain fastnesses there was never a sight or sign of other human presence. They saw valleys whitened with the bones of long dead buffaloes, giant forest trees felled by storm and avalanche, but nowhere a trace of man's disturbing touch ; they might have looked in vain for the cut of an axe on wood, for the print of a horseshoe, or for anything that had been fashioned or altered by human hands.

But in the stillness of one evening when they were making camp there came to them as it were along the water the musical tinkle of a bell.

Woolly held up a finger.

“ Listen ! ” he said. “ D’ye hear ? It’s the vesper bell at the French Mission. The nuns an’ the little children’ll be goin’ in to evenin’ service. We might have gone in along of ’em if we’d known we was so near.”

Early on the following morning they turned their canoe into Beaver Tail Creek and paddled up the stream for about a mile when they came within sight of the white buildings of the Mission, surrounded by maple trees. They beached the canoe, rolled down their shirt sleeves, and made themselves tidy with the help of a comb. They crossed a meadow where cows were grazing and entered an orchard of apple trees heavy with blossom. Beyond the orchard they came upon a grey-haired man planting cabbages.

“ Bon jour,” said Woolly in greeting. “ Is Monsieur l’abbé at home ? ”

The old man straightened himself and limped painfully forward.

“ Bon jour,” he returned, holding out his hand. “ The abbé is speaking to you. He gives you welcome.”

He buttoned his black soutane about his waist and took up his shabby clerical hat, leading his two visitors across a playground where some thirty boys and girls were at play, watched by a grey-robed nun who sat sewing on the edge of a wheelbarrow.

The nun dropped her work and clapped her hands together, calling to the children to cease their play. She spoke to them in French and they instantly obeyed her. Woolly noticed at once that many of them were Indian, some were half-breeds, while others were fair enough to be purely French Canadians. The nun turned as the abbé and the two boys approached her. The morning sunlight fell upon her white head-dress and into her face. Woolly thought that he had never seen so beautiful a human face in all his life. It was more beautiful even than the picture of the Madonna which Henri Pardonet treasured and worshipped in his room at Fort St. Agnes.

“Our friends will have food, Sister Ursula,” said the abbé, speaking in very good English. “You will please take them into the refectory while I go to the kitchen and help Sister Martha to cook a good breakfast.”

“Thank you, sir,” Woolly interposed, “but we ain’t anyways hungry, an’ we ain’t figurin’ to stay. We’ve left our outfit

away up among the mountains, near Croonin' Water, an' we got ter hurry back, soon's we can get the loan of a canoe an' the help of a couple of Injuns or Breeds. Our Boss reckoned as you c'd tell us where to get 'em. The Hudson Bay Company'll pay 'em well."

Sister Ursula turned her beautiful dark eyes upon Woolly. They were like the eyes of an antelope, soft and deep and clear.

"There is a spare canoe at de Assinaboine Camp on Dead Man's Creek," she said. "There are canoemen at de half-breed village at Mosquito Crossing. I myself, I go to Mosquito Crossing to-day to visit a poor sick woman. Perhaps you would go with me, if you are not afraid."

"Afraid?" repeated Woolly. "Afraid? Say, I shouldn't be afraid ter go anywhere—*anywhere*—along with you."

He consented to accompany her; but had he known what was in store for him he might not have been so ready to declare that he was not afraid.

CHAPTER XXI

SISTER URSULA

“**A** FRAID? I shouldn't be afraid ter go anywhere, along with you.”

Sister Ursula smiled very sweetly on hearing Woolly's resolute words.

“ I go round to the stable, then,” she said.

“ I mek ready de cart.”

“ Couldn't we go by canoe? ” Woolly suggested. “ Ain't it on Beaver Trail Creek? ”

Sister Ursula shrugged her shoulders in the expressive French way. Woolly regarded her as a typical Frenchwoman. He supposed that most French people had hair as black and complexions as brown as hers.

“ De trail by land is more direct than by de winding creek,” she explained. “ Also, your canoe would carry not so much as our cart. We tek much provision with us for de poor people, you compre'end.”

Moving with the silence of a soft-footed puma, she crossed a corner of the yard and

disappeared through a gateway, while the abbé led the two boys within doors along a whitewashed passage into a large, spotlessly clean kitchen, where three nuns, all older than Sister Ursula, were at work; one ironing clothes at a long table, one peeling potatoes at a sink, and the other packing eggs and butter in a basket.

Here the priest filled two large cups with delicious milk and handed them to his visitors, while one of the nuns silently produced a dish of cakes.

“Your friends waiting up there among the mountains are perhaps miners, prospecting for gold?” inquired the abbé, resting himself against a table while the boys ate. “There is much gold lying there for those who know how to discover it. Yes?”

Woolly shook his head as he took up a slice of the cake.

“They’re prospectin’ a track fer the new railroad, sir,” he answered. “It ain’t easy work either gettin’ through the wild places with a loaded canoe. We’re needin’ help. Boss reckoned as this was the nearest place to look for it. I’ve gotten a list of the fixin’s we want most. Say, I’m hopin’ we ain’t troublin’ you too much, sir!”

“Not at all,” returned the abbé. And in

proof that he considered it no trouble, he consulted Woolly's list and began at once to collect as many of the required articles as he could supply from the Mission store-room.

"D'you reckon on me goin' along of you in that cart?" Otter Joe inquired when he and Woolly were alone for a moment.

"Don't see as you need," said Woolly. "I c'n sure manage by meself. It would save time if you was to paddle along ter Dead Man's Creek and inquire 'bout that spare canoe, though. Might see if thar's two or three Injuns willin' ter join our outfit at the same time, in case none of the Breeds'll take on. If I'm back first, I'll hang round for you right here, see?"

"An' you won't need ter hang around long," said Joe.

They heard the abbé panting with exertion in an adjoining room. Woolly pushed open the door and discovered the old priest wrestling with a heavy bag of flour, which he was too rheumatic to lift.

"Hold hard, sir!" Woolly cried, bending and flinging the bag lightly over his shoulders. "Lemme help you. Where d'you want me ter put this?"

"It is to go with the cart," the father told him. "They will be short of flour at

Mosquito Crossing. We can spare them this much. Ah! how strong you are!"

He opened a door leading out into the stable yard, where Sister Ursula was engaged in harnessing an old grey horse between the shafts of an equally old Red River cart. Woolly dumped the bag of flour upon the support of the tail board.

"Anythin' more to go in?" he inquired, smoothing his ruffled red hair with his two hands.

"There is a sack of seed-potatoes," Sister Ursula told him, "and a basket of eggs and butter, a parcel of tobacco, a bag of tea, and my medicine chest. Also, we must not forget a feed of corn for Modestine, and food and blankets for ourselves."

She glanced at Woolly's belt, from which his revolver dangled in its holster.

"You 'ave bring your gun," she added. "That is well."

Woolly wondered if she expected to encounter dangers in which a gun might be useful. He found himself almost hoping for an opportunity of protecting her. It seemed to him extremely venturesome that she, a defenceless woman, should go out into the woods to face possible perils from wild animals and wild men. He was greatly impressed by her

refinement and gentleness. Such a woman, he considered, ought not to be exposed to the hardship of life in the backwoods.

Otter Joe helped him to load up the cart, and when all was ready Sister Ursula climbed up by one of the wheels. As she put her foot on the hub, Woolly noticed that she wore moccasins of soft, grey tanned deerskin, which perhaps accounted for her moving so silently. She caught up the reins and seated herself at the side of the cart, waiting for Woolly.

“ Say, Sister, you’d best allow me ter do the drivin’,” he offered.

But for answer Sister Ursula made a clicking sound with her tongue, and the old horse drew out of the yard, following the wheel track down towards the creek.

“ Pr’aps you’re figurin’ as I can’t be trusted ter drive you,” Woolly ventured after a long spell of awkward silence. “ Your pony don’t look as if she’d buck any. Say, I c’n ride as well as drive. I c’n do heaps of things. I c’n swim, an’ shoot ; I c’n track a moose on a cold scent, an’ set a beaver trap. I killed a grizzly once, time I hurt me hand. Bear get hold of it in his jaw. Don’t reckon as you’ve ever seen a bear. What? Dessay you’d scoot if one came nosin’ around. As fer handlin’ a gun—huh ! ”

Sister Ursula made no response. She was gazing dreamily towards the creek to where the canoe lay on the grassy bank with the sunlight gleaming on its yellow side. Near the canoe she drove the horse into the water and forded across to the opposite bank, regaining the broken trail where it entered a gloomy forest glade. Here the larger trees had been cut down, and the brush cleared to make a track wide enough for a cart. The old horse followed the trail without need of any guidance.

Woolly and his new companion spoke very little. Once when they were passing a bank of beautiful blue flowers the silent nun turned sharply as if to admire them and Woolly was on the point of jumping out to gather a bunch of them to present them to her when he reflected that perhaps an austere sister of charity might be different from other women, and would not wish to decorate herself like a may queen.

“ You could 'ave used your gun jus' then,” said Sister Ursula.

“ Me gun ? ” questioned Woolly, not understanding.

“ But yes. Did you not see ze lynx, lying along de bough of ze maple tree ? It was very fine, very beeg lynx.”

Woolly shook his head. "You got sharp eyes, sure," he said. "I never noticed no lynx. An' me a trapper, too!"

Farther on, she again turned and looked searchingly among the trees.

"Another lynx?" asked Woolly.

"No," returned his companion. "I was remembering that ze las' tam I journey through dese forest it was cold winter. I was alone wit' Modestine. We was attack by a beeg pack of timber wolves."

"My!" exclaimed Woolly. "An' what did you do? Your pony couldn't help you any; an' you—a woman—what did you do? Wasn't you scared?"

"Not too scared to use my gun," was the unexpected answer. "It was ze wolves dat would be much scared when I keel five of dem."

"That was plucky—real plucky," said Woolly. "Say, I've known Injun gels do things like that; but not French women. An' it's the first time I ever heard of a Sister of Mercy usin' a gun. Didn't suppose you'd know how. It was plucky."

Sister Ursula opened her lips as if to make some explanation; but at that moment the near wheel jolted against the root of a tree and her attention was diverted to her horse.

In preserving her balance in the uncomfortable, springless cart, she thrust out her feet against the sack of potatoes, and again Woolly observed the grey moccasins which she wore.

“ I expect some Injun squaw made them moccasins for you,” he remarked.

She nodded. “ They were made by an Indian girl—yes,” she responded, quickly drawing her feet beneath the cover of her skirt.

Beyond the fringe of the forest they came out into the wide, fertile valley of Beaver Tail Creek, with its ploughed fields and green meadows, where cattle grazed. Near a bend of the stream a faint blue mist of fire smoke curled into the sunlit air from a cluster of timber-built shacks, nestling among blossoming fruit trees.

“ *Voilà!* Before us is our destination of Mosquito Crossing,” announced Sister Ursula. “ You see we ’ave come much more queek by de land trail dan you could possibly come in your canoe.”

She swept a wide glance around the valley.

“ Dey are lazy, dese people,” she said. “ There is none of them at work, you see. Dey neglect ze fields, ze cattle—everyting! Halt, Modestine!”

She drew rein, and the obedient old horse came to a quiet standstill.

“ Why have we stopped ? ” Woolly wanted to know.

His companion mechanically handed him the reins and climbed out of the cart.

“ I go see why dat pauvre infant cry so much,” she answered him, and he watched her cross a patch of grass to where two or three children stood around one who was crying. He heard her questioning them in voluble French. Then she stooped and lifted the crying child in her arms and carried it back to the cart, followed by the other half-breed children.

“ She is ill, the poor infant,” she said to Woolly, as he took the child from her arms and laid it gently on the folded blankets on the floor of the cart.

“ D’ye see ? ” he exclaimed, pointing at the child’s face. “ See them spots on her ! ”

Sister Ursula had mounted to the cart and stood over the child.

“ Yes,” she nodded, shrinking backward with instinctive terror. “ I see. It ees unmistakable. It is the scourge—the smallpox ! ”

“ That’s what I was reckonin’ it was,” said Woolly. “ An’ the others must have caught it, too.”

Within half an hour they had the child at its home and in bed.

Leaving the Sister at work, Woolly went round amongst the shacks to see if there were other cases, and hastened back to inform Sister Ursula that the whole village—men, women, and children, with few exceptions—was stricken with the terrible disease.

“Say, we’re fixed,” he declared in consternation. “We’ve got the infection on us already. We can’t go back. It wouldn’t do ter go back to the Mission an’ carry the infection to all them children, an’ the other nuns, an’ to Otter Joe. But you! What about you? You’ll sure have ter get out of this somehow. It don’t matter any ’bout me. I’ve had it. You c’n see the marks of it on me ugly face. But you haven’t had it, an’ you’ll sure have to quit, right now.”

Sister Ursula looked up at him over the lid of the medicine chest which she had opened on a rickety table in the dark, untidy hut.

“I remain here,” she announced resolutely. “I nurse these poor people. There is nobody else.”

CHAPTER XXII

A MISSION OF MERCY

“**W**ONDER what’s keepin’ Woolly! Suthin’s gone wrong! What’s keepin’ him?”

Otter Joe had returned to Beaver Tail Creek after three days’ absence, expecting to find Woolly waiting for him at the Mission. He had been to Dead Man’s Creek, where he had succeeded in borrowing a suitable canoe and in engaging the services of three stalwart Assinaboine Indians. And now he had discovered that Woolly and Sister Ursula had neither returned nor sent any message to explain what was detaining them.

The abbé was equally perplexed, although he was not yet anxious for the safety of Sister Ursula. She had often stayed away for a longer time attending to the home comforts of the improvident half-breeds. The inhabitants of Mosquito Crossing were notoriously careless and dirty in their domestic management. They neglected their children, they allowed

refuse to collect in their doorways ; their cattle and horses often needed doctoring, and there was always a quantity of sewing and washing to be done whenever any of the mission sisters visited them.

“ Be patient,” urged the abbé.

“ That’s all very well, sir,” returned Otter Joe. “ Dessay Sister Ursula’s found heaps of things to straighten out ; but that don’t concern Woolly. He’s got no occasion ter wait for her and the cart. He could walk. Suthin’ sure gone wrong or he’d be back as he promised. I’ve a mind ter go an’ search for him.”

He spent hours watching the forest trail where it emerged from the trees on the far side of the creek ; but still there was no sign or sound of the cart. So anxious was he that he kept his three Indians close to their wigwam and the loaded canoes, and would seldom go up to the Mission, lest Woolly should return in his absence.

He had decided to make a search through the forest, and had even entered one of the canoes to pole it across the stream when he heard a shrill, far-away whistle from the trail. He knew it was Woolly’s whistle, and he waited, listening for the sound of cartwheels. Instead of the cart, Woolly himself presently

appeared, running towards the creek, not by way of the cart track but in among the trees. Otter Joe seized the canoe pole and pushed off, but had only reached the middle of the stream when Woolly called out to him in a voice of command :

“ Stop where you are ! Don’t come any nearer ! ”

Otter Joe allowed the canoe to drift with the current.

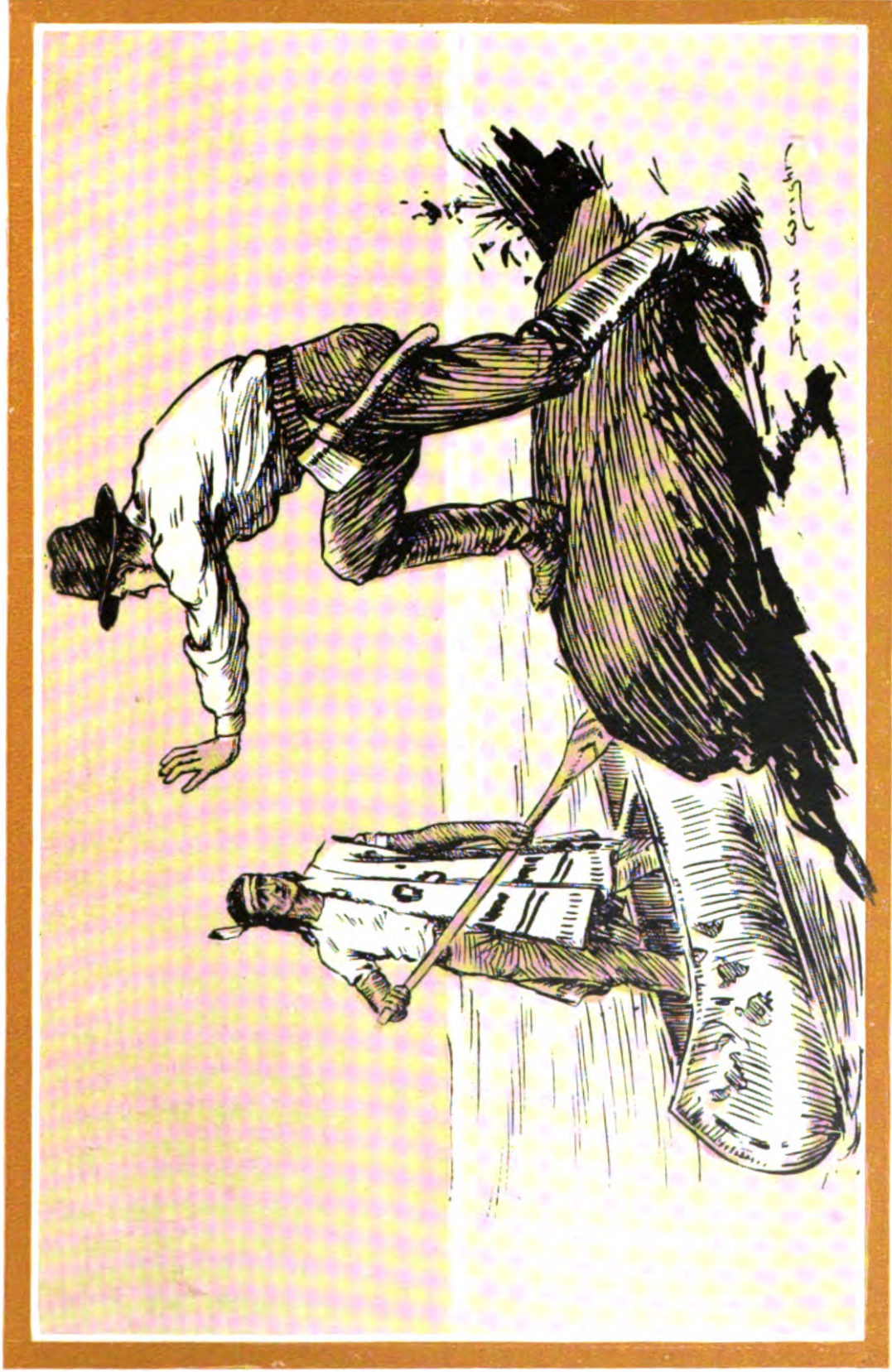
“ Ain’t you comin’ across ? ” he cried.

“ No,” Woolly answered, “ I can’t. I mustn’t. Stop where you are an’ listen.”

He stood on a rock at the water’s edge. The wind was blowing towards him and would not therefore carry the infection across.

“ You’ve got ter hustle back to the outfit at Crooning Water without me,” he instructed Otter Joe. “ But first you mus’ run up to the Mission an’ tell ’em as Sister Ursula won’t be back for days, an’ mebbe weeks. They’ve got smallpox back thar at Skeeter Crossin’, an’ she can’t risk bringin’ the infection to the school children.”

“ Huh ! ” exclaimed Otter Joe in alarm, pushing the canoe back a few strokes. “ That’s bad. What’s goin’ ter happen to you ? You sure ain’t figurin’ to go back ! ”



“Woolly called out to him in a voice of command.”



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“ I’m goin’ back ter help Sister Ursula do the nursin’,” Woolly answered. “ An’ look here ! I’ve got a message from her to Father Raymond, the abbé. Tell him she’s gettin’ along all right an’ doin’ everything necess’ry ; only she’s needin’ carbolic acid an’ more lymph. D’y’ understand ? Carbolic acid disinfectant an’ lymph for vaccination.”

“ Yep,” Joe nodded gloomily. “ I’ll be off, right now, if you’ll wait where you are.”

He poled the canoe quickly to the bank, jumped ashore, and ran up the slope. In about a quarter of an hour he re-appeared, accompanied by one of the nuns, who helped him to carry a heavy basket.

They deposited the basket in the canoe, and Otter Joe took it across and left it on the trail, where Woolly could afterwards get it.

In the meantime the nun interrogated Woolly across the dividing water. She spoke in French, and he answered her in the same tongue, telling her everything. She especially wanted to know why the cart—their only means of crossing the ford—had not come back. He explained that one of the sick and infected children had been carried in it. They arranged between them that should any drugs or further supplies be wanted he, Woolly, would come through the forest and

signal to the Mission by whistle, and either swim or wade across to take up parcels left within his reach from the water, thus guarding against the possibility of the infection reaching the Mission.

Already the three Assinaboine Indians had pulled down their wigwam and were packing their outfit. Woolly lingered near the creek until the two canoes, with Otter Joe in command, were paddled out of sight. Then he shouldered the basket and began his long journey through the woods back to the plague-stricken village, where further adventures awaited him.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE REDSKIN SCOUT

WOOLLY'S backward journey through the woods was long and difficult. The basket which he carried was heavy, as well as cumbrous. Father Raymond, indeed, had packed it in the belief that it was to be conveyed to Mosquito Crossing in the cart, and had added many drugs and dainties beyond the few simple things that Sister Ursula had asked for. But Woolly was strong, and he made light of his burden, taking very few rests by the way.

Naturally he was disappointed in having to remain at Beaver Tail Creek instead of returning with Otter Joe to the outfit in Crooning Water Pass ; but he consoled himself with the reflection that with a second canoe and the help of Joe's three Indians the exploring party would get along very well without him, and that in helping Sister Ursula in her merciful work of nursing the

stricken half-breeds he was making himself useful.

He had already proved his usefulness by preventing Sister Ursula from recklessly exposing herself to the worst of the infection. She had objected to his attending alone to the patients, who were far advanced in the loathsome disease ; but he had pointed out to her that as he had himself been a victim in a former epidemic he was not liable to suffer a second time, whereas she, who had never suffered from smallpox, was exceedingly susceptible. In order to protect her from the danger he had erected a tent for her occupation well removed from the infected shacks.

“ I’ll do all the necess’ry nursin’,” he told her. “ You c’n be doctor an’ cook, givin’ me advice. Tell me what ter do, an’ I’ll do it. Dessay you’ll catch the infection ’fore we’re through. Don’t jus’ see how you c’n avoid it. But thar ain’t no occasion fer you ter try how soon you c’n be ill. You’ve got to stop here, then, in this yer teepee as I’ve rigged up.”

Sister Ursula’s first anxiety was to prevent the scourge from spreading, by vaccinating all who were still well and inducing them to quit their unwholesome dwellings. Woolly discovered the materials of half a dozen teepees in a shed, and he made a camp on a

breezy knoll among the fir trees on the far side of the narrow creek. In this work, as also in the work of nursing, he was helped by four of the half-breeds—a man and three of the women, who, like himself, bore on their faces the lingering marks of the awful disease.

He and his four helpers took up their various quarters in the deserted huts, and held very little communication with the isolation camp.

When it was necessary for him to hold council with Sister Ursula he was careful always to disinfect himself. But their small stock of disinfectant was soon exhausted, and now Woolly was returning from the Mission with a new supply.

He walked quickly with his awkward burden. Once when he rested beside the cart track at a point where it was forked by a narrow bridle path it occurred to him that he might overhaul his basket and see of what especial use its contents would be to him. He withdrew the white napkin that covered them. Yes, there were two large bottles of carbolic acid, and two canisters of another disinfectant; there were some packets of cornflour, too, and—

He looked up sharply. An unexpected

sound had come to him from the woodland—the clip of a horse's shoe against a stone. He listened, and could hear the dull beating of horses' hoofs on the soft turf, and the rustling of tree branches. The sounds came nearer, from along the narrow trail. He did not know where the trail led from, but it seemed to be a short cut from Minnewanka Lake to Mosquito Crossing. Then a man's voice reached him.

“We ought to hit that cart track somewhere here,” it said.

Woolly rose to his feet, left his basket, and climbed up the bank and stood with his back against a stout birch tree, where he could command a view of the narrow bridle path. Presently the gleam of a scarlet tunic broke the even curtain of green leaves.

“Stop!” he called warningly. “Don't come any nearer! Stay right where you are!”

There were three horsemen, he saw now, coming towards him in single file. Two wore the uniform of the North-West Mounted Police. The third was an Indian in buckskins and a beaver fur cap. They did not halt immediately, but the leader held up a gloved hand, and his companions drew rein.

“What should we stop for?” he asked, still



“Trooper Whiffen pulled his mount to an abrupt stop.”



advancing. Then he caught sight of Woolly. "Hullo!" he cried in recognition. "Say, what are you doing cavorting round here? You're from Fort St. Agnes."

"Stop!" Woolly repeated. "Listen! I've got the infection on me. You might catch it. Say, if you're figurin' ter go anyways near Skeeter Crossin', you'd best change your mind. It isn't healthy. They've got smallpox thar, real bad. Most all the Breeds are down with it."

Trooper Whiffle pulled his mount to an abrupt stop.

"So?" he said. "Smallpox, eh? I allow that's serious. Who's looking after 'em? Anybody that knows what to do?"

"Meself," Woolly answered. "Meself an' Sister Ursula, from the French Mission."

"Ah," nodded Whiffle. "That's quite all right, if Sister Ursula's there. Guess there's no need for us to interfere any. What's she doing?"

"Everything," Woolly answered. "She's just wonderful. Better'n any doctor. She's vaccinated 'em all round--them as needed vaccination. She's separated the sick from the well. She's usin' heaps an' heaps of physic an' disinfectant. I jus' bin along to the Mission for more."

“ And what about herself ? ” inquired the trooper. “ She sure ain’t nursing ’em herself, running the risk of her valuable life ? ”

“ Well, no,” Woolly explained. “ She ain’t goin’ inter any of the shacks. Three of the women’s doin’ that. An’ I’m helpin’, some.”

“ Good,” nodded the trooper with satisfaction. He was a policeman, but something more than a mere guardian of the law. “ And you don’t figure that we can do a whole lot of good by going along there ? ”

“ Best not,” Woolly advised. “ You’d only carry the infection away with you. Supposing Sister Ursula falls ill, I shall let ’em know at the Mission, an’ one of the other nuns’ll sure come. That’s fixed.”

“ We could ride along to Fort St. Agnes and fetch things,” suggested Whiffle.

“ No need,” said Woolly. “ You best quit.”

The second trooper and the Indian drew nearer, and while Whiffle was explaining about the epidemic, Woolly glanced at the Indian and to his surprise recognized the Chipewyan who had brought the silver-fox pelt to St. Agnes, and who had shown such interest in the doeskin moccasins.

“ What’s Tawabinisay doin’ along of you ? ” he inquired. “ Guess he’s your scout, eh ? ”

Mebbe he's helpin' you ter track down some criminal, what ? ”

“ Sure,” signified Whiffle. “ We figured we might drop on that criminal hanging around Mosquito Crossing. Have you got any white people there ? ”

Woolly shook his head.

“ Never a one,” he answered, “ except meself an' Sister Ursula, if you calls her white. Say, it ain't Pete Collyer as you're after, is it ? ”

Trooper Whiffle gave a discreet affirmative nod.

“ Him and a breed named Batiste Gagnon,” he returned. “ You see, we haven't rounded them up yet.”

“ No ; an' you sure never will,” declared Woolly. “ They're drowned ; both of 'em. They was drowned in Crooning Water Rapids, tryin' ter get through in the canoe as they stole from Fort St. Agnes.”

Whiffle and his fellow trooper exchanged glances of amazement and doubt.

“ Are you sure ? ” Whiffle inquired of Woolly. “ Sure that both those men are drowned ? ”

“ Plumb sure,” Woolly declared positively. “ We found the wreck of the canoe. We found the dead body of one of 'em.”

“ Wough ! ” grunted Tawabinisay, shaking his head in doubt. “ What we have heard is very strange.”

It seemed indeed that the Indian could not bring himself to believe that what he had heard was true. If the two men were dead then it was clear that his tracking was at fault and that he had been leading the police patrol upon a totally wrong scent

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MYSTERIOUS FOOTPRINTS

WOOLLY waited until the three riders had turned and disappeared by the way that they had come. Then again he took up his basket. As he did so he heard, or thought that he heard, the sharp sound of a breaking twig not many yards away from where he had stood. He held in his breath and listened. All was silent except for the twittering of birds and the rustling of the wind in the tree-tops. He was just deciding that for once his hearing had deceived him, when the sound was repeated yet farther away. Following its direction, he saw a branch of a balsam tree swaying up and down, as if it had been disturbed by some large animal passing under it. He thought of Sister Ursula's lynx; his hunting instincts were aroused. He wanted to discover what animal it could be that had lain in ambush so near while he was talking with the horsemen.

Dropping his burden, he walked back a few paces to the spot from which the sound had first reached him. Beyond the birch tree against which he had stood the ground sloped downward into a hollow, still moist with recent rain. He searched for the animal's trail, and was not long in finding it. But it was not the trail of a lynx or deer or fox. What he saw in the moist mud was the very distinct impression of a man's boots, and near them, by the roots of a thick tree, the unmistakable marks of a pair of knees.

"Queer!" he said to himself in perplexity. "Looks jus' as if some chap had bin kneelin' thar, listening to what I was sayin' to Trooper Whiffle! Wonder who it could have been!"

He was half inclined to set off in pursuit of the supposed eavesdropper; but conjectured that, whoever it might be, he was already too far away to be overtaken without loss of precious time.

"Dessay the chap was only hidin'," he reflected, once more taking up his basket. "Some folks is nat'rally scared at the sight of a mounted policeman. Anyhow, he sure couldn't have heard anythin' of consequence."

He had gone about a hundred paces when he heard the patter of footsteps behind him.

"Wait, then, monsieur!" a voice called

to him pantingly, "you wait, I 'elp carry your load."

Woolly stopped and looked round to see the half-breed man who was his assistant amongst the patients at Mosquito Crossing.

"Hullo, Alphonse!" he cried. "What brings you here? Anything wrong?"

Alphonse ran up to him and caught hold of the basket.

"But no," he answered, still panting. "I come for meet you; dat is all, absolutely. I wait for you, then I see de police. I lak not de police, not at all. I 'ide be'ind tree, why not?"

Instinctively Woolly glanced down at the man's feet. They were covered with ragged moccasins—not boots, such as had made the impressions in the mud.

"Say, Alphonse, were you alone, back thar?" Woolly questioned.

"*Comment?*"

"I say, were you alone—was anybody along with you, hidin' from the police?"

"Oh, but no," answered Alphonse, in well-simulated astonishment. "Certainly I am alone. What for you ask such droll question, *parbleu?*"

"Never mind," returned Woolly. "Des-say it's no affair of mine. I only figured it

was a bit queer. Why don't you like the police, Alphonse ? ”

Alphonse said : “ Pah ! dey ask too many question ; dey annoy me. Dey 'ave too much of imagination, as if de poor habitant commit always de beeg crime, or is on point of commit one, you compre'end. For myself, I am absolutely innocent. I lak not de police, therefore I 'ide. What would you ? ”

Woolly knew that the man was lying to him, but he did not contradict him or say anything concerning the boot-marks. When they came within sight of the village he instructed Alphonse to take the basket into one of the empty shacks, while he himself crossed the creek to see Sister Ursula and report to her what he had done at the Mission.

He met her as she was returning from the meadow carrying two pails of milk. She had temporarily discarded her nun's grey cloak and white headdress, and wore instead a dark blue overall and a close-fitting cap of lace, which did not quite cover the extreme blackness of her hair. It occurred to Woolly as she approached him that it would not be difficult for her to disguise herself as an Indian, only that she was much more beautiful and majestic than any Indian woman he had ever seen.

“ I brought the things from the Mission,” he told her, “ an’ I gave ’em your messages. Father Raymond sent word as he’s sure you’ll try to keep the infection away from the children at the Mission, an’ that you’re to be extra careful ’bout yourself. They wanted ter know how the infection was brought here ; but o’ course I couldn’t say.”

“ But that was not impossible to explain,” said Sister Ursula. “ It was brought by a man who already ’ad the disease upon him, and who is now your most difficult patient.”

“ You mean the man with the grey beard in that shack back of the cottonwood trees ? Yes, he’s real bad. Don’t expect he’ll live over to-night. He’s a stranger, ain’t he ? Nobody seems ter know much about him. I don’t even know his name.”

“ Nor I,” returned Sister Ursula. “ He is stranger, yes—a trapper, I t’ink. He catch de infection in Indian village, over de mountain, and immediately ’e give it to everybody else. Not a very proper return for ’ospitality, you will say, *hein* ? Never’less, *mon ami*, we mus’ not go to blame ’im. People are careless, ignorant ; dey consider only demselves. Yes ? ”

Returning to his duties among the sick people, Woolly experienced some difficulties

with this same patient, who had been the cause of the epidemic at Mosquito Crossing. The man was passing through the crisis of his attack. He was very weak and delirious. Woolly carefully bathed his repulsively unsightly face and his swollen eyes, at which the flies persistently gathered. He used a strong solution of the carbolic disinfectant, and gave drugs to reduce the high fever, doing everything according to Sister Ursula's instructions. And all the time the man in his delirium was muttering strange, incoherent sentences, sometimes in French, sometimes in broken English.

Woolly at first paid little regard to these ravings of a disordered mind ; but once while he was cleaning out his sponge he heard something which arrested his closest attention.

"De gold?" the delirious invalid was muttering. "Ah, *oui*, I know 'e 'ave de gold. Always 'e carry it wid 'im. . . . *Comment?* Why 'ave 'e no' come back *avec moi?* *Sacre!* You tink I keel 'im? *Pas de tout!* I see 'im, yes. I watch 'im. I see 'im go 'long de edge of de cleef. I cry to 'im, 'Come back, you Hercus, it ees dangereuse!' *Mais*, m'sieu, 'e per'aps not 'ear me in such roar of de beeg river, you compre'end. 'E mek step leetle bit nearer de edge. *Alors* I look for

'im, I see 'im no more. ' What 'ave 'appen ? ' I ask myself. *Parbleu*, it is no good I ask. 'E 'ave sure fall over—down, down into de deep cañon, into de raging rapid."

Astounded at this revelation, Woolly leaned forward eagerly to hear more. Who was he, this man who had been the witness of that tragedy ?

There could be but one answer, and the boy knew what it was. This patient of his whom he was tenderly nursing through a most horrible illness was none other than the missing Batiste Gagnon, for whom the police were searching—the man who had taken the life of Woolly's own father, Ewan Hercus !

CHAPTER XXV

WOOLLY'S GREAT TASK

BATISTE GAGNON !

Woolly drew back from the delirious patient's bedside, trembling in the excitement of his strange discovery. He was not deceiving himself. He had heard aright, and what he had heard was the circumstantial truth, and not the mere fancies of a brain overbalanced by fever. Yet even while he was convinced, he yet could not bring himself to believe in the man's identity.

Batiste Gagnon—this? How could it be possible? Was not Batiste Gagnon dead—drowned in the wild rapids of Crooning Water Cañon? Until this surprising minute, at any rate, Woolly had believed that it was so. He had told Trooper Whiffle that Batiste was dead, and Whiffle had believed him—believed him and turned away, abandoning the useless chase.

But there was no real evidence of the man's death ; nothing but the discovery of the

wrecked canoe and the knowledge that Batiste had been voyaging with the canoe up the Bow River. It seemed miraculous that he had escaped and wandered on foot all this distance over the mountains to Mosquito Crossing. But, Woolly reasoned, perhaps he had not actually been in the canoe when it was being taken through the rapids. Perhaps he had quarrelled with Pete Collyer and left him farther down the river. Anyhow, it could not be denied that he was here.

If this grey-bearded man, lying helpless and delirious in the crisis of an awful disease, was not Batiste Gagnon, then who was he? He was a stranger to the people amongst whom he had taken refuge, that was certain; and there had been time for him to travel here from Crooning Water. If he was not Batiste Gagnon, how came he to know the circumstances of the tragic death of Ewan Hercus, of which, according to Dave Sinclair, he (Gagnon) was the sole witness, if not the actual cause?

"It's Batiste Gagnon, sure," Woolly told himself. "It can't be anybody else. He spoke me father's name; he spoke in his delirium jus' the same's he spoke to the Boss that time, makin' out as it was an accident, when it was nothing of the sort. He—this

yer man I'm nursin'—killed my father. Shot him, robbed him, an' then flung his body down the precipice into the rushin' water! Queer that he should be lyin' ill here, an' me—*me* nursing him!"

Woolly was still arguing and reasoning with himself when a wild, insane laugh drew him again to his patient's bedside. Batiste's disordered thoughts were still hovering about the scene of the long-past tragedy. And it was to Pete Collyer that he imagined himself to be talking.

"Gold?" he laughed. "Oh, but yes, I get de gold, sure. Mais it was not so veree much; not so much as pay me for tek a man's life, *hein*? But den, you see, mon cher Pete, we 'ave now de map which guide us to de mine where is de beeg pile. We mek ourselves riche, you and I."

Woolly's doubts vanished, turning into absolute certainty. And with the certainty there came upon him a desire for vengeance against the coward who had killed his father for the sake of a handful of gold. For an instant, but only for an instant, it occurred to him how easy it would be to let his patient die. No one would ever know. Even already the man was on the point of death. Only a very great effort, indeed, could save him.

Woolly saw that it was his duty to make that great effort. He must strive his very utmost to get Batiste safely through the crisis of his illness and restore him to health and strength.

Very calmly, very deliberately, he set about his task. His main object was to reduce the high fever by promoting perspiration, to support the strength by a free supply of fluid food, and constantly to bathe the eyes with boracic lotion. He worked for hours, untiringly, never leaving the shack for a moment, until at last Batiste slept.

"Don't see as I c'n do any more for you jus' now," Woolly ruminated, standing over the bed. "An' thar's others that need me. Say, you don't look as if you was figurin' ter die—not this time. You've got past the worst corner. When you get well, though—if you ever do get well—I'll tell you what I think of you, an' it's me you'll have ter reckon with, me you'll have to answer to for the evil that you've done. An' I guess you won't escape."

CHAPTER XXVI

IN BURNT PINE COULEE

IT was a clear, moonlight night. The trees stood out in inky blackness against the dark blue of the far-away mountain peaks, and in the shadowed camp beside the whispering creek where the half-breds were asleep in their teepees, all was quiet and still. Even the sombre, grey-robed figure of Sister Ursula, kneeling within the fitful light of the camp fire, was as motionless as the trees above her. Only her lips moved—her lips and her fingers which held her rosary.

She continued reverently kneeling for a long time in her solitude. When at last she rose to her feet she lifted a billet of pine wood and thrust it into the fire, watching the sparks fly upward in the smoke that curled in a ragged cloud to the tree-tops. Then she glided silently away from the fire, and went to each of the teepees in turn, listening beside it to assure herself that her

human charges were asleep, needing no attention.

Crossing a stretch of grass, she approached her own white-covered tent, which stood apart from the rest. But as she was drawing near to it she came to an abrupt stop, and turned her eyes inquiringly southward to the blackness of a mass of forest trees down in the valley. It seemed to her that she had caught the momentary gleam of a strange light in among the trees ; but all was darkness now. She moved slowly backward a few steps, still looking searchingly in the same direction.

Yes. She had made no mistake. It was not, as she had at first supposed, the glint of the moon on water, but a light, dimly red ; and she was conscious of the aroma of burning wood borne towards her by the soft night breeze. Surely it was the light of a camp fire ! But who could have made camp down there in Burnt Pine Coulee, so near to the plague-stricken village ? Some wanderer who did not know of his danger in being so near, or else one who, aware of the danger, still dared, for some mysterious reason, to pitch his camp within reach of the infection !

“ It is not good that he should be so near,” Sister Ursula decided. “ He must be warned.”

She entered her tent, but presently came

out again without her conspicuous white head-dress, and wearing an Indian's blanket over her shoulders. In the moonlight she looked much more like an Indian than a Sister of Charity. Her feet were encased in moccasins, and her movements were silent and almost stealthy. In her hand, under the blanket, she carried a loaded revolver. Father Raymond, at the French Mission, had enjoined her never to go out alone unarmed at night when there was risk of encountering wild animals or evil-disposed men. There was no such risk now that she knew of, but the weapon gave her a feeling of security.

She left the camp and, keeping within the deepest shadows, walked along the bank of the creek towards the coulee. She did not wish to be seen spying upon the stranger, who, after all, might have a perfectly legitimate motive for making his solitary bivouac in the neighbourhood of the half-breed village. He might, she surmised, even be a messenger from the Mission, waiting for a chance of communicating with her or with Woolly.

She decided to go cautiously near and see what she could discover from a discreet distance.

When she had gone to within thirty yards of the place she paused, standing within the

darkness of a wall of rock and brushwood, listening and watching. New fuel had been added to the fire, and the huge shadow of a man's head and shoulders was cast by the flames upon the leafy branches beyond him. The man was seated in the shelter of a roughly-made screen of saplings thatched with boughs of balsam and the skins of animals. Evidently he was a lonely trapper, resting for the night, unaware that he was in danger of infection from the half-breed settlement on the farther side of the creek.

Sister Ursula was about to proceed and advise him to quit when suddenly her sharp hearing caught the sound of soft footsteps approaching. It was as if some one were following on her tracks. She knew that it was not likely that Woolly had deserted his post. She stood as still as the rock against which she was leaning. The footsteps came yet nearer, and a shadowy figure passed swiftly between her and the light of the moon, going unerringly towards the fire.

Instantly she recognized the figure as that of Alphonse Amyot, the half-breed who was supposed even at this moment to be helping Woolly with the nursing. Why had Alphonse come here, straight from the bedside of a smallpox patient? What excuse could he

have for disobeying his strict orders and crossing to this prohibited side of the stream? She could not guess. She only knew that Alphonse was a notorious scoundrel, a thief, a liar, and a drunkard, and that he was out for no good.

Before she could attempt to stop him he had disappeared. But, listening to his stealthy footsteps, she heard him give a low whistle, like the call of a curlew.

In response to this signal, the trapper stood up and peered forward among the dark tree-trunks.

“That you, Alphonse?” he cried. “Don’t come any closer. You’ve just come away from the shacks. I ain’t anyways afraid ’er small-pox myself; you can’t catch ’em a second time; but thar’s no occasion fer you ter infect my outfit. Stand right where you are. Nobody’ll hear what we say. Tell me, how’s my pardner gettin’ along?”

“Batiste is verree ill,” Alphonse answered. “I tink ’e sure die. But your friend, your Woolly of de Wild, ’e tek plentee care of ’im, all by ’imself, jus’ lak a woman, *parbleu!*”

“Woolly?” the trapper repeated in a voice of alarm. “Woolly nussin’ Batiste Gagnon—his father’s murderer? Huh! That’s steep!”

Sister Ursula heard these words clearly, and clearly understood their terrible meaning. She crept silently nearer, until she was between the two men.

"Say," the trapper continued, standing out from his ambush in the full light of the moon. "He hasn't found out who the man is that he's tryin' to bring back to life, eh?"

"Dat is impossible," Alphonse assured him with a laugh, "absolutely impossible. Batiste is complete stranger. Nobody can know 'im—nobody but I."

"That's all very well," resumed the trapper. "But I'm not trustin' to Woolly not strikin' our trail. You don't know him as I do. He's 'cute. As long's he's foolin' around on this nursin' job thar's danger. I allow he side-tracked the Mounted Police. But he wasn't bluffin' them any when he made out as Batiste an' me was drowned in Bow River rapids. He didn't tell 'em that yarn for the sake of turnin' them on a false scent. He figured it was the bed-rock truth. But it don't make a pin's difference that he reckons we're dead. If Woolly gets hold of the notion that I'm hangin' around at Skeeter Crossin', the whole game's up."

"In such case it is bes' you quit," suggested Alphonse.

“ But I ain’t intendin’ ter quit,” declared the other. “ The police know now—Woolly told ’em—as the place is infected with small-pox, an’ they sure won’t look for us here. We’re safer here than anywhere, if it wasn’t fer Woolly. We’ve got ter get quit of him, Alphonse. Savvy ? ”

He strode nearer to the half-breed, passing so close to where Sister Ursula was hiding that she could hear the creaking of his leather belt. She could see his features distinctly, and was impressed by the blackness of his bushy beard and the look of evil cunning in his eyes. The moonlight flashed for an instant on the shining barrel of the revolver at his side.

“ Savvy ? ” he repeated. “ We’ve got ter get quit of Woolly. It’ll be better for the lot of us—Batiste, an’ me, an’ you. He’s a sly, interferin’ skunk ; heaps wuss’n any policeman. This ain’t the first time by a long way that he’s planted hisself in my track. An’ it won’t be the last if we allows him to live.”

“ Pardon,” interrupted Alphonse. “ It is no concern for me dat ’e is in your way. For myself, I tink ’e is good comrade.”

“ Talk sense ! ” retorted the trapper. “ Ain’t you standin’ in with me an’ Batiste in the matter of that gold find in British Columbia ? We’d ha’ bin on it by now if it



“ ‘Savvy!’ he repeated, ‘We’ve got ter get quit of Woolly.’ ”



hadn't been for Crooked Horn messin' up our canoe, an' then Batiste catchin' the smallpox. Soon as Batiste gets well, we'll make a fresh start, see? An' we'll take no low-down Injuns with us this time. But we got ter get quit of Woolly right now."

Alphonse shrugged his shoulders.

"But, mon cher Pete," he objected, "'ow shall we?"

Pete took his pipe from his pocket and knocked the tobacco ash out on the palm of his hand.

"Thar's only one sure way," he answered. "A bullet would do the business."

"What!" exclaimed Alphonse, "you keel 'im?"

Black Pete nodded, and blew the last remnant of tobacco from his pipe.

"Not over thar in your village," he responded. "It could be done best somewheres along here, if you c'n entice him out. Listen! Go back to him right now. Tell him as his chum Otter Joe has had ter turn back. Tell him as Otter Joe is here, waitin' for him, wantin' him to come an' see him most partic'lar. He'll sure come if you say Otter Joe sent you. Tell him to make a bee line for the firelight in among these yer trees, see?"

“ *Très bien,*” returned Alphonse, “ all right. I go queek.” And he ran off.

Now Sister Ursula was in a quandary. She dared not run after Alphonse immediately, lest Black Pete should stop her with a bullet. And it would be unwise to reveal herself to Pete and let him know that she had been listening to his plotting. He would certainly take to violence, and she was not sure that she could successfully defend herself against him. Yet she decided that, in order to save Woolly, her surest course was to keep an eye upon Pete.

She waited. She watched him stroll back to his fire and light his pipe. Standing absolutely still and silent, she followed his every movement until he seated himself on a log and took out his revolver to examine the cartridges. He lighted a second pipe, drank something from a bottle, mended the fire, and again drank.

The slow minutes went by. It seemed that quite an hour passed and nothing happened. At last, long before Pete heard them, she detected afar off the quick patter of footsteps on the turf. She had gathered her blanket about her, ready to run out, when Pete jumped up and strode past her. She allowed him to go on a few paces, and then glided out from

her hiding-place and followed him, making no sound with her soft, moccasined feet. Stealthy as a trained Indian scout she followed in his trail, through the shadows of the trees, and then out into the moonlight, where he came to a halt and stationed himself behind a bush of hazel.

The sound of footsteps came steadily nearer. They were light, young steps. Very soon now Woolly would come into sight on the open, moonlit grass, where Black Pete could see him and take certain aim.

This was the moment for Sister Ursula to act.

CHAPTER XXVII

AN EXTRAORDINARY SITUATION

LIKE a doctor going his rounds, Woolly made the tour of the disease-infected shacks, visiting each sufferer, administering medicines and nourishment; bathing them with antiseptics, and making them comfortable for the night. Many of his patients, and especially the children, were approaching the crisis of the awful disease, and required most careful attention. But he had the assistance of three half-breed women, as well as Alphonse Amyot, who were capable of taking charge while he rested.

He had left Batiste Gagnon asleep, and, having visited each hut in turn, was kneeling at the bedside of Alphonse Amyot's little daughter, bathing her repulsively swollen and disfigured face, when Alphonse entered, breathing heavily as if he had been running, and leaving a trail of wet footmarks on the earthen floor.

“ Ah, you are 'ere, then, M'sieu Woollee,”

began Alphonse, affecting surprise. "I 'ave search for you long tam—everyw'ere. 'Ow is my p'tite Louise?"

Woolly glanced round in the candle light.

"You'd no need ter search far," he said. "An' you'd no occasion to go foolin' on the far side of the creek. Your legs are wet. You've been wadin' across the ford. Why? Ain't you bin told often enough that you're not to risk carryin' the infection to the camp?"

"It is dis way," returned Alphonse. "I go hout jus' one minute for get little fresh air, w'en somebody call me from de other side. It is de good Sister Ursula, you understand. She will spek to me verree important. Alors, I go little way in de water. I listen for wot she will say. She say, 'Mon cher Alphonse, it is necessaire you go immediatement to Woollee of de Wild. Tell 'im from me dat 'is friend—'is camerade—Otterjoe 'ave return, and is waiting dis verree minute in de Brûler Coulée for spik with 'im.'"

Woolly leapt to his feet.

"Otter Joe?" he cried in alarm. "Otter Joe come back? What's happened? Did Sister Ursula say she'd seen him—spoken with him?"

“ Oh, but assuredly,” Alphonse answered glibly. “ Otterjoe wait for you right now in ze coulee. I tink 'e 'ave verree bad accident. It is necessaire you go queek. For de rest, I tek your place, what ? ”

Woolly was perplexed, amazed. Yet he clearly saw that if Otter Joe had come back to Beaver Tail Creek it must be for some exceedingly urgent and serious reason. Not for an instant did he question the genuineness of Sister Ursula's supposed message. What he thought of most was Otter Joe's danger in remaining in the neighbourhood of the pestilence, and of the grave risk there must be in any one going to him straight from the very bedside of a smallpox patient. But even this circumstance made it the more urgent that there should be no delay in obeying Joe's summons.

Taking the precaution of hurriedly washing himself in carbolic water and wearing a clean cloak over his clothes, Woolly set forth across the ford and along the bank of the creek, wondering all the time what had caused Joe to turn back: wondering, too, what would be the consequences of this delay to the Boss and Henri Pardonet, waiting for help among the far-off mountains.

From a distance he saw the glow of what

he believed to be Otter Joe's bivouac fire within the sheltering hollow of the coulee, and he made a slant across the open moonlit grassland towards it. He went at scout's pace, never looking aside, never dreaming that he was going straight into the trap that was laid for him, and that instead of Joe it was his greatest enemy who was lying in wait for him.

It was Woolly's footsteps which Sister Ursula heard padding along the soft turf. He was coming steadily nearer. She saw Black Pete draw out his heavy revolver and grip it in his right hand ready to take aim. He was watching for his victim to come into sight between him and the moon. But before he could do more she had crept close behind him. He had not heard her, so silently, so stealthily had she moved. And now, raising her arm, she covered him with her own weapon.

"Hands up!" she cried in a firm clear voice.

Black Pete staggered back as from a physical blow and swung himself round to see the shining barrel of her gun levelled at him. He saw the strange, unknown woman's wonderful dark eyes fixed upon him along the sight, saw the steadiness of her hand and

the movement of a finger twitching at the trigger. He cringed from her like a frightened animal.

“Hands up!” she repeated, following him with her determined aim. “Move one little step and I shoot you!”

Slowly, submissively, his hands went up above his wide slouched hat. He looked into the muzzle of her revolver and beyond it at her glistening eyes that reflected the light of the moon. And Woolly's steps came nearer.

“Woolly!” cried Sister Ursula. “Woolly! —dis way!”

The boy knew her voice. He turned aside sharply and ran down to her unerringly. The moonlight was full upon her, but at the first glimpse he did not recognize her without her nun's veil. She looked exceedingly tall and majestic, cloaked in her blanket like an Indian, so very unlike a demure Sister of Charity. Her face was whiter than he had even seen it before in contrast with her long black hair, which had fallen in loose coils about her shoulders. She did not move at his approach or turn her eyes from her captive's craven face.

“Drop your gun,” she commanded without lowering her own, and, hearing the dull thud of the falling weapon, Woolly came to a

sudden halt, staring in blank amazement at the man who stood at bay in front of her.

"Pete Collyer!" he exclaimed. "Say, I figured you was dead—drowned in the rapids of Croonin' Water, where we found the smashed canoe!"

"Seems I wasn't born to be drowned," said Pete with an uneasy grin. He glanced down at his revolver as if he were planning to seize it.

"Pick up his gun," ordered Sister Ursula, speaking to Woolly in the French which came easier to her than English.

Woolly hesitated, still standing back from her.

"You ferget, Sister," he demurred. "I've just come from the shacks. I got the infection on me. You'll catch it if I go near you. Suppose you step back a bit."

"Pick up his gun," she insisted without moving. "I am not a coward."

Woolly went forward then and caught up the fallen revolver, which he gripped in his right hand, hoping that Sister Ursula would now draw back to a safer distance; wondering at the same time what had brought about this extraordinary situation of a Sister of Mercy holding a strong man cowed under the menace of a loaded revolver.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE EMBROIDERED SACHEL

HE stood at Pete's side.

“ Say, I'm curious ter know just what you reckoned on doin' with this yer shootin' iron,” he said. “ I'm not supposin' you'd be such a low-down cur as to threaten a woman. But what's been your game? P'raps it was meself you notioned to put out of the way, what? D'you mind tellin' me what brings you foolin' around here, anyhow? ”

He looked down at the man's feet, and, seeing that they wore heavy boots, wondered if they were the same boots that had made the impressions in the mud on the forest trail.

“ You knew as I was fixed up in this locality,” he declared. “ You was spyin' around when I was talkin' with the Mounted Police; that's plumb sure. I'm figurin' as you came here along with your pal Batiste Gagnon.”

Pete glared at him savagely, flinging back his upraised right hand to strike him. But Sister Ursula's ready weapon was thrust forward on the instant, and Woolly's gun was raised. Pete shrank back with his hands still above his head.

"So you found out about Batiste bein' here, did you?" he growled sullenly. "I might ha' known we wasn't safe while a cunnin' fox like you was prowlin' around. But you'd never seen Batiste before. You sure didn't know him by sight. How in thunder did you tumble on his secret?"

"I ain't figurin' ter satisfy you on that point," said Woolly, glancing around at Sister Ursula.

She was making signs to him which he did not understand.

"Tie his arms to his sides," she ordered. "Fasten his belt about them."

Pocketing the revolver, Woolly stepped nearer to Pete and began to unbuckle the man's belt.

"Who's this yer female tough that's gotten me side-tracked like this?" Pete asked. "Belongs to the French Mission outfit, I guess; though she ain't togged out like a nun. Looks a heap more like a Redskin squaw out of a fancy pictur! Sneaked up

behind me same's a soft-footed lynx, she did, an' covered me 'fore I knowed she wat thar. What's her notion, Woolly; d'ye know? What made her draw her gun on me?"

"Dessay you know a heap better'n I do," Woolly answered, loosening the belt.

"*Ecoutez, mon ami,*" interposed Sister Ursula, again speaking in French. "Listen, my friend, and I will tell you. This man, who is evidently your enemy, and who finds you very much in his way, wanted to kill you. He laid a trap for you, sending Alphonse Amyot to you with the false message that your comrade Otter Joe was here in Burnt Pine Coulee urgently wishing you to come to him. It was a trick, a wicked ruse, to bring you out, so that, from his ambush here, he might put a bullet into you. And now you understand what you have escaped; now you understand why I am holding him under the threat of this pistol."

"I understand more than that, Sister," returned Woolly. "I understand that I owe you me life. An' I'm grateful."

While she had been speaking he had pinioned Pete's arms to his sides, buckling the belt round them.

“An’ now,” he asked, “what’re we goin’ ter do with him?”

Sister Ursula lowered her weapon and drew her blanket closer around her.

“Lead him away,” she ordered. “I will follow behind to see that he makes no attempt to escape. There is the blockhouse on this side of the creek. It will make a good prison until the police come to take him.”

Woolly remembered the blockhouse. It was a stout building of timber, surrounded by a palisade, used in former days as a refuge and defence against attacks from hostile Indians, with narrow loopholes for rifle fire. It stood on a high projecting point of land at a bend of the creek, commanding the stream from two sides. To this stronghold Black Pete was taken. His arms were liberated; he offered no resistance, and the heavily-barred door and gate were closed upon him.

“He cannot escape,” said Sister Ursula. And wishing Woolly a good-night she returned to her tent.

Woolly went back then to the coulee to put out Pete’s fire and take his blankets and some food to him. By the light of the moon he gathered Pete’s belongings and packed them in a small canoe which he found drawn

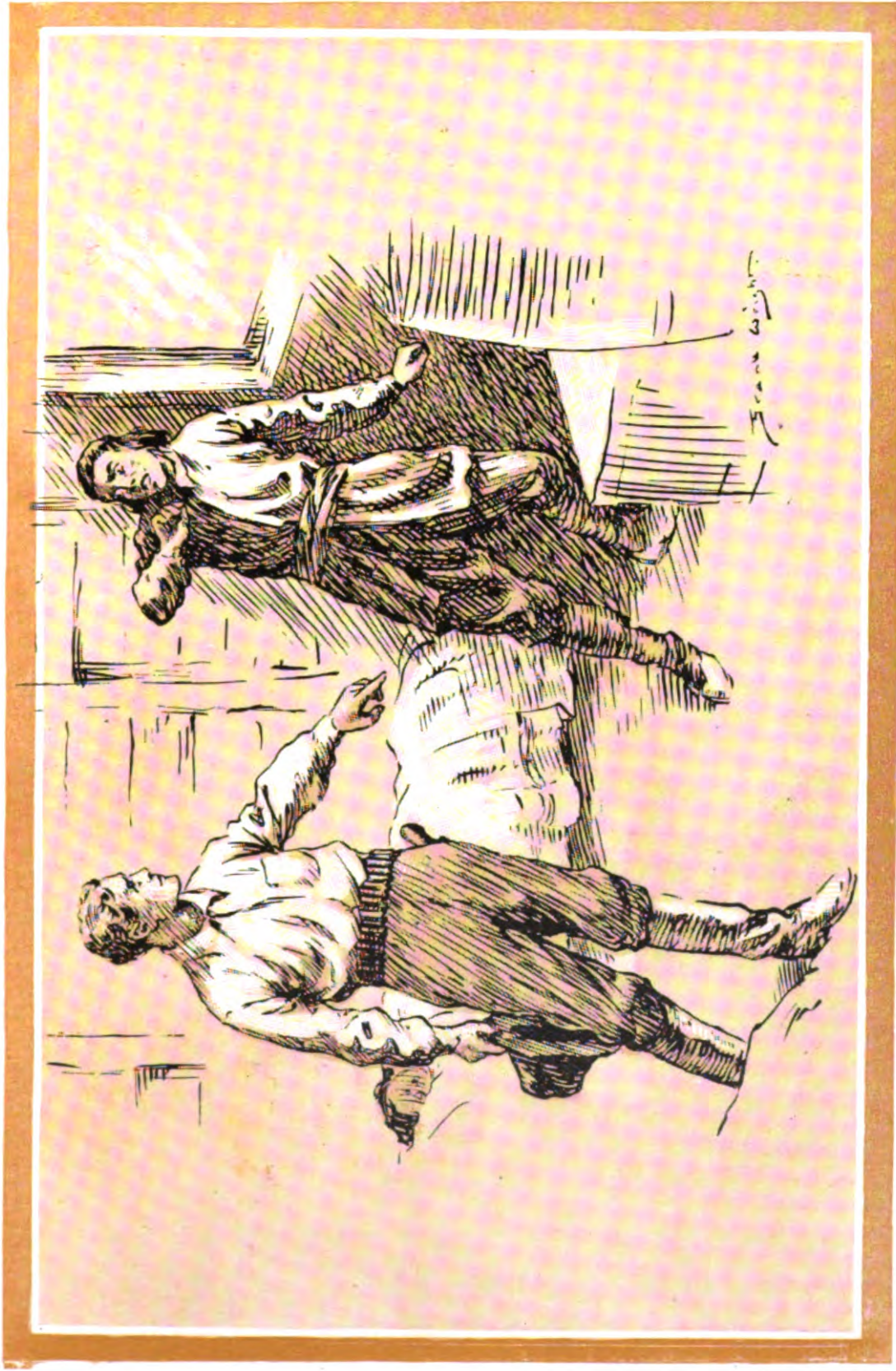
up at the side of the creek. Amongst other things he discovered a bundle of very valuable furs which he did not doubt had been stolen from Fort St. Agnes; but what interested him most was a haversack bearing the initials of the Hudson Bay Company, and containing various legal-looking documents in the familiar and beautiful handwriting of Dave Sinclair.

"Huh!" Woolly exclaimed at sight of them, "I've seen these papers before! They belong to the Boss. They're what he called his securities. An' here's his plan of that gold find in British Columbia, an' a map of his claim! Pete was a fool to reckon he could negotiate them. But I'm figurin' the Boss'll be glad to get 'em back!"

He launched the loaded canoe and paddled round to Mosquito Crossing, stopping on the way at the blockhouse to deliver Pete's bedding and grub.

"An' I've brought your bottle," he said, handing it to Pete. "Guess thar ain't enough left ter do you a whole lot of harm. So long!"

Leaving the haversack in his own hut for future examination, he went to Alphonse Amyot's shack to assure himself that little Louise was going on all right. He entered



“ ‘You!’ he cried agitatedly. ‘You have come back safe?’ ”

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very quietly. The room was in darkness, but he could see the father seated at the bedside.

"She's asleep?" he questioned in a whisper.

At the sound of his voice Alphonse started to his feet and staggered back.

"*You!*" he cried agitatedly. His face was now in the reflected light from the tiny window. It was very pale and contorted with fear. "You 'ave come back safe?" he stammered.

"Safe?" Woolly repeated. "Ah, then you knew that you was sendin' me out to me death? You knew that Otter Joe wasn't thar in the coulee, but some one else—some one as meant ter put a bullet in me. I c'n tell by the look of you as you knew. But the game didn't come off, Alphonse; not as it was intended."

"Den you 'ave keel 'im! You 'ave keel de Black Pete, wid de gun I now see sticking hout from your pocket!"

"Hush!" Woolly interrupted him. "Don't speak so loud. You'll waken the child. She mustn't be disturbed. Did you give her the medicine? Right. Stop here beside her, then; an' don't quit her even for a minute, till I come back at daylight."

He crept out softly and went about the shacks visiting other patients—three men, two boys, five women, and four children—finishing with Batiste Gagnon and a young girl.

The girl was a new patient sent across from the camp with only the first symptoms of the disease upon her, and she was not yet too ill to sit up in bed and talk with Woolly's assistant nurse who was engaged in boiling a kettle of water with which to make coffee.

"You will wait, M'sieu Woolly, and tek cup of de coffee, yes?" the nurse invited.

"Thank you, Céleste," he nodded, seating himself on an upturned box beside the stove.

When the water boiled, Céleste took a small canister of coffee from a buckskin satchel which hung from her belt. Woolly noticed the satchel and took hold of it.

"Say, Céleste, that's a pretty pattern worked along the edge of your satchel," he observed. "Nice stitchin', too. Looks as if some Injun squaw had worked it."

"On the contrary," returned Céleste, "I work it myself, an' I assure you I am no squaw. I 'ave mek de satchel complete wid my own fingers at de French Mission, where I am educated."

"Pattern's sure Indian," Woolly pursued.

“ I’ve seen the same design before—zig-zags an’ scrolls an’ flowers made of coloured beads. Don’t just remember where.”

“ Pardon, M’sieu,” rejoined Céleste, “ but it is impossible you ’ave seen such pattern anywhere else; because, you must understand, it was design by my teacher, out of ’er own ’ead. Sister Ursula is verree adroit. She is artist, *vous voyez*.”

Woolly took the cup of coffee that was offered to him. While he sipped at it he was thinking. Suddenly he looked again at the girl’s embroidered satchel.

“ Yes, I remember now,” he said to himself. “ It’s the same pattern as was worked in silk round the edge of Henri Pardonet’s pocket book. That’s queer! Now, I wonder——? No, it ain’t possible.”

CHAPTER XXIX

THE SILVER LAKE PATROL

IT was fortunate for Woolly's peace of mind that Alphonse Amyot was so greatly concerned with his child's dangerous illness that he did not attempt again to go out of bounds or try to hold communication with Pete Collyer. As a matter of fact, Alphonse did not yet know that Pete was a prisoner, secured behind the heavily barred door of the block-house. He believed that Pete was still at liberty and that the failure of his plot to take Woolly's life was a mere accident. He never suspected that the plot had been discovered and frustrated by Sister Ursula. And so he continued to devote himself to his little daughter and to the other patients, thankful that Woolly was taking no steps to punish or expose his treachery.

Woolly, however, was far too busy in the plague-stricken shacks to trouble himself about Alphonse. In spite of prompt vaccination, two new cases had been added to the

number of his patients, and most of the earlier cases were approaching the critical stage of the disease. He had difficulty in attending to them without skilled help, and he was worried by the fear that he might not be giving the proper treatment.

This fear was increased when one of his boy patients died. He blamed himself for neglect, and hurried down to the creek in great distress to tell Sister Ursula, standing knee deep in the stream while she spoke with him from the farther bank.

"It happened in the night, while I was asleep," he told her. "I oughtn't ter have gone to bed, knowin' how bad he was."

"But Céleste was with him," she reminded him, "and it is necessaire you take some rest. Otherwise you will yourself be ill. You must not speak of neglect. If it had not been for you many others would have died. Nevertheless, you must now have more help. I will myself come across and help you."

"No," he protested. "I can't let you. Thar's too much risk, an' you've got ter look after the others that ain't yet ill."

But Sister Ursula shook her head.

"It is my duty to help you," she insisted. "Bring me the canoe, and I will come this very hour. As for the people over here in

ze camp—— Listen, my friend. You are in need of more drugs, more disinfectants, more of ze delicate food. Well, then, you will take Modestine in de cart to the Mission : you will fetch these necessaries. And it is probable that Sister Claire, who is a very good nurse, will come back with you. I command you to do this, you understand ? I command you. Otherwise, it is better you return to your Hudson Bay Fort of St. Agnes, or else go on ze trail of the Mounted Police and get them to relieve us of the responsibility of this Black Pete.”

“ I will go to the Mission for the drugs,” Woolly yielded ; “ because we can’t get along without ’em. But you ain’t comin’ across ter handle these sick people. It’s a nasty job. It ain’t a fit job fer a lady like you.”

“ We shall see,” she nodded. “ And you will bring the Sister Claire, *hein* ? ”

“ Dunno,” said Woolly. “ I’ll think about it. An’ say, I’ll fetch a canoe over ter this side in case Alphonse gets foolin’ about with it. I’ve disinfected meself an’ the cart. What about Modestine ? Must I disinfect the mare as well ? ”

This precaution was not considered necessary, especially as he did not intend to drive within dangerous nearness of the Mission buildings.

Leaving Céleste in charge of the shacks, he started off on his journey through the forest trail, and arrived at his destination in the early afternoon. In response to his signal of a shrill whistle, the abbé limped down to the shore of the creek. Woolly reported to him all that had happened at Mosquito Crossing, not forgetting to tell of the arrest of Pete Collyer and of the death of one of the patients.

“ You will, of course, bury that poor boy,” said the priest, “ even without the religious ceremony, since it would be unwise for me to go into the midst of the infection. At all costs we must keep the epidemic from the Mission children.”

“ That’s all right, sir,” said Woolly. “ I’ve set two of the Breeds to dig a grave, an’ I’m figurin’ it’ll meet the case if I read the prayers meself. What am I to do about our prisoner? It may be months before the police patrol comes round here again.”

“ Clearly, it is your duty to go and search for the police,” returned Father Raymond. “ You see, you have no legal right to arrest this man, whatever his crime. You have no warrant ; and in detaining him by force you are yourself committing a breach of the peace. I do not counsel you to set him free ; but

assuredly the sooner you fetch the police the better."

"Dunno where to find 'em," Woolly objected.

"I think I can help you," said the priest. "They are on the Silver Lake Patrol. Two days ago they were at Rattlesnake Ranch, on their way to Fort St. Agnes, where, if you go at once, you may possibly find them."

"Then I'll go right away ter Fort St. Agnes," Woolly decided.

He told Father Raymond what things he wanted, and he waited with the cart until they should be fetched, in a handcart drawn by one of the Mission sisters. In addition to the drugs, disinfectants and food, the load included a large bundle of clean clothing for Sister Ursula, a bucketful of sulphur for fumigating purposes, and a quantity of bedding as well as the material for a tent.

"Sister Claire will go back with you," said the abbé. "She will take your place as doctor and nurse."

Woolly would have protested, but he recognized that a trained nurse was of far more use than himself in battling with the epidemic, and he silently yielded to the arrangement.

Back again at Mosquito Crossing, he occupied himself that evening, with the

assistance of Alphonse, in conducting the funeral of the dead half-breed boy. Afterwards he took possession of a small, isolated shed in which he hung up his clothes and all the things he intended to take away with him. Having stopped up all the crevices, he lighted a brazier of sulphur in the middle of the floor and tightly closed the shed, so that the things would be thoroughly fumigated. Then he gave himself a hot bath, with strong disinfectant in the water.

In the morning when he dressed in his fumigated clothes he compared himself with a skunk; but he bravely endured the sulphurous smell, knowing that he at least was carrying away no infection. Without returning to the village or bidding good-bye to Sister Ursula, he packed his canoe and paddled away down the creek.

CHAPTER XXX

THE BATTLE OF BROWN BEAR GAP

HIS long, lonely journey back to Fort St. Agnes was an enjoyable relief to him after his arduous time of nursing, and when he left the creeks and the difficult portages behind and came out into the wide stretch of Silver Lake he was happy. The water was a calm mirror that reflected every tree and crag and mountain. How different from the storm-swept, frozen lake upon which he had been lost and where the wild wolf pack had come to him!

And at length he came in sight of the familiar white buildings of the fort, with the Union Jack flying bravely above them. On the landing place there was a group of trading Indians in their bright-coloured blankets, and lounging half-breeds with tasselled caps and red sashes. He moored his canoe and strode up to the fort, carrying Pete Collyer's haversack. In the courtyard, where he was greeted by the temporary factor, he noticed the marks of horses' hoofs.

“ I see the Mounted Police Patrol has got here before me,” he remarked. “ I’m hoping they haven’t quitted yet.”

“ They went away this morning,” he was told. “ You see, there’s some trouble brewing among the Sidlaw Range Indians. Old Thunder Bird’s figuring to go out on the war trail, and Trooper Whiffle, soon as he got word of it, made up his mind to go off and put things straight.”

“ This mornin’ ? ” repeated Woolly. “ Then the patrol can’t have gone very far. With a good mount I might overtake ’em. Guess I’ll go after ’em right now—soon’s I’ve had a bite of grub with you an’ locked away a few fixin’s that belong to Mr. Sinclair.”

Over the meal he told the factor of the imprisoning of Pete Collyer in the blockhouse at Mosquito Crossing. The factor had known both Pete and Batiste Gagnon.

“ Yes,” he said. “ It’s good business on your part having laid those two rascals by the heels. Trooper Whiffle was no end disappointed when he heard they were drowned. You’ll do well to put him on their trail again.”

“ What was their crime ? ” Woolly asked. “ D’you know ? ”

“ Why,” said the factor. “ It happened at

Qu-Appelle the last time Pete was down east. He and Batiste notioned to rob the Hudson Bay factor there. They broke into the fort and were collaring the money when the factor dropped on them. There was a tussle, in which the factor was killed. The rascals vamoosed with the loot, leaving no clue to their identity. But Whiffle got on their trail, somehow, and made up his mind to round them up, even though he searched for them all over Canada."

Woolly wasted no time over his preparations for prolonging his journey. Saddling a borrowed broncho, he mounted and rode off in a northerly direction towards the Sidlaw Mountains. He rode fast, hoping to overtake the patrol before nightfall, but in this hope he was disappointed. Two days of hard travelling failed to bring him within sight of the three horsemen he was tracking. But he had a clear idea of their destination, and he went on and on. And on the third evening he came to the Beaver Indian Reservation in Brown Bear Gap. Dismounting and hobbling his pony, he went in among the wigwams and found his way to the chief medicine lodge, in front of which a large fire was burning. Many Indians stood about the fire, and in the midst of them were two

tall white men in the familiar uniform of the North-West Mounted Police. Woolly approached them.

"I guessed I might find you here," he began, plucking at the sleeve of Trooper Whiffle's red tunic. "I've tracked you all the way from Fort St. Agnes, to tell you I made a mistake when I said that Pete Collyer an' Batiste Gagnon were drowned. They're both at Skeeter Crossin' right now, if you're figurin' to go back an' arrest 'em. Pete's locked up in the blockhouse. Batiste is ill with the smallpox."

"Bully for you!" cried Whiffle. And when Woolly had given him the fuller details and assured him that neither man could escape, he said: "You've done us a real good turn, Woolly; and we'll fix the business right away, as soon as we're through with the job that brought us here. At the moment we're waiting round for your friend Tawabinisay. He's gone out on a big scout into Lost Man's Cañon, and ought to be back by now."

Even as he spoke there came the sound of a galloping horse's hoofs, and presently Tawabinisay dashed into the firelight on his sweating, panting pony. He pulled to an abrupt halt and leapt to the ground.

Woolly listened to the Indian's quietly

spoken report of his scouting. Tawab had been spying round the lodges of a band of hostile Crees, whose chief was named Thunder Bird. He had counted the horses in their corrals. Many of these horses were piebald mustangs of a breed exactly resembling the horses which he himself had kept years before when he was a warrior among the Chipewyans. He judged that they were the descendants of those that had been stolen from his own corrals in the big raid upon his village, when so many of his brother braves had been massacred and his daughter Maple Leaf had been lost. If this was so, then Thunder Bird was his enemy as well as the enemy of the Beavers. And now, as he had just discovered, Thunder Bird and his warriors and braves were coming out on the war trail. They were coming here to this village. He had seen them coming. They would be here before the next rising of the sun, and it was time for the Beavers to make ready to meet them in battle.

It appeared to Woolly that the two troopers did not wholly credit this report, or at least that they saw no cause for alarm. Whiffle, indeed, seemed to think much less of it than of the work of preparing a good supper of roasted caribou flesh.

“Redskin cookery leaves a lot to be desired,” he said to Woolly. “You wouldn’t relish their seasoning. But I think you’ll enjoy these steaks if only you can forget the disturbing smell of sulphur that’s clinging about you. It’s pretty evident to me that you didn’t neglect to disinfect yourself before you came away from that hotbed of dirt and disease.”

Woolly slept in his blanket in a corner of one of the lodges, and dreamt that he was back again wrestling with the dangers of Crooning Water Cañon, perched on an isolated point of rock half way down a tremendous precipice trying to clutch at a swinging rope that was far beyond his reach. He dreamt that he overbalanced himself and was falling down, down into the awful abyss, and just as he was reaching the bottom he awoke with a start and felt a hand on his chest, while Trooper Whiffle’s mellow voice was saying to him :

“Say, boy, if you’re figuring to take part in this show, now’s your time. Thunder Bird’s scouts have dismounted, and they’re crawling up through the long grass.”

Woolly had not undressed. He was up in an instant, buckling his belt and filling his revolver with cartridges. Outside the teepee he found his pony already saddled in charge

of Tawabinisay, who was mounted on a fine police troop horse.

“ You come alonga me,” said the Indian, as Woolly gripped his reins.

The village was as silent as if all its inhabitants were asleep ; but beyond the wigwams a ring of crouching, half-naked figures could be seen, waiting ready for the expected attack, each one of them with a gun, a tomahawk and scalping knife. Behind the medicine lodge there was a group of horsemen—the chief warriors of the village under the command of Trooper Whiffle. Woolly and his companion joined them.

From beyond the corrals there came sounds like the cheeping of sage hens—the signal cries of the raiders. Then there was a rifle shot, followed by volley firing, mingled with wild barbaric yells.

Whiffle led his horsemen into the open at a gallop. They streamed out in single file, then rallied into a close bunch and charged across the shallow river and up the farther slope to cut off the approach of the Crees, who dashed towards them yelling their war-whoops from the ravine where they had halted. Woolly, riding between Whiffle and Tawabinisay, saw that the leader of the oncoming hostiles wore a war-bonnet.

“The man with the feathers is Thunder Bird,” said Whiffle, gripping his carbine.

There was a sharp crackle of musketry fire from both sides. Two of the Crees' horses ran riderless. Whiffle wheeled his company to the left, to attack the enemy's right flank; but Tawabinisay quitted the ranks and rode forward to engage the chief, discharging his repeating rifle as he went.

Glancing round for an instant, Woolly saw Thunder Bird fling up his hands and fall to the ground. Then Tawab, finding himself alone, swerved round and raced back, with a crowd of the yelling Crees behind him. Whiffle and Woolly rode out to his help, and at sight of the red coat the Crees turned in precipitate retreat, leaving their dead chief and three of their braves on the field.

The whole fight had occupied hardly more than half an hour. One of the Beavers was killed and half a dozen were slightly wounded. Tawabinisay had received a bullet wound in his right side and another in the fleshy part of his thigh, but he was satisfied in having got the better of his enemy Thunder Bird, and he claimed the chief's war bonnet as a glorious trophy.

“And now,” said Trooper Whiffle to Woolly when it was all over, “you'd best cut back

home to St. Agnes and take old Tawab along with you. Quain and I are going to follow up those Crees to their village to make peace terms. When we're through, we shall get to the business of arresting Pete Collyer."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE EMPTY BUNK

IN the old days of frontier fighting and Indian raids the Redskin was exceedingly vain of his wounds received in battle. He bore them without flinching, displayed them with pride. He was usually so sorry when they healed that he would plaster the old scars with vermilion, lest they should pass unnoticed. He gloried in his wounds. But Tawabinisay was one of the peace Indians of the woods, with whom wounds were no longer fashionable, and he allowed himself to feel pain like an ordinary civilized being, and he wished that his hurts might be speedily cured. The wound in his side troubled him. It was very sore. He pitied himself. One of his ribs was fractured; he was afraid it would be the end of him, and he didn't want to die and be forgotten.

Woolly was his attentive surgeon and nurse at St. Agnes, and did all that he could for him, giving up his own little room to

him, dressing and feeding him, assuring him always that he would soon be quite well again, and earning his gratitude.

When Woolly was about to leave the fort and go back for a few days to Mosquito Crossing, the Indian spoke to him of his gratitude.

“Tawab owes much to his friend, his white brother,” he said. “He is heavy hearted because he is leaving him; he will die. But he hopes that his friend will not forget him.” He fumbled in his wallet and produced a parcel enclosed in a wrapping of sweet grass. “He would give his friend a present,” he went on. “It is this.” And he put the parcel into Woolly’s hand.

Woolly knew without opening it that the parcel contained the pair of white doeskin moccasins which Tawab associated with his lost daughter Maple Leaf. He knew also that when an Indian offers a gift it is almost an insult to refuse it. Yet he hesitated.

“Tawabinisay is too kind,” he said. “His friend will remember him always. He needs no keepsake to remind him of the Man who Travels by Moonlight.”

As a matter of fact, had the choice been given him, Woolly would much rather have had Thunder Bird’s war-bonnet to keep as a

souvenir. Nevertheless, he took the moccasins with him in his canoe and tried to imagine that they would bring him good luck.

He calculated that he would reach the half-breed village well in advance of the police patrol, who, being on horseback, would have to travel by a long roundabout trail across the mountains to avoid the lakes and the wide fordless rivers and creeks, whereas the way by water was direct and easy. Trooper Whiffle had instructed him to meet him at Mosquito Crossing; but an additional reason for his journey was that he was taking some stores and medicines which could not be got from the French Mission.

It was on a beautiful calm morning that he paddled into Beaver Tail Creek, and by noon he had come to the village. Alphonse Amyot and Sister Claire met him as he hauled his canoe out of the water.

“You have been absent longer than you expected,” said Sister Claire. She was an elderly and very serious Frenchwoman, who never smiled. “And even now you have not brought the police. Why? Did you not find them, after all?”

“I found 'em, yes,” returned Woolly. “But, you see, my canoe wasn't built fer carryin' horses. They're comin' by land. I

expect they'll be here before long—to-night, most likely. How're your patients? ”

“ Hélas ! ” the Sister answered. “ Three are dead since you went away. We have had a terrible time, Sister Ursula and I. Always one of us has been on duty.”

“ Gee ! ” exclaimed Woolly. “ Are you telling me as Sister Ursula's bin workin' amongst the shacks—nursin' ? ”

“ Oh, but yes,” he was told. “ She has been vaccinated, you know. There is no danger from the disease. The only danger is that she works too hard, and takes not enough rest. At this moment she sleeps.”

“ Best let me take her place for a spell,” said Woolly, beginning to unload the canoe.

Alphonse helped him to carry up the stores to the hut where such things were kept, but did not seem to wish to linger. As soon as the work was done he took up his jacket and was slinking away.

Woolly called him back, asking him where he was going in such a hurry.

“ Pardon, M'sieu,” said Alphonse, “ but it was tam I give Batiste 'is soup. Batiste and the others.”

Woolly did not suspect anything ; but had he watched Alphonse he might have seen

that although he did indeed take a flagon of hot soup into Batiste's shack, yet he took none to the other patients.

Alone with Batiste for a few moments, he said in a hurried, urgent whisper :

“ Quick, my friend. It is now time. The police are coming ! ”

Batiste was well enough to be sitting up in bed, although the unsightly smallpox rash was still upon him and he was very weak.

“ What can I do ? Where shall I hide myself ? ” he questioned in alarm.

Alphonse dropped a bundle of garments on the stool beside the bed.

“ First, you dress yourself,” he answered. “ Then I come back to you very soon. I go now to give the warning to Pete. Afterwards we all three escape together, you understand. There is a place which I know, where we can hide. It is safe, absolutely. The police can never find us—never ! ”

Alphonse slipped out of the shack and went stealthily down to the creek. Creeping along under the cover of the bank, he came to the place where Woolly's canoe was beached. He launched the canoe, unseen, and paddled up the stream until he came abreast of the blockhouse. Here he successfully concealed the canoe amongst the reeds

under a shadowing willow. Then he crawled up to the blockhouse.

His absence from the village was not noticed for a long time. During the afternoon Woolly rested in his hut, to prepare himself for taking night duty in the place of Sister Ursula.

Towards dusk, Woolly got up to take stock of the stores and medicines. With other things from Fort St. Agnes he had brought a supply of salve with which to anoint the suffering patients. And now he took some of this and visited each of the shacks in turn.

When at length he entered the one wherein he expected to see Alphonse attending to Batiste Gagnon, he was astonished to find the bed empty. There was no sign of either patient or nurse. Had Batiste been moved into another hut?

He went out again and called aloud:

“Alphonse! Alphonse!”

Receiving no answer, he ran about the village making inquiries. Nobody could tell him anything.

He remembered then that when he had told Sister Claire of the expected coming of the Mounted Police, Alphonse Amyot had stood listening with suspiciously close atten-

tion. But this did not explain why a patient who was still barely convalescent from so dangerous a disease as smallpox should be so mad as to get out of his bed, much less to go out of doors, carrying the infection about with him as well as risking his life. And yet it might be so. A man hunted by the police might risk even life itself rather than be captured.

And what of Black Pete? Had he, too, escaped?

CHAPTER XXXII

UNDER ARREST

WHEN Woolly thought of Pete in connection with the disappearance of Batiste he could no longer doubt what had happened: that Alphonse Amyot was in league with the two criminals and that in all probability he had not only helped them to escape but had even gone off with them.

As a precaution, Woolly armed himself with his loaded revolver before beginning his wider search. He ran down to the creek and saw that his canoe had been taken. He waded across the ford and made his way towards the blockhouse. As he approached very silently in the growing dusk, he heard the sound of digging. He went cautiously nearer and crept round to the farther side of the stockade.

It was Alphonse who was digging. He had already removed a huge pile of earth from an excavation beneath the heavy timbers of the palisade. Such a quantity of

earth could only mean that a tunnel had been bored right into the interior of the block-house.

Crawling yet nearer, Woolly was on the point of rising to his feet and making a dash forward when a movement in the bush beside him caused him to hesitate. He glanced round and saw Batiste Gagnon, lying under the cover of a blanket, raising himself on his elbows and staring at him, with terror in his blotched and swollen face. Batiste did not speak or give a call of alarm. He was trembling violently and his teeth were chattering like castinets.

The digging had ceased, and instead of the sound of the spade came the voice of Black Pete :

“ Hold hard ! That’ll do. Lay hold of my hand and gimme a pull up.”

Woolly ran forward then, gripping his revolver.

“ That’s your game, is it ? ” he cried, moving his aim threateningly from Alphonse to Pete and back to Alphonse. “ Seems I’ve dropped on you just in time.”

Alphonse shrank back from him, leaving Pete helpless at the bottom of a deep trench, with his rough head on a level with the upper ground.

“Get back into your den, Collyer,” Woolly commanded. “An’ you, Alphonse—you c’n jus’ lay to an’ fill up that hole again, right now.”

Alphonse took up the spade, but to use it as a weapon. Seizing it by the shaft in his two hands, he flung it back above his head and made a fierce rush at Woolly as if to cut him down with a blow upon the head. Woolly leaped aside and threw out a foot, tripping Alphonse, who rolled over, with Woolly on top of him, kneeling on his back. They struggled together for some moments, but Alphonse, feeling the cold ring of the revolver muzzle pressed against the back of his head, subsided and lay panting and moaning.

They were still in this position when Pete Collyer succeeded in climbing up out of the trench. Woolly saw him rise from his hands and knees and start off at a run towards the creek. But Pete had not gone half a dozen paces when there was a sharp report and a bullet from Woolly’s revolver caught him in the leg. Pete fell, tried to get up again, and again fell.

“Say, I don’t figure you c’n run away any farther,” observed Woolly, rising to his feet. “You best lie right where you are for a



“ But Pete had not gone half a dozen paces when there was a strange report.”

Woolly of the Wilds]

[*Chapter XXXII*



bit, till I can look after you." He turned to Alphonse. "Get up," he ordered, "and help me carry Batiste down to the canoe. We must take him back to his bunk, see? You proved yourself a mad, chuckle-headed caribou when you allowed him to get out of it."

Fully an hour was occupied in getting the sick man back to his bed, and even already he was seen to be in a high fever. His exposure to the cold air and the fact that he had been foolish enough to wade across the creek had brought on a relapse, and before the night was over his condition was more serious than it had been in the most critical stage of his previous illness.

"Looks as if I was goin' ter be cheated of me revenge on him," Woolly reflected. "The police an' the law won't have a chance."

Returning to the blockhouse, Woolly found Black Pete lying where he had left him. His wound, although not serious, was severe enough to prevent him from making another attempt to escape, and when it had been dressed and bandaged Woolly helped him into the shed and stationed one of the half-breeds from the camp on guard over him.

On the following day Batiste Gagnon was too ill to be left alone. Woolly devoted him-

self to him unremittingly, trying all in his power to save him ; but the man grew weaker and weaker beyond hope of recovery, and in the afternoon Woolly watched him drawing his last breath.

Just as he was closing the door behind him he turned and saw the glint of a scarlet tunic moving amongst the trees of the forest trail. The police patrol, with two spare horses, came riding towards the village. Woolly went to meet them, stopping at a discreet distance away from them.

“ You’re too late to take Batiste Gagnon,” he told Trooper Whiffle. “ He had a bad relapse, an’ died about an hour ago. Thar’s no occasion for you to go an’ see him, is there? You needn’t go into the infection. ’Twouldn’t be safe. I’ll lead you straight away to the blockhouse, though, an’ you c’n arrest Pete Collyer. We shall be glad ter git quit of him. Say, he’s got a bad leg. I was obliged to fire a bullet at him last night. He was tryin’ to escape.”

“ A good thing he got it only in the leg,” said Whiffle. “ I should have been disappointed if they’d both of them slipped through our fingers. We’ll take Collyer along with us, anyhow ; and there’s no need for you to show us the way to the lock-up. I

know where it is. Keep clear from us with your infection and throw me the key."

Catching the key that was thrown to him, he turned in his seat.

"You'll be quitting here now, I expect," he said. "We heard along the trail that your friends are coming home after their explorations. It's likely you'll find them there when you get back to Fort St. Agnes. Well, so long, and thank you for all you've done for us. You've been as good as a policeman yourself."

From the high ground at the back of the village, Woolly watched the two troopers riding away with their prisoner between them. Black Pete was proudly mounted on a magnificent troop horse, free from all restraint, as if he were the comrade and not the captive of the police. He saw Woolly in the distance, and shook his fist at him.

"You blamed young skunk!" he muttered deep in his throat. "It's you that's brought me to this, with yer schemin' an' spyin'! Got the pull of me every time, you have. But I'm quit of you now—quit of you!"

Woolly was reflecting upon Trooper Whiffle's advice to him that he should return at once to Fort St. Agnes.

"After all, thar ain't a whole lot of need

that I should stop here," he told himself. "They've got plenty nurses now. I'll disinfect meself again, an' go, right away. Guess I oughter say good-bye to Sister Ursula, though, an'—an' thank her for savin' me life. Never said a word of thanks to her yet. Clean fergot, I did, an' if it hadn't been for her I should be dead. P'raps I oughter give her a reward—a keepsake, of some sort. No use offerin' her me pistol, or me knife. Wonder if she'd accept a few ermine skins, or a nice silver-fox pelt. Furs don't seem to go with a nun's uniform, somehow. Dunno what to offer her. Dessay I'd best do no more'n thank her an' have done with it. Hold hard, though!"

He smiled to himself.

"Why didn't I think of it before!" he exclaimed. "Thar's that dinky little pair of moccasins I could give her. She sure wouldn't refuse 'em. She's fond of embroidery an' needlework. I'll give her the moccasins. They're me own ter do what I like with. They bin given to me twice over, an' I ain't got anythin' in the world that I value so much. Jus' because I want 'em meself—jus' because it'll hurt me to part with 'em—I'll give 'em to Sister Ursula."

CHAPTER XXXIII

A SORT OF KEEPSAKE

THE Mounted Police and their prisoner had not gone away from Mosquito Crossing more than a couple of hours when a cart arrived through the forest trail from the French Mission, bringing two Sisters of Charity as additional nurses. Woolly had no longer any scruple about leaving. There was only the duty of burying the dead Batiste Gagnon, and then he might go when he pleased, back to the Hudson Bay trading station on Silver Lake.

He had taken the precaution of bringing with him from Fort St. Agnes a spare suit of his Sunday clothes to replace his old workaday ones, which in spite of fumigation, were probably full of smallpox germs; and this better suit, as well as clean underclothing, he had kept wrapped up in a gunny sack until he should have thoroughly disinfected himself and was otherwise ready to start for home. His jacket was of soft, dressed antelope hide,

fringed at the seams. Beneath it was his blue cotton shirt and a crimson sash, loose corduroy breeches and beaded leggings and moccasins. He wore a wide-rimmed sun-hat with the skin of a rattlesnake coiled round the crown.

In this picturesque costume of the backwoods he made his way to Sister Ursula's tent on the heights beyond the camp.

The door-flap was open to admit the air and sunlight, and, looking within, he saw the devout woman kneeling at her devotions before a crucifix. He drew respectfully back and waited.

"I'm hopin' I didn't disturb you," he said apologetically when presently she came out to him, wearing her nun's cap with white wings. "The police have been here, an' they've taken Pete Collyer away with 'em."

"Yes, I am aware. I saw," she nodded. "It was for Pete that I was praying—for him and the other. You look surprised. But, believe me, my friend, there is never a poor sinner so utterly lost that he is not worth praying for. And so you are leaving us, *hein?*"

"Yes," Woolly answered. "I'm goin' back to St. Agnes. Th' ain't no need for me to stay here any longer now as they've sent

more helpers from the Mission. I've come ter wish you good-bye, case I never see you again. An' I wanted ter thank you," he went on falteringly. "You bin as good as a mother to me since I've been here."

Sister Ursula shook her head slowly.

"It is not necessaire you thank me when I do only my duty," she said softly.

"P'raps not," he responded bashfully. "But you done more'n your duty when you saved me life, the time Pete was ready to put a bullet inter me. Say, it was plucky—real plucky of you, a nun, ter stan' up against a man like Pete, especially when he'd bin' drinkin' an' was desperate. Dunno quite how you found out as he was thar, lyin' in wait for me—unless it was Alphonse."

"It was Alphonse," she told him. "I heard them plotting together, those two."

"Anyhow, you sure saved me life," he rejoined nervously. "I'm grateful to you, an' I'm wonderin' if you'd accept jus' a little sorter keepsake from me, 'fore I quit." He thrust his hand under his leather jacket and drew forth a small parcel. "Will you?" he asked humbly.

"Oh, but no, my friend!" she protested, speaking now in French. "Why should you give me things? It is not as if we were not

to see each other again. It is better that we simply shake hands and say au revoir."

Woolly took her hand in his own, but before releasing it placed his little parcel in her palm.

The wrapping was of pure white ermine skin, tied round with a pink silk ribbon, which he had got from the girl Céleste. For a moment he thought of running off before she could reject his gift. Then the wish came to him to watch her and judge by her expression if she appreciated his offering.

"Won't you open it?" he requested. "It's only a little pair of Injun moccasins. But they're extra nice ones, with lovely stitchin' on 'em. An' I know you're kinder fond of fancy needlework an' embroidery."

Sister Ursula smiled at him as she proceeded to untie the bow of ribbon. She turned back a fold of the soft ermine skin.

"Pretty, ain't they?" he said, wondering why she did not speak. He saw that her fingers were trembling. She was strangely agitated. He glanced at her face and saw that it had become pale and that her big dark eyes were staring wildly at the moccasins as she turned them over in eager examination.

"Ain't you well?" he asked in alarm. "Say, you're all of a tremble. What's wrong?"

She looked at him sharply, clasping the pretty things tightly in her two hands.

“Where—how—when?” she exclaimed confusedly.

Woolly was perplexed, astonished at her agitation.

“Ever seen ’em before, Sister?” he questioned.

“Oh, but yes!” she answered him. “Indeed and indeed I have seen them before—many years ago. It—it was I who made them. Every stitch in them was sewn by these my hands!”

“Huh!” cried Woolly. “Is that so, sure? You—you made ’em? Why, it ain’t possible. Excuse me for saying so, but it ain’t possible! You must sure be makin’ a queer mistake; you must be thinkin’ of another pair that was mebbe somethin’ like ’em. Look at ’em again! That’s real Injun needlework, that is. Those moccasins was made by a Injun girl—see?”

Sister Ursula pressed a hand to her forehead in bewilderment. Her thumb caught in the hem of her nun’s white headdress and a strand of her black hair escaped.

“Sure,” Woolly insisted, “the girl as made ’em was Indian.”

“Well?” returned Sister Ursula—“well

—and I—did you not know, did you not guess that I also am Indian ? ”

“ Never ! ” cried Woolly, taking a step back and staring at her as he had never dared to do before. “ Allus figured as you were French. Never put the question to meself, anyhow. Injun ? *You* Injun ? ”

She was again busily examining the moccasins, regarding every line and curve in their design, every beaded flower and silken stitch on their white doeskin surface. Woolly did not lower his wondering eyes from her face.

“ Now that I look at you in the light of what you’ve just told me,” he said, “ I seem to understand.” He glanced behind her at a thick log of timber. “ Say, Sister Ursula,” he went on gently, “ thar’s a whole lot of things I’ve got ter tell you. Won’t you sit down on that log ? ”

She obeyed and he stood in front of her, looking down at her, with his right foot on the log and an elbow on his knee.

“ Guess I’d best begin at the beginnin’,” he said, and then paused, marvelling at the strange circumstance of an Indian girl transforming herself into a Sister of Charity ; a Redskin savage being turned into a gentle, peace-loving nun. But more than all he was

marvelling at the discovery which the moccasins had brought about, and the mystery which they had so suddenly and unexpectedly solved.

CHAPTER XXXIV

GOOD MEDICINE

“**F**IRST time I ever set eyes on 'em,” he said, plunging into his explanation, “was when I found 'em lyin' among the dust an' cobwebs in our store-loft at Fort St. Agnes. They'd been there years, forgotten. I showed 'em to the boss—Dave Sinclair—an' he told me I might keep 'em for meself. Boss told me that he'd found them, years before, lyin' on the trail halfway between Crazy Woman's Creek and Minnewanka. Didn't know anythin' about 'em beyond that.”

“Yes,” said Sister Ursula. “I do not know the places by their names, but I know that I dropped them on the trail when I was making my escape. Thunder Bird, the chief of the Crees, had made a raid upon our wigwams. They had killed many of our people and were carrying many of us away into captivity. It was at night-time that I made my escape. One of our young braves



"I heard the Crees racing after me along the trail."

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helped me as he had helped others, one by one. He brought me a horse. I leapt upon it bare back and rode off alone, taking the moccasins with me, wrapped in sweet grass. But my escape was soon known. I heard the Crees racing after me along the trail. In my terror I dropped my little parcel, and there was no time to dismount and search for it. I was very sad at this loss, for I treasured these moccasins."

"But you escaped?" nodded Woolly.
"They never tracked you?"

"I escaped. For two days and nights I rode, always away from the mountains, away from the Crees. I rested for many days in a great forest, feeding upon berries. I was lost. But I rode on and on, beyond the foothills to the far-stretching prairies, where there was no food and no water, but only the choking dust and the parching heat. My pony died of thirst. I was alone and utterly lost. But the good God, who is ever watchful of His children, sent help to me. Even as I lay unconscious at the point of death I was found by a party of French missionaries, who carried me with them to far Quebec. You see? You understand? That is the way it happened."

She broke off, and, having wrapped the

moccasins in their white fur covering, was preparing to rise.

“ But that ain’t the end of the story,” said Woolly, signing to her to remain seated. “ I’m figurin’ that you stayed in Quebec, learnt to speak French, became what you are now—a Sister of Charity—an’ afterwards came west to Beaver Tail Creek. But you’d a father ; you’d friends ? Didn’t you ever want ter find ’em ? ”

Sister Ursula looked up at him strangely.

“ How can you ask ? ” she faltered. “ It was to try to find them that I came west to the mountains. I have searched and searched ; but always in vain, and I have long given up hope. You must understand, my friend, that our village was destroyed. My father, if he remained alive, became a wanderer without a home.”

Woolly moved back from her and strode to and fro, thinking for several moments. Then he returned and resumed his former position with a foot on the log.

“ Listen, Sister Ursula,” he said, “ or mebbe I should call you by your Indian name—Maple Leaf.”

He saw her start in astonishment.

“ Maple Leaf ? ” she exclaimed in agitation. “ That name—where did you hear it ? ”

“ Listen ! ” he repeated. “ Until you reco’nized those moccasins jus’ now I hadn’t the ghost of a notion you were Indian. I thought you were French, or mebbe a half-breed ; though once or twice—an’ especially when you stood in front of Black Pete, with a blanket round you an’ your hair loose an’ with a loaded gun in your hand—you sure looked the very picture of an Indian. Even so, thar was nothin’ to tell me or make me guess as you was the long-lost Maple Leaf, daughter of Tawabinisay.

“ Say, you’re surprised that I know his name. What ? I’ve known himself for a long while. I’ve known that he was pinin’ his heart away because he couldn’t find you. An’ yet you’ve been near to findin’ each other many a time. Only a few days back he was here in the forest trail. He was with the police patrol, actin’ as their tracker, their scout. He’d led them on the track of Batiste and Pete ; an’ led them true. They only went away because I told ’em, as I believed, that the two men were drowned in Croonin’ Water.”

“ Yes—yes—go on ! ” urged Sister Ursula, listening eagerly.

“ When I discovered that the men were alive here—Batiste ill, Pete in the lock-up—

I went on the track of the patrol. I located 'em away back among the Sidlaw Mountains, in the wigwams of the Beaver Indians. Thar was a bit of a war goin' on between the Beavers an' the Thunder Bird Crees. Trooper Whiffle wanted to put a stop to it. There was a sort of battle. I'm not just sure, but I believe it was a shot from Tawab's gun that killed old Thunder Bird. Dramatic justice? Well, yes. But Tawabinisay was wounded."

"Ah!" cried Sister Ursula. "He is dead?"

"No," Woolly shook his head. "He ain't dead. He's not even badly hurt."

"Then where is he?"

Woolly stood back, hitched his belt and adjusted his wide-brimmed hat.

"I might have told you at the first," he said. "He's at Fort St. Agnes. I'm goin' to him, to look after his wounds an' to tell him as I've found you. Say, you'll keep the moccasins, eh? An' now we'll shake an' say au revoir."

Sister Ursula had stood up.

"Wait," she said, "I go with you. There is room in your canoe?"

"Heaps," Woolly nodded. "Do you mean it—mean as you'll come with me? Good!

You'll find me waitin' ready down on the creek."

He wondered while he waited in what costume she would appear. She was going with him into the wilds to rejoin her Redskin father. Would she abandon her nun's robes and all the vestments of her religious order and come to him wearing an Indian's blanket, with her black hair hanging loose, looking like a squaw? He wondered very much, knowing that this was a turning point in the passage of her life. Very soon he had his answer.

At the sound of her soft footsteps on the bank he turned sharply and saw that she still wore her grey gown and white-winged cap of a Sister of Charity, with her rosary and crucifix hanging from her girdle.

He took her bundle from her, but she would not allow him to help her into the canoe. She stepped into it with the lightness and agility of one accustomed to travelling in such frail craft.

"Tain't the first time you bin in a Injun canoe," he smiled, dipping his paddle and shoving off into mid-stream.

She sat silently watching his strong arms at work as they went gliding smoothly down the winding creek.

“When you are tired,” she said, “I take your place.”

“I’m not goin’ ter be tired,” he responded.

Abreast of the French Mission he sounded his whistle and waited until Father Raymond came down to the water’s edge. Sister Ursula stood up in the unsteady canoe and so cleverly balanced her weight that it quickly became motionless. She explained to the abbé why she was leaving, and continued standing while Woolly paddled away.

For hours they glided along through green avenues of overhanging trees. Pure sunlight dashed fitfully upon them like a shower. The still water reflected the mossy banks and rugged crags. They passed through gloomy cañons, between beetling cliffs and came out into placid lakes dotted with islands. In Ghost Creek, when they approached the cataracts, Woolly requested his companion to get out and walk and meet him lower down. But she refused.

“No,” she said. “You will instead let me take the paddle.”

“You—Sister Ursula—a nun?” he objected. “But think of the danger!”

“I—Maple Leaf—an Indian,” she urged. “To me there is no danger, but only an Indian’s joy.”

He yielded to her. She guided the canoe into the smooth, rapidly flowing water, keeping her eyes steadily in front of her to where the current curled over into unknown depths of mist and foam. The speed was quickened as she drew to the perilous edge. Then the prow leapt outward into empty space and the canoe plunged bodily down the slope of the roaring cataract, dropping with a thud into the boiling swirl, burying itself in spray, but coming out on an even keel and rushing onward into green water beyond.

Sister Ursula laughed, showing her splendid teeth. And after that Woolly never doubted that she was still at heart an Indian.

At dusk he pitched her tent in a sheltered forest glade and himself slept in his blanket in the canoe. In the morning she was up before him and had cooked their breakfast while he was yet asleep. He awoke to find her beside the camp fire, telling her beads. Thus did she combine religious observance with her woodcraft.

They came at length into the wind-swept waters of Silver Lake, and for a whole long day they battled with the breaking waves, each wave a separate danger threatening instant swamping. But a loaded Canadian canoe will weather a rough sea if managed

with skill and experience, and in the late afternoon Woolly halted in his work to point out the fluttering folds of the Union Jack above the white buildings of the fort.

“Guess I’d best run ahead an’ prepare him,” he said to his companion as she stepped ashore.

He discovered the old Indian in the courtyard, feeding the cinnamon bear, and as he took him to the gate where Sister Ursula had paused he told of how the moccasins had led to the finding of Maple Leaf.

“My medicine had told me that a great thing was to come,” said Tawabinisay. He was staring with searching, penetrating eyes at the figure in the gateway. “My medicine spoke true. It is good medicine, for the great thing has happened.”

CHAPTER XXXV

THE INDIENNE WHO WAS A LADY

DURING the following days, Woolly left the care of the wounded Tawabinisay entirely in the capable hands of Sister Ursula, and resumed his old duties in the trading station. There were accounts to be balanced in the ledgers, journals to be brought up-to-date, stock to be taken and other business matters to be attended to in which his help and knowledge were valuable to the temporary factor, who wished to make everything straight before the return of Dave Sinclair. The peltry in the store lofts had to be looked over, beaten, re-packed and labelled in readiness to be sent down to Fort Garry, and articles of merchandise had to be taken from the bales and boxes against the next visit of the trading Indians.

But in the midst of these duties, he had leisure to set flower seeds in the garden, go out fishing on the lake or to set a line of beaver traps along the creek. Once when Sister Ursula, discarding for the moment her

convent uniform, seemed anxious to go out upon the water, he challenged her to a canoe race across the lake and back, a distance of three miles. She agreed with more alacrity than he had expected, and took great care in selecting her paddle. He offered her five minutes' law, but she stipulated that they should start even, and they went off with splashing paddles, making tracks of foam. The exciting race was watched by all the staff at the fort. If there was any betting, it was in favour of Woolly, who shot quickly ahead. But at the far side of the lake Maple Leaf was a length in advance of him, and she reached the winning post leaving him far behind.

Woolly realized that Maple Leaf was clever in all out-of-door sports and pursuits—riding, shooting, fishing, throwing the lariat, tracking. She knew all the arts of the backwoods. Most of all she was clever as a scout; and she taught him many a useful lesson of the nature of flowers and trees and the habits of insects, beasts, and birds.

“To-day you will be going out across ze lake with your gun, eh?” she said to him one morning at breakfast.

“Why to-day more'n any other day?” he asked.

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“ Because, *mon ami*, de wild goose 'ave arrive. Did you not 'ear their mournful cries over'ead in ze night? Gabble—gabble—gabble—ee—ooo! Ah, so many!”

“ Wough!” grunted Tawabinisay, “ Maple Leaf has the good hearing. She knows many secrets. In the old days she would have been the squaw of a great warrior, a mighty chief. But the Red Man has now no great chief. It is bad medicine.”

An hour later Woolly was felling a tree on the high ground behind the fort, and looking down upon the sunlit lake sure enough he saw vast flocks of water-fowl swimming on the blue surface and flying above their nesting places on the farther cliffs.

He got out his fowling piece and, taking an abundance of ammunition in his canoe, paddled cautiously across the lake. The birds took wing at his approach; but he waited and they came back to feed on the weeds and fish spawn. Then he opened fire, and very soon after he had started his bag consisted of three mallard ducks, a red-breasted merganser, a blue-winged teal and a great grey goose. He might almost have filled his canoe to the gunwales with birds.

But his sport was interrupted.

Lying at full length behind the curved

prow, watching a swan that seemed about to alight on one of the small islets within range, he heard a shrill familiar whistle from behind him. He turned on his knees and looked down the lake. He stood up, laid aside his gun and seized his paddle. Abreast of the nearest headland he saw two large canoes coming towards him. He took off his hat and waved it above his red head. Then he set to work with his paddle.

The two canoes were close together. His keen sight soon distinguished their occupants. In one, Henri Pardonet, Otter Joe and two strange Indians. In the other, Old Man Sinclair, Little Swan and two other Indians.

As they came near, Woolly paddled round into their wake and brought himself between them.

"How do, Woolly?" cried Otter Joe. "That your gun we heard a while ago?"

"Sure," said Woolly, getting near enough to shake hands with the Boss.

"I see you're weel, laddie," smiled Sinclair. "An' how're things at the fort?"

"All serene," Woolly assured him, turning to greet Monsieur Pardonet.

The three canoes were kept abreast, with bare room for the paddles between.

"Which way did you come?" Woolly



"Abreast of the nearest headland he saw two large canoes."

Woolly of the Wilds

[Chapter XXXV



asked of the Boss. "Did you call in at the French Mission at Beaver Tail Creek?"

"No. We came by a nearer way, through Box Elder Cañon and Lake Ponoka," the Boss told him.

"Oh, then, you sure didn't hear 'bout Pete an' Batiste," returned Woolly, and he proceeded to give an account of how he had discovered the supposedly dead men, of how Batiste had died of smallpox and Pete had been arrested by the Mounted Police.

There were many questions for him to answer before he could in his turn make inquiries as to the fortunes of the Pathfinders.

"I'm supposin' that your expedition through the Rockies turned out a success," he said to Henri Pardonet, whose canoe with his own had dropped somewhat behind the one occupied by Sinclair. "That so?"

"Absolutely," Pardonet affirmed. "We 'ave mapped out de 'ole route of de railroad in its mos' difficult section. It is all clear; it can be accomplished. Tunnels, bridges, cuttings, they are all signified in our survey maps. We 'ave estimate every gradient, every incline. Naturally, we shall 'ave much labour to clear so much timber, to blast away so much rock, to bridge so many lakes and rivers. But what would you? It can be

done. It will be done. Everything is arrange. There now remains only that I shall at once 'urry back to Ottawa with my report, my maps, my calculations, and *voilà* de work is begun. In three four year you 'ave de iron trail right across from Lake Superior to the Pacific Ocean."

While he spoke he was gathering his cases of surveying instruments together and putting into orderly compactness his many rolls of maps and plans.

"When you talk about goin' back to Ottawa," remarked Woolly, plying his paddle vigorously to keep pace with the two Indians, "course you ain't figurin' ter quit St. Agnes for a while. Thar's no occasion for you to hustle. Say, we've a heap of good sport for you. Look at the waterfowl I've gotten this mornin'. An' I've only been out a couple of hours. You'll be stayin' with us a week or two, mebbe?"

"*Parbleu*, no!" exclaimed Henri. "Already I 'ave occupy too much time. I go, then, immediately—to-morrow. Nothing must detain me—nothing; not even your recommendation of such excellent sport."

"Not a bit of use your tryin' to persuade him," interposed Otter Joe. "His mind's fixed like a steel trap. He's pinin' to see the

engineers at work borin' holes through the Rocky Mountains. An', say, Woolly, the track's comin' alongside of Silver Lake. Thar's goin' to be a railway station at St. Agnes, with signal boxes, bookin' offices an' telegraph posts. It'll make a heap of difference to you an' me. No more carryin' of the fur harvest by dog sleds across the snowy wastes ; no more journeys by canoe across the portages or trailing over the prairies by pack-horse. What ? ”

Woolly was watching Henri Pardonet packing his belongings, and his eye had been attracted by a pocket-book which lay on Henri's knee—the same soft leather embroidered letter-case which he had seen once before at the camp near Crooning Water. At sight of it now, Woolly experienced a strange inner excitement. His thoughts were hard at work puzzling out a curious problem.

“ Say, Henri,” he cried abruptly, “ d'you mind tellin' me just where an' how you came into possession of that pocket-book ? I'm admirin' the needlework on it—that scroll pattern round the edges.”

Henri Pardonet looked aside at him in confusion.

“ As a matter of fact,” he answered presently, “ it was made for me and given to me

many year ago by a lady of my acquaintance.”

“ Oh,” nodded Woolly, somewhat abashed. “ I was thinkin’ to meself as it must have been made by an Indian.”

“ Well, *mon ami*,” returned Henri. “ Is it not also possible that an Indienne may be a lady ? ”

“ Sure,” Woolly acknowledged. Then after a pause he went on : “ Say, Henri, a while back—’fore you went away—when we was talkin’ around the stove about Pete an’ the stolen furs, I happened ter mention the name of a certain Injun. D’you remember ? ’

“ Tawabinisay ? ” exclaimed Henri.

“ Yep,” Woolly nodded. “ He came to St. Agnes, an’ once, sittin’ along of me out in the moonlight, he told me things—told me about himself an’—an’ his daughter, Maple Leaf, an’ about a young French voyageur who used to come out west an’ go trappin’ an’ huntin’ with him. Never spoke the name of that French voyageur ; just called him M’sieu.”

“ Yes—well—yes ? ” stammered Henri. He leaned over and caught at the gunwale of Woolly’s canoe, drawing it nearer. Woolly shipped his paddle.

“ Guess he might as well have called him Henri Pardonet,” continued Woolly, “ be-

cause I know now that it was you, just as I know without your tellin' me that it was his daughter Maple Leaf, the Indienne who was a lady, that made an' gave you that pocket-book."

" Explain ! " cried Henri excitedly, " Explain ! Tell me how you know these things ! "

Woolly took hold of his paddle.

" It's a long story, Henri," he said, " an' we're gettin' near the landin' place. Guess I'll leave it for some one else ter tell you, better'n I can."

He dipped his paddle and pulled round to the other side, keeping near.

" Henri," he said again. " I think I ought ter let you know as our friend Tawab is stayin' with us at St. Agnes. He was hurt, an' is bein' nursed. Say, look across at the landin' slip. He's thar. That's him sittin' on the bench in the sunshine."

Pardonet stared fixedly across the narrowing strip of water.

" And the nurse who is beside him ? " he questioned.

" That's my friend Sister Ursula that I mentioned to the Boss jus' now," responded Woolly. " She's a Sister of Charity at the French Mission. Speaks French as well as yourself, she does. Don't figure as it'll be

necess'ry for me ter introduce you. You'll know her. Can't help knowin' her. What?"

They were at the landing place, close to where the Indian and Sister Ursula were sitting. Sister Ursula stood up and walked slowly forward. At sight of Henri Pardonet she stopped, staring at him with wondering eyes. He took off his ragged hat and dropped it. She advanced a step, stretching out both her hands.

"Henri!" she cried.

He took her hands in his own and looked into her face.

"Maple Leaf!" he whispered. "Sister Ursula!"

She drew him gently towards the bench where her father sat leaning eagerly forward.

"How!" exclaimed Tawab, putting forth an agitated left hand. "M'sieu—M'sieu? Ugh! Good medicine!"

Then the factor joined them and listened to the story that Maple Leaf told of how Woolly had discovered her by means of a dainty little pair of doeskin moccasins.

"Say, Woolly," cried Otter Joe, unloading the canoes, "this yer goose of yours ain't too newly killed ter be plucked an' roasted, is it? What d'you say t' our havin' it for supper to-night, along of the ducks?"

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“ It’s a reasonable proposition,” Woolly agreed. “ We’ll get Sister Ursula ter make the stuffin’. She’s a rare hand at cookery. Thar’s some fresh trout, too ; an’ apples for a pie. Say, we’ll make a big feast for to-night—a kinder re-union banquet. Then Henri shall play us a tune or two on his fiddle an’ we’ll all join in singin’ the good old Canadian song of the Maple Leaf. Appropriate to the occasion. What ? ”

CHAPTER XXXVI

POSTSCRIPT

IT was just after the great battle of Neuve Chapelle, in which our splendid Canadians won imperishable glory. I was crossing the Channel in a hospital ship, crowded with wounded soldiers from the land of the Maple Leaf. Many of them were stalwart sons of the prairie provinces, some were from the mining valleys and lumber camps of the Pacific slope, others were from the workshops and offices of the cities, from the vast wheatfields of the West, the farms and orchards of the East, from the forests of the Rockies and from lone outposts on the shores of Hudson Bay. All represented the virile manhood of the Dominion that had hurried to arms in defence of the Empire.

Many who were only slightly wounded were up on deck with bandaged heads or with arms in slings. It was amongst these latter that I found my old friend Sir Henri Pardonet.

I had hardly recognized him at the first with his grey hair and his uniform of a colonel, so different was he from the gay young French voyageur of the western creeks, who had driven his dog sled along the ice of Silver Lake and set his traps in the green glades of Grey Wolf Forest. But his bright eyes and his gay, boyish laugh were the same.

We talked of the Great War and of what Canada had done and was doing, and then of the Canadian Pacific Railroad, in the construction and development of which he had played so important a part.

“Yes,” he said; “it was assuredly the making of the Dominion. It has fulfilled all our dreams. Picture to yourself, for example, what it has done in this war! By its means we have been able to transport troops and material not only from all parts of Canada itself, but also, with our steamship connections, across the Pacific from the far East, from Australia and New Zealand. Without the Canadian Pacific Railroads, Great Britain could not have gathered her children to her aid as she has done. The Empire might have been lost.”

He spoke for long on this subject so dear to his patriotism. But I broke in with the question :

“ And how is our friend Hercus—Woolly of the Wilds ? ”

“ Woolly ? He is great,” he answered with a smile. “ Always prospering, always becoming more and more prominent, more wealthy. You see, he took the advantage of his opportunities. To begin with there was his possession of the gold claims, the shares also in the Hudson Bay Company, bequeathed to him by Old Man Sinclair. Then he made fortunate investments in railroad stock. He bought up land along the railway tracks, he became what he is now, a great financier, a member of the Dominion Government. Always he prosper ; always he win the good opinion. At the present time, he is, of course, much occupied with the war organizations over there.”

“ And Otter Joe ? ” I pursued. “ What of him ? ”

“ Oh, well, you may believe that Hercus has never neglected Joe. They were the great comrades in childhood, in boyhood : they are so still, working hand in hand.”

“ And Sister Ursula—she is well, I hope ? ”

“ She is well,” returned Sir Henry, adjusting the sling about his wounded arm. “ I thank Heaven she is always well, and perhaps the greatest woman in Canada. You know,

she became the Sister Superior in one of the chief convents in Quebec. She has trained many hundreds of nurses who are now over here in Europe. She has organized much ambulance work. Oh, she is marvellous, I tell you, marvellous! And always so modest, so gentle, so capable, so truly Christian. They call her Saint Ursula, over there. But to me, who knew her so well in the earlier time—to me she will always be the same Maple Leaf; just as Hercus will always be the same Woolly of the Wilds.”

THE END.



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