

"Tam dat man. I shoot him," exclaimed Elk, his mouth dropping wide open. He had never worn an overcoat in his life. "He lie when he say you wear de long coat inside de short one. He ask if I wear 'em. I say yay. Den he say de long coat is de one for me to take squaw in. So I laugh. Ain't big coat and overcoat de same ting?" he asked, eagerly.

"No, but it don't matter," replied Tom, trying on the garments one after another. "I tell you what we'll do. The short one is all I want. It's heavy and warm; and you shall have the long one. The storekeeper is right. It's the very coat to be married in. You must keep it till you find the squaw."

"And you no wear 'im?"

"No, put it on and see how it fits."

"It fit all right. You bet." Joyfully Elk put it on, and strutted round in it for the rest to admire.

"Did they ask any questions?" Tom asked.

"It was no use. Indian never tell tales."

"But about the wreck?"

"Dey got nothing."

"Not even the name?"

"Naw."

"And no one knows that I am here?"

"Not any one."

And again he grasped Elk's hand, for faithfully fulfilling his mission, and bravely keeping his secret.

Two days later, when Tom was ready to leave, his heart was full of gratitude to the Indians for all they had done for him. He knew how little the money he gave would repay them for the life they had saved, and the care they had bestowed upon him. Tenderly he bade the old squaw adieu, promising to visit them again before another winter arrived; and accompanied by Mustang and Elk, started upon his journey. The Indians went with him as far as the mainland; and as the snow was deep and the track unbroken, he wore a pair of Elk's snow shoes until they had crossed the frozen channel and reached the beaten road on the farther shore.

CHAPTER XVI.

Up to the time of the shipwreck, Tom had always worn a smooth face; but after that event, owing to the loss of his razor, as well as inability to use his hands, he could shave no longer. Consequently, when he left the wig-wam to find his way back to the settlements, his chin and upper lip were covered with a short, dark beard, materially altering his appearance. This was much to his liking, however, for although there was little probability of meeting anyone who had seen him on the Concord, it was yet possible; and the beard, coupled with the change of clothing, made recognition less likely to occur.

When he parted with Mustang and Elk, the afternoon was well advanced; and he only ventured a few more miles directly in from the lake, for his feet were still tender. He realized now how impossible it would have been for him to walk far in his boots, and appreciated more than ever the kindness of the squaw in making the moccasins for him.

That night he rested at the house of a hospitable farm man, and had the felicity of sleeping in a warm and comfortable bed—the first time such an event had occurred since his sojourn at Rooky Cove. The result was that when morning came he felt fully equal to the exertion of a long tramp, and started early upon his solitary journey northwards. In the afternoon he had the satisfaction, too, of purchasing an overcoat to suit him at a store in a village through which he passed.

But long hours of tramping made Tom's feet very sore; and it was with delight that he at last heard the jingle of sleigh bells on the road behind him. In another minute a horse dashed up, and the driver offered him a ride in the direction of the old home.

Thoughts chased each other quickly in his mind as they rapidly covered the road. Every hour brought him nearer, and the nearer he got, the more vivid did the picture become. How about his mother? Was she alive and well? And what of her life during the long years? Did she look for his return? Or did she mourn him as a dead? What changes had taken place in the old homestead? And his father? And his brother? And the farm itself? How much he would give to know all about everything, and how glad he would be to see them all—even his father!

Five years was a long time, and yet how short! He did not feel a day older than when he trudged away that early morning in the long past—but for the experience—and that was everything, save the love and the sorrow that filled his heart.

And Elsie! What would she think of him, with only the one little message sent five years ago from nowhere—without news of anything—could she have forgotten him? Had he, old friendship—dare he call it love—been sacrificed to his interminable silence? The chills ran down his spine as he thought of it, and of the many possibilities which might have occurred.

"How near to Linbrook do you go?" he at last asked of the driver.

"To the corners, three miles from the village. Be that your stopping place?"

"In a way, yes," said the driver. "Well, I'll drop you about four o'clock. You can easily walk there by sundown."

"There much change in the village?" he asked. "I haven't been in these parts for years."

"You do look kinder strange, and 'ud pass for a Yank, sure!"

"Still, I'm Canadian—no matter how I look."

"You were asking about Linbrook," said the man, apologetically. "It's the same old place. Lumbering as hard as ever. The village don't grow much, but she's got a good steady biz. The Cartwrights are still making money, hand over fist; and no wonder, for they have the store now, as well as both the mills."

"That's something new. I thought the Nelsons owned the grist mill."

"So they did; but the young chap went out West to take up a ranch, and to give him a start the old man gave the Cartwrights a lien on the mill. This must be four years ago. Things dragged on until last spring, when he failed, and they got the whole thing."

"Couldn't he pay his interest?" Tom asked.

"No, not a cent. Fact is, after the boy went away, old Nelson lost his grip. He couldn't manage nothings. So the Cartwrights had to help him right along and they took the mill to save themselves."

"And who runs it for them?"

"Oh! they hired the old man to run it, for they couldn't turn him off altogether; and they look after the financing themselves."

"It was a pity the son went away," said Tom. "I suppose, if he'd stayed, this wouldn't have happened."

"That's what everybody says; but if the truth was told, there might be another reason back of wanting a ranch."

"What was that?" Looking backward, Tom thought he surmised the truth.

"Folks say there was a girl in it. Some one Joe wanted who wouldn't have him."

Tom remembered Joe Nelson's admiration for Elsie in the old meeting-house days of long ago. Could she possibly be the one referred to?

The driver's cask had been tapped. The wine had begun to flow; and with a little encouragement, he would tell all he knew. It was common gossip, anyway, and having an appreciative listener, why not?

"Perhaps young Nelson got the ranch to help him to win the girl," said Tom.

"Ruining his father for something he could never get? Pity he hadn't more smuck! He should 'a' stayed at home and let her be; for I tell you she's a kind not easily won!"

"You seem to know all about it," said Tom, forcing a laugh.

"I keep my eye skinned about what goes on in these parts," said the man, complacently. "I know another fellow, a schoolteacher at that, who'd give his ears for the same girl, if there's anything in what a fellow hears."

Tom held himself tight, and to keep his face and his voice unoccupied; for this was incident number two, that he remembered the possible foreshadowing of.

"I've not given no names, but that of the young man you asked me about—you are a stranger and no harm's done—but there's a curious thing about the hull 'un—meat. Years ago when the same g. wasn't much more'n a kid, there was a young chap hanging about, who went out West, too. I believe she thought, more o' him than the hull pile besides."

"And what of him?" said Tom. "Did he ever return?"

"Never." "What's more, they never heard from him again, and report had it that his name was in the papers as one of the men killed in a railroad accident out in the Western States. It was three years ago when he went away, and about two years ago now."

"What was his name?" Tom asked, clenching his teeth.

"It was either Bill or Tom Potter, I disremember which."

"And so the people believe he is dead?"

"I reckon they do. I've heard that his mother took it to heart bad; and has worn crape ever since. About a year ago she had to, anyhow, for the old man died, too."

"Great heavens!" exclaimed Tom, with a gasp, and he seized hold of the dashboard to steady himself.

"What's the matter, man, are you sick?" cried the driver in alarm, as he noticed Tom's sudden pallor.

"I feel a little faint, but I'm all-travelling steadily for two days—and I wasn't very well at the start—I'll be all right soon."

"It's lucky we're so near the turn. 'Taint half a mile now, and there's a house close at road, where you can rest a while."

"Thank you—I felt a little queer—but am better now."

For some minutes they drove on in silence, the driver's attention being diverted from rural gossip to the present condition of the unknown traveller. Tom, too, had heard enough. He felt dazed—his mind full to the point of repletion—and he dreaded lest even more might be said.

Gradually it dawned upon the driver, that his companion must in some way be connected with the persons whom they had been discussing. What could he want in this remote region? Who was he? Tom then turned and looked at him closely. That face, spite of the beard, seemed familiar. He was sure he had seen it before.

"If it's a fair question," he asked at last, "who be you, and what is your name?"

(To be continued.)