

XXV.

I think the merry Christmas bells must have rung the Christmas day by this time from church time unto blessing time unto blessing time (for does not the Christian world give the Christmas afternoon to their work amongst the poor?)—it was on this account, I think, that Gladys, seeing that we were getting sentimental (for hadn't Curly thrown himself upon the rug, and betaken himself to meditation?) called upon Billy for something in his own calm and thoughtful style.

Then Billy arose: 'I have a simple thing, but mine own,' said he. 'It is entitled, "A very quiet village,"'

XXVI.

The quiet little village of St. Agnes on the north shore of the St. Lawrence (and situated between Quebec and Labrador, not to be too particular), is not often visited by strangers; and as, at sunset, we made the tiny bay which forms its harbor, and cast anchor under the shelter of the granite promontory which protects it from the north-east gales, there was some little stir and show of interest visible on shore.

As to our reason for disturbing the uncivilized quiet of the village, and attracting the curiosity—dignified and polite as ever among the French Canadians—of its inhabitants, I may say, that our old pilot, warned by the threatening sky, and the ground swell momentarily increasing and booming along the rocky shore, preferred lying safe at anchor to knocking-about, on a very dirty night, off a granite coast, with a half decked ten tonner under him.

So here we are, and, sails being furled and everything made snug, the ever important subject of tea naturally and spontaneously suggests itself to all the crew. Pork, flour and maple sugar, notwithstanding the infinite number of happy combinations of which they are capable, have grown monotonous. Is there not haply a chicken on shore? Might we hope for the luxury of bread? A party of discovery crosses the bay, and speedily returns with the news that these and other delicacies, the very enumeration of which causes the mouth to water, are to be had on shore. Did you say partridge? Eggs? Milk? And who has proffered us this delightful hospitality?

The last question is answered in person by a fine-looking old man, whose sixty or sixty-five years do not seem to have dimmed his sight or unnerved his arm. He ranges alongside in his birch bark canoe, and courteously saluting, tells us in his *patois* that he will be pleased to do whatever he can for us, and that his house is at our service. Without permitting us to thank him, he takes two of the crew on board his craft, and the other three embarking in the dingy—for is not the complement of our ship five—we are soon on shore and under our newly-made friend's hospitable roof-tree.

What avails it to detail to civilized ears the minutiae of that sumptuous repast? It will be sufficient to say, that, even at a distance of time, it stands a spot of unsullied delight on a grateful recollection—its lustre brighter and more enduring than the memory of any lobster-patty and *extra-sec* luncheon, or other ingenious machinery for producing headache, qualms of conscience, and views tinged with pessimism. Our friend betrays, outwardly at least, no uneasiness at the prospect which must rise before him of imminent famine, and actually has the hardihood, our meal being finished, to produce a square, dubious-looking flask, which, on investigation, is found to contain most excellent Hollands. Pipes being lighted—the strangers' tobacco is evidently appreciated by our host and his stalwart sons—we make what small return for his kindness we can, by telling him the latest news (a fortnight old) of the great world. This curiosity being satisfied, the conversation turns at length on our host's manner of life and varied adventures in the woods and on the river. From hints dropped in his talk, we learn that the old *coureur de bois* has a story to tell. And, after some little pressing—his evident desire to narrate combating with bashfulness in the presence of so many strangers, in the peculiar archaic dialect of that part of the country he tells the following tale:

'Our village here has not changed much since the time when I was a young man of twenty, some forty years ago, but then, to be sure, we had no road to Quebec, and it took a fortnight to get there in canoes. A few more houses lie along the river bank, and the clearings stretch further away into the forest, schooners, too, sometimes lie in our bay, but bless me! I can look out in the morning on the river and the mountains, and imagine that all those years have not passed, and that I am a young man still.

'Ah! the young men were different in those days! Why, I could walk twenty leagues every day for a week, on my snow-shoes, and dance at a wedding on the evening of the seventh!

'But my story.—Francois and I were boys together, and day or night we never were separated. As we grew up we learnt to fish and shoot together, and many a long hunting and trapping expedition we

made in company. As boys we loved to protect our "little sister" Marie—for thus we used to call her; and it was our delight to find the first ferns in the woods to twine in her beautiful dark hair, and to bring her the very earliest June-berries and Indian pears. Marie was a few years younger than either of us, but great friends we all were, and the three of us used to ramble together in the woods, and boat on the river, and sing in the still summer evenings till the rocks across the bay echoed back our songs. One day,—we were young men then, Francois and I discovered, I know not how, that we both loved Marie; and from that time our friendship began to grow less warm, and we fell away more and more from one another. The child never thought of love,—bless me! she was as innocent as the ferns in the forest, but at length some village gossip told her, and then, all at once her manner changed, she who had always laughed and sung with her brothers Joseph and Francois, grew cold and reserved, and called us 'Monsieur!'

We were celebrating a fete one day in midsummer—a beautiful day, with a golden haze over all the mountains, and the river, just streaked here and there with current lines, lying blue and calm outside the bay—not as you hear it now, with the ebb-tide foaming its way against the north easter, and the waves dashing high over the rocks outside. All the village lads and lasses were dancing in the meadow by the river, and we had been trying feats of strength, and shooting at a mark, and wrestling—I think I could give one of my boys a stiff bout even now.

As evening came on we noticed that the rose of the village—they called Marie—was not amongst us; she had wandered off, someone said, towards the woods, which then lay close to the village, and stretched away unbroken for hundreds of miles to the North and West.

They had not thought this strange at first, for she had been fond of late of being alone, and of rambling off into the woods. But now night was falling, and when the sun set and no Marie appeared, we all began to fear for her safety. Darker and darker it grew, and soon the whole village was in a state of excitement, for all, from the youngest to the oldest, loved Marie.

Everyone had some idea of their own as to what had become of her. Some thought she was lost, or had sprained her ankle and could not walk, others even spoke of the river, and one old man, who had just come in from the mountains, said he had seen a large band of Indians not far from the village and hinted that they might have carried her off. We all laughed at him for thinking of such a thing, but truly it was hard to explain the reason she had not returned, for she was strong and sure-footed, and knew the country near the village as well as any of us.

'As soon as the moon rose all the men set off from the village, Francois and I leading the search. For hours we explored the woods as well as we could by the dim light, but one by one the party came back and brought no tidings of Marie. When the last straggler appeared with no news, fear took possession of us and we were ready to believe the very worst. The old trapper still persisted that the Indians must have had something to do with her disappearance—the band he had seen were not fitted out for hunting, there were no women among them, they were fully armed, and had no baggage with them so that they could travel fast. Besides this, the Indians were not friendly to us, for years they had stolen from us, and disturbed our traps when they could; we, too, had often passed over their hunting-grounds and spoiled their chances of game, and there was a bad story of one of our men having killed an Indian in a dispute about a moose which one of them had shot.

'A miserable night we passed, and at day-break all were off into the woods to try and find some trace of Marie. Sure enough, a mile behind the village we found the trail of a large body of Indians, and the blood rushed to my heart as I saw near by on a bush, the handkerchief that Marie had worn around her neck the day before. Those who could hear our call quickly came to the spot, and we hastily consulted as to what had better be done. All were ready to start out to Marie's rescue at once, but then the village could not be left unprotected, the Indians far outnumbered us, they were as well armed as we. I told them that every moment the Indians were getting further away; I implored them to start at once, but still they talked and hesitated; I called them cowards and left them, and said I would go alone.

'Running back to the village for my gun and some food I met Francois, ready also to seek Marie; mad as I was with fear and anger I spoke, "Go your way, I will go mine, let he who finds her have her." He did not answer me, and alive I never saw him again.

'I went straight back along the left side of the river, and followed the trail until nightfall. They had travelled fast, yet I must be gaining on their steps,—but still there was no sign of them. Next day I pushed on, and in the afternoon came to a place where the trail crossed the river. The footprints in the mud were quite fresh, and I knew the Indians were not far off and could not travel much further, so I thought the safest plan was to keep on the same bank of the river and wait till evening. What plan I had of rescuing Marie, God knows; my life I