

The Story.

One Day in a Settler's Life.

(Concluded.)

Leading the way over a freshly-felled log, then another, and turning a thickset of young oaks, that caught at Jenny's skirts as if they would fain hold her back from a painful sight, she came to a halt. There was no reason why she should go further.

A tree had evidently fallen in an unlooked-for direction; or, perhaps, Roland Hardy had been a little reckless. It had swept him to the ground, and was lying across his legs; as immovable to him as a mountain. On the rough bark, where he had been able to reach it with his knife, was cut "Dear Jenny—" showing that he had not intended to call her "Jane" on this occasion. But the fond work, which perhaps was intended as a last memento, had ceased. His arms were lying at his sides now, and a fleck of blood stained his blue lips. Jenny thought it was the life crushed out of him; but it only came of his long and vain efforts to free himself.

She did not scream. It was not her way. She rushed forward to fling herself against the fallen tree; pushing it, beating it, bruising her shoulders against it like some mad woman. This was her first impulse, and it availed nothing. Then she sank down at her husband's side, wiped the red drops from his mouth, and covered his face with kisses that might have kissed the dead into life. The kisses made Roland faintly stir, and he moved his hand instinctively toward the knife, which had fallen in the snow. He was wanting to finish his message.

"Roland! Roland!" she cried, in an anguished voice, seizing his benumbed hands in hers, and pressing them to her face and to her warm throbbing throat. "Oh, if he could only speak to me once more!" she piteously moaned. "Only once more!"

"It is—Jenny?" came struggling faintly from his lips. "Yes, it is Jenny. I am here! I am here to die with you, my own blessed heart! Oh, what can I do?" raising his head tenderly to her breast. "Oh, my husband, look at me—speak to me! Are you terribly hurt?"

But though he opened his eyes had looked at her, he could not answer.

Then she remembered the wine; and filling the tiny cup at the bottom of the flask, she held it to his mouth. Roland drank the wine with difficulty; partly because he was only half-conscious, and partly because Jenny, in her wild solicitude, seemed bent in pitching the whole down his throat without waiting for the little formality of swallowing. She continued to drain the tenderest expressions upon him. Over his features began stealing something that, under the depressing circumstances, looked singularly like a pleasing surprise. The eyes opened wide with a look of recognition, and a heaven shone up into Jenny's terror-stricken face. He laboriously flung his arm about her neck, and murmured her name again, as if it would express the tenderness of his whole soul.

"Are you crushed to death, dear Roland?" illogically cried Jenny.

"Not quite. But I'm so tired! I have been buried under this horrible log for several hours."

"Thank God you are not killed!" she aspirated. "Tell me what I can do."

"Poor child, you can do nothing. If a man were here with a handspike—"

His voice ceased; ceased in very hopelessness. The nearest man was probably two miles off. And before he could be found and brought, even if Jenny could find him, life might have gone out.

"I will do it," said Jenny. "Tell me where I can find a handspike."

"You could not do it, child."

"But I will," she returned cheerily. "I studied natural philosophy at school, and I have plenty of muscle. Did not somebody say he could move the world if he only had things to do it with; a lever, and that. I can cut down something for a lever, Roland."

She was speaking in sheer desperation. But a desperate woman can put out an incredible amount of strength; and the stake at issue was her husband's life. Roland saw how full of energy she looked; what an amount of determination her whole attitude betrayed. It imparted some degree of hope even to him, and he pointed to a pile of oak rails.

"If you could drag one of those here—"

She was flying for the rail before the words left his lips; had brought it to the spot, and then began to try and lift the fallen tree. But the grim burden refused to move.

"Oh, Jenny—"

"I see, Roland," she interrupted. "Don't be afraid. Of course I am stupid at first. Wait! I am undertaking to do too much at once, you perceive."

Jenny partly withdrew the lever, making the resistance less, and lifted again, with some effect. Roland's legs were too much like dead legs to be aware of the lightened pressure upon them; but he saw the log move a little.

Stars swam before Jenny's eyes, and the veins on her forehead looked like little knotted cords, as, averting her face from him, she strained at the lever once more with all her weight. "Now!" she cried. He essayed to move his half-frozen limbs, but only succeeded in groaning. "They are as dead as stones," he gasped and looked as though he were going off into another faint.

Just for a moment she paused in despair. But courage and increased energy came back to her.

"Drink this, Roland," she said, putting out some more of the sustaining cordial. "I must prop up the log; and I think, dear, you can help me."

Selecting a larger rail, she dragged it up, and commanded him to push it under the log while she lifted with the lever. Reviving under the influence of her cheerful courage, he saw this as his golden and perhaps only opportunity. There was no man's aid within reach of this lonely spot, and night was coming down, bringing a tempest with it. The rail was placed; and, pushing it with all his remaining strength, he held each atom that the log yielded, while Jenny took breath to gain one more. Slowly and reluctantly the fallen tree was

forced to acknowledge itself beaten, and at last rested on the prop. The man was free!

David got off his haunches, and wagged his tail. Roland pressed his lips to the snow-wet hem of Jenny's skirt. The mute, eloquent act made her heart overflow, but she caught her skirt away hurriedly.

"I cannot allow you one minute's delay, Roland. It will be a horrible night. Do you think you can stand?"

With her help, he got upon his feet, but not until he had made more than one attempt. The legs were not broken, then; and this took a dreadful fear from Jenny's heart. But the returning circulation gave him intense pain. Leaning on his wife's proffered arm, he at length began to move homeward. The stormy twilight was already filling the forest. Managing to limp and stumble along, the outskirts of the wood were reached before absolute darkness had set in.

But until now they had not realized the terrible might of the storm. It grew worse with every minute. David alone was able to distinguish the path that led homeward. Around them appeared nothing but the whirling snow. The forest was shut out, as by the sudden fall of a gigantic curtain; before them came the discovered nothing but the wavering form of David, as he wrestled with the difficulties of the path.

"We must walk for dear life!" gasped Roland.

He felt now all the hazard and terror of their position. It was almost impossible to breathe in the face of this fierce gale. If they lost the path, or the strength of either gave out, the result would be death.

They stumbled on, their arms entwined, making no attempt to speak after this. Once Jenny caught at David, patted his shoulder, and murmured that he was a good fellow, a brave dog; but she and her husband had enough to do for themselves.

It seemed to both that they must be nearly at home. Probably more than half the distance had been got over when a calamity occurred. David disappeared. He was missing! Had their trusty pilot deserted them? Yes; for not a trace of him could be heard or seen. Roland shouted his name; but the wind dashed his voice back again, so that he scarcely heard it himself, and he had no hope of recalling the fugitive.

They were off the path now—the softer snow told them this; and they were both very cold and alarmingly exhausted. Roland thought that this was the end; that all hope was over. He clasped his wife closely in his arms, and bowed his head on her shoulder. If he had not been half dead at the outset, with suffering and exhaustion, he would have borne up more bravely. As it was, he felt that his senses were taking leave of him; and he knew that if he failed, and he thought he had failed, he was laying down not only his own life, but a dearer life than this.

"Go on—leave me. Try to reach—" he began saying in her ear. But Jenny would not listen to him. His despairing words filled her with frenzied strength.

"People talk that way when they are freezing," she thought. "He shall not die. Pray, Heaven, help me! Bear up, Roland. Just a little while longer! We must be pretty near the house. I still know enough to keep my face to the wind."

"I cannot go on further, Jenny. I must lie down and sleep."

"Never," answered poor Jenny. "We will not give up. It is only frozen people who want to sleep. Oh, Father of all mercy, help us! If we may only reach our sweet, sweet home once more! If I may only have strength to save my dear heart! To make him know how I love him above everything in the world."

Thoughts like these were flitting through her brain as she struggled on, almost falling at every step. Oh, the cruelly lengthened distance! Would they never touch anything else but snow—blinding, stinging, bewildering snow? Had it swept away house, fence, trees, everything, and left them nothing but this endless plain, where, sooner or later, they must sink down to their fatal rest?

Roland staggered and fell heavily forward, casting his arm away from him. It was a gesture of farewell. For one instant it seemed to Jenny that it would be very sweet to fling herself down beside him and fall asleep. An aching weariness filled her limbs; her very heart seemed turning to ice.

Yet she would not give up. Energy, struggle, meant either life or death, as she should use or non-use them. She partly raised poor Roland from the snow, and tried to shout encouraging words, but her lips were benumbed, and it was like shouting behind the torrent of Niagara.

It was when Jenny began desperately to drag him on by main force that Roland rallied a little, and showed signs of resistance. It was an ungallant thing for a man to permit a woman to carry him, or partially carry him, he dimly thought, striving to free himself from her grasp. All his faculties were dulled. But the more he resisted, the more Jenny persevered. She always believed afterward that God gave her strength.

It was while she was dragging, and coaxing, and lifting, and beating him, all at the same time, and luring him on with the sweetest and tenderest words, that a most heavenly sound swept across her half-delirious senses. The lowing of the cow! The cow, anxious for shelter and supper.

Then it was that the poor exhausted, young woman felt that she should swoon herself; that she should die; the rebound from despair to hope was so sudden. On him, if he heard it, the sound made no impression. In that state of apathy he would have unresistingly passed away to death, though the very firelight of home, so to say, was beaming from its windows upon him.

"Oh, merciful Father, help him!—let him not die now!" prayed Jenny. And with desperate energy she pulled him on; pulled, and pulled, and pulled. And the house was gained at last.

Fortunately, the fire had almost gone out in the stove, and the room had a healthful chill in its atmosphere, that was better suited than comfortable warmth to partly frozen people. It seemed an eternity to Jenny before she could command her fingers sufficiently to light the lamp. The lamp lighted, she had to crawl upstairs and fling down blankets and pillows, in which she buried her husband, first gladdening herself with the assurance that he was alive, and probably not badly frozen. Then she turned her attention to the fire. She regretted having said so haughtily, in that far off morning—ages ago, it seemed—that there was plenty of wood. There was no wood left now; she had put the last on before going out. But Mrs. Hardy had not survived the cruel tempest to perish for the lack of an armful of fuel. Her husband might die yet, if not properly cared for. She could not rest, she could not breathe, until he could speak to her again, and assure her that he was going to live.

She carried the lamp to the window, and shading her face with her hand, looked out. The wood-pile, whenever the driving snow permitted a glance, was a discouraging sight, only a log showing here and there like the fin of a buried whale. Jenny shrugged her shoulders ruefully and turned away. Then she bethought herself of a stack of wonderful knots and grotesque little stumps, which Roland had from time to time stored in a corner of the loft; to be worked up, when help in his labor should arrive and he had consequently more leisure, into vases and hanging-baskets for the house-plants. It seemed a pity to burn these; but pity must give way to necessity; and, without a moment's hesitation, Jenny reascended the stairs, and made a plentiful selection from them. They were dry as tinder; and in a short time a noble fire cracked and roared in the big stove, and Roland Hardy was oh-ing and ah-ing under his blankets with the pain of returning warmth.

The glowing consciousness that she had saved him bore Jenny up. Her own exhaustion was almost unfelt, her eyes sparkled triumphantly; and as she put the kettle over the fire, and got out Roland's slippers and some dry clothing, and placed them by the stove to warm, her heart was giving vent to praises of thankfulness.

She drew the wide, comfortable sofa to the fire, and heated its cushions. Then she stooped and took her husband's face in her hands.

"Oh, Roland, do you know what a fearful tramp we have had? Do you know that we were freezing to death only a short while ago?"

Roland did not know anything very clearly as yet; but he grew conscious of being by the fire, wrapped in warm blankets when, as he vaguely remembered, his last act was to lie down in snow.

"What was done?" he presently asked. "How did we get here? Who helped us?"

"Angels!" replied Jenny.

"You must have brought me—and you may have killed yourself!" cried Roland, a glimmer of intelligence beginning to light up his eyes.

"Roland, dear, I am not dead yet. I don't mean to die, by Heaven's good will. And now I am going to pull off your boots."

"Oh, Jenny—"

But remonstrance was idle. He was thrust back on the pillows, and his boots removed with great difficulty, and many tragic flourishes and solemn remarks concerning his inordinately vain wearing such tight ones. Poor Jenny, in the joy of their escape, strove to be merry.

She was saying, as she put them away, that she would next get him into bed, and make him a cup of coffee; and Roland was struggling to free himself from the blankets, and vowing that he would have no more nonsense, when the room began whirling around her. "I feel so ridiculously faint," she said, as he started up; and the next moment she had fallen into his extended arms.

Her first sensation on coming to herself was a consciousness of intense comfort, mingled with a luxurious, drowsy wish that it might last for ever. Present time had faded from her. She fancied she was a child again, tenderly borne upon her mother's breast, and nestling among soft pillows. She heard the lambs bating upon the green hillside, the brown thrush singing in the sweet-briar hedges; the perfumes of clover-blossoms and of June roses seemed softly to sweep over her, touching her face like cool, sweet, shadowy hands; and she nestled closer among the pillows, and slept.

Her next consciousness was that of a man stumbling over a chair and uttering in consequence a mild imprecation. She opened her eyes. The grey light of the late winter morning filled the little cabin. She was lying in one of her best night-gowns, tucked up in high state on the sofa; and it was the tea-kettle she had heard in her dreams, and the Cologne water on her face and hands that had seemed to her like the breath of summer fields. Close beside her was the armchair where Roland had sat and watched through the night. Her boots and snow-wet clothes were strewn recklessly about the floor; wine, camphor, the coffee-pot, and the chapped hands lotion occupied the table; the bath-tub was tilted up by the wood-box; the wardrobe bore evidence of having been turned topsyturvy; and David was calmly slumbering on her best shawl. The devastating power of man had been let loose in that orderly little house.

Poor David. He had got home then. He must have lost his way as they did.

Roland Hardy, awkwardly busy after man's fashion, and alternately regarding his wife, lest his movements had awakened her, looked half-bewildered. His manly face was softened by a look of the keenest and tenderest solicitude, interspersed with perplexity as to the household arrangements. He had just poured some water into the tea-kettle, and was looking hopelessly about for the cover.

"On the top of the coffee-mill, dear," spoke up Jenny, encouragingly. And she was surprised at the weak, tired sound of her own voice.

He came swiftly to her side, and knelt down. Jenny drew his head closely to her breast. "Dear heart!" she whispered. "I am so glad we are alive!"

It was a long while before Roland spoke; and when he did, it was in a choking voice.

"I talked to you like a ruffian yesterday."

"No, dear, it was I who did that."

"It came back to me in the night; and, with it, how you dragged me out of the jaws of death. You saved my life, Jenny."

"Because your life is so dear to me! I was only selfish, you see."

"And you risked your own life," he continued, softly. "I ought to have cut my tongue out, Jenny, before saying to you a cross word. Oh, my best and sweetest!"

A beautiful blush stole over her face, a smile parted her lips. "Roland, you know it was all my fault, all my temper. But my dear, I think this night has cured us both of ill-temper for ever. And oh, how delightful seems to me the home here that I grumbled at."

Yes, it no doubt read an effectual lesson to both of them. There are enough real ills in life without creating imaginary ones. And this true picture of a day in a settler's existence may perhaps serve as a lesson to us, by making us more contented with our own civilized lot.

Fini.