

marked for one of the company's men; while a lengthy epistle from a venerable bishop to one of his missionary clergy was pushed into the envelope addressed to the young lover. And in this helter-skelter manner the rest of the letters were disposed of. With a grunt of complete satisfaction the Indian returned the letters to the box, harnessed the dogs, and was soon speeding across the snow as if nothing had occurred.

The trading post, Fort-O-Rest, was an unusually busy place this Christmas Eve. The Indians had gathered in from their distant hunting grounds, and were encamped but a short distance away. During this season the trader did a stirring business, and many fine furs were received and food and clothing given in exchange. Among the returned hunters were several white men, English and French, drawn northward by the spirit of adventure, and the hope of gain. They were a motley, venturesome crew, to whom there was nothing attractive in the luxuries of civilization.

FORT-O-REST was a quaint fur-trading post in that dreary northern wilderness. Several buildings surrounded it, belonging to the employees of the Great Company. There were other buildings as well, such as the mission house, and church, hunters' and trappers' shacks, to say nothing of the Indians' lodges, all occupied at this season of the year. But the most conspicuous building in this little village was the Big House where the trading was carried on. This was built entirely of logs, squat and of a very humble appearance. But to the inhabitants of that region it was a place of considerable importance, forming, as it did, the centre of business, law, and authority. The Indians looked upon it with pride mingled with awe. To them it was an outward and visible sign of a power they could not understand which controlled the destiny of the country. The flag floating from its slender staff, with the large letters H. B. C. upon it, was to them a marvellous thing. But greater than the flag, building, or company, in fact, was the Factor in charge of the post. The interior of the building was a rough, rude place, but the man grown old in the service, who stood behind the counter, was a wonder in their eyes. He had been there so long that they looked upon him as a part of the place. Year after year he had stood behind that same counter receiving their furs and measuring out in exchange cloth of many colours, kept on the shelves placed along the walls. There were numerous other things that store contained, from candy, beads, pipes, and tobacco, to beans, flour, and rifles. The natives were not lined up in front of the counter this Christmas Eve, as was their usual custom. They remained in the background, and squatted upon the floor against the opposite wall. Every available space was utilized by Indian men, women, and children. On their right was the large rack, erected for rifles and shot-guns, while piled around were bags of flour, and beans, sides of ham, and slabs of bacon. The natives watched with much interest the white men who had crowded into the store. Some were sitting around the large stove, puffing at their blackened pipes, while others were leaning against the counter. They were engaged in an earnest conversation, and the talk centred upon one person.

"HE'S a mean cur, that's what I call him," Big Alec was saying, as he cut a generous piece from a large plug of tobacco, and deliberately gazed upon it before putting it into his mouth. "He's been here now nigh onto two years, an' last Christmas, when we asked him to jine us in our little doin's, he refused pint blank. An' now he stays over yon in his shack, an' when I asked him to-night to chip in an' jine us in a real downright good time he agin refused, sayin' he had bad luck,

an' sich trash."

"I say, pardner," drawled out Swift-water Bill, a regular Nimrod, who was cleaning the barrel of his rifle, "d'ye see that arm? There's no weakness there, an' afore to-morrow night that same cudgel 'ill straighten up Hugh Slater, strong though he is, an' teach him not to put on airs in this land."

"Me no savvy," chimed in Little Pete, a typical French-Canadian. "Brave garcon, heem, don't care for not'ing, an' strong as de diable also. Las' winter, w'en beeg moose chase me up a tree, an' kep' me dere tree hour, till me froze almos', Hughie heem come by an' shoot dat moose dead. Mon Dieu! heem brave garcon, an' me no savvy w'y he sit dere sam' he don't care 'bout not'ing on dis place."

"Look here, men," spoke up Big Alec again,



"With a smile of satisfaction at his own clever plan the Indian continued the work of drying his clothes."

"we've talked enough about that cur, not only now, but all through the past year, so let's do something. Suppose we go over to his shack and knock some of his importance out of him, an' if he doesn't agree to jine us in our doin's to-morrow, by the muzzle of my rifle, we'll make this the hottest place he ever struck."

"Here, here," cried several, "and let's waste no time about it, either."

They started to their feet and were making for the door, when a shout and jingle of bells were heard without, and in an instant Swift-foot Hydo appeared in the doorway, covered with snow and frost. A shout of welcome greeted the courier, and for a time Hugh Slater was forgotten. Eagerly the men watched the trader as he coned the letters. Most of them were for the company's men, and for the missionary who worked among the Indians, whilst one was for Hugh Slater, and another for Big Alec.

Without delay the latter drew forth the letter. It was nothing to him that the envelope was soiled and open, for he knew how much handling it had undergone in its long journey to the northland. But as he began to read a puzzled look came into his eyes, and glancing to the bottom of the letter

he gave vent to an exclamation which caused his companions to inquire what was wrong.

"Wrong!" Big Alec replied in disgust, "this letter is addressed to me, but the writin' within is to that cur from his mother, who signs herself Agnes Slater. How in the name of all creation did it get here!"

AS the rest were staring in wonder at such a marvellous thing the trader drew their attention by an ejaculation of astonishment.

"Look here," he said, "the letters are all open. I did not notice it in the hurry and excitement of the moment. What can it mean? Say, Hydo," and he addressed himself to the Indian, who was sitting by the fire enjoying some food which had been given him, "do you know how these letters came to be open?"

Then, as if nothing more than usual had occurred, the native told about the accident, the drenched letters, and how he had dried them before the fire.

When the Indian had finished there was silence for an instant, and then roars of laughter came from the men.

"Well that is rich," cried one.

"Rich? I should say so," repeated another. "And to think that Alec should get the one sent to that cur. Say, boys, let's read it. I daresay it's all baby talk about her little tootsey, and the awful dangers and hardships he meets; it'll be a fine spree."

"Yes, Alec," cried the rest, "read it."

Nothing loth, Big Alec began:

"My dearest son, Hughie."

"Didn't I tell you what it would be like?" interrupted the prophet.

"I have sad news for you, my son," Alec continued. "Your poor father, after months of suffering, passed away yesterday. His last words were for you. As you know, our home where we lived for so many years was heavily mortgaged owing to sickness and financial trouble, and was about to be taken from us. On the morning of the day of the sale the money reached us from you, my own dear son, and we were thus able to save our old home. Your little sister Eva is no better, and the doctor says that a change to some warmer climate is the only thing that can save her life. She is always talking about the money you said you would send her when you came in with your furs next Christmas. I wish you could see her sweet face brighten when we speak of what the trip will do for her. You are our only support and comfort now. Oh, my dear son—"

Here the reader was interrupted by several voices.

"Hold, Alec," they cried; "that's enough. For God's sake,

stop! Them's too sacred things for us to meddle with."

And Big Alec was nothing loth to do so. Rough as he was in speech and manner, his heart was big and tender, and as he read he felt a huskiness in his voice and a dimness in his eyes, though he tried to conceal it. To that sturdy hunter arose a picture of another home. He saw several loved forms, and heard the fond words of farewell the last time he had looked into his parents' eyes. That was years ago, and his parents were at rest. But as he was reading the letter the whole scene came back to him with great clearness.

AND Big Alec was not the only one who was much affected. It was evident that the hearts of all present were touched, and more than one brushed his sleeve across his eyes. Swift-water Bill suddenly realized that his rifle needed more cleaning, and the trader remembered that the fire was getting low, and fell over a box in his effort to get a stick of wood. It was Little Pete who at length broke the silence which was becoming painful.

"Mon Dieu!" he exclaimed, "me was leetle fool, (Concluded on page 30.)