

They are not a high order of creation. They speak indifferent French and yet more indifferent English, but their usual medium of communication is a jargon-mixture of both languages. Probably they are descendants of French Canadian settlers with mayhap some Indian taint in the blood. Their prodigality, their quarrelsomeness, their "hand-to-mouth" method of existence, and their general lack of industrious thrift, bring quite within the limits of probability the supposition, that certain far-off "*coureurs du bois*," scarcely discernible at this distance of time, scouring those marshy lowlands for beaver and mink skins, had taken to wife some dusky Indian maidens, who have left behind them, after length of years, this doubtful issue.

Or, indeed, the matter may be the other way about. Indian braves of the Huron tribe, paddling up the sluggish river from their stronghold on Lake Simcoe, may have fallen upon some little French settlement, exterminated the men and married the women out of hand, as it were, without priest or license, after the manner of the Indian, strong in his belief that he with his scalps and his war-paint was more than a sufficient compensation for any woman whatsoever.

These few suppositions are at least within the bounds of reason, for the Frenchman in his *amours* and the Indian in his conquests are two greatly prominent features of early Canadian history, as I read it.

But the Indian sleeps with his fathers, and the mink and the beaver have vanished long ago from the river and marsh. Only the muskrat is left and this settlement.

These people number about one hundred souls—may be more—may be less—and their miserable homes lie in a line along that sandy stretch of soil which runs side by side the marsh, at about one-half mile south of the river, as the crow flies, and which bears such a great contrast to the marsh itself: The one barren, light, arid—the other fertile, heavy, rich; the one with difficulty producing life, the other prolific in every kind of rank growth. Here one would expect to find the botanist, with his tin

case over his shoulder more particularly delving and searching after rare treasure of flower. But no; the botanist comes not here, and the Muskrat knows better where to find the choicest beauties.

There also grows upon the marsh abundance of coarse grass, which is very valuable for upholstery purposes, and the cutting, stacking and pressing of which supplies many people with work for months. The Muskrats get a portion of this work, too; and, as the pressing-machines are fed by hand, even the women and girls take their turn and share the labor: and then in the autumn there are the duck and snipe, which abound along the reed-margin, to be shot and sold.

Taken altogether, the Muskrat with his unreliable habits puts in a "dare-devil," do-as-you-please existence which suits his nature perfectly, and which he would not exchange for a consideration. He is not an imaginative creature, and his wildest flights of fancy rarely soar beyond the next drinking bout in the Dorf. His day is filled, between whiles, with visions of carousals past, present and to come, and his night is broken with muttered dreams of rum and whiskey. Debauchery has so written itself out upon his face that in intellectual expression he is little better than a fool. Sinister superstitions haunt him, but he is not without a certain skulking courage. Good people belated in his neighborhood at night keep a sharp look-out for this uncanny dweller, for he might "put a knife in your heart," say they. Of three things only is he greatly afraid: a clergyman, death and the goal. I put the goal last, advisedly; for, although the visit of a priest or clergyman is distressing to him while it lasts, it must come to an end some time, and as for death, why, when all's said and done, it is no more than must be expected. But the goal! That is another thing. To the Muskrat, this represents the law and order, and the very fibre and blood of him is averse to these rigid principles.

### CHAPTER III.

#### SHADOWS.

Jinny got her pails from the foot of the platform at the mill.