

Grul's Christmas Gift.

By Charles G. D. Roberts.

IN HIS sleep the child sobbed with the cold. The young mother stooped a white face over him, drew him closer to her breast, and strove to cover him more warmly with the one scant robe of red fox skins which her captors had spared to her. She was astonished to find that she had slept in her bonds.

Her arms were free, indeed, that she might care for the child and save her captors trouble. She was sitting on a pile of spruce boughs, her back against the trunk of a tree to which she was securely tied.

The fire, in the centre of the circle of snow, had died down to a heap of glowing embers, the light of which, falling upon her face as she raised it and gazed about her in bewildered despair, showed her to be a woman of English blood and obviously gentle breeding.

The hood of her cloak had fallen back, revealing a great abundance of ruddy brown hair, in part still piled in a coiffure somewhat elaborate for the wilderness, the rest hanging in rich dishevelment over her shoulders.

As she stared about her, bewilderment passed into a spasm of horror. Her gravely sweet face grew pinched as the sudden disaster of yesterday re-enacted itself in her brain.

She saw herself and her boy, well muffled in furs and blankets, driving in their roomy box-sleigh along the forest trail. Slowly they went, through the deep snow, but merrily enough, for the bells jingled loud on the harness, the horses were willing, the morrow would be Christmas, and each hour brought them the nearer to a joyous meeting. She saw the driver slouching on the front seat, his pointed hood of gray flannel over his head. She saw the orderly sitting erect beside him, the collar of his great coat turned up to meet the edge of his bearskin shako.

She saw Boy Jerry lift his laughing little face from the furs at her side to lip.

"Don't you think we'll get there pretty soon, mamma?"

Then she heard again the heavy crash of muskets on both sides of the trail, their reports thinning instantly into the wolfish, appalling war-cry of the Micmacs. She saw the smoke spurt white out of the underbrush. She saw the big orderly fling up his musket with a violent, convulsive jerk, discharge it blindly, straight in the air, and topple from his seat, a limp dreadful sprawl of legs and coat-skirts. She saw the driver lean forward, with screams and strange curses, to lash the horses into a gallop—but too late.

She saw the painted red fiends swarm forth, surround the sleigh, seize the horses, cut the traces, drag the driver from his place, and cut him down with their hatchets. She saw herself clutch Jerry to her arms, and bury his face as she crouched over him to shut out from the eyes of both the sickening butchery.

She felt again that icy numbness in the back of her head and neck, expecting the crunch of the iron. But then, as she was pulled violently out upon the snow, she recovered her senses, and stood upright, facing the butchers with steady eyes. As she had not been killed at once, as Jerry had not been at once torn from her arms, she concluded that they were reserved either for torture or for captivity, and with a strenuous effort of will she resolved to think of nothing that might weaken her, lest she should miss some chance offer of that hope which lasts with life. She saw the savages rifle the sleigh, emptying of it of all her possessions,

while two of them disappeared into the woods, leading the horses.

With a curious spasm of pity she saw herself and Jerry standing there in the snow by the trail, waiting for their captors to notice them—the most miserable, the most infinitely alone, the most hopelessly deserted, it seemed to her, of all the world's wretched. She remembered herself soothing Jerry's hushed but heart-breaking sobs with

set but on till moonset. When bound to her tree beside the camp-fire she had resolved not to sleep, lest she should miss some chance of rescue; but fatigue and anguish had forced upon her their own anodyne. She had slept in her bonds; and now she was so stiff she feared she could not move.

The camp, which she now for the first time took note of, was a tiny amphitheatre, dug by the Indians with their snowshoes. The walls were of snow, and about four feet in height, sufficing to keep off the wind.

Round the heap of embers and charring sticks in the centre sprawled the sleeping savages, comfortably bedded on spruce boughs, and wraps from the looted sleigh. The two on guard sat bolt upright, close to the fire, motion-

she set her teeth, and thrust the thought from her heart.

And now a strange sound came echoing solemnly through the woods. It was a great and bell-like voice chanting in French:

"Voe, woe to Acadie the Fair, for the hour of her desolation cometh!"

At first a wild hope of succor leaped in her heart, but it sank again instantly as she noted the attitude of the Indians. They awoke at the first notes of that strange voice; but they did not appear alarmed. They all seated themselves gravely around the fire, and seemed to await something. Jerry, too, awoke and sat up. He stared questioningly at his mother, wondering awe in his wide, blue eyes, and he forgot to complain that he was cold.

That deep-toned proclamation was repeated thrice each time nearer and louder; but its sound so pervaded the forest that the woman, seaching everywhere with her eyes, could not tell the direction when it came. It was followed by a minute of tense silence, and then she could not tell how, a grotesque but impressive figure stood by the fire.

A murmur ran round the circle. She caught just the one word, "Grul! Grul!" repeated by different voices.

He was tall, and a high conical cap added to his stature. In the cap were stuck sprigs of hemlock and of that false mistletoe which grows in the fir trees. From under it streamed long wisps of snowy hair, meeting and mingling with the long streamers of his snowy beard. About his shoulders swung a heavy woolen cloak, woven of black and yellow in a staring but mystical pattern.

In his left hand, — and the woman noted with wonder the aristocratic fineness of the long, pallid fingers, — he held a short wand of white wool, topped with a grotesquely carved head of vivid scarlet. His right hand he held outstretched over the fading embers, into which he gazed fixedly. His face was turned half toward her, and with a new hope fluttering up she noted the noble mould of the features, the high serenity of his forehead.

Slowly he turned his face, and his eyes met hers. They pierced like points of pale, glancing steel, and her new hope chilled to extinction. Then a terrible and daunting white flame seemed to dance within them, and she shuddered, saying to herself, "Mad!" The next moment she wondered if she had spoken the word aloud, for, as if in retort, he came over to her, and stood before her, thrusting the fantastic wand toward her.

She shrank in overmastering fear, and averted her eyes; but little Jerry in her lap was not in the least afraid. With a cry of delight he caught the grinning scarlet head of the wand, laughed confidently up to that terrifying face, and asked:

"Aren't you good Mr. Santa Claus? Have you come to save mamma and me?"

Slowly Grul turned his eyes upon the child, and slowly the white fire faded out of them. They softened first into a sort of wonder, and then into mild compassion. Without a word, but very gently, he removed the child's grasp from the wand. Then, with another and more human look at the mother's face he gathered his bright cloak closer about him, and glided off soundlessly into the receding vistas of the forest.

Dawn was now fairly abroad, and the savages stirred the fire to cook their moose-steaks before resuming the march.

The sloping glacis of Fort Lawrence, mantled with snow, gleamed in the noon sun. From the flagstaff on its southwest bastion flapped lazily the red ensign of England, sentineling the white levels of the marshes out to the winding line where the dark gash of the Missiguash Channel divided English sway from the domains of France.

In the low, wood-ceilinged dining-room of the officers' quarters, within the fort quadrangle, Major Ford, with Captain John Sansom and a half-dozen trim subalterns, were but lately seated



He gathered his bright cloak closer about him

the promise that "Mamma will take care of her boy!" a promise which in her heart translated itself into a wild prayer that God might make it good.

And then, again, she shrank with a physical horror as a savage suddenly came up to her, gave her some guttural command which she could make nothing of, and struck her on the face with the flat of his reeking hatchet because she did not obey. At once, however, another Indian had intervened in her behalf.

He had spoken in a "patois" French, of which she could gather the drift, and had ordered her to put on a pair of snowshoes which the other Indian was holding. A New Hampshire woman by birth, she was an adept with the woven moosehide; and she had therefore been apt to join in the march at once, carrying Jerry, and murmuring thanksgivings in her heart for the bodily strength which now, — for the present, at least, — saved her from the knowledge of what indignities her captors had struck off from the trail, and into what seemed to her the pathless woods; and they had journeyed not only past sun-

less as statutes. The stony profile of the one nearest to her froze the woman's soul with a deadly terror, which was succeeded by a wave of half-animal ferocity — the mother-fury. It set her chilled blood racing again. Her strong white fingers clenched, and she muttered to herself, — half prayer, half pledge:

"Oh, God! as long as they leave me Jerry, I'll be servile to these beasts. But if they take him from me, I'll kill some of them! I'll kill that one by the fire!"

Soon she noticed a change in the color of the night. An icy pallor stole upon it, and the coals began to turn gray. Looking up through the tree-tops far above her head, she saw the stars had faded, and the sky was whitening with dawn. Several of the sleepers stirred, preparatory to waking.

"Christmas! Christmas morning!" she whispered to herself. "And so happy a Christmas we had looked for, Jerry and I!" The pity of it, — pity for the little one's disappointment, — gripped her throat. It came near weakening her and breaking her down to tears; but