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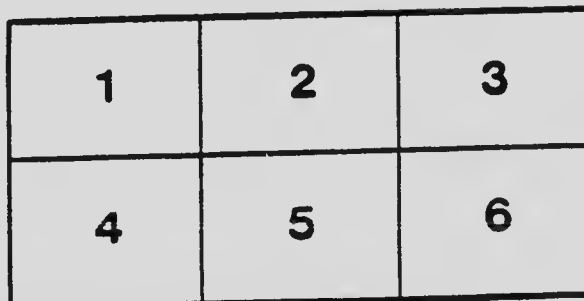
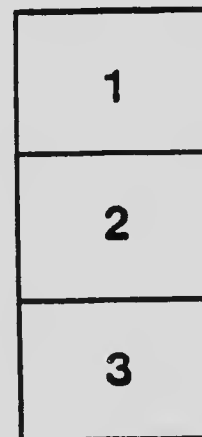
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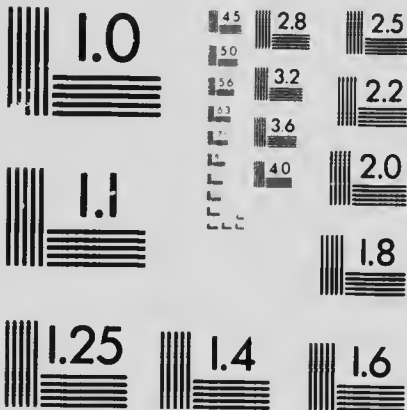
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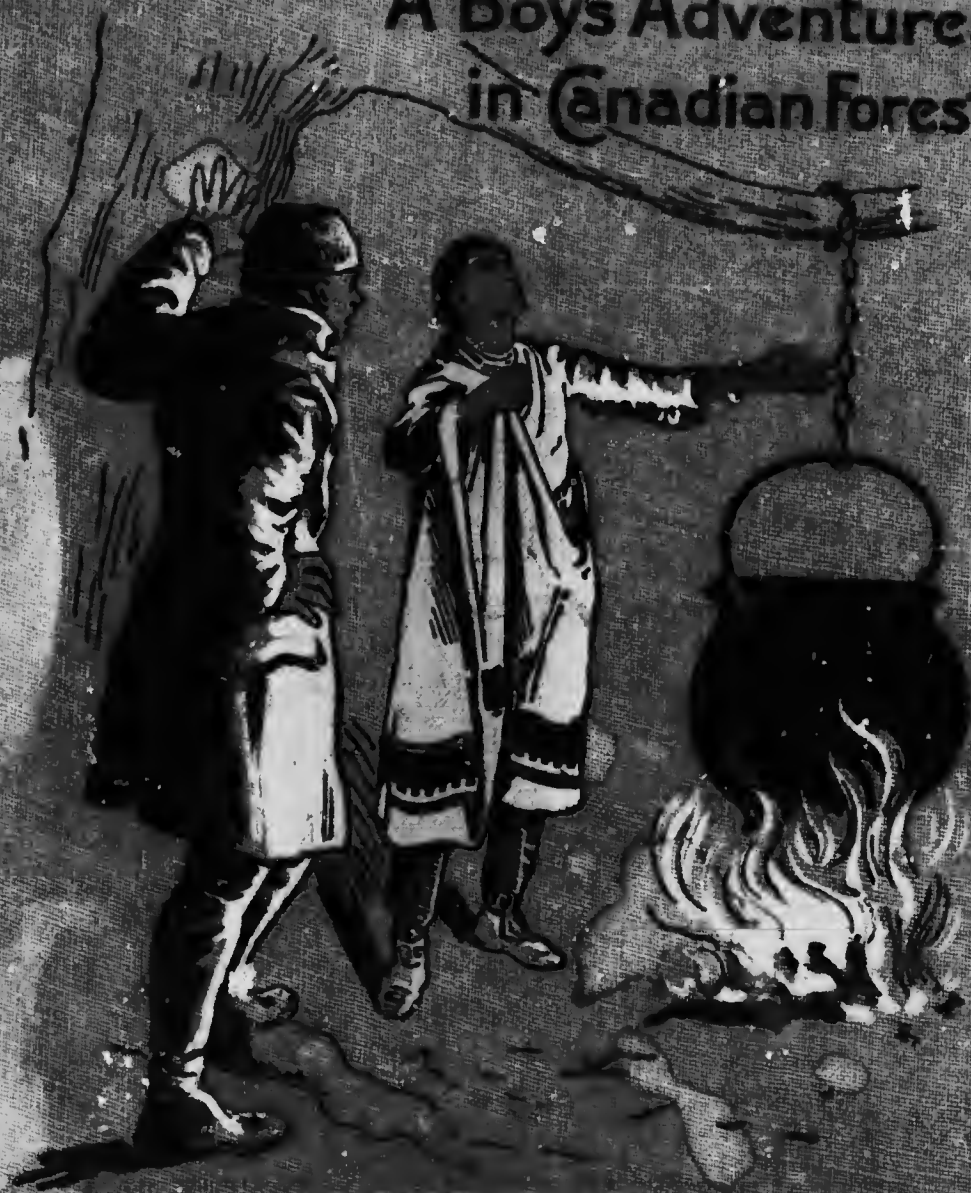
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DICK'S — DESERTION

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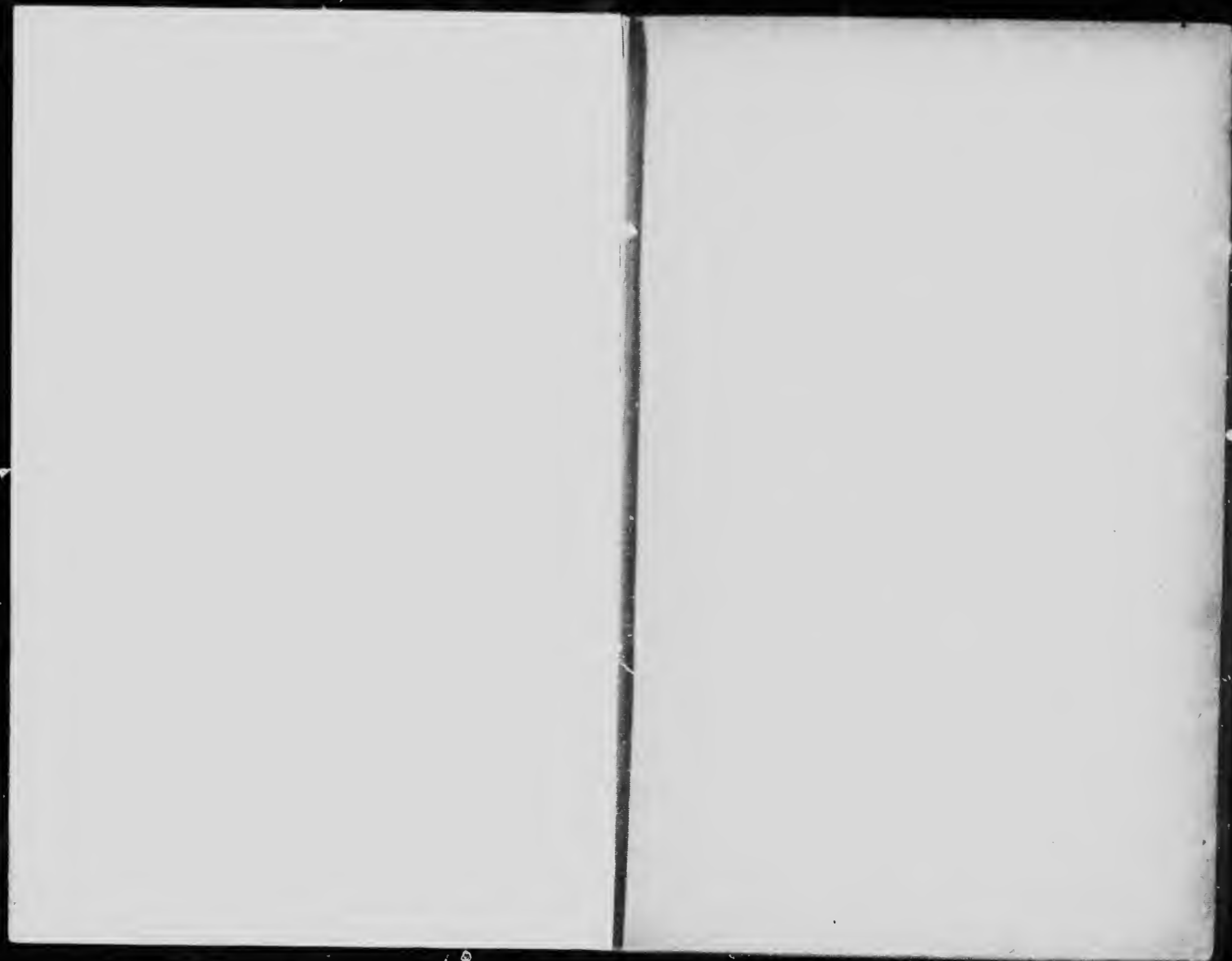


MARJORIE L.C. PICKTRAIL

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Carroll Whitehead

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"THE GREAT BRANCH TORN FROM A NEIGHBOURING MAPLE TOLD ALL THE TERRIBLE TALE."—p. 20.

DICK'S DESERTION

A Boy's Adventures
in Canadian Forests

A TALE OF THE EARLY SETTLEMENT
OF ONTARIO

By

MARJORIE L. C. PICKTHALL

WITH SEVEN ILLUSTRATIONS

Toronto
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DICK'S DESERTION:

A Boy's Adventures in Canadian Forests.

CHAPTER I.

In the Heart of the Woods.

IT was early fall, and all the world was golden. Golden seemed the hazy warmth of the sky; golden were the willow leaves and the delicate foliage of the birches; even the grass, pale from the long heat of the summer, had taken on a tinge of the all-pervading colour. Far as the eye could reach, the woods and uplands were bright with gold, relieved only by the deep sombre green of pines and hemlocks. Save for these, it seemed a country that some gracious Midas had touched, turning everything to ethereal, elfin gold.

The Midas-touch had even included the little log-cabin and its untidy clearing, for broad-disced sunflowers were scattered over the neglected garden, and between them bloomed late goldenrod, which had crept in from the wilds outside; and a small patch of ground was covered with shocks of Indian corn,

roughly bound together, yellowing also beneath the influence of sun and frost.

The land was beautiful to look upon—Ontario scenery, marred little by the works of man in that autumn of 1820, when His Most Gracious Majesty George IV. was king. And the log-cabin and its clearing were picturesque enough to the eye of an artist, though speaking of all lack of skill and thrift and industry to the eye of a farmer. Even the garden in front of the cabin was being slowly and surely swallowed up into the wilderness again. The sun-flowers flourished and bloomed and seeded, forming food-stores for multitudes of birds; and the squirrels would flicker down the tree-trunks and feast upon the seeds which the birds dropped, spitting the hard shells deftly to right and left through their whiskers. But the wild asters and the long convolvulus vines were choking the blossomless pinks and the sweet-williams and the few shy English flowers that were left. There were only very few of these fading alien plants for the healthy native growth to smother and kill, most of them having been taken away to set upon the grave of the woman who had cherished them.

In the centre of this neglected garden grew a clump of sumach trees, heavy with their clumsy crimson cones; and beneath these, in a little hollow lined with all the dead drift of the October woods, a boy was lying. He was about sixteen, burnt brown as any young savage of the forests, but with sun-bleached fair hair and blue eyes to proclaim his English birth. His clothes were of very coarse homespun, and he

wore a pair of old moccasins and a deerskin belt, brightened with gaudy Indian-work of beads and dyed grasses. The whole clearing was crying out for some skilled hand to tend and reclaim it once more from the encroaching wilderness; but this sturdy lad lay there with all the busy idleness of a savage, very deftly making a tiny canoe of birch-bark. He seemed a fit occupant for the tangled garden and the half-cultivated fields.

Five years before, a certain Captain Underwood, flying from financial disaster in England, had come to Canada with his wife and his two children, Dick and Stephanie. There was roving blood in the Underwoods, so perhaps it was not surprising that the unfortunate captain should have ranged farther afield in Ontario than others had then done; for he left the settlements and the surveyed townships behind him, and struck farther north, wishing to get as far away as possible from the world that had brought him ruin. In the friendly forests, a little beyond the region where the white settlers had penetrated, but not entirely out of touch with them, he found a natural clearing, and here he had built his tiny cabin and roughly marked out his small fields. Here, perhaps, the poor man, knowing nothing of the country, had thought to live a sort of idyllic hermit existence. But he found it very different. It was a terrible life to which he had brought his wife and children; and when Mrs. Underwood died, three years after leaving England, he blamed himself for her death. Most of his heart he buried with her in that lonely grave under the mighty maples on the

hill; and afterwards he turned to the wild life around him as to his only help and comfort.

But he had no longer the courage to fight the farmer's fight, the primitive conflict between man's skill and nature's strength. Soon the garden that his wife had loved became overgrown with native flowers and weeds. Soon the bushes and the grass crept inwards over his fields. Soon his son and daughter shot up from childhood to youth, perfectly healthy in their hard life. Stephanie was fifteen years old, and being as strong as a young lynx, she did all the work of the log-cabin. She made a rough sort of corn cake which served for bread, she prepared the endless pea-soup and pork, she washed and mended and even made the clothes. Dick helped his father, or idled away on little hunting expeditions of his own, from which he returned happy and rarely empty-handed.

It was a strange life for a boy and girl, carefully and lovingly brought up amid English comforts and ease, to lead. Their nearest neighbours, the Collinsons, with whom Captain Underwood did most of his little trading, were twenty miles distant. Kindly Mrs. Collinson had offered Stephanie a home when Mrs. Underwood died, but the girl had chosen to stay with her father and Dick, and be the one influence which restrained that little household in the woods from lapsing into the happy-go-lucky sort of savagery to which even the most cultivated are liable in a new land.

I do not think that we of this generation can quite realise the life which was led in Upper Canada eighty

years ago, when forest and swamp and bush foretold nothing of the great farms and cities and thriving towns which now replace them to such a great extent. Those first settlers did not foresee the heights of prosperity and hope to which the land would rise in the time of their children. They looked upon it rather as some unfriendly place from which they might wrest a living, than as a goodly country given them that they and their children and their children's children might labour in it and love it and enjoy it—and fight and die for it if need were. All their love and remembrance they gave to those little Isles across the sea; but, willy-nilly, they were obliged to give their wit and muscle to Canada. They fought against hardships and privations that were almost incredible, chiefly in the hope that they might win enough from the New World to take them back in comfort to the Old. They thought chiefly of making provision for present needs, not foreseeing that their toil went to the making of a nation, the building of an Empire. They wrought indeed better than they knew.

No prophetic vision of the mighty future came to Dick Underwood as he lay beneath the sumachs that golden October day, nearly ninety years ago. He gave all the sentiment of which his boyish heart was capable to his fading memories of his English home, even as his father did—laying these recollections aside, as it were, in a sacred place. But here the likeness to his father ceased; for he looked forward in vast, ignorant, splendid dreams to the possibilities of the land of his adoption—not the possibilities of trade and agriculture, which seldom

DICK'S DESERTION.

attract youth—but to the more alluring chances of those great Unknown Lands, to the wonder and mystery of the Indian-haunted North.

He did not put this feeling into words. Indeed, he did not know how to describe it, or what it was. But it is written in the history books that in Talon's time the welfare of the French colony was endangered by the number of young men who took to the woods, obeying the "call of the wild." It was this that moved Dick Underwood. It moved him then as he lay lazily in the sweet, new-fallen leaves, so deftly shaping that little canoe of birch bark; and he wished, with a half smile at himself, that it might turn out to be a fairy canoe, suddenly growing to full size, and bearing him away on some new risen fairy river, into the land of his dreams. "But if I had fifty rivers and fifty canoes," he said to himself with a sigh, "I could not leave Stephanie."

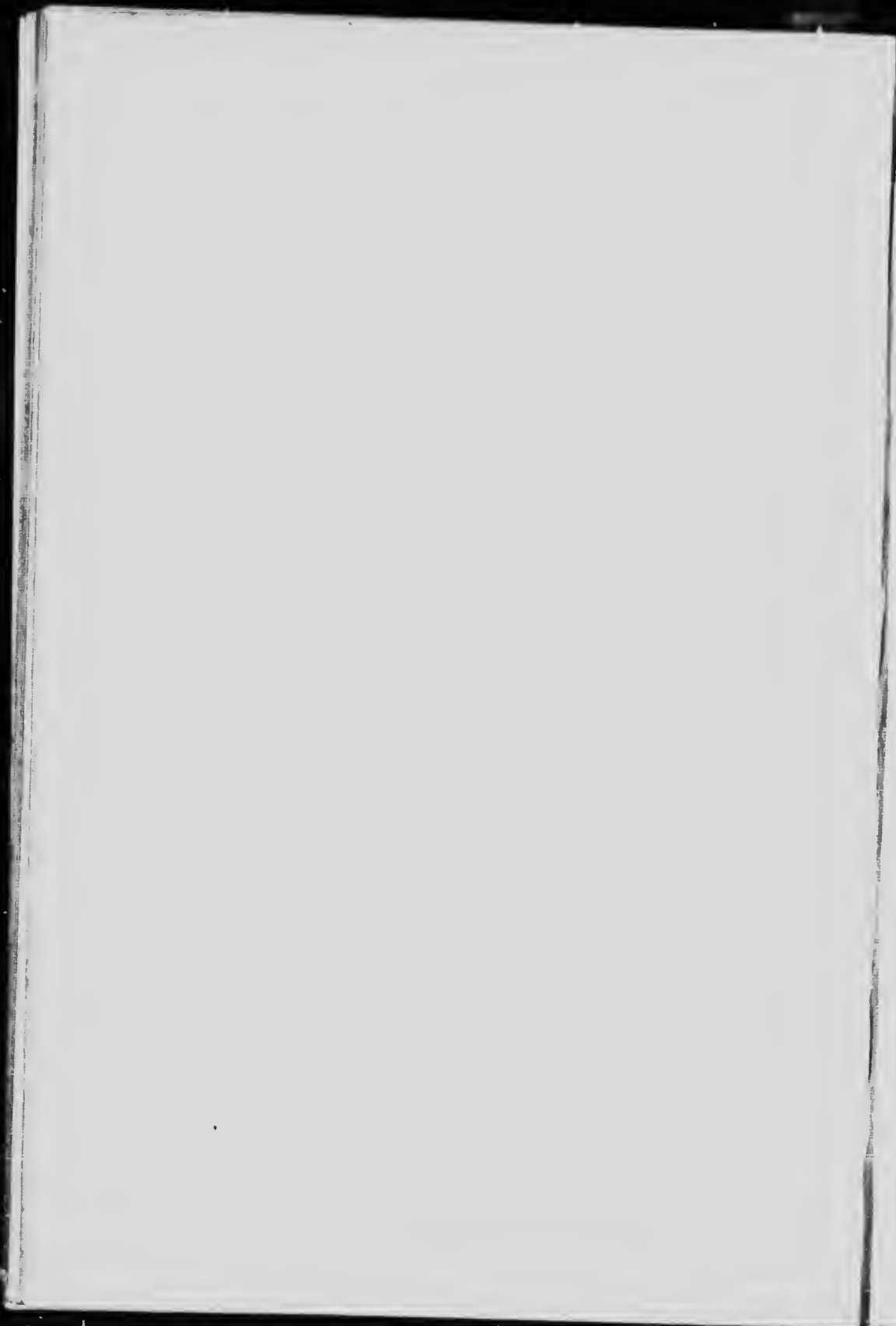
It was the old struggle, though he did not know it—the voice of the wilderness striving against the voice of the home ties. This time the voice of the home ties sang in triumph at thought of Stephanie; but there comes a time occasionally in a man's life when his mother the woman may mean less to him for a space than his mother the earth.

But with Dick the crisis had not yet come; and he scrambled to his feet very contentedly, and proceeded to a little marsh close at hand, where all sorts of fair swamp plants grew—feathery green things, and jewelled touch-me not, and jacks-in-the-pulpit, and long-stemmed violets in season. For the tiny canoe was to be filled with little ferns and soft mosses as a



“IF I HAD FIFTY RIVERS AND FIFTY CANOES, I COULD NOT LEAVE STEPHANIE.”

THE ILLUSTRATION IS BY L. PERYS. THE SCENE IS SET IN A RURAL COUNTRY. THE MAN IS Lying ON THE GROUND, AND THE HOUSE IS IN THE BACKGROUND.



gift for Stephanie, and that thought of the fairy river was forgotten.

This important business attended to, he turned slowly and reluctantly towards home. But the woods were full of sights and sounds that appealed to every half-awakened instinct in the boy's soul.

A small, brown, hawk-faced owl lay stupidly at the mouth of a sort of tunnel it had made for itself in the long, bleached grasses. So perfectly did it resemble a piece of decayed and mottled wood that even Dick's keen eye almost passed it over, until it sprang up from this cosy day-time retreat, and blundered away among the trees. Dragon-flies, unlike their brethren of the earlier year, in that they were clad in crimson and russet plush, and not in green and pink and sapphire mail, took their flashing flights among the faded undergrowth. The air was warm and golden still, but a keen nose might detect in it a threatening of frost; and the fallen leaves yielded a delicate fragrance as of damp earth and new mown hay.

A chipmunk ran down a tree trunk and scolded him viciously, and then fled before him to another tree, where it awaited him angrily, evidently under the impression that he was following it with evil designs upon its winter stores. In this way it preceded him to the edge of the corn-field, and finally vanished into a hole in a half-dead pine that stood near the clearing, putting out its head once more with a last outpouring of abuse. "Oh! little fellow," said Dick, "I am afraid your nuts will be wasted, for to-morrow we chop the tree down. But I've promised Stephanie that first I'll climb up and poke you out with a stick—and get

bitten for my pains, I suppose, you little spitfire. So you need not be afraid you'll be killed." He ran a hand over the smooth bark, blue-black, mottled with fragile green lichens, with no thought of its beauty. "Half rotten," he said to himself, "and it ought to go down as easily as a bulrush." And he turned away, his mind full of the fascinating way in which the bright blades of the axes would bite deep through that beautiful dark bark into the sweet-smelling white wood beneath; of how the chips would scatter and fly, and lie like creamy shreds of ivory underfoot; of the tremor that would seem to shake the neighbouring woods at the sound of the falling of the tree.

CHAPTER II

The Fall of the Tree.

NEXT morning the year had grown perceptibly older; or so it seemed to Stephanie, as she stood in the doorway of the log-cabin, looking across the misty clearing to the golden forests that encircled it. The fallen leaves looked browner, each furred at the edge with a delicate fringe of hoar-frost; and the newly risen sun strove as yet in vain to send some heat through the faint, cold haze. It was more penetratingly chill than if it had been the drier winter time. Stephanie snuggled into her little gray shawl with a keen appreciation of its rough warmth, and watched her breath floating as tiny silver clouds in the almost motionless air.

She was a tall, strong girl, with an unexpectedly plaintive face—a quaint, dark-eyed face which suited well with her quaint foreign name. Already she looked older than Dick, for her eyes were grave, and her mouth had taken a firm, responsible curve; it was a look which comes sometimes to motherless girls who have men-folk to manage and care for.

The room behind her was neat and clean, but almost bare of even such comforts as might have been found in pioneer homes. Here and there some little

stool or shelf showed that her brother's deft fingers had been at work; but in this as in most things he lacked the steadiness of application which would have served to better their lot. And Captain Underwood was a broken man, plunged in a lethargy of remorse and disappointment which threatened never to lighten. Since her mother's death, life would have been almost unendurable to Stephanie had it not been for two things: these were the passionate affection existing between herself and Dick, and her intense love for and kinship with nature. All her scanty hours of idleness she spent roaming about the clearing or the edge of the forest—she knew the haunts of every weed and flower for a mile around. In the winter, flocks of little hungry birds were her pensioners, and it is likely that she would have seriously diminished their own stores in feeding them, had not Dick collected berries and wild rice and seeds in the fall as a provision for emergencies.

On this keen autumn morning there were very few birds about; the robins had flown, and the owls were going to bed; far away some noisy crows wheeled and cawed above the trees, but no longer could Stephanie hear the innumerable small twitterings and tentative songs of a morning in the summer. The forest was very silent. Indeed, the only sound that broke the half-awakened quietness was the distant thud and throb of axes biting deep into the trunk of a tree.

It was a curiously insistent sound, that seemed to claim more notice than it was worth. Very clearly on the clear air was borne the noise of every blow,

and occasionally a faint crack as of a blade being wrenched away. It forced itself on Stephanie's attention, growing louder and fainter as slight breaths of wind moved the hazy air, but never ceasing in its continual, irregular thud — thud; thud — thud. Her father and Dick were chopping down the half-dead pine; she could distinguish the difference between the weight of their respective strokes.

Half unconsciously she listened. There was no cessation in the dull noise; and to her it seemed full of threat and menace. She fancied that the other trees must be shaking all their remaining leaves in fear that a like fate might befall them, and she hoped that Dick had remembered to chase the chipmunk out of his hole. The chipmunk had been a friend of hers, and she used to drop acorns at the foot of the tree where he might find them. Vaguely she wondered whether she would recognise the little fellow again if she saw him in some other tree, and concluded that it was scarcely possible. While all the time the thud—thud of the axes seemed to weave itself into a sort of irregular accompaniment to her wandering thoughts. And then suddenly she was aware that it had stopped, and that a brief silence had once more fallen over the golden woods and the hazy field of corn.

The silence was broken by a sharp crack. Then a series of small tearing, rushing, rending sounds ended in a mighty crash. Stephanie knew that the tree was down, and an odd little feeling of regret came over her; once more there was a moment of

utter silence. Then, sharp and keen and terribly distinct, she heard a wild cry from Dick.

She had run down the garden almost before that cry ceased to ring in the air, and now she fled over the rough ground outside with as swift and sure a step as a young deer might use. Her face was grey and drawn with the sense of coming disaster, but neither her feet nor her breath failed her as she breasted the low rise of ground, slippery with pine needles, which lay between her and the place from which that cry had come.

As she gained the crest of the hill, she staggered back a step and almost fell, but recovered and ran on, though for a minute she was blind and deaf and scarcely conscious.

The pine, shorn of its few branches, lay upon the ground, and near the stump lay her father, with Dick kneeling beside him. When her sight came back to her, she found that she also was kneeling there, staring stupidly at her brother's agonised face, and at the great branch torn from a neighbouring maple, which told all the terrible tale.

Somewhere in the silent woods a chipmunk chattered shrilly, and she wondered when it would stop, for the noise hurt her head. Someone seemed to be saying clearly over and over again, "What are we to do? What are we to do?" and she felt angry with the momentous question. Surely silence was the only fitting thing.

Then her senses seemed suddenly to wake into painful life again, and she stood up and looked about in dry-eyed desperation. That her father was

seriously injured she knew, for the branch had struck him at the base of the head. But he appeared to be still living; and what were they to do for the best? A feeling of their utter loneliness swept over her, bringing back that other irremediable loss of two years ago. Once more she knelt in the rustling leaves, sobbing her heart out. "Oh, mother!" she cried, "oh, mother, mother, mother!"

The words held the most passionate prayer she had ever prayed in her life. And presently she rose to her feet again, with dimmed eyes and trembling lips, but strong to do and to endure. She seemed almost to have grown a woman in that moment, and unconsciously she took the lead, though she was the younger of the two.

"Dick," she said steadily, "go and harness Murphy. We must take father to the Collinsons."

Dick stumbled off blindly to do her bidding. Murphy was the one lean ox who had done all their carting and ploughing; and before long the boy came back again, driving the slow brute in the clumsy, creaking ox-cart. Between them they managed to draw their father up two inclined boards until his inert body rested safely in the cart; and then fleet-footed Stephanie ran back to the cabin for all the coverings and pillows in their poor store. Before half-an-hour had passed, the clumsy conveyance was creaking down the rough old Indian trail which led by many windings to the Collinson homestead, bearing the unconscious Captain, while Dick and Stephanie walked beside, urging Murphy to his best pace. Their hearts were sick with dread; mother-

less they had been for two years—were they now to be fatherless also?

It had all been so terribly sudden they had scarcely time to think, but it was the best thing they could do. At the Collinson homestead their father would be certain to receive the tenderest care, and perhaps medical attendance if things turned out fortunately. But would they ever get him alive over those long, jolting miles? The same fear was in the eyes of each as they looked at one another.

They were never to reach their journey's end. Before long the Captain began slowly to regain consciousness, and his first question was a faintly-uttered "What's this? Where are you taking me?"

They told him, with white, anxious faces bending over the rough sides of the cart, while Murphy tried to reach a tempting bit of green grass under the trees. But the injured man shook his head. "It is no use, my dears," he said feebly, "another two miles would kill me at once. And I must die where *she* died, for I cannot recover. Stephanie"—it was curious how he turned from the elder child to his younger—"Stephanie, take me back! Promise to take me back!"

Who could have withstood the pitiful appeal in his eyes? With aching hearts they promised, and once more he relapsed into unconsciousness, muttering fragments of old orders which he had given as captain of the great merchantman *Theseus*, in the long ago days. They looked at each other in miserable helplessness.

Dick broke the wretched silence. "Stephanie," he

said, "you must take him home again, and I must go on to the Collinsons—for if he will not be taken to help, help must be brought to him. I shall be able to take two or three short cuts, and they will ride or drive back with me, so it won't be so very long. But oh, my dear, I do hate to leave you!"

Stephanie shook her head. "We are thinking of him now," she said quietly, and without another word turned Murphy round. With a last hurried look, Dick plunged rapidly into the bushes at the side of the trail, and she could hear the rustling of his footsteps growing fainter in the distance. Then began the weary journey home again.

They had only travelled a short distance from the little clearing, but to Stephanie it seemed hours before the log-cabin and the field of corn came into view. And having reached home, she had to face a new difficulty. She could not, unaided, lift her father from the cart. So she backed it into a sheltered place among the trees, and brought the rough chairs and barrels from the log-cabin to support the shafts. Then she unharnessed Murphy, and led him to his shed, moving as if she were in some terrible dream.

Returning to the cabin, which already looked deserted and strange, she ransacked every corner until she found a little of some coarse, crude spirit in an old bottle. Mixing it with water, she strove to force some into her father's mouth, but he did not seem able to swallow. So she began her long helpless vigil beside the cart, knowing that there was nothing she could do. If only Dick were there! The shadows grew long and longer, and still the Captain

lay motionless in the cart beneath the great trees ; and still Stephanie kept her patient watch beside him. Only once did her father speak in all those terrible hours. She had been bending over him adjusting his coverings, when she found him looking up at her with a brighter, more gentle look than she had seen upon his face for years. "I thought you were your mother, little girl," he said faintly, "your hands move as hers did."

"They are not as soft as hers, father," said Stephanie in a broken voice.

"No," answered the Captain, "they are not as soft, poor brave little hands. But their touch is as tender, my dear, their touch is as tender."

After that the silence fell again—a greater, deeper, more divine silence, though Stephanie did not know it. And still she sat beside the cart in the gathering shadows, waiting for the help that was to come.

CHAPTER III.

Friends Indeed.

MR. COLLINSON pulled the red handkerchief from his grey head and broad weather-beaten face, and crossing the room, threw a handful of pine splinters on the fire. It was a fire such as one seldom or never sees nowadays. First came the great back log, some four feet long and twenty inches thick ; then upon the "dogs" were laid sticks of the same length, but only about six inches in diameter ; and lastly, upon these, a mighty pile of pieces of pine and various chips of wood. In those days, fire-building was an art. The flames leapt up, and caught the handful of pine chips into a blaze of heat and brightness, which showed every corner of the room. It was a large and cheerful room, with two windows which now were covered with red cotton blinds. The walls were of smooth match-boarding, and a few gay water-colour sketches and old portraits in little oval brass frames were tacked upon them. The furniture was rough and home-made, but comfortable ; and in a corner, partly hidden with a red cotton curtain, three cot-bedsteads, covered with red quilts, were trying hard to pretend they were sofas.

It was a cheerful room ; and most of the people in

it were cheerful too. Mr. Collinson was cheerful certainly ; and Mrs. Collinson, small and round, with cheeks as pink as roses, seemed made for tender words and smiling. Two tall lads of eighteen, twins, stood before the blazing fire, and their faces were as broad and merry as anyone could desire. Perhaps the only faces in the room that bore shadows in them were those of Dick and Stephanie.

Stephanie sat near one of the windows, patiently stitching at a shirt, which from its dimensions seemed intended for Mr. Collinson. She was dressed in black, and the gown was of very different material and cut from that she had last worn. There were dark shadows under her dark eyes, and her face was thin ; but beyond these signs of a recent and terrible grief, she seemed brighter and better for the cheerful companionship of the Collinson homestead.

Dick was as patiently sitting before little Mrs. Collinson, holding the yarn that she was winding. He had discarded his wild Indian finery, and was dressed as were the two older boys on the rug before the hearth. He and Stephanie might have been another son and daughter of the house, as far as treatment went ; but they had that shadow of sorrow in their eyes which the rest had not.

But now all faces, grave and gay, were turned to Mr. Collinson ; for when the good man woke himself thus emphatically from his evening nap, and brightened up the blazing fire, it generally meant that he had something important to say. So no one was surprised when he cleared his throat and put himself into an attitude for speaking. Only the larger and

merrier of the twins looked anxious, and edged imperceptibly nearer to Stephanie.

"Mrs. C.," he began, with a bow to his wife, "and young people—Stephanie, Dick, Roger and William Charles—I have something to say which concerns us all, because it concerns Stephanie and Dick here especially. I would not speak of it at all, but it seems to me, and also to the wife, that things need to be discussed a bit."

Stephanie glanced up quickly, with an expression that was both anxious and relieved, anxious because the future seemed so dark, and relieved in that the subject had at last been mentioned. Dick looked dejected, he hated discussions.

"You know, my dears," said Mr. Collinson, smiling at his two guests, "that I would not for the world bring up, unnecessarily, any subject such as this, which is bound to give you pain. But things had better be talked over, for good and all, to-night."

He gazed thoughtfully into the glowing heart of the fire for a moment, and then continued. "Six or seven weeks ago, Stephanie, my dear," he went on, "you came here, and welcome indeed you both were. Since then I have been looking after matters a little, and as far as I can tell, things are like this: Your poor father was more a hermit in the wilderness than a proper settler; he just put up his lodge in the woods as an Indian might have done. He did not put in his claim for any land in the townships as he ought to have done, but must needs wander off by himself. He found this clearing—the worst land in the region, by the same token—and here he managed

to keep body and soul together on what he grew, and the little money he had left. But he was not really a settler, and he had no right there. Though it's not likely anyone would have interfered with him until the country came to be surveyed, which may never happen. But the land, I fancy, was no more his than mine, as he was there but four years—though I may be wrong in thinking so, knowing little of the law. But at any rate, what I want to say is this, the land is worthless—the poorest in that part, from what I saw of it; so my advice is this—let it go, and when Dick is of age he can have his pick of a dozen fine claims—a hundred, maybe, if the country opens up fast. Meanwhile, I take over anything of value up there—Murphy, and the corn, and the plough, and such, at a fair price, and put the money to the credit of both of you equally. Think of it, and if you agree, the future is arranged. So, now for the present.”

He looked at his wife meaningly, and then back at the fire again. After a moment he went on slowly and deliberately. “The beauty of it is,” he said, “that the very day before you came to stay with us, I said to the wife that we had too much room in the house.”

There was a faint sound, which might have been either assent or amazement, from Mrs. Collinson; and Roger, the largest twin, gazed at his father in open admiration; while the cots, squeezed into the corner behind the red curtain, took on a reproachful expression.

“And I also said,” continued the serene voice, “that my wife wanted someone to be company in the

house and help a little with things, and that I could do well with another handy youngster for outside work ; I have often," he continued softly, "longed for a daughter, and I don't mind another son. So, Dick and Stephanie, what do you say ? Will you stay here until you get a place of your own to go to ? I shall not be a loser in the bargain."

Stephanie was crying quietly into the sleeve of the shirt, and Dick went over to Mr. Collinson. "Sir," he said, choking, "you're a good man, and I hope you will never have to regret what you've done for me. You know what Steenie is, and need have no fear for her." He spoke steadily and seriously, unlike himself, while Mrs. Collinson went over to Stephanie and patted her hand softly.

And so, after some further discussion, it was settled. What else could Dick and Stephanie do ? Even if Mr. Collinson had been one from whom they would not have received such kindness without a painful sense of obligation, there was no other opening for them. As it was, they accepted his offer warmly and gratefully, all the more so for knowing that they would and could be of use to him and his wife. And his plain, sensible, hopeful words had touched the dark future with a glow of rose-colour, which, even before their sorrow, it had lacked. Already Stephanie saw herself keeping house for Dick in the midst of peace and plenty.

And Dick himself ?

At present all other feelings were swallowed up in the warmth of gratitude. But that night, as he stood in the dark enclosure in front of the log-house which

in summer was ablaze with flowers, he was aware of a little cool spot in the midst of his gratitude. He was ashamed of it, but there it was. For he knew that the hard, steady labour he had to look forward to would be very dull after the idle, gipsy-like life and the freedom to which he had been accustomed.

Ever since that terrible day of their father's death, the Collinson homestead had been home to himself and Stephanie also, and apparently it would be so for some years to come. All this he told himself, as he stood and watched the pale moon of early winter rising behind the trees; but it did not do away with that little cool thought. And he quickly decided that he would take all the pleasures in the shape of sport or travel that came in his way.

It was a cold night; but for some reason, after deciding this, Dick did not feel like facing the kind, bright faces in the bright room. He did not know that it had been another step in the lifelong fight between duty and inclination—between the love of wandering that was rampant in his blood and the clear call of quiet, unromantic, unceasing work that lay before him—and that, in the one little lazy, selfish thought, he had lost.

He was roused from his reverie by a fearful clamour that broke out among the farm buildings. All the geese hissed and screamed as if they had another Rome to save, and the hens fluttered and clucked, and squawked after the manner of their foolish kind. Roger hurried out with a shot-gun, and he and Dick ran towards the scene of the tragedy. But they were

too late. The fox had already gone, and with him had departed a venerable gander.

"We have got to get you, my friend," growled Roger, "or we shan't have a bird left. And I repaired the fencing myself. Oh, you villain!"

"Let me go to-morrow," said Dick promptly.

The older boy looked at him and laughed, with one of the flashes of insight which sometimes comes to slow people. "I can see you would rather be a mighty hunter before the Lord than a humble tiller of the soil," he said, "and if my father says yes, you might as well catch the thief if you can. But you had better take Peter Many-Names with you."

"Who is he?" asked Dick.

"Well," answered Roger slowly, "he is—himself. An Indian boy about my own age, and the cleverest fellow with a gun or a snare or a paddle that I ever saw. But beyond that—well, he's an Indian, so I don't know anything more about him. He's been round here lately, selling fish. He wraps them in wet leaves and brings them over from the river—the Otonabee, you know. There are a lot of settlers over there now, I've heard, and I wish we were nearer the river ourselves. Peter has promised to bring mother some fish to-morrow, and if he turns up you ask him to go fox-hunting with you, and you will have good sport after a fashion. His methods are funny, but they're interesting, and a day in the woods with him is always jolly." So it was arranged that next day, if the Indian arrived, he and Dick were to go and catch the marauding fox.

They returned to the house, Dick in great glee.

All his dreams that night were of the delight and freedom of the forests. And miles away in the woods, an Indian lad slept beside his fire, with a basket of fish hung up on a branch in the shadow overhead.

Next day these two were to meet. What would be the outcome of the meeting?

CHAPTER IV.

A Day in the Woods.

THE following morning Dick was up and out before even the early rising Collinsons were stirring. It was one of those mornings in late November which seem to be a faint, sad recollection of spring. The sun had not yet appeared above the far-off edge where the misty forest lands faded into mistier skies, but the promise of his approach thrilled the leafless, songless world to deeper quiet. Everything was hushed and dark ; but in the east a clear bar of amber broadened and brightened slowly.

Yet it would be some time, Dick knew, before it became really light. He wandered through the frosty garden, the noise of his footsteps in the dried leaves sounding harsh and clamorous ; but save for this, and for the lanterns which moved about the farm buildings as some of the hands attended to the stock, the world seemed wholly given up to shade and silence.

The air was damp and very chill, and the ghostly half-light was full of unexpected gleams and shadows. But Dick wandered on restlessly, until he came to the boundary of the enclosure. Here the land dipped sharply, and the cultivated ground ended in a low stump fence. Beyond this fence there was a small

and rocky ravine, which ran up in a constantly narrowing cleft into the very midst of the fertile fields. On the crest of the dip Dick paused, and peered attentively over and down into the little valley, which here was scarcely fifty feet across—a mere sword-cut of beautiful worthlessness in the rich acres around—for his nose had been greeted by a small, savoury odour of cooking.

His eyes were as keen as his nose, and presently he made out a very tiny spiral of blue smoke rising from among the bushes. No sooner had he seen it than he scrambled silently, but with difficulty, over the barricade of the stump fence, and crept cautiously round the trees to get a clearer view.

As he half expected, an Indian lad crouched beside the tiny fire, busy with the preparation of his wild breakfast. Dick had thought to steal upon him unheard, but he was disappointed, for the lad's eyes sought him out immediately and unerringly. It had grown much lighter now, and each was able to see and take stock of the other.

Dick saw a boy of about his own age, smaller and slighter, but hardened so by the ways of his life that he appeared older; his every movement had the silence and precision of an animal's; and he was made up of a shock of black hair, a smooth brown skin, sharp white teeth, and a compact mass of light bones and untirable muscles. He was dressed in what had originally been a respectable suit of homespun, probably presented to him by good Mrs. Collinson, but it was patched and pieced out with all manner of skins and rags. A scarlet blanket served to keep out the

frost. But his eyes were what attracted at once the attention of an observer; they were not black, nor even dark, but a very light, bright, greenish grey; this, and their utter lack of expression, rendered them unpleasantly impressive. No one might say whether such eyes portended good or evil, but most people would have inclined to the latter.

Peter Many-Names glanced at Dick with a grave sort of indifference, which was annoying and yet amusing. He saw a good-looking youngster, strongly built and fresh coloured, who bore himself as if life owed him something very easy and pleasant. Peter also saw that the English boy would not go more than one mile to his own two on the trail; that while he was probably a good shot, he lacked patience; and that he moved with excessive noise; so Peter valued him accordingly, though his eyes gave no sign.

Dick nodded cheerfully, and Peter returned the nod with ceremonial gravity; then he bent once more over the little fire, and left to the other the task of opening the conversation.

Dick felt somewhat at a loss; Roger had told him that the Indian understood English perfectly well, though speaking it according to his own taste, but he felt that his questions were too trivial to break the massive silence with which the young savage surrounded himself. It was the first time he had come into contact with that dignity which is not the outcome of education, but which is a characteristic of some races. Indians he had seen, but not such an Indian as this.

"You're Peter, I suppose," he began at last, and

then waited for some confirmation of his words. But the other was raking among the wood ashes with a little stick, and merely nodded again in answer, seeming to think it a matter of entire indifference whatever Dick chose to suppose. "When you've been up to the house," continued Dick, "I want to know if you'll come with me after a brute of a fox that is taking our poultry." It appeared better to put the matter briefly.

Peter Many-Names regarded him gravely still. He knew enough of the mannerless ways of white folks not to be shocked at this abrupt introduction of business. So after a few minutes' meditation, he grunted agreement. "All right, I come," he said. Then he turned his back calmly, and went on with his culinary operations. There was no mistaking the hint, so Dick walked back to the homestead again.

Shortly after appeared Peter, with some fine fish, and a somewhat less taciturn manner; and before an hour had passed, the two lads, some provisions, guns, and an excited dog, were all on the trail of the fox.

The Indian strode on ahead with the dog straining in the leash, and left to Dick their weapons and the food, which vexed him mightily. Nor was his temper improved when he noticed that Peter carefully moderated his pace from time to time as if out of consideration for his companion's weaknesses. It is not pleasant to know that your comrade can run twice as fast as you can, and to know that he knows it also. He had always prided himself on his strength and fleetness, and to find himself relegated to the

position of follower and burden-bearer by the first Indian into whose company he was thrown was a salutary lesson.

In this manner they proceeded for some two or three miles. Every now and then Dick made valiant efforts to gain upon his companion, but Peter, as if maliciously aware of it, always kept the same distance ahead.

Once, restraining the dog with difficulty, he pointed to a little piece of grey down caught on a thorn—pathetic reminder of the perished gander. Then once more they went on, following unerringly the fresh scent, until, all at once, the character of the country changed, and a small, low, sandy hillock, almost bare of trees and underwood, thrust itself upwards amidst the encircling forests. In a confident manner, which Dick found vaguely annoying, Peter announced it to be the end of their journey.

Dick looked back. They had not come far, as distance was counted in those days, but the land was entirely strange to him. However, to the Indian and the dog it appeared to be familiar enough; for Peter Many-Names, after a few minutes' search, unearthed two broad discs of thick wood from beneath the accumulation of leaf and vine which had safely concealed them. Dick looked at him inquiringly, but he did not seem disposed to give explanations. "Me here bin before," he remarked, "catch fox. These hidy then."

Not thus had the English boy dreamed of the hunt. Rather had he thought of a progress through

the woods in lordly wise, killing or sparing at his pleasure, with the Indian as an appreciative audience. He resented the way in which Peter took the whole affair into his own hands, competent and cunning though the said hands were.

But now the Indian's proceedings arrested his attention. After much cautious scrambling and struggling, the dog led them to the mouth of a burrow, where, Peter declared, the thief must now be securely and gorgedly sleeping. At the same time, he gave Dick clearly to understand that he, and he alone, would compass the fox's destruction. "You sit see watch," he commanded.

Were anyone else concerned in this matter, Dick would have disputed this order with heat. But already he had fallen under the spell of that savage nature, so much wilder, so much stronger, than his own. There seemed to be something in the keen, dark face, with its strange eyes, which required obedience, and he yielded it without a word. In the wilds, the soul and will of the savage at once became dominant, not to be disregarded.

So Dick meekly conveyed himself to a little distance, and sat down on a little mound from whence he could "see watch" the whole affair, which promised to be interesting, and even peculiar. He wondered why the Indian had brought only one dog. "I suppose he's going to smoke it out," he murmured doubtfully to himself.

But that was not it. For first Peter cut small branches into slender poles about three or four feet long, until he had quite a bundle of them. These he

pushed into the burrow until it was completely though loosely filled for some four feet from its mouth. Next he took one of the flat discs of wood, and fitted it carefully into the opening, using earth to wedge it firmly, and finally blocking it with a big stone. This process, which mystified Dick entirely, he repeated at a second hole that he said was the other exit from the burrow. Then he rested from his labours with a satisfied air.

“And what about the fox?” demanded Dick.

Whereupon Peter Many-Names unbent sufficiently to enter into a long and curiously worded explanation, the gist of which was as follows:—

When the fox found the narrow entrance of his burrow blocked with the little poles, he would at once set cleverly to work to pull and kick and scratch them away, which he could easily do. But in so doing he built a barrier in the burrow behind him as he worked, and by the time he had pushed them all back, he faced the immovable plug of wood, and was penned into a section of the tunnel of little more than his own length. He could neither move backwards nor forwards, and so fell an easy victim when the plug was removed. As Peter pointed out, his industry was his own undoing.

Dick scarcely knew whether to admire or laugh at the quaint stratagem. But the fact remained that their work for that day was done, and done without his help or advice. He supposed there was nothing to do but go back to the homestead, and his face showed how little he relished the idea.

The Indian watched him with keen eyes, seeming

to read his thoughts. At last he spoke, quietly and indifferently, as was his wont.

"Why you not stay with me this to-day?" he said, not even looking at Dick.

A sparkle sprang into the boy's eyes. To have one more day of lazy freedom! One more day of the wood-running in which his soul delighted! One more day with no will but his own to follow, with no cares, no work, no restraint! One more day of the deep silent undergrowth and the stately uplands, of the clear chill skies and the keen cold wind! One more day of the wilderness that was dearer and fairer to him than the farm and the fruitful fields! To wander for one more day, with no master but his own pleasure, no one calling to sterner labour; and only the silent crafty savage, himself the very incarnation of the wilds, his comrade!

His face grew bright and dreamy at the thought. It was the look which all restless folk wear at times, reflecting the love of God's "unmanstified places" which glorifies their profitless wandering. Profitless only in the worldly sense of material gain, yet often the stronger soul is shown in resisting the call to freedom and to nature.

But Dick had not yet learnt his lesson; and once more he chose the way that pleased him best. "Yes, I will stay," he said.

Peter Many-Names nodded, his usual mode of assent; to him Dick's evident struggle between inclination and duty had been amusing, and there was a rare gleam of merriment in his dark face. He had a far keener appreciation of the situation than

had Dick, and it gave him a boy's feeling of pride to think of all the wonders of the woods he might show to his white comrade if he chose. "Come, then," he said, with a flash of his white teeth, "and I show you bear, sleeping much for winter. Come quiet."

The forests were bright with that soft recollection of spring which the early morning had promised. The bare twigs seemed as full of life and colour as if the sap had been rising instead of falling, and the recent frosts but made the going better. Very silently, Peter Many-Names turned into the undergrowth, Dick following closely in his track, and the well-trained dog following Dick as closely. He was troubled in his mind, this dog, remembering an unguarded bone near the woodpile, and longing to end such foolish, aimless rambling as his two-legged companions indulged in. Many were the wistful glances he cast back.

But Dick's face was set to the forests of his dreams, and duty called him to the homestead in vain.

CHAPTER V.

A Backwoods Christmas.

THAT was the last time for some months that Dick yielded to his inborn love of wandering. He had spent a night and the best part of two eventful days in the woods with Peter Many-Names. And on the second day he returned to the homestead by devious ways, very much ashamed of himself.

He became more than ever ashamed when no notice was taken of his desertion. Roger greeted him somewhat resentfully at first, owing to the fact that he had had to do all Dick's work as well as his own, during the younger boy's absence, and Stephanie looked anxious and grieved. But beyond this, nothing was said or done to remind him of his fault.

No better course could have been taken to bring Dick to a state of almost excessive penitence, and remorse speedily overtook him. His moods were always intense while they lasted ; and now he settled down to his hard daily tasks with a fury of sorrowful determination which Mr. Collinson regarded doubtfully, considering it too good to continue. But if Dick grew weary of his resolute toil, he gave no sign. Outwardly, he was again contented with his lot, and

seemed to desire no other. So well did he work, so cheerful and patient he was, that the anxious look gradually cleared from Stephanie's face. But Mr. Collinson, shrewd man that he was, still regarded the boy with a certain grave and wholly affectionate distrust.

The days passed and November gave place to December. The wheat lay warm beneath a foot of snow, and Christmas was at hand.

The Collinsons always kept Christmas as nearly as possible in good old English fashion. Dick and Stephanie, used to all sorts of privation, thought that the preparations for the coming feast were positively luxurious.

Everyone at the homestead worked early and late. Mrs. Collinson was intent upon bread-making; so Dick and Roger ground grain at the hand-mill, turn and turn about, until they nearly fell asleep over the handle; and very bad and black would their flour appear to us. The silent William Charles, who was always called by his full name, seemed to chop wood incessantly. Mr. Collinson, who always worked so hard that it was scarcely possible that he could work any harder, found time to interfere jovially with everything, to the utter confusion of his wife, who, with Stephanie, was perpetually preparing extra delicacies for her thriving and hungry household. Stephanie was so busy she had no time for mournful memories; and Dick did nothing but work, and sleep, and eat enormously.

It was rough fare they had in those far-off days. But with pork and mutton, pumpkins for

"sass," and pies, maple syrup and sugar, potatoes, and plenty of barley, rice, egg, milk and tea, Mrs. Collinson and Stephanie accomplished wonders. So vast were the preparations that even the dogs seemed infected with the stir of excitement; and everyone looked forward to sumptuous faring. To Stephanie, real tea, with milk and sugar, represented in itself comfort and prosperity; she had been used to making an unattractive substitute for it with young hemlock shoots.

That Christmas dinner was a great success. Everyone was in good spirits, and even Mrs. Collinson was astonished at the way in which the eatables disappeared. The silent William Charles especially distinguished himself, and was accused of demolishing a full pint of hazel-nuts in twenty minutes.

Afterwards, with the red blinds drawn, and the great logs blazing on the hearth, faces were more serious, though not less cheerful, while Mrs. Collinson read aloud the story of Bethlehem. Stephanie, leaning back in her chair, could see a great star, cold and silver-pure, around the edge of the curtain; and it seemed to her, as she listened to the familiar words, that it must be that star which the wise men saw, shining upon her with its promise of peace.

Then followed song after song, to which Roger contributed an uncertain tenor, and Mr. Collinson a thunderous bass. In the midst of warmth and comfort and merriment, Stephanie felt her own griefs and troubles slipping further and further away. She lost herself in happy dreams for the future, which had never appeared so full of hope and

cheer. All her dreams were centred round Dick, and the home he would make for her when he was twenty-one.

Songs led to stories, and Dick developed unexpected talents, thrilling them all with legends of Lower Canada, which he had learned no one knew how. Then Mr. Collinson began a long account of an incident in the war of 1812, and when he was fairly in the middle of it, Dick signed to Stephanie, and they both slipped from the room.

Knowing how the Collinsons delighted in the old customs and traditions of an English Christmas, they had resolved to act the waits, and so give a finishing touch to that tender illusion built up in the woods of the New World from the lore and fancy of the Old. Dick dived into his blanket-coat, and Stephanie wrapped a big shawl about her, and then they both hurried out at the kitchen door, and so round to the front of the house again. It was intensely cold and still, so cold that the motionless air seemed to be heavy and painful to breathe, and stepping from the warm house was like entering icy water. The stars shone like steady silver lamps, and the woods were hushed and dark, bound to silence and desolation beneath the weight of frost. A faint white mist showed in the northern sky, and presently it spread and broadened, and the pale green ice-blink began playing and slanting and fading along its edge.

With their young faces held up to the solemn stars, the brother and sister began to sing the quaint old carols their mother had taught them long before. They had good voices, and their hearts were in the

words, so the old, old tunes went sweetly enough under that vast arch of sky. Roger softly set the door ajar, and the quietness within showed how the singing was appreciated.

As they sang, Stephanie felt that it was almost irreverent to break the solemn silence of the wintry world: it was so still that their voices sounded far-off and yet clear. She glanced nervously at the black ring of forest encircling the homestead, and feared it for the first time, not for what it might contain, but for its gloom and emptiness.

The cold was too intense for them to stay out there long, and as the last notes of the last carol died away, Stephanie was glad that the great silence would be no longer disturbed. It seemed more fitting to leave that lonely night to quiet—the utter quiet of snow and windless air—of life held in suspension.

But before they reached the door, another sound, distant, distinct, horrible, cut suddenly through that quiet. Dick involuntarily clasped his sister's hand in his, for, however often one may hear that sound, it never fails to move the nerves. It rose, and sank, and almost died away, and was answered by a dozen throats, all taking up the wild, shrill, menacing notes—the howl of the wolf-pack in full cry.

It was a terrible sound. And though they had heard it a hundred times before, it seemed even more impressive than usual, coming after the warmth and good cheer, the laughter and singing. It was as if the surrounding wilderness had chosen to remind



"THEY BEGAN TO SING THE OLD CAROLS THEIR MOTHER HAD
TAUGHT THEM LONG BEFORE."—p. 45.



them of its presence by that sad, cruel, awe-inspiring howl—as if their hearts were to be rendered more in tune with the great woods by the knowledge that death was abroad, even at the edges of the fields; Dick and Stephanie were glad to return to the light and cosiness of the house.

That cry of the wolves had disturbed Dick. He had heard it last when his father was alive, and when they lived in that dreary little log-cabin twenty miles away. It recalled to his memory all those days of cold and hardship, all the roughness, the poverty, the privation of their lives in the dreaded winter-time. But it recalled also his past freedom, his wood-running, his neglected skill in shot and snare. The very note of the howl suggested the idea of untiring, relentless speed; and he suddenly remembered all the old delight of those long snow-shoe runs he had been wont to take whenever it so pleased him—over the crackling snow, beneath the black pine branches and the dazzling winter stars. He laughed at himself for being so readily moved from his contentment, and then he wondered—had he really been contented? Or had the old unrest always been there, however much he might strive to hide it even from himself?

Leaning back in his shadowy corner, he let his thoughts drift to his old life, and to that little deserted cabin which had been home to him for so many years. He imagined just how the roof would fall into disrepair, and how the feathery snow would drift between the chinks of the logs. He supposed that the little bold beasts of the woods would inhabit it,

and the grey squirrels store their nuts in the corners, and the birds build under the eaves and on the window ledges. Soon the woods would creep nearer and nearer, reclaiming the worthless fields which had been wrested from them, and even filling up the natural clearing with small bushes and thimble-berry vines. At last there would remain nothing but a pile of mossy logs and a few struggling, widely-dispersed sunflowers, to show where that poor home had been. Remembering the pain and sorrow those walls had often held, he felt it was the best end for them; yet he had an unreasonable tenderness towards anything connected with the care-free, idle, roving life he had loved, and for which he longed.

"A penny for your thoughts!" cried cheery Mrs. Collinson suddenly. And when he shyly told her, in part, what they had been, she patted his hand tenderly, and her eyes glistened.

"The lad's fretting for his father," she found opportunity of whispering to her husband, a little later.

But Mr. Collinson was still doubtful. "I don't know, Mrs. C., I don't know," and they were silent, as once more the howl of the wolf-pack came faintly to their ears.

Meanwhile, Dick had retired again to a brown study in his corner.

On this peaceful Christmas night there was a tumult in his easy-going mind which confused him sadly. Now he had time to think about it, he knew that during the past few weeks he had not really been contented—he had only been avoiding the con-

sideration of his own perplexities. But that avoidance was not always possible, and he knew that, at any time, his love of roaming might descend upon him, as it were, in irresistible force. Since that day of the fox-hunt, he had become more fully alive to his own wild hopes and longings; and now his sincere fit of penitence and industry was beginning to wear off a bit, the old, idle, roving mood was all ready to return to him again. He feared his own thoughts, and he dreaded the crisis—dreaded the event which must settle his decision one way or the other.

As he sat there, gazing at the roaring, glowing logs upon the hearth, he reflected half-resentfully that duty and inclination had been utterly at war in his life of late, and that the worst of the trouble dated from his arrival at the Collinson homestead, which was perfectly true. Before then, inclination had reigned supreme. He did not put his own thoughts very clearly to himself. He only felt that, if he yielded to his love of a wild life, that life would soon grow necessary to his happiness. He thought how cruel it would be if he left Stephanie and all other ties behind him, and struck out into the vast space and freedom of the north. He shunned the very idea, and was ashamed of it, yet there was an attraction in it which made him dwell upon it again and again. The great plains and the free life of them, the great woods and the mighty rivers, the beautiful lakes, and mountains, pine-clad and snow-crested, untracked, unknown—he had heard of it all dimly, from one and another. All these things he loved and longed

to know, and against them Stephanie. "Of course, I wouldn't do it," he assured himself. Yet his eyes took on their bright gipsy-look as he gazed into the heart of the blaze.

For the rest of the evening he was in a dream-world, far from the homestead; and later, he put on his blanket-coat again, and wandered out into the garden, that he might indulge in his dreams more easily. Just near the door he nearly fell over a shadowy figure crouched against the wall. The figure rose to its feet, and just then Roger pulled aside the curtain. In the sudden gleam of light Dick saw a keen, dark face, in which were unexpectedly set two hard, green-grey eyes. He heard the sound of some ceremonial greeting in a strange speech. But it was so much like a part of his dreams he felt bewildered. It was Peter Many-Names, who presently descended to his English, and pointing to a frozen haunch of venison, gravely gave Dick to understand that he would dispose of it to the highest bidder.

CHAPTER VI.

The Call of the Forest.

FROM that time onwards throughout the winter, Peter Many-Names was never more than a few miles away from the homestead. He did a flourishing business with the Collinsons in the way of small game and so forth, and appeared to think he had come upon a land of plenty, so many were the meals with which kindly Mrs. Collinson supplied him. Soon the farmer began employing him in small jobs about the fences and farm buildings, which, for some dark reason of his own, Peter condescended to do, and to do well. He was too proud to be dishonest, and he was never there when he was not wanted ; so that after a few weeks the inmates of the homestead looked for his silent presence as a matter of course. Mr. Collinson was interested in him—in his quaint English, his stately ways, his swiftness, and his untiring activity—and said that he belonged to none of the tribes which occasionally visited that neighbourhood, but that he was probably an outcast from some northern tribe, who, separated from his people for some reason, and caring little to take up with others, fended for himself, and lived his own proud,

lonely life. And the shrewd farmer was probably as nearly right as might be.

After a time it seemed to Dick that he never left the house to go to his work about the farm without seeing the dark face and the cold grey eyes which had grown so familiar to him. And by degrees Peter's tongue became loosened, and he told tales in his odd, sing-song English which sent Dick about his tasks with wide, dreamy eyes and ears that heard not. Dick feared the Indian as he might have feared all his temptations embodied in a human form; but he went about with him, and listened hungrily to his stories, feeling fascinated and attracted in spite of this wise fear. He did not realise what a great influence that strong savage nature was gaining over his own.

Thus the winter went on, peacefully and happily to all outward seeming; but as the year drew closer to the spring it was noticed by watchful Mr. Collinson that Dick sought Peter's companionship more and more frequently, and that the Indian's uncanny eyes often rested upon the English boy with a half-amused, half-malicious expression of power that was hard to read.

The cold weather held until the end of March, with scarcely a break. But at the beginning of the month the monotony was broken by an important annual event in the lives of all settlers. This was no less than sugar-making. Curiously enough, the Collinsons had few sugar-maples on their farm, so they used to go to their nearest neighbour's, where a certain number of trees were yearly set aside for

them. This neighbour was more than ten miles distant as the bird flies, and the journey there, the sugar-making among fresh surroundings and with fresh companionship, and the triumphant return through the woods that were just beginning to awaken, were all looked forward to throughout the winter.

This year it was arranged that one of the twins, Dick, Stephanie, and two of the farm-hands, should go; William Charles was chosen at first, but he yielded to Roger's evident disappointment, and said he would stay at home. "Though I'm sure," he said to himself placidly, "that I should take just as much care of Stephanie as he could. However, if he wants to go, I would just as soon stay at home, for it is hard work they will get and plenty of it." And stay he did, with complete satisfaction.

The others started on their journey one chill morning in early March, before day had broken. In the first sleigh were Stephanie, Dick, Roger, and one of the farm-hands driving the pair of horses. The other and more roughly built sleigh followed them, loaded with all the appliances necessary for the sugar-making—three great cast-iron kettles, a couple of heavy troughs cut out of pine-logs, and so forth—in charge of the second man.

Stephanie never in her life forgot that drive through the great woods; there had been heavy snow, which filled up all the hollows between stumps and natural roughnesses that generally made the rude trail a path of torment; the snow had been followed by sharp, incessant frost, so the going was good. At first so

impressive was the hush of the cold, dim world into which they drove, that only the jingle of harness and the squeal and bump of the clumsy runners broke the silence. But as the pale March day dawned in a flood of blue and primrose-yellow, crystal-clear and chill behind the trees, subdued talking and laughter startled the solitudes as the sleighs passed. The skies, as the sun rose higher, were of a deep translucent blue, and the breeze had an edge as of steel. Nothing seemed at first sight to give promise of spring. But an observant eye would have seen that the smaller branches and twigs of the trees had lost their winter hue of dull grey-brown, and shone as the sunlight struck them, in all hues from bright yellow-green to warm deep reddish-brown. The bud-cases, too, were very dark and sticky, and some little birds were feasting on the close-curved green within, while once, far away, a robin called huskily, not yet triumphant in his shrill bubbling whistle.

Stephanie never forgot that journey. Trees, trees, nothing but trees before them behind them, on either side—except where the trail wound onwards, and even that, the low branches and the long-armed bushes were striving to reclaim. And between these trees the carpet of white lay as yet unbroken, though somewhat shrunken here and there. Winter seemed to be still present ; but as the day advanced, Stephanie noticed that the woods were disturbed by an occasional whirr and flutter of birds, while in the sunnier spots could be heard the soft insistent music of melting snow. The spring melody had not yet begun, but the forests were crooning snatches of it in their sleep.

That journey was never forgotten, and not forgotten easily was the welcome extended to the chilly travellers by the warm-hearted Irish family they counted their nearest neighbours. Stephanie was to sleep at the house, and all the evening she discussed matters with the eldest daughter, bright-faced, soft-tongued Nonie O'Brien—matters dear to the hearts of girls; and Nonie exhibited with speechless pride the never-worn dress of rose-pink tabinet, less pink than her own cheeks, which her father had brought her from distant Cobourg on her last birthday.

Meanwhile, the men and boys had taken the kettles to the sugar-bush, stabled the horses afterwards, then returned to the bush and built the rough shelter of boughs they were to inhabit for the nine or ten days of their stay. This finished, they rolled themselves in their blankets, and were almost instantly asleep, too tired even to snore.

The next morning the sugar-making began. Notches were cut in the trees, and below these the cedar spiles were driven in, down which the sap trickled into little troughs set for the purpose. Several times during the day the sap was all gathered in buckets, carried at the end of a yoke which was placed across the shoulders, and taken to the great store-troughs. The iron kettles slung over the fires had to be kept full and constantly watched, until the sap should turn to syrup; and then came the "sugaring-off."

Everyone was kept busy almost every hour of the twenty-four, for the sugar-making went on day and night. And on one particular night, about a week after his arrival, Dick was chosen to sit up and keep

watch until two o'clock in the morning, filling the kettles and replenishing the fires when necessary.

He was quite willing to do so. And after the others had had their evening meal at the homestead, and had returned to the shelter and to peaceful but noisy slumbers, he cheerfully began his vigil.

There was no comfortable place to sit, he decided, so he scratched a hole in the snow, lined it with small twigs and pieces of bark, placed a folded blanket over all, and then settled himself for his nest with complete satisfaction. He had the happy faculty of adapting himself to his surroundings, and so was seldom uncomfortable, whatever other people might be.

The woods were dark, a vast and shadowy background of gloom to the wavering circle of firelight. The calm stars looked down between the dark twigs of the upper branches, and the snow showed red and full of uncertain gleams in the flicker of the flames. It was all empty and still, and the silence at first seemed unbroken; but, owing perhaps to the breeze and the recent thaw, on carefully listening the forest was full of very slight sounds—sounds as if living things were moving about in it with infinite caution and stealth. It was a disturbing idea, and Dick was glad of the heavy breathing of his comrades in the shelter for company.

The time passed on, and the nest in the snow was very comfortable indeed. The woods were still full of those ghostly rustlings, but after a while Dick ceased to notice them, and it is probable that he was asleep.

But whether he was asleep or not, about midnight

he roused quickly enough, with the instinct that someone was near him. Owing to his wild training, he had enough of the savage in him to lie perfectly still and listen for several minutes before moving. The noise that must have awakened him was not repeated, but there seemed to be an increase in those faint, ghostly rustlings and whisperings and half-heard stealthy footfalls, so at last he climbed reluctantly out of his cosy nest and built up all the fires.

Having done this, he settled himself once more in the blanket-lined hollow. The fires were now beds of leaping flame beneath the bubbling kettles of sap, and the shifting light made it difficult to distinguish objects at a little distance. But Dick had sharp eyes; and soon he had gained the knowledge that someone, he knew not who, was crouching on the opposite side of the fire nearest his nest in the snow!

It was disturbing knowledge, for he knew it was not one of his comrades; but no one could have accused Dick of physical cowardice, and immediately he tiptoed round the fire to investigate, with a heart that beat a little faster than usual.

The crouching figure glanced up at him with eyes that shone like a wild animal's in the glow of the fire, and Dick, thrilling suddenly, recognised Peter Many-Names.

The Indian did not give him the usual greeting, but remained crouched as he was, staring across the fire into the black mystery of the forest. His dark face was shaken with some strange excitement, and his eyes gleamed green like a wolf's behind their grey. He seemed to be in one of those states of wild exalta-

tion to which his race is liable; and as he crouched there, he rocked himself backwards and forwards in a sort of ecstasy.

"I-i-o-i-o-o, I-i-o, I-o-o, I-e-e!" he crooned over and over again, and at each repetition his eyes shone more wildly. He seemed unconscious of Dick's presence after the first glance, and gave himself up to his own mad mood and the odd charm of his wild chant.

Dick's nerves tingled. There seemed to be some curious rhythmic infection in the whole unexpected performance. The rocking, the swaying, the subdued, incessant crooning were fascinating him, just as they might fascinate and excite a young brave at his antelope dances. After a few minutes he fancied he felt his own senses urging him to join in the monotonous, mesmeric swaying, the soft barbaric chant.

The suggestion fairly frightened him, and he dropped his hand heavily on the Indian's shoulder.

Peter sprang to his feet, his eyes still glittering with that strange excitement. For a moment he was silent. Then he flung out his arm, lean, brown, circled with savage ornaments—flung it out with a wild gesture to the north, and began to speak.

He spoke in his own tongue, deep-noted, musical almost as Greek, and though the English boy, standing white-faced and motionless in the glow of the fire, did not understand one word in twenty, there was no need to ask the meaning.

Many have borne witness to the marvellous charm of Indian oratory, and the meaning was plainly to be read in the wonderful play of expression in Peter's



"HE FLUNG OUT HIS ARM, CIRCLED WITH SAVAGE ORNAMENTS—FLUNG IT OUT WITH A WILD GESTURE, AND BEGAN TO SPEAK."



dark face and flashing, grey-green eyes, in the faultless artistic skill of his every gesture, wherewith he painted what he had in his mind almost without need of words.

It was a barbaric song of freedom—a song of the rush and roar of the buffalo hunt, a song of the evening fires before the lodges; of the call of birds at the dawn, and the evening star hanging silver above the pines; of the limitless northward world, and the homeless wind of the prairies; of the flowers whiter than snow, redder than blood; of the pipe of willow-flutes in the dusk, and the triumph-cry of the raiders as they thunder home to the music of a hundred stolen hoofs—all these things Dick thought of as he listened, only understanding a word here and there, yet charmed to the bottom of his restless soul by the art of Peter Many-Names. It was a chant of the spring, of roving feet and tents that are never in one place for long; a gipsy song of the north. And as such Dick's very soul responded to it.

He stared at the Indian with fascinated eyes even after that wild speech was ended.

Peter came close to him, with those hard glittering grey eyes of his gazing into the English boy's softer ones. And suddenly he spoke again, in English. "You come with me?" he whispered.

And Dick answered, against his own will, in a voice which did not appear to be his. "Yes, I will come!" he said. There was no need of explanation.

CHAPTER VII.

A Message from the Wanderer.

A FEW weeks had passed, and sugar-making time had gone for that year—gone in a sudden burst of life-giving warmth and moisture, in a tumult of tentative bird songs, in a broidery of earliest green things which heralded the swift, brief, infinitely caressing spring of the north. Gone also was peace and happiness from Stephanie's heart, and the kindly Collinsons grieved with her. For no sooner was the sugar-making over than Dick disappeared, leaving no word or trace behind. And with him disappeared Peter Many-Names.

They had looked daily for his return. But as the sweet keen weather grew more golden to the spring, as the shiny bud-cases burst, and the leaves showed in delicate wrinkled greens and reds, as the birds came back in coveys and battalions, fluttering and piping through the sunny wonderland of the woods, and still neither Dick nor his dark-faced tempter reappeared, Stephanie lost hope, and even cheery Mr. Collinson could give her little comfort in this strait. "He's sure to come back, my dear," he said to her often, "stout and wiry and very penitent ; some day soon when we least expect it. He's got

tired of civilisation and has gone off picnicking in the forest with Peter for a while, the young rascal. Don't you worry, lassie, he'll come back."

Stephanie would try to smile in answer to show how little she was troubled; but her eyes would stray to the great woods, and her grave, pale young face would quiver tearfully now and then. Whereupon Roger would always retreat, and rage in a fury of work and a fever of wrath among the farm buildings, to the silent distress of William Charles, and the great anxiety of his mother. The farmer had carefully schooled himself to view the matter in its best light—and indeed there were many and great excuses for Dick—but sometimes even he meditated upon the probable consequences of finding himself confronting the runaways with a stout cane or sapling in his hand. Yet, in spite of all, he was as fond of Dick as ever, ungrateful though the lad had shown himself to be; and he would no more have thought of casting him off as a result of his folly than he would have thought of casting off one of his own boys in punishment for some thoughtless error. He felt that Dick's dreamy nature and inherited tastes had scarcely given him a fair chance in fighting that temptation which Peter Many-Names had personified. But he was very angry and even more disappointed.

And Stephanie? Stephanie felt that she could have borne her grief and anxiety, as she had already borne much sorrow. But there was a more bitter sting in her trouble than this. She was utterly humiliated. She had relied on Dick's affection for herself, but above all upon his gratitude and sense of

honour. And to find that he could thus requite the man who had been such a friend to them was a bitter blow.

Perhaps she underrated the influences which had been brought to bear upon Dick's resolution, understanding little the gipsy strain that moved him, and knowing nothing of the ways of Peter Many-Names. Be that as it may, poor Stephanie felt for a long time that, while she had love and forgiveness for her brother in plenty, she could have little trust or pride in him. "I don't think I should mind anything," she said once to Mrs. Collinson, "if only I could see Dick well and safe and contented, working round the farm once more. It seems impossible that he has really gone. If only I could know he was safe!"

Whereupon warm-hearted little Mrs. Collinson kissed her vehemently, as an outlet for her indignation. "Don't you fret about his safety, child," she said; "he's safe as can be. Safe, indeed! Why, that little brown Indian wretch knows the country as few do, and they're both used to wood-wandering, the naughty boys. Oh, he's safe enough, if that were all you have to worry about." But perhaps at the bottom of their hearts neither she nor her husband were quite so confident as they gave Stephanie to believe. They felt sure that the fugitives had gone north to unknown wildernesses. And what dangers might those unsettled countries hold?

"I don't doubt Dick's wanting to come back here before the year's out," remarked Mr. Collinson privately to his wife; "but they're only a pair of boys, and in my opinion, Mrs. C., it's a risky thing.

Practically, young Underwood has put his life into the Indian's hands, and I doubt whether that clever little brown villain values the said life enough to take very good care of it. However, there's no telling. Only when I see Steenie's face, I should like to have the thrashing of both the rascals, brown and white. What business had Dick to go off and leave his only sister in this fashion?"

"Others would be glad to take care of her better," remarked Mrs. Collinson oracularly. And her husband screwed up his face as in preparation for whistling, and afterwards regarded Roger thoughtfully but with approval.

The last of the grey drifts of snow disappeared from the cool hollows. Roger always found time to visit the sheltered nooks along the edge of the little ravine that cut through the fields, returning to the homestead with great store of frail, exquisite arbutus, and the starry hepaticas, blue, pink, and white, nested in silvery down; the promise of leaf and blossom was fulfilled on every branch; the first sky-bird calls were brought to perfect song; and still Dick remained away.

Through all its beautiful subtle changes, the spring passed on to summer. The young leaves of oak and maple lost their tinge of scarlet, and the wild fruit trees lost their snow of blossom. Sturdier, less shadowy flowers replaced the bloodroot and hepatica. The birds were busier. All about the homestead was a world of warm delicate air, and skies shadowed with promise of rain, passing gradually to brighter sun and deeper blue. Yet still Dick did not come.

Stephanie knew that, once having run wild as it were, he would not return until he had drunk his fill of freedom. That he would return eventually, she firmly believed, drawn back by his affection for her. And as the weeks went on, she set herself to wait as patiently as she might. But it was very weary work, and at times Mrs. Collinson's tender heart ached for her.

"You are worrying needlessly, my dearie," the good woman would often say, with a great show of cheerfulness, when Stephanie had been quieter or sadder than usual. "Dick will be back before very long. We are sure of it."

"If I could know that," the girl would answer, "I should not mind so much. But sometimes I can't help thinking, suppose he should never come? Suppose I wait for years, and still he does not come? I know I'm silly, but you don't know—you can't know what he was to me. I hate to think so, but—but perhaps he may be too much ashamed ever to return. How shall I bear to wait, knowing he may never return after all?"

Then the rosy, motherly, little woman would soothe and comfort her. "Dick loves you too well to stay away for good, and you know it at the bottom of your heart, child. There's no weariness like the weariness of waiting, I know. But many lives seem to be made up of waiting and prayings of which we don't see the end—more hopeless waiting and praying than yours. For, after all, such things are in higher hands than ours. And if we watch and pray patiently and trustfully, we are maybe doing more than we think,

Stephanie." Whereat the farmer would nod in solemn admiration of his wife, and Stephanie would face the recurring days with hope renewed.

At the bottom of her heart she had always dreaded and expected something of the sort to happen. Dick's character was easy to read, and no one was surprised that he should have thus yielded to his love of the wilds. That did not make the pain of disappointment and anxiety any the less. But as time went on, the sincere and simple faith of the Collinson homestead taught Stephanie an abiding lesson. She learned to leave her brother's welfare in the hands of God, and to be more content with her task of waiting and praying, sure that a greater love even than her own was watching over Dick.

That fair spring passed, and its flowers gave place to the more gorgeous blossoms of early summer. Wild roses opened their red petals, and wild strawberries were nearly ripe. And still no word of Dick or Peter Many-Names. The day after the sugar-making was finished they had gone off together, with a gun and a blanket each, and very little besides, and the great wilderness had taken them to itself.

After some time had passed, Stephanie grew in a measure accustomed to Dick's absence. She was so surrounded by affection, and so much occupied by work, that she had no opportunity for brooding and melancholy thoughts. She always watched for him, always waited for him.

"I know he will come back to me," she said to Mrs. Collinson, "but how long, how long will it be?"

It seems to me that I have waited a long time already."

But she was not to be left entirely without knowledge of him throughout the summer. It was one morning in June that she had word of Dick. She had just finished milking two of the cows, and, having a few spare moments afterwards, she had hurried down to the edge of that ravine which ran up through the fields to the very farm buildings themselves. It had been her wont of late to haunt the edge of the clearing, to roam whenever she could into the outskirts of the woods, and there wait and listen for a space, feeling the silence and beauty of the wilds to be, in some vague sense, a link between herself and Dick.

It was a very fair morning. The distant trees were softened by a faint haze that gave promise of heat, and the dew was still damp and chilly in the shadows. There is no more lovely time of the year than June, when things are ripened to full beauty, and yet young, when each tree has still its own individual shade of green, not yet merged into the heavier, denser, universal tint of the later season. And Stephanie found both peace and promise in the still radiance of the early day.

She paused at the brink of the ravine, watching the tree-creepers with wide, unconscious eyes. She remembered that morning, now many weeks ago, when the knowledge, hard, inevitable, had first come to her that Dick had run away with the Indian; and when for a time she could feel nothing, think nothing, but that he had left her, his only sister. Those feelings were softened now; softened with the sure

though gradual growth of her trust and faith in that love deeper than her own, which could guard and care for her brother through all things. But she longed for a sight, a word of him, more than for anything else in the world. Just at that moment the longing was almost unbearable, and the little, long-beaked birds scuttled away in fright as Stephanie leant over the stump fence. "Dick! Dick! Dick!" she cried very softly, and the words held a prayer.

It was a prayer which was to be immediately answered, for, without any preliminary rustle of leaves or noise of footsteps, a man walked softly out of the thick-leaved undergrowth, and stood before her. Her heart leapt wildly, and then grew quiet again, for the man was a stranger to her. He was tall, and his dark, bright face showed his mixed French and Indian descent; he was almost fantastically dressed in fringed deerskins and quaint finery, and the cap which he raised was decorated with feathers. But Stephanie had seen such trappers before in the old days, and did not fear his long gun or his savage silence. And, indeed, in his flourishing bow, French courtesy was apparent. But he was slow of speech, as are all dwellers in the woods; and now he merely held out a tiny package, wrapped in birch-bark, with an inquiring glance towards her.

She saw her name scrawled upon the outside, and took it eagerly. There was a mist before her eyes for a moment, and she could do nothing but clasp the precious package close, and murmur little phrases of gratitude and comfort and endearing words—she

scarcely knew what. When she came to herself a little, the trapper had gone, as he had come, in utter silence. She tore off the outer wrapping of the smooth bark, with its fringe of fragile green lichen, and read the few lines scrawled within. The note was from Dick, as she had expected, and it had been written weeks before.

"Dear, dear Steenie," it ran, "I am almost too much ashamed to write to you, but I think of you always. I could not go on with the farm work any longer. You don't know how I hated it. I know what you must all think of me; but I only wish you were with me now! I never thought the world could be so beautiful, and I feel as if I were living now for the first time. I'm sorry and miserable, of course; but I wish you were here to see the trees and the skies and the rivers that I am growing to love. It is all splendid. Never forget me, as I never forget you." That was all; but, besides the not very deep shame and penitence, these lines held a great joy, a great happiness—the happiness that comes from fulfilment of longing.

She refolded the paper in its wrapping with trembling fingers, and then stood, gazing with wide, unseeing eyes at the rustling trees. For the first time she realised what Dick's struggle must have been, realised also what was his passionate love of freedom. She felt the tears wet on her cheeks—tender, forgiving tears—and her heart was full of thankfulness to think she was not forgotten. But he had said nothing of coming back, though in her great relief she scarcely noticed it.



"HE HELD OUT A TINY PACKAGE, WRAPPED IN BIRCH-BARK, WITH AN INQUIRING GLANCE TOWARDS HER."—p. 71.

She pictured his probable surroundings when that letter was written ; until she almost fancied she could see him sitting beside a little fire, apart from Peter Many-Names, scrawling those hurried words of affection and penitence and boyish delight ; and then wrapping them in birch-bark and consigning them to the care of the half-savage trapper, who had thus, after many days, given them into her hands.

It was a very boyish note, and she smiled half sadly to think that he who had written it was actually a little older than herself. He seemed to realise so little the deeper meaning of his action, and evidently regarded it as a child might regard a delightful but naughty escape from school. For a time, she saw freedom and the forests held his heart. "But he loves me, and he will come back, for we have no one but each other."

She showed the letter to the good farmer and his wife, her joy shining in her dark eyes. "It came to me from the woods," she cried almost merrily ; "a trapper came out of the woods and handed it to me like a messenger in a fairy-story. Dick is safe and well, you see, and he does not forget. I can think of nothing but that now !"

The farmer raised his eyes from the fragrant screed of birch-bark. "No, lassie," he said tenderly, "he does not forget." Then he fell silent, reading and re-reading the boyish scrawl, while Mrs. Collinson watched him with secret uneasiness.

He was almost especially gentle to the girl that evening ; but as soon as possible he drew his wife aside, and spoke to her in his gruff whisper. "We

must keep up Steenie's heart," he said, "but it's my opinion, Mrs. C., that the boy won't be back for many a long day."

"We must not let Stephanie think that," echoed his wife sadly.

But they need not have troubled. Stephanie was confident. Dick did not forget her, and she could trust his welfare to a greater love than her own.

So thereafter she watched and waited with a new and confident patience, comforted and strengthened, not to be shaken in her hope and trust. And thus for a time we will leave her.

For, meanwhile, how had Dick fared?

CHAPTER VIII.

A Wood's Adventure.

FROM the night of Peter Many-Names' arrival at the sugar-camp, Dick had yielded himself utterly to his dreams. Home, duty, Stephanie, all this had become as a shadow before the wonder and delight which the thought of freedom held. And when the time came, he had shaken off all ties of affection, all thoughts of right and gratitude, and had turned north to the country of his longings. At last, at last, the skies were blue for him, the airs were fresh for him, the world was wide for him, he could follow where he would and none should call him back. Of probable consequences he did not think. The struggle was over, and, though he knew he had chosen ill instead of good, the knowledge troubled him little. Was it not enough that the humdrum round of toil lay far behind him, and that all before and on every side of the land was fair with spring?

At the time he found it enough—enough to fairly intoxicate him with delight. In this spirit he began his wanderings, and the days passed in golden dreams of beauty and of freedom. He followed in utter content wherever Peter Many-Names chose to lead, caring nothing so that he might eat and sleep and

dream and wander on again, guided by any stream that ran, any wind that blew. After a while he lost count of time, lost count of distance, and was still content. Left to himself, he would have gone on thus indefinitely; but he was held by a keener, harder intellect than his own.

Peter allowed matters to go on thus for some days. He was contemptuously fond of Dick, willing to indulge him to a certain extent. So for nearly two weeks they idled northwards through the awakening woods, killing for food as they required it, with the Indian to do all the hard work and bear most of the burdens.

They travelled in irregular zig-zags, choosing the drier ground, and having a good deal of difficulty owing to streams swollen with melting snow to angry little rivers. But Dick only saw the choke-cherry's white tassels trailing in the water, the white drifts clearing from the hollows and showing all the tender tangled green beneath, the delicate green mist that showed upon the birch-boughs, and the young leaves that reddened the twigs of oak and maple. He only heard the robins whistling from dawn to dusk, the rush and patter of the sudden sparkling showers, the rustlings and murmurs that showed the woods were full of life about them. He ate what was offered him and slept where Peter wished, dazed and enraptured. For two golden weeks the dream endured. And then quite suddenly Peter Many-Names buckled down to the trail.

The dream was roughly broken. Thereafter Dick had no leisure for the beauties of the wilderness.

After the day's march, he had only strength enough left to roll himself in his blankets and groan. He lived from dawn till dark in a stupor, not of delight, but of weariness. His softer muscles were racked and tortured with manifold aches, strained and swollen with the effort of the pace. And when he moaned and lamented, Peter scowled at him horribly, and called him rude discourteous names in the Indian tongue.

"Where are we going?" Dick would groan impatiently, at the end of a trying day. "What's the need of all this hurry?"

And Peter's contemptuous little dark face would flame with that excitement which Dick had seen in it that night in the sugar-camp, and his voice would rise again to that wild mesmeric chant. "We are going north, north, north!" he would sometimes answer; "north to the land of clean winds and strong men, to the land of uncounted bison and wild fowl in plenty for the hunter! North to the land loved of its children, to my country! But what do you know of it? Is it not enough for you if I lead you there in ease and safety?"

"Ease!" poor wearied Dick would reply, "do you call this ease?" and then would roll himself in his blanket and fall into the sleep of exhaustion. Day after day this incident was repeated. For Peter Many-Names was merciless, and his tongue played round Dick's very excusable weaknesses with the stinging unexpectedness of a whip-lash.

But after a while Dick's muscles hardened. The day's march was no longer torment to him. He grew almost as lean and wiry as his comrade, though he

would never attain to the Indian's powers of endurance of fatigue. And then the daring young pair proceeded amicably enough.

The dream had faded to a more real world, though the beauty of it still remained. Dick's faculties and feelings awoke, though his conscience was sleepy enough. His skill in woodcraft, his hunter's lore, all came again in play, and he and the Indian regarded each other as pleasant company, though the silence of the wilderness was rendering Dick as chary of speech as was Peter, and sometimes they scarcely exchanged a dozen words in as many hours.

He never forgot Stephanie. When the first delight and excitement were over, the thought of her troubled him daily, though as yet the charm of wood-running held him a willing captive. Now and then came ugly little pricks of conscience concerning his duty to his only sister, and to those who had been such friends to him and his in the hour of need; but no glimmer had as yet come to him of a higher duty to One far higher even than these. And on the whole he was perfectly happy.

Yet he welcomed the opportunity that a chance meeting with a southward bound trapper offered him of sending her a word of affection and penitence; which, as we know, she received safely. After that he saw and spoke with no one, Peter seeming to avoid all other wanderers in the wilderness. "No need to run away from man," he was wont to explain, "but no need run after 'im. What you want with 'im? Nothin'. What he want with you? Nothin'. So all right. You come on, quick an' quiet."

Sometimes they came upon the cold ashes of a hunter's fire, now and then upon a deserted Indian camping-place. But the stars and the clear skies and the calling winds, the trees and the bushes and the unseen stealthy life within their shadows, held undisturbed possession of all things.

This same stealthy life was not always unseen. Sometimes Dick and Peter would come upon a battle royal beneath the calm spring dawn. Sometimes they were aware of quiet presences around their evening fires. Sometimes they caught glimpses of great moving shapes, indistinct in the foliage, and knew that some forest lord was watching them. They had as yet contented themselves with whatever small game came most readily to hand, for Dick lacked the love of slaughter, and Peter Many-Names was apparently in a hurry, and turned aside as little as possible.

Once that noiseless spirit of death, that was ever abroad in the forest, touched them more nearly. They had made their camp for the night rather earlier than usual, owing to a slight mishap that had befallen Dick—a strained ankle, which, while not serious, made it imperative for him to have a long night's rest. They watched dusk fall over the banks and glades all ablaze with the tall, purple wind-flower of the north, they had seen the stars show softly, one by one, beyond the branches of the trees, they had heard the even trickle of a tiny spring nearby interrupted by faint, faint sounds, as little wild creatures, bold in their obscurity, came there to drink.

As night darkened down, and the flame of the camp-fire grew more bright and ruddy in consequence, the woods became more stealthily hushed. For a moment, watching the gloom surrounding them—black, silent, yet giving the listener an impression of teeming, hungry multitudes within it—Dick's heart sank with a sense of isolation. On every side, for leagues, these forests lay. He felt a benumbing realisation of his own loneliness, and of the smallness of man's aims and hopes when confronted with the impassive greatness of nature. What part had he in this solemn wilderness, full of the things of the woods seeking their meat from God?

A sound like a heavy, dragging footfall broke the silence, and shook Dick's somewhat troubled nerves, so that he nearly jumped out of his blanket, in sudden, unconcealed fright. "What was that?" he cried involuntarily. And Peter responded with the nearest approach to a scornful giggle of which his dignity was capable. For it was only a porcupine taking a nocturnal walk, and not caring how much noise he made, secure in his terrible quills. The thump—thump of his leisurely progress died away, and then the quiet was disturbed only by the cries of night-birds and those continuous, faint rustlings and murmurs which seemed but a part of silence.

After dreamily listening and watching for a while longer, Dick dozed off to sleep. But his slumbers were not as peaceful as usual, owing, perhaps, to the slight pain in his ankle. And presently he was roused again—roused, not by any noise, but by a

sudden and complete cessation of all the tiny sounds of the woods about them.

He had thought that the silence before had been deep ; but now the intense quiet oppressed him like some palpable weight. He glanced drowsily at the fire, which was low, and then across it to Peter's crouching figure, indistinct in the shadows. Some thought of rousing the Indian was in his mind. "But no, I won't do that," he said to himself. "I've been laughed at quite enough for one night, and it's only my fancy."

The hush was so great that he could hear the sound of the little breeze among the leaves—so great that it seemed as if all life were held in breathless suspension for a space—and it endured for some moments, broken at last by the frightened flutter of a bird roused from its sleep.

Then, as if this little frightened flutter of wings had been a signal, a dark, snarling shape launched itself from a low branch, and leapt, with a harsh cry, straight upon the Indian!

There was a yell from Peter ; and then followed a second's fearful rolling, snarling, grunting, worrying confusion in the shadows. But in that second Dick had unsheathed his knife, cleared the fire at a bound, and leapt to the rescue.

No need to ask what was the assailant. Only one beast, "the devil of the woods," was capable of such an attack. And Dick's heart throbbed as he stood beside that frantic turmoil, lighted only by the uncertain flicker of the fire, and waited for a chance of getting in a thrust, fearing also, lest in striking the

lynx, he should wound Peter Many-Names. But on the instant of thinking this, the chance came. Peter's unyielding hands were grasping the beast's throat, and as they rolled over and over, its gaunt side was fully exposed for a moment, and Dick drove in the knife up to the handle.

So strong and true was the blow, that it ended the struggle, and the Indian was safe, though terribly scratched and torn. Indeed, if the savage brute had not leapt short in the first instance, Dick's ready aid might have come too late, and there would have been an end of Peter Many-Names.

Dick laughed a little uncertainly when it was all over. "That was a narrow escape," he said, turning to assist Peter to his feet again. But the Indian had already shaken himself free from the dead lynx, and now took the English boy's hand in his own, regardless of the pain of his wounds, as befitted a brave. He always spoke in his own tongue in those rare moments when he gave way to emotion. And now he began a long and dignified speech, the meaning of which was not difficult to gather. "That's all right," Dick interrupted nervously, "you are not to say any more about it," though, as a matter of fact, he had not understood more than a few words of the rapid, musical oration.

Peter relapsed into his English. "You my brother now," he said briefly; "come danger, come death, come anything, my life yours. My life yours, my home yours, my horses yours, my people yours." He waved a lordly arm to the four points of the compass, and Dick suppressed a laugh. Peter's

worldly wealth so evidently existed for purposes of ceremonial gratitude only. But the Indian felt that he had returned thanks with proper dignity, and submitted in a sort of contented, stoic indifference while Dick roughly bound up the worst of his cuts and scratches.

Gratitude is a feeling somewhat difficult to awaken in the heart of the Red Man; but when once it is aroused, it is deep and binding. The adventure with the "lucifee" was a fresh tie between the two lads, and they proceeded on their way in greater good-fellowship than ever.

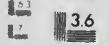
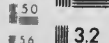
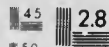
Through all the splendour of wild forest and deep ravine, Peter led the way, straight north-west, stopping for nothing. And so great was his ascendancy over Dick, that the English boy never questioned his leadership, or even asked definitely where they were going. In the wilds the Indian was supreme, and his speed, endurance, and skill were dominant. Dick relied upon him almost blindly, and was content to follow where he led.

The life at the homestead seemed a thing of the past, part of some other state of existence, so intense a hold had the wilderness upon Dick's mind. But the thought of Stephanie was real and living, the only point of pain in his present lot; and this pain he put aside as much as possible, together with all worry as to the future. "I made my choice," he said to himself, "and there's an end of it. I know it was pretty hard on Steenie, but here I am, and what's the use of worrying?" Minds of his type are convinced of error only by stern measures, and Dick showed



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a great deal of argumentative skill in assuring himself that he had been perfectly justified in escaping from the bonds of humdrum toil which had grown so unendurable. He knew that he had proved himself weak and lacking in gratitude, nevertheless; but the knowledge had not yet touched his heart to any keener sense of wrong-doing.

Straight northwestward they went, through gradually changing country, and all the subtle passage of the weeks was heralded to them by new flowers, new streams, new lands of wonder. The wild strawberries ripened, and the last violets died. The raspberry canes were heavy with fruit, and the spots where they grew best were much favoured by brown bears, big and little. White lilies shone upon the pools and the still reaches of the small rivers. And still, through all the shifting moods of the year, they hurried on, never resting, never turning aside, but always keeping up the same unvarying rate of speed.

Where was Peter Many-Names going? Dick did not know, and did not care. He had chosen his way of life, and now gave himself up to its delight. He only knew that the wilds he loved were very fair, that the weather was almost unbroken in its warm sunniness, that food was easily come by, and that all things, great and small, made for happiness. He seemed to be one with the clear blue Canadian skies, with the silver stars, with the free, beautiful things of stream and forest, with the very blades of grass beneath his moccasined feet. The little owls, the great wood-peckers, the tiny songsters of the reeds and bushes, he looked upon as his brethren. He felt

no return of the desolate ache at his heart he had experienced on the night of Peter's struggle with the lynx. His was that joyous fellowship with nature that knows no weariness, and he troubled himself as little as possible about Stephanie. Not yet had his awakening come.

Straight northwest they went, through all the brief splendour of the northern summer; and the weeks passed in golden dreams of freedom and of beauty. And thus the year drew slowly, inevitably, to its close.

CHAPTER IX.

On the Prairie.

IN after life Dick never forgot those weeks of wandering. The freedom and beauty of all that summer world was indelibly impressed upon his memory. His was a nature readily moved to admiration, and had powers of observation unusual in a lad of his age. But there were two small scenes, each perfect in pictorial beauty, which he afterwards recollected with special clearness.

They were tramping steadily along the bottom of a small ravine, one late July afternoon, through a luxuriance of fern and vine almost tropical. Dick, watching the dark woods ahead, saw a sudden little flame of colour leap to life against the black stems of the pines—a flame so intense in its ruddy gold that it seemed to throb and pulsate like a tongue of fire. A sunbeam, slanting through the branches, had been caught and held in the cup of an open red lily—that was all. But the effect was one which no artist on earth could have reproduced.

Another time, they were paddling up a small stream in a little canoe of Peter's building—a little canoe he had hurriedly made, with Dick's help, while they camped for the purpose—a flimsy, crank craft,

but serviceable, and sufficient for their needs. They were gliding slowly along in the shadow of the bank, when they came upon a tall brown crane standing quietly on one yellow leg in the calm shallows. He did not offer to move as they slipped past, but stood there peacefully, in water which reflected the sunset skies and small opalescent clouds floating above. Backed by the green rushes, surrounded by the mirrored glow of sunset, he stood and watched them out of sight with wild, sad eyes—untamed, fearless, and alone. And thus he remained always in Dick's remembrance.

After a time, they hid the canoe in a tiny creek, and took to land-travelling again. Peter's haste increased, and Dick was sometimes hard put to it to keep up with him. His caution increased also as they advanced into more open country—country which gradually grew to foreshadow the prairies. But Peter kept to the trees as much as possible, speeding swiftly and stealthily northwestward.

"One would think we were thieves," murmured Dick, with an uneasy English dislike of stealthiness. It was the first time he had in any way rebelled against Peter's leadership. "All right," the Indian responded, "go on your way, see how far you get. What you know? What you see? What you hear? Nothin'. You blind, deaf, sleepy all times. I see, hear, know. You come with me, or you go alone. But if come with me, you come quiet. I lead you," he concluded, thrusting his little dark face with its strange eyes close to Dick's. Thus the incipient mutiny was crushed.

In all those weeks they had seen and spoken with no one but the solitary trapper to whom Dick had consigned the letter, and the absolute loneliness had become as natural to Dick as the splendid clearness of air was natural. So when one morning in September he came upon the ashes of a fire that were still warm, it gave him a curious feeling of wistful excitement. "Look, Peter," he said, "feel here. The ground is not cold yet under the ashes. Someone was here only a little while ago!"

Peter snarled something inarticulate, and peered about the fire with a frowning face. "White man," he grunted uneasily at last.

"How do you know?" asked Dick; and then, not waiting for an answer, "I should have liked to have spoken to him. I wish we had met him."

"Company's man," grunted Peter, still restless and uneasy. "They bad people. Not like us here." But Dick was full of his own thoughts, and scarcely heeded. There was some reason for Peter's uneasiness, for they were then almost within the vast territories ruled over by the Hudson Bay Company. And at no time did the great Company prove friendly to strangers. The Indian had probably, at some crisis in his chequered career, come in contact with the authority of the said Company, which thereafter he regarded with superstitious awe and veneration.

As they went stealthily on their way, and the miles dropped behind with the vanishing summer, Peter Many-Names became strangely eager and excited. Dick did not understand the cause of this

excitement or of the haste that accompanied it. But had he possessed the key to that savage nature, he would have guessed that it was the nearness of the prairies which so moved the impassive Indian. As the sea to a coast-bred man, as the mountains to a hillman, so were the prairies to Peter Many-Names. They had called him north with a voice that, to his wild fancy, was almost articulate—insistent, not to be mistaken. He had been born and bred upon the plains, and now he was returning to them as a tired child runs to its mother, asking only the presence of that which he loved.

And by the time that the woods about the distant homestead were lighted with the purple of the tall wild asters, Dick had had his first sight of the open prairie. In after days he never found words to describe that sight. Once having reached the goal of his desire, Peter's hurry seemed in great measure to evaporate. He was content to see the vast arch of the pale autumn skies above his head, to feel the keen air in his face, to travel over those limitless earthen billows, interrupted only by some bluff of aspens or other soft-wood trees, or by the forest-growth which fringed the courses of the larger rivers. To him, life offered nothing better.

Two days after they had definitely left the last of the wooded country behind them, Dick camped in the shelter of a poplar bluff, while Peter Many-Names went off a day's journey to the east with the intention of procuring a couple of ponies. "Saw fire-smoke dark when sun rose," he declared, "and when fires, there wigwams; where wigwams, there Indians;

where Indians, there ponies. You keep close, and I come back soon."

"But you can't buy ponies, for we've nothing to give in exchange for them," Dick protested. However, Peter took no notice of him, and presently departed, leaving Dick to loneliness, and wonder unsatisfied.

He had leisure to wonder as much as he liked. Peter departed stealthily, leaving him in charge of all their little stores, with only the slim poplars and his blanket to shield him from the winds that had now begun to blow very coldly. He had, as has already been written, leisure to spare, for it was four days before Peter appeared from the southwest, riding one pony and leading another. They were sturdy little brown beasts, very shy of Dick, and practically wild. There was nothing remarkable about them in any way except that they were very muddy. It was not for some time that Dick discovered that this dried mud concealed some very conspicuous white spots. Thereupon he wondered more and more, noticing that there was nothing lacking in the equipment or among the possessions of the triumphant but always taciturn Peter.

"How did you get them?" he asked. "Did you find friends, or what? However did you manage to get them?" But Peter only grinned, as he occasionally condescended to do when much amused, and Dick got no further answer. There the ponies were, and there Peter evidently intended they should stay.

To Dick, the beginning of their wanderings across the prairie was as the beginning of a new world. The

sense of vast space was almost terrifying. Vision was obstructed by nothing, and the great skies rounded down to the utmost edge of the great undulating plain. They were now travelling quite slowly, but after a few days—nay, a few hours—the prairies seemed to close in upon them, to swallow them up in vastness and silence. Dick, dreamy and impressionable, felt a little lonely and bewildered, troubled by the mighty width and apparently limitless expanse surrounding him. But to Peter Many-Names the prairies were as home-like and familiar as a meadow.

Here, where Dick would see the far skyline broken by the irregular black mass of a herd of bison, the wheat waves now, mile after mile, about the countless farms and homesteads. These fertile lands, known then to few but the Indian and the hunter, have been claimed by civilisation, and their produce goes to the feeding of the nations. Agriculture has taken the prairies, and their nomad life is surely slipping into the past.

To the Indian, these prairies were dear above all things. But they impressed Dick more with awe than admiration, and he grew to long for the friendly trees left behind them, and to regard the limitless plain and the skies arching from the horizon almost as hostile things, with something menacing in their very splendour. Now also for the first time he began troubling about the future, and once he put his feelings into words.

“Where are you going to spend the winter, Peter?” he asked.

"With some tribe of my people," Peter replied carelessly. Of course, it was the only thing to be done, and in Peter's mind no alternative was to be considered at all. But Dick felt a doubt as to his own endurance and toughness compared with the Indian's. He was no weakling; but he dearly loved his flesh-pots, and, with the prospect becoming one of hardship and discomfort, he began to think a little regretfully of the cosy Collinson homestead, now so far away. And Stephanie! "I wonder what Stephanie's doing, and whether she misses me much," he thought. "I should like to see her again."

The last of the yellow leaves fell from the poplar bushes, and the silver foliage of the aspens fluttered to the ground. At night the stars shone large and frosty, but so intensely dry and bracing was the air, that Dick did not feel the cold, and Peter Many-Names was of course inured to any changes of climate. Game became more scarce, and sometimes they wandered far afield in search of their supplies, occasionally falling back upon their reserve store of dried meat. But it was still very enjoyable, and perhaps Peter, who had been an exile from his native plains for several years, strayed somewhat farther away from the river-courses and the sheltered lands than he had formerly intended. But to him the prairies were home; and who would not feel justified in relaxing caution a little when in his native haunts?

So, for some little time, they wandered about, meeting with few adventures. Once they passed too close to a cluster of tepees, and three young braves

chased them for miles. The mud had by now scaled off their ponies, and the curiously shaped white spots were as remarkable as the speed of the little animals who were distinguished by these marks. Peter seemed to think that this incident effectually put a stop to the quest for hospitality in that region, but the difficulty could be easily overcome.

"We will muddy ponies again, go farther north," he said. And a little farther north they went, following the trail of a band of Indians. "Many people go along here two, three days ago," Peter remarked, "we follow them. If enemies, bad. If friends, good. Come on quick." The second day after they had struck this trail, the first snow fell. It was only a couple of inches of delicate, powdery white crystals; and in an hour or so the clouds had cleared off, and the sky was dazzlingly fair and blue. But it gave Dick a curious shock to think that the winter was close upon them. His thoughts turned to the homestead where he and Stephanie had been received as welcome guests in the time of sorrow and almost destitution, to that Christmas day when he had, as he thought, fought and conquered his roving inclinations. How different had been his intentions! Even in the hour of his greatest delight, when freedom and the forests had filled his life, he had not been able to stifle thoughts of Stephanie entirely. And now, when he was a little tired of wandering, a little lonely, a little anxious, these returned upon him with double force. Some of the glamour had perhaps passed from a wild life. And it was a fact, that, however he might love the wilderness, he could never become an

unthinking, unquestioning part of it, as was Peter Many-Names.

This knowledge brought with it his first feeling of intense shame and repentance. But he fought against these feelings more stubbornly than he had ever struggled against his longings for the gipsy-life of the trapper and the Indian. Indeed, the very awakening of his conscience and his almost dormant affection for Stephanie made him cling more obstinately to the wilds. He angrily assured himself that he *would not* go back. He had chosen his present deliberately, and the future must take care of itself. With determination worthy of a better cause, he faced the prairies and the cold sky, and nothing, he told himself impatiently, should drive him to forsake that life which was dearer to him than all. But, now the first dazed rapture and delight were over, was it dearer than all? That was the point.

The difficulty was increased by the fact that the fall of snow had been sufficient to cover the slight trail they were following. And now Peter's caution began to re-appear. A bitter wind had suddenly arisen, blowing with increasing force, and Peter as suddenly and emphatically expressed a wish to return by the way they had come.

Dick, for the first time in all their daring journey, flatly refused to follow the wishes of the Indian. He felt that to turn southward now would seem like a concession to those softer, better feelings which filled his heart, and of which he was so anxious to rid himself. If they turned south now, they might never turn north again. And that one homestead which

held Stephanie represented to him the whole of the country they had left behind them. He felt that he could never face the Collinsons, could never endure the humiliation of a return to civilised life, could never endure the thought that his dreams had led him astray. "I will go on by myself if you are afraid," he said in a fury of suddenly aroused stubbornness. "I don't care what happens. I may freeze or starve or anything, but turn back I will not."

Peter Many-Names shrugged his shoulders uneasily. "So," he said, "you go on if you will, I come with you. You my brother now, and I cannot leave you. But it is for true we go into death." And the ponies hung their heads and shivered restlessly before that steady, unceasing wind as they proceeded. But Dick kept his face turned obstinately northward, resolved that he would never yield.

It is written that "the stars in their courses fought against Sisera." And now the spirit of the wide prairies was to fight against Dick.

That night they found no game. And, by the morning, fine particles of icy snow gave an edge of steel to that steady, unceasing wind. By midday the sky was overcast, the wind increased, and the snow became thicker and thicker.

CHAPTER X.

In the Grip of the Storm.

A WORLD of small, whirling, white flakes, rushing, eddying, drifting before a wind that continually shifted from one quarter to another; a cold, grey light filtering through this haze of stinging snow; a continuous, angry murmur, as the icy particles struck the tall, stiff, prairie grasses, sometimes deepening to a roar as the wind momentarily increased; and, in the midst of this unresting, resistless tumult, two dark figures staggering uncertainly northward, leading between them an almost exhausted pony, laden with the last remnants of their food.

For three days, the snow, and the wind, and the great cold had scourged the prairies, and the storm was almost an early blizzard in its wild fury, in the confusion of air-currents and always-falling, never-resting white flakes, tipped with ice, and stinging like fire. And for these three days Dick and Peter Many-Names had gone blindly on their painful way, trusting to the Indian's sense of direction, yet not knowing where they were going. An Indian's bump of locality is a marvellously developed organ; but it is of little use in a blizzard. And now the two lads were staggering forward, with no hope that they were

keeping to the right path—one in stoic resignation, the other in a passion of regret and despair. They were almost exhausted, and only kept moving through fear of that snow-sleep from which there is no awakening. Even this fear had now become dulled through cold and weariness.

When the blizzard first struck them, Dick's obstinacy had changed to a very lively realisation of danger. "We will turn back now, if you like," he had said somewhat shamefacedly.

But Peter had given one of his rare, bitter laughs. "All too late," he had said grimly. "Death behind as well as in front—everywhere. P'raps so we go on we find band of Indians that we followed. P'raps we do. All too late go back now, too late." And, with those words in their ears, they had faced the unsheltered prairie and the strength of the storm.

For the first day hope had been left to them, for they could judge their direction from the steady, cutting wind. But, after that, the wind began to shift constantly, and thus their only guide failed them. A prairie is not as bare of all landmarks as a lawn, but one buffalo-wallow is much like another, one poplar-bluff is not distinguishable from the next, and most sloughs have a family likeness to each other, especially when one's circle of vision is limited to a couple of yards' radius, and everything beyond is blotted out with pitiless, hurrying, scurrying clouds of white flakes. Dick was utterly lost. "Where are we? Where are we?" he kept saying. "Is the whole world turning to snow?" And sometimes, angrily, "I know you are going the wrong way, Peter. I know you are."

Whereupon he would stumble off by himself, and the Indian would follow and drag him back again.

"No right, no wrong, no anything," Peter exclaimed angrily in answer; "but you must not go round, round, round in circles. That what you doing, an' if you do so, you die pretty quick. You come on with me." And actually they had kept a straighter course than they knew, or than they would have dared to hope, thanks to the Indian's sense of direction.

The first night they passed in the shelter of a large bluff of aspens, and were not very much the worse for it. It was then that they somehow lost one of their ponies through inexcusable carelessness in securing it, and it was after that also that they began to lose hope.

Their food as well as their strength was failing them, and on this third day they were in a very bad case. Dick had, of course, suffered more than the Indian, and plodded forward in a sort of stupor, which threatened to end in fatal unconsciousness at any moment. But even Peter's keen senses were dulled by the cold, and his movements, though little less agile, were more mechanical. His face was grey and pinched, and his hard, grey eyes were very weary also. He seemed leaner and more shrunken than ever. But his mouth was set in grim determination to meet whatever fate might be in store for him with fitting dignity.

At first, Dick's remorse had been passionate. "It's my wretched obstinacy has led us into this, Peter," he said repeatedly; "but sorrow can't do any

good now. Nothing can do any good. Oh, what a fool, what a silly, self-willed fool I was! And all my regret is useless! Everything's useless! There's nothing to help us."

"Except Great Spirit," the Indian replied austerely, though Dick, in his despairing mood, scarcely noticed the words, and went on with his vain regrets and repentance.

But now the stealthy hand of the frost was lulling all his hopes and fears and regrets to sleep. As he plodded on beside the staggering pony, he thought only of his previous life, and that without any pain or grief. He vaguely remembered one May morning long ago, before his mother had died, when Stephanie had crowned herself with all the first frail blossoms of the year, and had then danced over the miserable log-hut, brightening it with the spirit of grace and childhood, and sweetening it with the shy fragrance of spring flowers. He had forgotten the little incident entirely, but now he remembered it clearly enough, and idly wondered over it. He suddenly seemed to remember so many things, pleasant little happenings of past years. And his mind dwelt upon them more and more dreamily. More and more slowly he walked, half-forgetting the benumbing ache of cold, the rush and whirl of the surrounding snow.

He was roughly roused from his dangerous dreams. The restless, dancing drifts and eddies of snow seemed to vanish from beneath his feet, and he fell head foremost down a steep bank, some three feet deep, into a little depression of the soil between two high ridges.

In spring this was doubtless a slough, haunted by wild-fowl, but now it was dry, and covered with grass, thin and poor, but much relished by the trembling, famished pony. It was sheltered on all sides by the three-foot banks, crested with little straggling bushes, against which the snow had drifted. So cosy did this desolate little valley seem after the roaring tempest without, that Dick grew quite comfortable and drowsy, and would have gone to sleep where he fell. But this Peter would by no means allow. "You wake up," he commanded; "even little child know better than go sleep in snow an' cold. You wake up."

"For pity's sake, let me alone!" Dick pleaded. "Go on if you like and leave me here. I'm so comfortable."

"Ugh! Yes, you very comfortable, so you stay there that your bones scare the birds away in the spring. That how comfortable you are."

And, roused by this grisly picture, Dick fought off the weariness that was overwhelming him. They huddled in their blankets silently, and ate some pieces of dried and icy deer's meat—ate with despair in their hearts, for this food was their last.

The slight refreshment following the food and rest was almost unwelcome to Dick, bringing with it a keener realisation of the consequences of his wilfulness, and of the desperate strait they were in. When they started again on their hopeless tramp, his thoughts turned to the probable fate that awaited them. Once more he seemed to hear himself say, "Nothing, nothing to help us!" And once more he seemed to hear Peter's solemn answer, at the time



“FOR PITY’S SAKE, LET ME ALONE!” DICK PLEADED. “GO ON AND LEAVE ME.”

unheeded, "Nothing, except Great Spirit." With his whole soul he felt that it was true. He was facing death more nearly than ever in his life before, and he knew it. With the knowledge came the old, instinctive cry, the readiest of all prayers, "God help us!"

But had he deserved such help? He knew that he had not. He was too much confused with bitter cold and exhaustion to feel these things other than vaguely and uncertainly. But as he stumbled on through the swirling haze of white, he gave full sway to those softened thoughts which he had hitherto rejected, seeing his past conduct in a clearer light—the light of repentance. "Before I ask for help," thought poor Dick, "I have need to say, 'God forgive me!' But if we get through this, I'll do my best to be less selfish, and to think less of my own wishes. Oh, Steenie, Steenie! Indeed, I have need to ask for forgiveness."

Resolves made under such circumstances are not generally worth much. But though that hour might pass, Dick would never again be quite what he was before. Some of his careless selfishness would be wanting, and in its stead would appear a far more manly humility.

For the first time he had dimly realised that no human being can live to himself alone—realised that, even if a man is responsible to no earthly duties of kinship and labour, he is responsible to his Maker. And such realisation could not fail to bear fruit in deeds.

But presently the insidious hand of the frost fell heavily upon them again. Peter's long, savage step became shorter and less sure, and he fell to crooning

little snatches of some wild chant under his breath—a brave's death-song, if Dick had known. The pony lagged more and more, and Dick noticed nothing, felt nothing any longer. He was benumbed, mind and body, with the cold. Peter's song blew past his ears on the irregular gusts of wind, but he did not hear. He was back again in those long ago days, and his mother was standing at the door of the cabin, calling, "Stephanie, Stephanie!"

The name was on his blue lips as strength failed, and he fell full length in the snow, while the whirling haze of white, the pony, and Peter Many-Names, slid away to nothingness, and only that voice remained—"Stephanie, Stephanie!"

Peter, partly roused from the lethargy which was creeping over him, tried to lift Dick from the drifts, but was too weak. So he quietly pulled off his own blanket, laid it over the English boy, and then crouched down with his back to the worst of the wind, and waited stoically—waited for death, which was all he looked for. He thought of it quite calmly; but then through all his stormy life the gates of the Happy Hunting-Grounds had never been far away. There was something very pathetic in that little crouching brown figure waiting so gravely and patiently for the end.

The wind blew the snow into little ridges on his long black hair, and then blew it off again. The pony came close to him with drooping head, as if for company; but by then the Indian was too far gone to heed anything, though still he crooned little snatches of his desolate song, as was right and fitting.

Presently he too fell softly sideways into the snow as a tired child falls. His last distinct thought was of the great broad woods through which they had passed, and of the warm summer sun upon the fair, green world.

Just then the pony lifted its lean head, fringed over with the long ragged mane, and pointing its nose to the blast, neighed shrilly, piercingly, as only an Indian pony can neigh. But neither Dick nor Peter Many-Names heard it.

That neigh was answered by a dozen or more. But so strongly blew the irregular winds that only faint echoes of the shrill clamour were to be heard. It proceeded from the very heart of an unusually large bluff of willows upon the bank of a river. There was an open space in the middle of this thick growth of stunted trees, which was occupied by several horses and a cluster of tepees. A band of Indians were very comfortably weathering the unexpected storm in this manner, little more than a few yards distant from the spot where Dick and Peter Many-Names had been overcome.

When the pony neighed, no echo of the sound reached the ears of the people in the tepees; but the loud whinnings of their own horses at last aroused Man-afraid-of-a-Bear, who had been sleeping the sleep of the just after a full meal, and he therefore went cautiously forth to investigate.

He noticed with satisfaction that the blizzard showed signs of abating, and he also noticed that another pony had been added to their little herd; so he carefully followed that pony's track for a few

yards, and came upon Dick and Peter Many-Names. He had looked for something of the kind, being accustomed to the chances of the plains.

The Red Man is hospitable, but suspicious. However, there was nothing about the half-frozen and unconscious pair that might have led Man-afraid-of-a-Bear to suppose that they were enemies. Besides, their advent had added a very fine pony to the wealth of the tribe; so, without much more ado, he dragged them one after the other to the tepees.

His haste was probably their salvation. Heroic and weird remedies were applied to ward off frost-bite, and after a time Peter Many-Names recovered sufficiently to eat a hearty meal.

But it was days before the grip of the frost loosened from Dick's brain. An old woman had taken a queer fancy to the white boy, and she nursed him patiently and fed him well long after the great storm had passed, and long after Peter had begun to do his share of the hunting and other tasks which fell to the men. Day after day passed, and still Dick lay helpless on the pile of skins in the dusky tepee, waited on by the grim, silent old squaw, and knowing nothing of his surroundings. He fancied the Indian woman was Stephanie, and kept calling out to her and begging her to forgive him. "For indeed, Steenie, I'm sorry," he would cry; "and after this I will be different, dear, and try and make it up to you. I was selfish and did not think, but I loved you all the time. I never forgot you. Forgive me, Stephanie! Stephanie, Stephanie!" And so it went on, until exhaustion brought quiet.

No one noticed him much or was much interested in him. But Peter Many-Names, after a few weeks, was counted a valuable addition to the tribe ; and the pony was the swiftest of the herd.

The days passed, and the prairies lay a vast field of white beneath the radiant blue of the skies. Then the snow blew off the higher mounds and ridges, and only the hollows and sloughs were white. So the season advanced, through all its changes of cold, through all its shifting winds, and brilliant sun and sudden tempest. And still the old squaw tended Dick, filling him with fearfu' herb-drinks, feeding him nobly, wrapping him close in soft skins. It was a fancy of hers that Death should not have the white boy ; and once having become possessed with the idea, she nursed Dick as if he had been her own son, to the wonder of the tribe. And at last her care was rewarded, and the clouds cleared from his brain, though he had little hold on life for a time.

But the days of weakness passed, and with them passed the last shadow of hesitation in Dick's mind. He had had long hours in which to repent and think as he lay in the corner of the smoky tepee—long hours in which to realise the fulness of that mercy which had shielded him in danger and saved him from death. And he went out into the sunshine again, resolved that as soon as he was strong enough to travel he would go back to that life in which his lot had been cast. He would go south, back to the Settlements, to work, and to Stephanie. And the wilds should thereafter call him in vain.

CHAPTER XI.

Back to Stephanie.

THAT long winter spent among the Indian was a bitterly hard one to Dick, and taught him patience and humility in no very gentle fashion. He was anxious to put his good resolves to the test of action ; but it would be some time before his strength became sufficient for the long journey back to the Settlements. And accustomed as he was to the possession of perfect health, he fretted under the knowledge, and chafed against the sense of helplessness which was so new to him. "But what's the use of fidgeting over it?" he told himself over and over again. "What's the use of thinking of it even, when I'm fit for nothing but to sit at the entrance of the tepee when the sun's warm, or to lie on the pile of skins when the weather's bad, and eat between times? Oh, but that old woman can cook things!" And indeed the old squaw, who was a person of position and influence, took care that he had plenty of food and warmth, and saw to it that no one molested him, regarding even Peter with suspicion. But the rest of the tribe looked upon him merely as an appanage of Peter Many-Names, and not a particularly creditable one at that.

Peter was enjoying himself thoroughly. The lean and haughty young braves, who looked down upon the white boy, were glad of his silent company; and the elders considered him a promising youth. While poor Dick lay weak and restive in the old squaw's wigwam, Peter was ruffling about the camp with a dozen arrogant young rascals at his tail. He was pre-eminently skilful as a hunter, and he added many ponies to the wealth of his host—ponies which were certainly never taken in trade for other articles, excepting probably an occasional bullet, or no less deadly arrows. In the genial warmth of admiration Peter expanded visibly in more respects than one. While poor Dick chafed under the knowledge that he was neither needed nor respected.

But in time a better frame of mind came to him. "How can I win respect, even the respect of untaught Indians," he thought, "when I don't deserve it? Even by their standards, I'm not of much account. Why, I don't even respect myself." For a time he was downcast and discouraged, but as strength of body increased under the old squaw's care, strength of soul increased also. And he resolved that in future he would think less of his pleasure and more of his duty, in whatever way of life his lot should be cast.

Some of this passive resignation passed off with his weakness; and he foresaw more clearly that his whole life might be passed in struggling against just such temptations as this one to which he had yielded. But by then the keen, clean prairie had begun to do its work, and he faced his future resolutely. With surprising wisdom he did not make many far-reaching

and likely-to-be-broken resolves. "I will go back to Stephanie as soon as I can," he thought; "and after that I will settle down to any work I find, as near to her as possible. At present, this is enough to think of."

So, with unusual patience, he set himself to wait for the return of strength and spring; while the old squaw grunted in undisguised admiration of his appetite, which bordered on the voracious.

The weary weeks of cold passed slowly. At the end of March the change came, and the prairies suddenly leapt into life. The skies were softer, and full of great white clouds which sailed grandly before the wind. The long, low earthen billows were covered with grass and all the radiant flowers of spring. Every depression of the soil was a slough full of green water, covered with battalions of mallards and other wild-fowl. The poplars put forth shiny leaves which glittered restlessly in the sunshine, and the meadow-larks filled the whole world with music.

Then Dick spoke to Peter Many-Names. "Tomorrow," he said, "we will begin to get ready, and next week we will start south again. I have had enough of your plains."

But Peter Many-Names was quite comfortable, and found many and plausible objections to the idea.

"Very well," said Dick quietly, "you stay here, and I will go alone. Only you must get back my gun for me."

Peter stared. There was a change in his comrade—a change which he could not fathom. But the day on which Dick was to start found Peter ready to start with him. "You my brother," he grunted in explana-

tion, "an' I go with you. You not quite strong yet, an' so you go alone, you get lost or starve or drown or somethin'," which was likely, though Peter might have expressed it in a less uncomplimentary fashion.

"I can go by myself," said Dick, a little indignant, though much relieved that the Indian had elected to go with him. But Peter only grunted again.

"I goin'," he repeated, "come back here in spring—next spring. You come along quick."

Many and ceremonious were the farewells between Peter and his stately savage host. But the old squaw was the only one who grieved for the loss of Dick; she gave him three pairs of delicately embroidered moccasins, and then stood and watched him out of sight with dull tearless sorrow. She had seen so many lads ride away in the distance; and few had ever returned. Dick waved his hand to her several times, but she did not respond; only stood and looked after him with sad, dim old eyes.

The two travellers were accompanied by a crony of Peter's, who was to go with them to the end of the prairie-lands, and then return to the tribe with the three ponies they rode. They proceeded swiftly, and for the most part in silence; for the two Indians were sparing of words, according to their wont. They rode together ahead of Dick; but sometimes Peter fell back and opened a brief conversation. "Tomorrow we begin to see woods again," he said once, "prairie soon break up, end. Then come trees, rivers, lakes. Now we see whole sky; then only little bits above leaves. Now we see who comes, miles an' miles away, then we see only grass, leaves, shadows, an' know

less." But Dick welcomed the thought that the prairies would soon end.

His dreams had led him astray. He fully realised that now. But it was not in him to think of the long woodland journey that lay before them with anything but keen and somewhat wistful pleasure. The prairies were not attractive to him. They were too vast, too monotonous, too remote from the little hopes and cares of human life. But the forests were different, and he was full of longing to behold them once more in all the beauty of the early year. Yet other longings were now stronger; and every night he counted that he was so much nearer to Stephanie.

At last the prairies were behind them, and he and Peter were alone and on foot once more. It had been autumn when they passed through this country on their northward way, and now, looking back, Dick could scarcely believe that in a few months such changes could have taken place in all his hopes and aims and feelings.

There were changes also in his appearance. Severe illness and long-continued hardship had made him taller and thinner and older. He bore himself with less light-hearted confidence, and seemed to expect less consideration. Instead of being a careless boy to be guided and excused, he now gave greater promise of becoming a good man to be relied upon and trusted. The trials of that winter had been excellent moral medicine for his selfishness, and the nearness of danger and death had led him to realise something, however dimly, of his unavoidable duty to his friends, his sister, and above all, to his God.

Through all the splendour of the northern spring they went steadily southward. Not this time was Dick lost in a lazy dream of delight, though he loved the great woods more intensely than ever. The free skies were as fair to him, the winds still sang their little gipsy-songs to his heart, the green solitudes were as welcome to him as ever, but he held to his purpose firmly. And the days passed from clear dawns to tender twilight, and every day left him so much nearer to Stephanie.

Steadily they journeyed southward, into lands of warmer sun and fuller blossom. Flower gave place to promise of fruit on all the wild bushes; the birds lost their spring songs with which the woods had rung, and flitted about busily and silently. Never had fairer season visited those forests, and Dick was alive to every subtle shade and gradation in all the beauty about him. He noted every point that made for loveliness in the glades and ravines and waterways, he felt akin to the very bees and butterflies in their enjoyment of sun and summer. Yet never did he turn from his purpose, even in thought.

And neither did he rely so utterly upon the Indian; who, feeling that his influence had somehow lessened, watched closely and wondered more. Dick was no longer as pliable as of yore, but his moral fibre seemed to be tougher and less yielding.

As the weeks passed and they proceeded farther and farther south, Dick grew restless and anxious. All sorts of vague fears began to torment him, and he imagined that some disaster might have befallen Stephanie. She might be ill. She might be needing

him in a hundred ways, and probably had been, throughout all those long months. The thought of her in illness or trouble became as a spur to goad him on, and Peter marvelled at the pace. Dick was still Dick, and his penitence was always deep in proportion to its tardiness.

So the year went on. The wild asters showed their buds, and presently opened into golden-hearted stars, filling the forest glades with a mist of delicate purple. Farther and farther south they went, while the wild sunflowers bloomed and faded, and the fair green growth became lifeless and sere with the sinking of the sap. And every day's journey brought Dick so many miles nearer to Stephanie.

Until at last, almost at the end of the autumn, they camped for the night only a few miles away from the Collinson homestead. That same night, as they sat beside their little fire, Peter Many-Names glanced at Dick curiously. "You go on alone to-morrow," he said, as one stating a long-decided fact.

Dick looked up, almost startled that the Indian should show so perfect a knowledge of his feelings. "Yes, I go on alone," he answered quietly, "I go on alone—to see my sister."

The Indian leant forward, his eyes shining greenly in the flicker of the firelight. "Yes, you go on alone, my brother," he replied in his own speech, "you go on alone, to the life of the white man. In dark houses shall you live, in hard labour shall you grow old. The white stars, the great stars of the north, the clear winds that are the breath of the Great Spirit, the noise of the buffalo-herd, the shrill

cry of the eagle, the note of the twanging bowstring—all these shall be to you as a forgotten tongue. In the plains and the forests man sees the foot-marks of the Great Spirit, hears His speech in the heart, and beholds His presence in all things. And you shall know them no more."

Dick nodded. "I shall know them no more," he answered, a little sadly, "but I think the Great Spirit can be heard and known as well in my life as in yours, Peter."

The next day Dick went on alone. He had no very distinct plan in his mind, but he was too much ashamed of himself to go directly to the homestead, and face the grave, displeased looks which he felt sure would be his portion, and deservedly so. Instead, he skirted round the edges of the familiar fields, and struck upwards through that little rocky ravine which cut through the fertile acres.

As he walked cautiously amongst the dead fern and bracken, stooping beneath the swinging, leafless branches, sinking knee-deep in the drifted, dead leaves, he wondered what chance he would get of speaking to Stephanie. Every familiar tree and fence, every detail of the ground, everything which he had known before and now saw again, gave him a feeling of half-painful pleasure which astonished him, for he had not realised that anything about the farm had grown dear to him. And the dearest thing of all—what of Stephanie? He almost ran along the bottom of the narrowing ravine, brushing through the bushes, leaping the fallen and rotting trees, yet his instinct of caution kept his progress quiet.

The ravine ended in a steep bank, and Dick climbed up it swiftly in the deep, dead leaves, breathless, and looked, and looked again. Beyond the stump fence, on the gradually rising ground, stood Stephanie. Her eyes and mouth had a wistful look, but she did not seem unhappy. She was standing a little turned away from the ravine, watching the distant forests beyond the farm-buildings—watching them dreamily, and a little sadly. She had neither heard nor seen Dick. And he knelt in the deep leaves, and looked at her, and looked. All his shame and repentance surged upon him overwhelmingly, and kept him dumb and helpless, unable to move.

Everything was very quiet—quiet as only the woods can be in the late fall. Once, while Dick knelt there, two big, brown woodpeckers flew heavily across the fields; once some little shrill-voiced bird called suddenly from the bushes, with a distant flutter of wings, and he could hear Roger's deep tones from the far, far distance, shouting directions to the farmhands. Still Stephanie did not move.

At last he made some involuntary sound, and she turned swiftly and saw him. He saw the light of wonder and joy flash into her clear, pale face, and sprang to his feet, calling her eagerly by name. Somehow, he could never tell in what manner he cleared the barrier of the stump fence, and was beside her in an instant.

"Dick! Dick! Dick!" And then for the first time in her life Stephanie fainted.

CHAPTER XII.

To a Goodly Heritage.

THREE years have passed, shifting from bud to blossom, from sun to snow, from promise to fulfilment, bringing with them all their store of light, and shadows only deep enough to make the brightness clearer. Three times the snow has cleared from the good brown soil, three times the tender green of wheat has gladdened the eye, three times the fruitful fields have grown golden to the harvest, since Dick came home. And how have these changing seasons affected Dick and Stephanie, and all the people at the Collinson homestead?

On the third of these golden autumns there were great festivities at the homestead, the occasion being no less than a barn-raising. It took place on a clear, cool, golden October day, when the woods were yellowed with softly-falling leaves, and late sun-flowers and goldenrod carried on the scheme of colour, with the brave purple asters to add a last royal touch to the loveliness of nature looking forward to her winter rest. The wide fields and the forest-bordered clearing had rung all day with shouts and merriment, and the cheerful noise of willing labour, for all the O'Brien family had lent their aid, and there

were nine of them. And now, when the early evening had darkened down in clear grey twilight, they were all gathered in the great, low-ceilinged living-room of the homestead, brightened only by the warm flicker of flames from the logs upon the hearth.

Four juvenile O'Briens were seated before this hearth, roasting apples, and also their own rosy faces. There was also Mr. Collinson, a little more grey in his hair, and, if possible, a little more genial ruddiness in his broad face than when we saw him last. Mrs. Collinson sat near him, plump and smiling as ever, and Mrs. O'Brien talked to her exhaustively.

In the pauses of the general murmur of talk that filled the room, her words sounded clearly, with the full power of an incisive soprano. "And so I took the sleeves out, and turned the skirt, and now it's as good as ever for ordinary wear. And sure, my nasturtium-coloured tabinet is only for the best occasions, and so I told O'Brien. But there! What sense has a man in these matters, my dear?"

"And did you put the frills on again," inquired Mrs. Collinson, with smiling interest. And then the hum of talk arose, drowning even that penetrating soprano for a while. But soon it rose again above the other voices. "And a fine lass she is," it said, "and it's happy your Roger ought to be, me dear. But Dick's a fine fellow, too, by all accounts. Though, as for me, William Charles was always the one for my money. He's a head on his shoulders, has that boy." Whereupon a general laugh ensued.

The "boy" in question, now a tall young man, was joking solemnly with the three O'Brien boys. And

there was Stephanie, tall, and grave, and quiet, with Roger beaming at her from the other side of the room, all unconscious that his face was an open book to whoever chose to read it. There was Nonie O'Brien, with her pink cheeks and her bright eyes, and her sweet, soft Irish speech. And there also was Dick.

He was sitting in the shadow, grave and somewhat silent, except when Nonie teased him, which she did frequently. Her treatment of him was a standing joke with the two families, as was also his meekness and patience in putting up with it. He was almost less changed in the three years than were any of the other young people; still one might have seen in him a certain dreaminess and tendency to choose the easier path, which were as much characteristic of him as his deeply sunburned face and short, fair hair were characteristic of his outward appearance. Yet there were many changes in him, after all.

Since his return from the wilds, Dick had never swerved from his purpose. His shame and boyish pride yielded to Stephanie's entreaties, and he accepted the work on the homestead which good Mr. Collinson freely offered. Here he had been ever since, facing cheerfully the humdrum round of toil, turning a deaf ear and unseeing eye to the beauties and delights of the wilds, and bent upon "making it up to Steenie." It had been a hard struggle at times, harder than anyone had guessed, but he had come through it well. And now he was thinking of taking up land for himself when a good opportunity should come. But the reward he had hoped for was not to be his. Throughout the first year of labour he

had held firmly to his purpose of somehow, at some not too distant date, making a home for Stephanie. After that, he had no longer been able to shut his eyes to the little romance that she and Roger were unconsciously acting. And, with an ache at his heart, he had put aside his own hopes of happiness, and merged them into hers. So Mrs. Collinson was to have a real daughter after all. But as she told every one, "I've always regarded Steenie as a daughter, ever since she's been here with us. So it won't make any difference in that way."

And, perhaps, on this particularly merry evening, it is not to be wondered at that Dick should feel a little sad though Nonie O'Brien did her best to keep him in good spirits, acting on the principle that whoever is annoyed and irritated has no time to be melancholy as well. But he was gradually learning the most difficult lesson of cheerful self-effacement, and did not allow his own thoughts and feelings to spoil the cheeriness of the others. He wove wonderful Indian romances for the benefit of the children; he helped Mrs. Collinson in a score of ways; he sang old English songs; he played games. Yet he could not help being a little sad that so soon his life and Stephanie's would be divided. They were as dear to each other as ever—dearer, perhaps, in view of the coming change. But now their hopes, and fears, and joys were to be no longer in unison. Dick's character had deepened and strengthened much in those three years; and his affections, and the slight sorrows which came through them, had deepened and strengthened proportionately.

But there was one source of help and comfort ever open to his heart—his love of nature, which should grow with his growth and strengthen with his strength as long as his life endured, and his growing faith and trust in nature's God. Whenever he was in trouble or perplexity, he managed to steal a quiet hour in the forests, and always returned to his work with fresh energy and fresh confidence. So now, when the fun and noise were at their highest, he slipped from the room, and out into the quiet night. Stephanie's dark eyes followed him very tenderly and proudly as he went, for still she seemed the elder of the two. "Dear Dick," she thought, "I know how he feels. It will be hard on him."

The wilderness surrounding the farm was no longer a source of temptation to Dick; it was a refuge where he might find comfort and peace. He had mastered his roving inclinations, and Peter Many-Names' free faring no longer filled him with envy. But his struggles for victory had almost imperceptibly saddened his irresponsible, sunny nature. He was still the old Dick, but with a difference—a difference that made for trustworthiness, patience, and power. The night, as he stepped from the door into the dusk quiet of the garden, was hushed and dark. Very soft misty clouds were drifting across the sky, with a suggestion of ghostly trailing draperies in their movement; here and there they opened to let a star look through, but the general aspect of the slumbering world was of an infinite variety of shadow, rather than of darkness relieved by any light. In an instant, the tumult and merriment of that fire-lit

room had become remote, and the great silence of the night had enclosed him as with a palpable substance.

Yet, as he walked down the straggling garden, with its vegetables on one side and its late flowers on the other, he was aware that the night was not as quiet as he had thought at first. From far, quiet heights of air incessant soft calls and uneasy, melancholy pipings came down to him; and he knew that the dark above him was alive with great flocks of migrating birds, calling ceaselessly to one another, travelling ceaselessly on their way. Peter Many-Names could have told him what birds they were, from the soft, sad echoes of their notes which floated down to earth. But Peter was away in unknown wildernesses, exploring on his own account; and the people at the homestead were rather glad that it should be so.

Dick sighed a little as he leant over the gate at the foot of the garden, watching the dim belt of grey forest before him. The memory of his time of wandering was over with him, and he had spent many such nights as this encamped with Peter Many-Names as his only comrade. His sense of loneliness increased as he watched a far-off pallid line advancing slowly across the sky, a line which marked the edge of the field of ghostly cloud which was passing over. Beyond this edge the sky was clear and dark, lighted by a few large stars.

When the clouds had faded to a low, pale bank of receding vapour behind the forest, the aspect of the night changed. It grew more distinctly dark, less unreal and shadowy, while the stars seemed to shine more brilliantly in consequence. But the faint bird-



"DICK! DICK! WHERE ARE YOU?" P. 128.

calls, the elfin pipings, still floated down from the hushed heights of air.

The quiet, the calm, the slow stately ascension of the stars were already soothing Dick.

A meteor fell with a curious, leisurely slide, from the midst of the heavens to the outermost darkness upon the horizon. He remembered how, when he and Stephanie had been children, they used to watch for the falling stars, so that they might wish their dearest wish upon seeing them. "After all," he said to himself with a sudden rush of tenderness, "my greatest wish is to see her as happy as she deserves to be. Roger's a good fellow, and I should be a selfish brute if I let my moping ways sadden her, God bless her!" Even this little thought showed how great a change had taken place in Dick's character.

His thoughts turned to the limitless prairies of richest soil, to the untouched forests, to the wide beauty of lake and river, to all those fair pictures of the wilderness graven upon his heart. He thought of the clear skies, of the stinging cold, of the splendour of summer, of the fulfilment of the fall. He thought, with new insight, of the meaning hidden beneath the round of farmer's toil which now held him, of the results of that labour which he had at first given so grudgingly, of the great purpose, the divine symbolism, which may make agriculture the highest of all occupations, the most far-reaching of all labours.

And then as he leant over the little gate, with eyes as dreamy as of old, some vision of a possible future did come to him. Dimly, as dreams must go, he saw towns arising beside those rivers, and chimneys

sending the smoke of peaceful hearts across those radiant skies. Not much he saw ; but it was enough to make him say in his soul with the man of ancient days : " The lot is fallen unto me in a fair ground ; yea, I have a goodly heritage." A goodly heritage indeed, O Dick, as we of later generation know. Though you knew it not, the unloved toil you faced so well went to the building of a nation. In a fair ground the lot had fallen unto you, and, standing there in the darkness, you realised the possibilities of that lot for the first time. You realised that the beauty of the wilderness must give way, and rightfully, before the wants of man ; that the splendour of freedom is less than the splendour of toil ; and that it lay in your hands to do your part towards the building of a future for that fair country, which hitherto you had loved ignorantly.

Yet, standing there beneath the still, bright stars, Dick did no more than say to himself, " It's a fine land ! A fine land ! And I'm glad I'm in a new country, and not in an old one."

Behind him, the door of the homestead banged open. " Dick ! Dick !" called Mrs. Collinson, " where are you ?"

" Dick !" echoed Stephanie, lovingly and a little anxiously.

" Coming, dear lady," he answered, " coming, Steenie." Yet he lingered a little, while they waited for him. But it was Nonie O'Brien of the soft speech and the shining eyes who ran down the long path and caught him laughingly by the hand, and drew him away from his dreams into the light and cheer again.

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