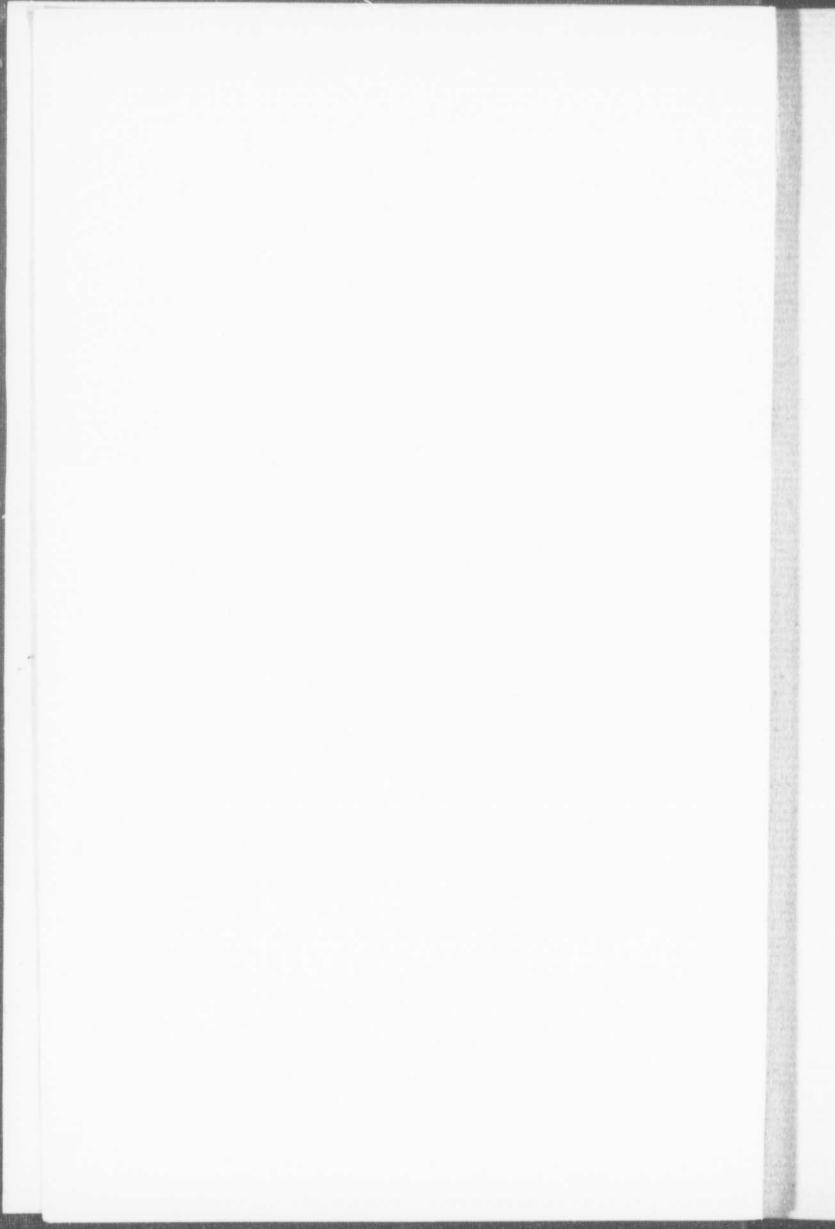


THE OLD RED SCHOOL-HOUSE



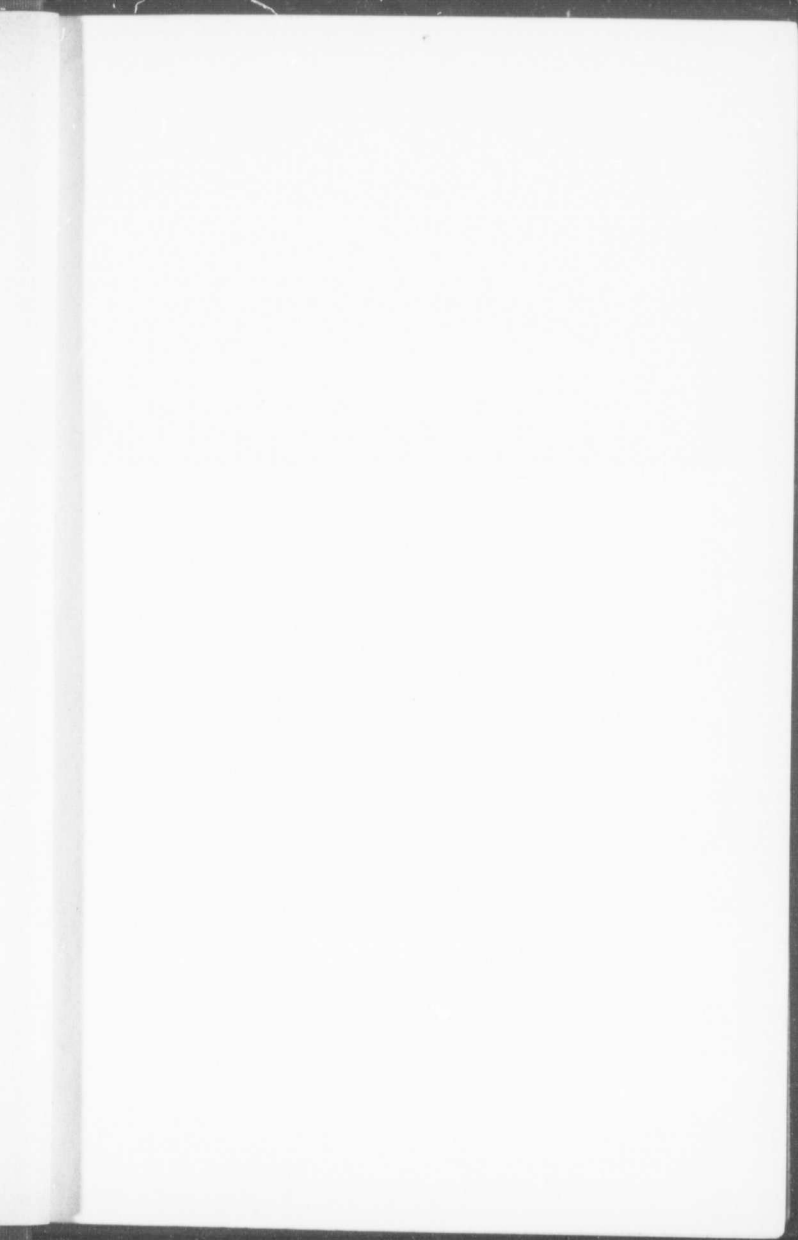
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THE OLD RED SCHOOL-HOUSE







“‘HOLD, BOY!’ CRIED A VOICE, JUST AS MARK WAS ABOUT TO
KINDLE THE BRUSHWOOD.”

THE OLD RED SCHOOL-HOUSE

A Canadian Bush Tale

BY

FRANCES HARIOTT WOOD

AUTHOR OF "A STORM AND A TEA-POT," "TEN MINUTES TO SPARE," NUMBER
ELEVEN," ETC., ETC.



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CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I. AN EMPTY SCHOOL	7
II. WILD BOYS	16
III. A MAD SCHEME	25
IV. FIRE	32
V. A DISCUSSION	38
VI. WIDOW LAWRENCE'S STORY	52
VII. THE MORNING VIEW	60
VIII. IN THE BUSH	64
IX. FRANK RUSSELL	71
X. ADRIFT	81
XI. A CHAPTER OF ACCIDENTS.	90
XII. RECOVERY	99
XIII. CHANGE	108
XIV. THE SILENT WAR-CRY	112

CHAP.	PAGE
XV. AN UNWILLING VISITOR	118
XVI. A CANADIAN WINTER	128
XVII. SNOWBOUND	136
XVIII. IN DANGER	143
XIX. THE END	153

THE OLD RED SCHOOL-HOUSE



CHAPTER I

AN EMPTY SCHOOL

FAR away in one of the least thickly inhabited parts of Canada East, there stood an old wooden school-house ; such school-houses are built in that country at intervals of five or six miles along the high-road, so as to serve the district in the midst of which they stand.

Very dingy and dirty looked the chimneyless wooden erection ; many of the windows were broken, for the school had been empty for some time, the School Board not being able to agree whether to have a master or mistress, and in the meantime the boys and girls were running wild in the bush, fishing for crayfish in the

sparkling burns, helping their parents in their work, and enjoying themselves greatly.

North and south of the school-house stretched a long, winding road, with a snake fence on each side, in many spots broken down by the winter snows, and never repaired since. Beyond this snake fence extended what had once been a fine pine forest ; now but little was left of its ancient beauty : here and there a massive fir stood up straight and strong, but round it charred, withered stumps showed what had been the cause of the destruction of the bush, and where but a few years before fire had raged in all its awful splendour, maples were springing thickly, whilst at their roots strawberry and raspberry plants and partridge berries flourished in rank luxuriance.

Away to the south, through the vista of trees and leafless trunks, you could see the gleam of blue water, and beyond, the purple hues of a mountain range. It was the long, river-like course of Lake Nemphrita, and the mountains were the Eagle's Nest and Bear, and the Pass of Tombol, famous for its beauty ; but it was more than twenty miles away. There was a piece of

water, which we should consider a lake in England, much closer to the school-house ; it was about two miles long and a mile across, but was only called a pond in those parts.

Two strangers stood at the school-house door on the June day when our tale begins. The one, Mr. Seymour by name, was tall, dark, and grave ; he was the missionary of the surrounding neighbourhood. His parish had a circuit of about twenty miles, and it was hard enough work for him, and ill paid—his income, all told, was scarcely more than that of the parson who

“ Was passing rich on forty pounds a year ; ”

and had it not been for the skill with which he managed the small farm surrounding the house, which he had built for himself in a clearing not very far from the Red School-house, he could scarcely have lived at all.

The other man, Mr. Emerson, was young, bright, and fresh - looking, and evidently a stranger to the place from the interest with which he looked around. He had just left the McGill Training College at Montreal, and was

about to make his first essay on teaching in the dilapidated roadside building, for at last the Committee had agreed at least to try a master till Christmas, and if it did not answer, then to have a mistress. The missionary was looking with great dismay at the broken windows.

"I have not been this way since Mr. Budget left," he said, "but it looks bad, very bad ; I fear the lads are getting into a sad, lawless state, and you will have plenty of trouble with them."

"Never mind, I'm not afraid. They shall help me to set this mischief to rights, and afterwards they'll protect their own handiwork. I can turn my hand to almost any trade, for when we lived far out west we were forced to it, and I don't feel a bit the worse for it."

In the meantime Mr. Seymour was fumbling with the key at the school-house door, but in vain, he could not get it to turn ; and no wonder, for some mischievous urchin had filled the lock with stones.

"The boys again, I fear," sighed Mr. Seymour.

"The little rascals !" said Mr. Emerson, as, kneeling down, he got out the fragments. "I

should have thought even *they* would have been tired of such a lengthened holiday, and not have wished to keep us out of the school-house. There, it's all right," as with a jerk the rickety door flew open, disclosing the fact that the lower hinge was gone.

The whole room was in a similar state of disrepair ; the forms hopped upon one leg, so uneven was the floor ; the stove-pipe had fallen away, and beneath a crack in it was a dark, black patch on the floor, showing where at some time or other the contents of the pipe had leaked out and made an indelible mark.

Even Mr. Emerson gazed somewhat hopelessly at the forlorn-looking room, whilst Mr. Seymour shook his head and said, "Bad, bad ; it seems dreadful !"

"Never mind, sir," answered Mr. Emerson, rousing up from his momentary panic, "the lads shall help me about this also. My things will be down from Montreal this evening ; I have a tool-chest with me. It will be useless to begin school for three weeks. In the meantime I can make friends with my boys over repairing

the school. It's a plan of my own, and I believe it will answer ; you need have no trouble with boys if only you find them occupation enough to keep them out of mischief."

"I daresay you are right, but I don't know what the Committee will say."

"We will chance that, sir," said Mr. Emerson. "And now may I ask where I am to board ?"

"You will board with me. It is only about ten minutes' walk from the house, but I do not expect that you will remain here very long. I think even you will find the boys too much."

"Oh, I hope not. I have set my heart upon liking the place and the lads, and I think I have a recipe which will conquer them."

"What is that ?"

"Patience, with myself first, and afterwards with them."

"Well," and Mr. Seymour shrugged his shoulders, "I trust you will succeed, but I doubt it. One of your boys is a regular scamp, a perfectly wild boy. I do not think there has been a piece of mischief for years which he has not headed ; he is dreadful."

"Of course I cannot tell. Theory and practice are not at all the same; still I have a theory that no boy is wholly bad. Each has his good point somewhere, and that point I shall try to find. I daresay I may fail; but of one thing I am certain, and that is, a cast-iron rule of education does not answer. Characters differ, so must the rules which form these characters. I have a twin brother, but we are as dissimilar as most twin brothers are alike; what touches me makes him sullen, what rouses his ambition crows me. I cannot bring forward a better proof of the care which ought to be taken in training boys."

"But, Mr. Emerson, what endless trouble it would be if masters studied every individual character!"

"They cannot be good masters, to my mind, unless they do. What should you think of a man who set to work to make a machine and did not try to understand each part? or of any great machine manufacturer who made all his machines on the same principle? Yet as a rule we treat our boys as if they were all made of the same stuff."

"But it is seldom that machine manufacturers

turn their attention to more than one machine at a time."

"Then it would be better for men to deal in the same way with what is surely worth more thought than a machine—the mind of a reasoning being; this is my feeling very strongly. There are some who seem to grow up with the very least amount of attention, but they rarely come to much. Now, on the contrary, I hold that daring, wild, active fellows often have the germs of good in them, which turn to evil for want of proper training. I had rather have some two or three such fellows in the school than not. It is true they may lead all the tame ones into mischief, but I believe that, properly directed, their energy will work for good in the school."

"Well, time will show; but I fear that you are right in saying theory is easier than practice. I shall be greatly surprised if that Mark Acton does not conquer you before you conquer him."

"I don't mean to try to conquer him till I have found out his soft point, so as to hit full at that; it is lost labour to attack any other part. But your horse will be tired of standing."

"True, but we shall be home in a few minutes now. Whoa, Dominion ! Let us get in, sir."

In they sprang with some difficulty, so close together were the wheels, and so anxious was the horse to reach its stable. The instant the reins were loose, away it sprang, nearly upsetting the light vehicle, but Mr. Seymour was too used to their management not to know on how much they could turn with safety, and in five minutes more they were at the Parsonage door.

Neither of them had noticed, as they stood talking in the school-house door, a pair of bright eyes watching them with fixed attention from under a clump of bushes.

There were wild beasts in those parts ; was it one of them ?—a bear, or even perhaps a terrible wolverine, with cruel claws and sharp, grinning teeth, or a wild cat ?

No ; it was something more terrible and alarming than any of the three, that most frightful creature—WILD BOY !

CHAPTER II

WILD BOYS

Now you must not picture to yourself such a wild boy as we hear of being found in some of the great European forests, like Wild Peter, uncouth, distorted, legs deformed and covered with hair like a beast, unable to speak his native tongue, and living upon wild fruits and succulent roots.

Mark Acton was a tall, fine, well-grown lad of twelve, with active, well-shaped limbs, tanned a deep brown by exposure to the sun and wind, for in the summer-time he wore as little clothing as possible. A flannel shirt, not always as whole as it might be, from his love of climbing, and a pair of what had been trousers, but through the same rough process of tearing had become

knickerbockers, constituted his whole wardrobe, for he entirely declined to wear shoes and stockings unless obliged to do so. A shock head of dark-brown curly hair covered a well-shaped head, and he was a handsome boy, with fine grey eyes, which generally sparkled with fun and mischief, but were now decidedly indignant-looking.

His parents kept a store in a town about six miles off on the American frontier ; they were well-to-do people, but Mark had scarcely been at all at home ; from an infant he had been brought up by his grandfather and grandmother, who lived on a small farm near the Red School-house, and who had done their best to spoil him, and had succeeded pretty well.

His parents had made two or three attempts to have him at home, but they had all been utter failures, and the madcap led his brothers and sisters into such scrapes, and horrified the townspeople so much by his wild pranks, that when for a third time he ran away, and found his way on foot to his grandfather's, no further attempts were made by his father to induce him to return,

and the old people were only too delighted to get their pickle back again.

For with all his faults—and we must not make light of the way in which he set himself against all authority, and the wild love of mischief which made him the terror of the neighbourhood—Mark Acton was a lovable boy in many ways. He was warm-hearted and affectionate, very fond of animals and little children, who in their turn were devoted to him. He never was guilty of a wanton act of cruelty, would have scorned to tell a lie, and was as dutiful and affectionate to his grandparents as could possibly be expected from a boy who had been so completely given his own way as he had.

He was just the sort of lad who, well managed, might turn out a fine character, but, as the neighbours said, at the rate he was going on now he might come to the gallows ; and, indeed, I think it is very likely he would have done so if, instead of Mr. Emerson coming in his way, he had fallen under the influence of some of the evil books that are written about thieves and highwaymen. Happily for him, at this stage of his

history he was not at all fond of reading, for he was not very likely to care for such books as would have done him good, and it is better not to read at all than to read what is bad.

As soon as the sound of the buggy wheels had died away on the road, Mark Acton crept out from the bushes, stretched his limbs, which were cramped from lying under the bushes, and then went up to the school-house door, the lock of which he carefully stopped up again with stones.

"They'll have some difficulty to get those out," he said, with a chuckle. "I wonder what they were talking about?" for under the bushes he had been quite out of earshot. "Blest if I don't think that's the new master! Why, he's only a boy; I liked his looks rather, only I don't care to have school again, and it shan't be my fault if we have it."

As he stood meditating in what way to prevent it, he picked up a pebble, and, from mere idleness, shied it at a window, managing by a clever stroke to break two at once, for the stone flew right through the window on the opposite side of the school-house.

Mark grinned with delight. "I wonder if I could do that again?" he said; but after several attempts, which were unsuccessful—though he did succeed in breaking two or three more panes of glass—he paused.

"Now, Mark, you're wasting your time," he said gravely; "it's time I called the rest together and told them what has happened."

Going a little further into the bush, he climbed up into the boughs of a tall Scotch pine, which stood on somewhat rising ground, and uttered a long, wild cry three times. It rang out clear and sharp on the summer air. It was a well-known sound in the neighbourhood, and one regarded with fear by all who dwelt round the Red School-house, who knew that Mark Acton was up to some prank or other.

"Whatever is the lad going to do now?" said some shinglers who were busy at their trade not very far away.

"I'm sure there's no saying, and one never knows where to find him so as to stop his tricks," sighed another man, who was working at the same place. "I'm sure it's a nuisance to have

such a boy in the place ; you never know what he'll be up to next."

After uttering this cry, Mark descended from his perch, and seated himself at the foot of the tree. It was a day so hot that no one but an active, mischievous boy would have cared to move about ; mosquitoes danced and hummed in the still air, and the bull-frogs droned a drowsy lullaby. Mark was beginning to feel unusually sleepy when he was roused by the appearance of several other boys about his own age ; they were a band of his playfellows, who were sharers in all his pranks, though he was their leader and suggester of all mischief.

"Well, Mark, what's up now ? " was the question, as at the well-known signal the boys drew near to their place of rendezvous and threw themselves in various attitudes of ease and comfort on the greensward.

"The new master's come, I believe ; I saw him just now—at least, I am pretty nearly certain it was he."

There was a long whistle of dismay from the assembled band, as before them rose up visions

of long hours indoors before uncared-for books and slates, and possible canings, of impossible liberty, of an utter loss of their present wild, free life, in which they so delighted.

"Are you sure, Mark?"

"I can't think of any one else who would care to go to look at that old tumbledown place, and look really pleased to see it."

"What was he like, Mark?"

"Young, not so bad-looking, but I should say he had a stiffish will of his own. I could not hear what he was saying, so I may be mistaken; but of this I am sure, if I can prevent the school being used I will."

"But how can you, Mark?"

"I have my plans; how many are there of us to hold together?"

"All of us, Mark; we're all ready to do what you tell us."

"That's right; then meet me to-morrow at the Red School-house, and I will tell you what my plan is. Come early, for we have a good day's work before us."

The curiosity was extreme.

"What is it, Mark? Tell us what it is."

Mark shook his head.

"Now, Mark do tell us; it's *mean* of you to keep it to yourself.

"Mean, do you call it? No; but I know better than to tell you before the time comes."

"Oh, do, Mark; we shall work all the better for being told."

What boy so pressed could keep his secret to himself? But Mark liked the feeling of importance, and kept his plans still concealed until further pressed.

"Well, then, I vote that we say we will not do anything till he tells us; I don't see why we're to be kept in the dark like children. He's bossed long enough."

The speaker was a boy of a very different style from Mark, more really bad; he was dishonest and untruthful, and bitterly jealous of Mark, as he was rather older, and expected to be the leader, which he was not.

"Jealous as usual, Ned?" said a boy who looked quieter than the rest; "but that game won't pay. We had rather follow Mark than you,

even if he does not tell us his plans; they're sure to be fun."

Either flattered by the admission, or touched by Hugh's submission, Mark's face flushed, and he was conquered.

"Well, boys," he said, "sit still, and I will tell you my secret."

CHAPTER III

A MAD SCHEME

"Now, boys," said Mark, "what do you think would be the best way of managing to keep free of school for another six months?"

The boys hesitated; each had some vague plan floating in his brain, but they were afraid of speaking of them before their leader, so all were silent. So was Mark; for the fact was this was the worst and maddest scheme he had yet thought of, and he did not know how to broach it—for the first time in his life he was afraid of this his wild and wilful idea.

"Can't any of you think of anything?"

"Let us get rid of the master," said one.

"But how? We can't force him to go if he chooses to stay."

"We can behave as badly as we like, and so drive him away."

"Only perhaps to get a mistress, which would be worse still," said Mark.

"Let us all run away!"

"We should only punish ourselves by that," said Mark, "for we shouldn't get on very well without our homes."

"Let us run away early every morning, and come back late at night," said a third.

All laughed at the cunning idea till the wood rang again, and the squirrels in the trees dropped their nuts in fear; but at last a boy managed to say through his laughter—

"I guess you don't get much of the stick at home, lad; it's more strap than supper I should get if I tried that game on!"

At which the group went into fresh peals of laughter.

"What's the use of making us guess, Mark?—tell us."

"Not I, till you try more; come, let us have a bathe, that'll freshen our wits."

And up sprang the young madcap, and ran off

in the direction of the pond, for he was as fond of the water as an otter, and spent hours of the hot summer weather basking in the shallow part of the pond, or executing all sorts of daring deeds in the deeper pools.

"How tiresome Mark is to-day!" growled his comrades; but they followed him nevertheless, and reached the edge of the pond just as the wild boy had thrown off his scanty clothing and leapt into the water.

"I'll tell whoever catches me before I swim round Long Island," he called out.

"That's too bad, Mark, when you know there's none of us can do it."

"Try, lads, try; you must have some pluck in you to do what I wish."

So they did try, but in vain; their provoking challenger was always a few strokes in front of them, or contrived by some dexterous dive to elude their grasp. At last they declared themselves beaten.

"Where do you think we should have school if there was no school-house?" asked Mark, and immediately after the question he swam off again.

In a few minutes he returned.

"Well, have you found out yet?"

"Perhaps out in the clearing," said one.

"Don't you believe it—we couldn't have school without a school-house; if we could get rid of the school-house, there'd be no school for another good six months, then most of us would be pretty near too old to have to go to school at all."

"Then what would you do, Mark?"

"I'd just put faggots all round the horrid old building and burn it; it's nobody's property that I know of, and if it is, it isn't worth anything. There are two things you must have for a school—a master and a house; as we cannot get rid of the one, let us do so of the other."

The boys were perfectly aghast; this was the most daring act of wickedness that Mark had planned, and even they were not prepared to embark in it without one thought.

"Talk it out among yourselves," said Mark, with some scorn; "I was afraid you were none of you bold enough for it. I will give you five minutes, whilst I go to look for the crane. I saw it fly across just now."

Away he swam, and for a minute or two the other lads only looked at each other.

"Who but Mark would have thought of it?" said one at last.

"I shouldn't mind doing it so much if it would not be known who did it," said Ned, "but everything is always put down to us, thanks to Mark."

"I don't mean to have anything to do with it," said a boy who had already got out of the water and was drying himself by rolling on the grass; "I think it's real bad; I don't mind a bit of fun, but I do mind this."

At this there was a shout from the boys, which reached Mark's ears, and he was soon swimming back. In the meantime some of the conspirators had seized upon Frank Russell's clothes, so that the poor boy could not go, as he intended, to give the alarm.

Oddly enough, his opposition had roused in most of them a wish to embark in this mischief, from which at first they had drawn back. Their leader was greeted on his return by a perfect chorus of—

"Frank Russell's going to split on us, Mark!"

"You wouldn't be so mean, Frank."

"I don't call it mean ; it would be far meaner to let you do such mischief."

"We've got his clothes, Mark, he can't go without them."

"Give him his clothes, boys—we won't keep him from splitting in that way, only you must not expect ever to be allowed to play with us again ; and do not forget that you have broken the promise we made that we would stick by each other through thick and thin."

"I never supposed such work as this."

"At any rate, promise me one thing, Frank Russell."

"What is that ?"

"Don't you go peaching to any chance person you may meet ; promise that you'll tell none but your father. Hold him, boys, till he does."

"Well, I promise then ; only let me go," said Frank, struggling violently.

"Let him go, lads !"

There was a shout of derision from the rest of the lads as Frank hurried into his clothes and darted off into the wood.

"I've tied his hands for some hours," said Mark, "for I know that his father went off to Sherborne about an hour ago, and will not be home till late, so the only thing is, we must set to work at once ; it will not take long, for the place is as dry as it can be."

"Isn't it almost too bad a thing to do, Mark?"

"Bless you, no ; what is the old house worth ? It's a very good thing that the Board should have to build it again, for it's a disgrace to the roadside. Make haste and come along ; we must be quiet about it, too, for there's no good being found out before the time."

The boys dressed silently ; none of them felt quite happy in the prospect of their piece of mischief ; it was far beyond anything they had ever done before.

CHAPTER IV

FIRE !

SLOWLY, and not very willingly, they followed their leader, and in a few minutes came to the scene of action ; but for a time at least they were obliged to put off their scheme, the road was so unusually full of traffic.

It was market-day at Sherborne, and sundry country carts were trundling along the road ; the stage waggon with the mails was coming down the hill. One man as he passed said to a neighbour—

“That building is a disgrace to the country—it ought to come down, it is not fit to be used !”

“Keep close, boys, keep close,” whispered Mark to his comrades ; “it will never do for us to be

seen till we have done this. You hear what they say. It is true—the school is not fit to keep a pig in; the sooner it is down the sooner we shall have a new one.”

The lads were all crouching under the shelter of a thick bush, beside a perfectly crimson patch of wild strawberries, which they were taking advantage of to refresh themselves; and when the road was quiet again Mark found them unwilling at once to leave off.

“Just one minute, Mark; it is so hot and we are so thirsty. We’ll come directly.”

Mark got up and shook himself impatiently.

“The time is going, and we shall not be able to do anything.”

“All right, we’re coming; but we must just finish this patch.”

In a few minutes they joined him, and the whole party crossed to the back of the school-house.

“We had better make a pile of faggots here, where it won’t be seen, and set it on fire and run to our own homes; we shall be far enough away before it is discovered,” said Mark.

There were a lot of faggots in the bush, not far from the school-house, which had been used in old times for lighting the stove, and it would not have taken very long to heap up a good pile outside the house.

Happily just at this point Mark caught sight of the hole in the window made by his wonderful shot.

"I say, look what I did," he said; "none of you can beat that. I threw a stone right through this window and out of the other—look, there's the hole."

"I don't believe it, Mark," said one; "it would have glanced off."

"At any rate you couldn't do it again," said Ned.

"I think I could," said Mark, quite forgetting his recent failures; and, taking up a stone, he began to try, but in vain. The rest of the boys tried too. They were soon quite absorbed in the attempt, and a considerable time passed before they gave up.

"It must have been a mere accident," Ned said to Mark.

"Perhaps it makes a difference being on the other side of the house," said Mark; "but at any rate we're wasting our time now. We must make the wood-pile a little higher. Have any of you got matches?"

No, no one had.

"Well, I must run home for some. Go on piling faggots till I come back; it won't be too many."

So the boys went on for some time; but Mark did not return, and they all began to feel hungry.

"I tell you what it is," said Ned; "I vote we leave Mark to do the rest of the work himself. It's his plan; let him finish it."

"I believe he's stopping to take his supper," said another boy.

"Oh, he wouldn't be so mean," cried all but Ned.

"I wish he'd come. I know I'm precious hungry," said Walter Sharpe.

"So am I," was the cry of all.

Indeed, had not Mark appeared at the time, there would have been a general revolt amongst

his followers; but his appearance calmed them. He carried a parcel over his shoulder, which on being opened proved to be full of Johnny-cake; this was received with delight by the hungry troop.

"Did you think I was never coming back?" said Mark, as he divided his store.

"We began to wonder what had become of you."

"Granny wanted some water from the well, so I had to go for that; but I can tell you I had to run pretty hard to get back even now."

"I should have thought you'd have known better than to be tied to your grandmother's apron-strings, Mark," said Ned, with a sneer.

"I don't call it being tied to your Granny's apron-strings to be ready to help her a bit," said Mark hotly. "She's been a good grandmother to me ever since I can remember, and now it's my turn to do what I can for her, and I'm not a bit ashamed of it. But come, if you've done, we ought to be beginning to light our pile. Here are the matches."

The boys crowded round, half eager to see the daring deed, half afraid of the consequences.

Mark struck a match, but no flame came out. He tried another, and another, and another, but with a like result; they were all damp, or in some way faulty, and would not light.

"We shall soon have a splendid fire at this rate," said Ned mockingly. "I believe your fine talk about lighting it was nothing but brag, and that you never meant to do it."

For answer Mark charged straight at Ned, and butted at him with such force that he toppled him down the slight rising ground, and he rolled down into the bushes, where he picked himself up, looking rather foolish, whilst all the boys laughed loudly.

"Now, is there any one else here who thinks it was only brag?" asked Mark defiantly.

But no one owned to it, so he continued, "Very well, then, here goes."

Scratch went another match, and this time more successfully.

"Hurrah for our bonfire!" said Mark, as he stooped down in readiness to apply the match to the heap of dried leaves and sticks,

CHAPTER V

A DISCUSSION

"HOLD, boy!" cried a voice, just as Mark was about to kindle the brushwood, which would have blazed up like tinder. "What in the world are you doing? A bonfire so close to the house! Why, it would have been on fire in another minute!"

All the lads started back in dismay. Before them stood the tall, active figure of Mr. Emerson. He had dropped his penknife in trying to free the lock from its accumulation of rubbish, and had returned to look for it. He looked round half in anger, half in surprise, upon the group of boys; their scared, frightened looks showed him what had been their object, and that it was no mere act of boyish ignorance.

"You don't mean to say you did this on purpose?" he said. "Why, Mark Acton, I would not have believed it even of you; you have too much that is good in you to do such a wanton act of mischief."

Mark looked somewhat abashed. This was a different ground of attack from what he had expected.

"What do you know good of me, sir?" he said in surprise.

"I have been visiting Widow Lawrence," replied Mr. Emerson.

Mark coloured.

"I hear very different stories of you from her from what I do from most people. How can I account for this?"

"I don't know, sir," said shamefaced Mark.

"I thought you must be most unjustly suspected; but now——"

There was a pause.

"Tell me what put this mad idea into your head. You seem to be the leader, or was it some one else's thought?"

"No one's but mine, sir," said Mark boldly;

for, whatever his faults, he was not in the habit of laying them on other people's shoulders.

"We tried to persuade him not to do it," said Ned in self-defence.

Mr. Emerson looked at him inquiringly.

"Mark and I will settle this," he said ; "but tell me why you wanted to burn the school-house."

"We couldn't have school without a house, and it's such a rotten old thing."

"Did you never hear of a hedge school ?"

Mr. Emerson had seated himself on the pile of sticks, and the boys were grouped round him, some lying on the ground at his feet, others sitting like young Turks. He had a most winning way with lads, and somehow, though he had caught them in such an act, none of them felt afraid of him, but they were ashamed of having been found out.

"No ; what's that ?"

"An out-of-door school such as they have in some parts of Ireland ; we might have had a hedge school. There are other things more needful than a house, pupils, and a master ;

and who do you think would take the trouble to teach such a set of young rascals as you?"

"We thought you were going to be the master," said Mark, with a slight shade of disappointment in his voice. He liked Mr. Emerson, and if he must be under control he would as soon have this bright, cheery man over him as any one.

"Well, I don't know. Do you think this is likely to tempt me?" and he pointed to the pile on which he was sitting, and to the broken window.

"It isn't fit for use, is it, sir?" said Mark; "if it was down, perhaps another might be built."

"This will do well enough with a little paint and glass; and now tell me, who do you think would pay for the new school?"

"The country, I suppose," said Mark.

"That is to say, this part of the country; all your relations and friends would have to pay, and pay heavily, towards it, so think of that before you begin another piece of mischief. Who will pay for it? Did you ever hear of the king whose

life was saved because a wise man had ordered him to have written on all the vessels of his palace the saying, 'Before thou undertakest a thing consider well the end thereof'? A barber had been hired by some conspirators to cut his throat while shaving him, but as he was about to do it he caught sight of the inscription. He thought to himself, 'If I commit this crime, how shall I be the better for it? What will my life profit me when I am cut off in the midst of my days?' He confessed his evil intentions, and the king's life was saved. Now we will go on the same principle and ask, If you had burnt down the Red School-house, what would the end have been? I have just spoken about the expense falling on your parents, but that would not be the worst. What has caused the desolate look about here?" and he looked up at the blackened, charred stumps.

"The bush was burnt about ten years back; our house was burnt also. It was winter, and we could scarcely save ourselves. I was a baby then," said one of the group.

"It was then that Widow Lawrence got her

fall and became crippled; they were trying to get her out of the window," said another.

"How did you intend to prevent the fire spreading?" asked Mr. Emerson. "Did you never think how easily it might have done so in this dry weather?"

They all looked sheepishly ashamed as he asked the question, for they had never thought of it at all.

"Can any of you tell me what there was clever in it?" asked Mr. Emerson again.

Still there was no answer. Mark was fiddling with some stones in the path, ashamed to look up.

"I might say it was foolish, but it was worse—it was thoroughly wicked. A citizen is as bound to protect what is the common property of the country as he is to guard his own private property, and if people would only think of this, there would be far less wasted by wanton mischief than there is. Now look at those windows; who broke them?"

No one answered for a minute. Somehow Mark no longer felt proud of his feat of throwing a stone through the window. At last he said—

"I broke a pretty good few of them, sir."

"Then I shall just set you to mend them again. How many of you are there?"

"There are seven here, but Frank Russell went away."

"What for?"

"He didn't like this business," said Mark, with some unwillingness.

"And I suppose you thought him rather mean and shabby, but I think him the bravest as well as the wisest of you all. I could not have believed there could have been such a set of foolish boys as you seven in the world. When next you play at follow-my-leader let it be in something better than this. But now you may all go excepting Mark; I want him to stay and help me look for my knife before he goes. I must have dropped it this afternoon. Stop—by the way, I was almost forgetting what I wanted to say. There are eight of you, and eight windows to the school, now I shall make each of you answerable for one window. On Monday, if all is well, you shall come down and help me to put in fresh glass. I think with a little paint and time we may make it



"MARK HANDED IT TO ITS OWNER."



really look well again ; and surely you would rather be proud of your school than ashamed of it ? ”

The boys did not answer ; they had not quite made up their minds, and found it difficult to believe that anything could be more pleasant than mischief.

They trooped off rather slowly, but it was getting dusk ; already they could hear the owls hooting in the wood, and the great night moths were beginning to flutter in the grey light.

“ It will be too dark to find my knife if we don’t look at once,” said Mr. Emerson.

Mark did not like the idea of being left alone with the new master, but he need not have feared. Whilst they hunted in the long grass for the missing knife nothing was said by either ; at last, just as Mr. Emerson was saying that they must give up the search for the night, Mark spied the white handle, and handed it to its owner, who was delighted to recover it.

“ It belonged to my poor old father,” he said ; “ it would have vexed me to have lost it. You have good sharp eyes, Mark.”

"Yes, I can see farther than any of them," said Mark.

"And I should say you were quick enough, and had enough in you, to be of pretty much use even now, if you choose to lead one way instead of another."

"There's no fun in it, sir," said Mark, pulling pettishly at the boughs of a balsam near at hand.

"Is there much fun in that?" asked Mr. Emerson, pointing to the pile. "Did you not find more pleasure in helping Widow Lawrence as you did?"

"Who told you, sir?" said Mark.

"She did herself. I tell you what it is, Mark Acton, you've plenty of good in you if you'll only let it come to the top, but it's being crushed by the evil. Mind, I shall look to you and trust in you to be my right hand in the school. You're the oldest and should be the wisest, but remember you cannot do it without help. Would you not rather be noted for goodness than for badness?"

Mark shook his head. "I've tried once or

twice, but it did not pay ; no one believed in my doing what was right."

"Well, I believe in you. You will not disappoint my trust, Mark?"

But Mark made no answer.

In the meantime what had become of Frank? It had required considerable courage to refuse to join in Mark's exploit. He had no doubt in his own mind that Mark and his band would keep rigidly to their determination of not playing with him any more, and it was hard to lose all his companions.

Still harder was it to be called a coward and a sneak; but he could not avoid it. He did not allow himself to think more than he could help as he hurried along through the bush.

Bright-eyed chipmunicks, the pretty Canadian squirrel, peered at him from the trees; yet for a wonder he did not see them; the boughs caught him in the face as he ran, but he cared little for that. His house was about a mile away, and before he reached it he quieted down a little.

"What a fool I was to make that promise!" he said. "Supposing I do not find my father at

home? Well, after all, they are not going to do anything till to-morrow, so there is no hurry; but it is as well to be beforehand."

Of course he had not heard the later suggestion that the plot should be carried out at once.

"Where's father?" he asked eagerly as he ran into the cottage.

"Bless the boy, what a heat he's in, to be sure!" said his mother. "What have you been doing with yourself all day—idling about, and up to no good, I'll be bound, along with Mark Acton and his lot. It's a pity that the school is not opened again."

"It's likely enough it may be soon, mother," said Frank. "I hear a new master's come."

"And a good job too, before you all go to the bad. I hope he'll do you more good than the last."

"Where's father, mother? I want him particularly."

"Well, you'll have to wait, then. He went to Sherborne about two hours ago with a load of shingles, and he'll not be back till ten or eleven at night."

Poor Frank ! what was he to do ? He paused for a minute and thought.

"Will you give me my supper, mother ?—now, please."

Mrs. Russell gave him a large piece of the yellow bread made of Indian corn which is so much more commonly used in Canada than wheat, and is called Johnny-cake, and a large cup of milk.

"There, lad," she said, "you must be hungry after being out all day. I wish you'd bide at home a bit and help father. You're getting a big, strong lad, and might be of main use."

"Maybe I shall after to-day, mother. I don't think I shall run about so much again," said Frank, as he hastily swallowed his milk, and, taking his Johnny-cake, went out.

He could not help feeling rather sad at the thought that after this day he should most likely be left to his own devices, and his mind was not full of particularly cheerful visions as he went along the road to Sherborne. He had determined to go and meet his father, so as to tell him the sooner.

As he walked along he wondered what his late companions were doing. Most likely they had gone home by this time, for he heard none of the whoops and wild cries by which they generally made their presence known far and near.

Or—and the thought made him quicken his steps—suppose they were already putting their mischievous design into practice !

There was a very steep hill in front of him—so steep that it was known in those parts as Break-neck Hill, and up this he could see a heavy waggon trudging. If he could catch this, he could get a lift to Sherborne.

It was a stiff run up the rough road in his unshod feet, but at last he reached the waggon, and called out, "I say, master, can you give me a lift ?"

"Where do you want to go ?"

"To Sherborne ; my father is there. He has gone with a load of shingles. I want to see him at once."

"What's up ?" said the waggoner, glancing inquiringly at the sunburnt, bright-looking lad,

whose face was darkened by an evidently unusual cloud of anxiety.

"I want to see my father. He went to Sherborne about an hour or two ago."

"Bless the lad, he doesn't expect to come upon his father at Sherborne! Why, it's like looking for a needle in a bundle of hay."

"I should like to try, please."

"Well, jump up then, but it's a fool's errand."

As the waggoner cried Whoa-up! and the horses started up the rest of Breakneck Hill after their little breathing-space, Mark Acton was striking a match successfully, and putting it to the pile outside the Red School-house.

CHAPTER VI

WIDOW LAWRENCE'S STORY

It is more than likely that Mr. Emerson might have been disheartened by Mark's manner, and have thought him sullen, had it not been for a visit which he had made just after leaving the Red School-house.

There was a solitary turnpike on the road between Sherborne and the lake, a building almost as ramshackle and tumbledown as the Red School-house itself. It was farmed by Widow Lawrence, the poor widow who had been injured, as one of the boys mentioned, in the bush fire some years before.

Her leg had been broken then, and whether it had been badly set, or at her age (for she was upwards of sixty) the bone did not unite properly,

it is hard to say ; but a cripple she had been ever since, getting about with great difficulty with the help of a stick, and very forlorn in consequence.

She might be truly said "to muddle along" ; everything in her house was in the greatest state of confusion and, it must be added, dirt. After all, poor thing, she was more to be pitied than blamed, for she was too poor to pay anyone for doing things for her, and it is not an easy thing to keep a house clean when one foot is useless and one hand occupied with a crutch.

Mr. Emerson had directed the luggage he was expecting from Montreal to be left at the turnpike ; it was to be brought from Sherborne in the stage waggon, and that lumbering vehicle had just deposited its burden, and was going pretty swiftly down the hill as the schoolmaster drew near to the door. He could see in front of the waggon, about a quarter of a mile farther down the steep incline, five or six country carts passing swiftly along ; they were returning from the fair at Sherborne.

Old Widow Lawrence was trembling with rage,

and the tears were rolling down her cheeks as he came up.

"Why, Mrs. Lawrence, what's the matter?" he asked.

"Matter, sir? matter enough! That's the way those country people cheat an old woman; each one of those carts that you see down there has passed without paying a cent. It's the way in which they serve me over and over again. A carter will come up and begin to talk, and whilst he is between me and the gate with his waggon, a lot of his fellows pass, and I can't get past; what with my lameness and their rough way, I'm afraid to try. I did try last week, and got pretty nearly knocked down by the teams; and how is a poor body to live?"

"Can't you get any redress?"

"Bless you, sir, how should I know their address? Most of them is Irish labourers, who are here one day and off another, and if I did know their address their masters wouldn't pay any heed to me."

"I didn't say 'address,' I said 'redress,'" said Mr. Emerson; "can't you county court them?"

"And then what would become of me alone at nights on this lonesome road? I'm afraid enough, as it is. No, I must put up with it, I suppose, though it's hard work; after all, it would be worse if it were not for that blessed Mark Acton."

"Mark Acton? why, I've heard he's the worst boy in the place."

"Don't you believe it, sir, don't you believe it; you're a stranger in these parts, but you take my word for it, there's a deal more good than bad in Mark Acton." She hesitated, for she had not got the usual American quality of being able unblushingly to inquire on first sight into all a stranger's movements and intentions; but after looking for a minute at Mr. Emerson, as if by that means to find out who and what he was, and then from him to the pile of luggage at the door, she said, "Maybe you're coming down to stop in these parts, sir?"

"Very likely; I'm going to try my hand in the Red School."

"No, really, sir, be you sure? Well, then, if you'll come in and sit down a bit, for I'm that

tired with standing I don't feel as if my legs would hold me much longer, I'll tell you what Mark Acton has done for me. Mischievous he may be, but he isn't so bad as he's made out."

Mr. Emerson entered the hovel.

"I'm sure I shall be very glad to hear any good of him, for so far I've heard so much that is bad, that I felt almost afraid to take the school."

"Well, it was as it might be about this time of the evening last year, towards autumn I remember, for the leaves were yellow and blowing about, and the early apples were ripe. I've a nice little tree in my garden, and I had gathered a lot of them to sell to the people as they passed along the road. I had them on a tray here in the doorway, when who should come along but Ned Barton and his lot. Ned's a deal worse than Mark, I can tell you, sir, though he mayn't be so full of tricks. Mark was some way behind, and as Ned came up he called out to the others, 'I say, lads, here's a chance ; let's have an apple apiece,' for he didn't see me, as I was in the house. So he and some of them made a dash at my tray and upset it, and the apples went rolling

over the ground. I came out as fast as I could with my stick, halloaing to them to leave my apples alone—not that it would have been of much use, and me so crippled, but down came Mark Acton amongst them all of a sudden.

“‘Boys,’ he called out, ‘leave the old woman’s apples alone. Would you go robbing her, and she so poor?’

“‘You’re a nice one to preach,’ said Ned Barton.

“‘I mayn’t be all I ought to be, but I hope I may never be such a sneak as to rob a poor woman, and she a cripple,’ said Mark; and with that he knocked Ned, although he’s half a head taller, right over into the road. Ned got up looking very ashamed and slunk off, and so did the others; but Mark stopped till he picked up every apple, and then he said, ‘I wouldn’t leave the apples here again if I were you, Mrs. Lawrence;’ but I said, ‘I’m too lame to cripplety backwards and forwards with them when people come. I should lose my chance. It’s as much as I can do to mind the gate.’ Upon that he looked round and saw how poor everything was,

and he said, 'It's hard for you to be all by yourself here—you can scarcely get along at all. I should be sorry for my grandmother to have it to do.' And I said it was hard, not to say almost beyond me. Why, there's the fetching of the water, that takes me ever so long, and people take advantage of it to pass through the pike, and if I lock it they beat it about till it costs as much in paint and wood to set the mischief to rights. 'In that I can help you,' he said ; and if you'd believe it he's fetched me my water from the spring ever since, and many another little job he's done for me, for he's quick with his hands, is Mark. So now, sir, do you wonder I say there's something in Mark that's not all badness ?"

"No, I don't," said Mr. Emerson, who had listened gladly, for the previous stories he had heard of Mark had really been very disheartening.

"I could tell you many more such like things," said Widow Lawrence ; "the boy's got a heart, and if some one could but lead it the right way it would be a good thing for him and for us all, for I'm not beyond saying that he is a very troublesome lad, very, and keeps one in some fear as to

what he'll do next, and he's ashamed of doing what's right, or of having it known."

So much Mr. Emerson had to guide him when he met the boys outside the Red School-house, and it had been a great help to him, or he would have been utterly thrown back by the discovery of what Mark had planned.

It helped him to read Mark's silence rightly. The boy was unwilling to let the good in him be seen; he had got into the odd frame of mind into which lads do sometimes get—he was ashamed of doing what was right.

The master therefore deemed it was better to leave him to think it over quietly, and only said as he leaped over the snake fence—

"Well, Mark, I shall hope on Monday that you and your friends will meet me here and help me to set the school to rights. I hear you are quick with your fingers, so I expect great things from you."

CHAPTER VII

THE MORNING VIEW

MONDAY morning dawned, warm, still, and tranquil; the cows lowed impatiently in the pastures adjoining the Parsonage. They wanted their calves, but the calves were shut up in the farm buildings, and, as is the somewhat cruel custom in this part of Canada, they would not be allowed to have their breakfast till after milking-time. So they answered their mothers with sharp, shrill cries of hunger.

Mr. Emerson slept in a small room overlooking the farm buildings. He was roused from his sleep by the lowing of the cows and plaintive crying of the calves, and rising dressed and seated himself at the open window, for he prized the early hours of the day, ere the world was well

awake, when all was quiet and still, and he could seek undisturbed the strength which his soul required.

It was a beautiful view which lay before him. Immediately under the windows were the group of outhouses, the arched cart-shed, under which the vehicles could drive up; the granary and large haylofts, and the stable and cattle shed—all close at hand for the sake of convenience in snowy weather. These were on rather lower ground than the house. To the left of them was a quaint country well with an upright post, and from the top of that a lever-bar for raising up the bucket. Very weird and ghostlike these wells look in the gloaming, standing like skeletons with outstretched arms; but there was nothing ghostly, though something old-fashioned, in it now. On the transverse beam, at its highest point, the master cock, or rooster as Canadians call them, of the farmyard had mounted, and was preparing to utter a shrill "good morning" and rouse the house-dwellers.

Ducks and geese were making their way down to the pond, and pigeons were wheeling in swift

flight, or pluming themselves upon the granary roof.

Over this roof could be seen the pond, its banks fringed down to the water's edge by trees and bushes of every description, here and there an island green with fir and maple, whilst upon the surface of the water wildfowl of various sorts were scattered. Mr. Emerson, who had been living for some months in Montreal, felt keenly the beauty of the tranquil country scene. As he stood gazing, wondering how any could prefer a town to a country life, the sun arose above the distant fir-trees bordering the lake. The new day had begun.

What would that day bring forth? Should he really be able to do anything with the boys? Such was his wondering thought, and with it came the answer which he knew so well—

“Not in his own strength.”

That strength must be sought from Him who alone was able to give it, who alone could lead him and teach him how to guide the will of a wild, untaught boy who knew not right from wrong.

One thing Mr. Emerson felt he should miss here, and that was the church at Montreal, where he had been accustomed constantly to claim the promise made to the two or three gathered together in the Saviour's name, and week by week, as the first day of that week came round, to seek fresh food for both soul and body in the house of God.

There was no church anywhere near the Red School-house ; the mission services were held in the next road-side school-house as being more central than this ; and although this was better than nothing, Mr. Emerson and Mr. Seymour both looked for the day when the people would themselves begin to wish for a consecrated building entirely devoted to the one grand object of God's worship and dedicated to Him.

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE BUSH

AFTER his quiet time of meditation Mr. Emerson determined to go out and wander by the tranquil pond. He felt that in the extreme stillness, where none but God was near, there was refreshment to be found.

Unhappily for him he did not know the country well yet. He struck off into a woodland path, which seemed as if it would take him to the object of his search, and wandered along it for some time. Perhaps his mind was occupied with his prospects, or he was not properly attending to what he was doing, but he soon missed the track, and in the course of an hour found himself deep in the bush, but not within sight of the pond.

One thing he certainly had secured, and that perfectly—total solitude and silence. No hermit

could have chosen a quieter spot for his cell. A tiny brook murmured plaintively in the distance as it wound its way slowly towards the pond, lamenting as it went over its diminished powers ; for in the winter and spring it was a turbulent little torrent, turning more than one saw and flour mill on its way. Its low voice only added to the stillness of everything else. Mr. Emerson seated himself on the trunk of a large fir-tree which had fallen during the previous winter, and round whose trunk tall ferns and dainty grasses were already springing fast, the young new life in strange contrast to the fallen, withered tree, which must have had such a history of its own to tell.

Not a bird chirped in the trees, for birds are rarely to be heard in the Canadian woods after the first days of spring ; not a leaf stirred ; all was silence so solemn that at length, man as he was, Mr. Emerson could stand it no longer ; it became quite oppressive ; he turned and actually fled.

He went up the path down which he had come with such haste that he almost ran straight into the arms of Mark Acton, who was at the top of it, and who noticed his hurried step with wonder.

"What is it, Mr. Emerson?" he asked.

"Is that you, Mark? You are abroad early," said Mr. Emerson, trying to look dignified.

"Did not something startle you just now, sir?"

"Nothing particular," said the schoolmaster, "only it was rather solitary here. I am glad to find a fellow-creature."

"Mr. Emerson," said Mark, with some hesitation, "have you ever felt an odd feeling out here in the bush? Did you feel it just now?—something very like being frightened, only it can't be that, because there is nothing to be frightened at? I have felt it before now, though I shouldn't like the other boys to know, but one day I ran pretty nearly a mile to get at some one to speak to."

"Yes, that's what I felt just now. I have felt it before, when living out west, but not for many a year now."

"What is it from, Mr. Emerson?" he asked. "I shouldn't have thought you'd have been frightened," looking with a somewhat mischievous smile in the master's face.

"I don't think it's fear. It's something of

which no one need be ashamed," said Mr. Emerson quietly.

"What is that, sir?"

"Awe, arising from the knowledge of the infinite power and majesty of God, and of our own nothingness. When we look around and see the wonderful beauty of the earth, and feel the Divine Majesty brooding over it, our soul seems involuntarily to cry out, 'What is man that Thou art mindful of him? or the son of man, that Thou visitest him?' Perhaps, too, it is the remains of the nature of Adam in us which makes us feel as Adam did after his sin, afraid of meeting the Most High in perfect solitude; we feel our uncleanness, our nakedness, the utter barrenness of good works within us, and we too are afraid when this is contrasted with the fullness and perfection of God's works in nature."

Mr. Emerson was speaking more to himself than to Mark, trying to put in words the strange, weird feeling which can only have been experienced by those who have been quite alone in the silent shades of some great forest, or at night watching by the form of some one made in the

image of God, but whose spirit has departed to the land of restful waiting. In sight of the grand works of nature, or before that helpless and inanimate form once so full of life, what soul could stand unmoved by the feeling, What am I, and what is God? This feeling was well described by a Frenchman. He was standing gazing with awe at the rocks of the vast chasm through which the river Saguenay cleaves its way to the St. Lawrence. These crags rise to the height of two thousand feet above the water, and soundings have been taken to another thousand feet without fathoming the depth. The full-sized birches which spring up in the crags look like tiny bushes, and the eagles which build in the summit of the highest of the crags, which is called Eternity, might be sparrows, so small do they seem at that height. Comparing the vastness of this great rock with the size of our tiny boat, our fellow-traveller cried out, "Ah ! que l'Éternité est grande et terrible." ¹

Mark looked at him wonderingly ; he saw that it was no mere talking "good" to him, but that

¹ "Ah ! how vast and terrible Eternity is !"

the master spoke out of the fulness of heart which must be relieved—indeed, that he himself seemed far enough from his thoughts. As to religion, Mark knew nothing of it ; he had always thought it childish to go to what served for a church, and when on rare occasions his grandmother had persuaded him to go, he had found it very tiresome.

Mr. Emerson's awe-stricken, almost terrified look had given him the first feeling that that God of whom people talked so lightly, whose name they even took in vain without fear, was a real, living, governing Spirit, in whom we live and move and have our being ; One to love, but One also to fear—to fear more than to love, were it not that He has given us His Son to take away our sins, and make us fit to appear before His Father.

There was a long pause. Mr. Emerson was too full of his thoughts to speak again ; the strange companions walked along the uneven woodland path for some time in silence. At last Mark said, somewhat timidly—

“Mr. Emerson, why should *you* be so much

afraid of being alone with God? You have never done anything so very wrong, have you?"

"Never?" Mr. Emerson paused. Was it well to let one who was to be his pupil think worse of him than he did? Would it not shake his authority? If so, what matter, came the second thought, so long as it upheld the authority of God? "I don't know, Mark; but I don't think there's an hour in the day that I don't do wrong somehow; not quite as you do, perhaps, because my temptations are not quite the same, but quite as much perhaps in the sight of God. And yet I am watching and struggling; and ask yourself if you are. If not, will it even not be harder for you to appear before your Maker in the end? But here we are at the Parsonage, so goodbye; we shall meet, I hope, at the Red School-house, at eight o'clock."

The master was not sorry of the break, for he felt it would be well for Mark to be left alone to think out the problem, Was he fit to appear before the presence of Him who made him?

CHAPTER IX

FRANK RUSSELL

KNOWING what boys' nature is, and how impossible it is for them to be long in a thoughtful mood, Mr. Emerson was by no means surprised to find that Mark had shaken off his solemn feelings in the bush, and was seated, an hour and a half later in the day, on the top of the bell turret of the little school. His face was towards the Parsonage, so he could not see the master, who had been to visit Widow Lawrence on his way, and therefore came from the other side of the building.

It must be owned that Mr. Emerson felt somewhat uneasy at the sight of the figure perched on the roof, as, although he remembered his own youthful exploits in that line, he doubted

whether the crazy old building was strong enough even to bear a boy's weight.

He was just about to call out to Mark to come down, when the lad looked round, and saw him, after which he gave the shrill, horrible yell known in those parts as "Mark's whistle," and tumbled by an ingenious series of somersaults safely on to the ground.

"I don't think you could do that, sir," he said, as he arrived at the master's feet.

"Certainly not now; I don't know what I might have done years ago, for I was rather a famous climber; but I tell you what, Mark, I doubt whether the old roof will stand much more such rough work."

"Perhaps not, sir; it's in a dreadful state—all over holes. I should think it would take almost a cart-load of shingles to set it to rights," said Mark, quite unabashed.

Mr. Emerson smiled in spite of himself at the boy's coolness. "Where are the rest of the lads?" he said, looking around inquiringly.

"Oh, I have just called them, they'll be here

directly," said Mark ; and in a few minutes more all the boys but Frank Russell appeared on the scene.

Mr. Emerson counted them. "Eight windows and only seven boys," he said ; "who is the eighth ?"

"Frank Russell," was the answer.

"Well, what has become of him ?"

The boys looked at one another and then at Mark, who said in answer to that glance and Mr. Emerson's question—

"I suppose after what we said on Saturday he did not think we wanted him."

"What, because he would not join your mischief ?" said Mr. Emerson. "Well, then, Mark, I think the best thing you can do is to fetch him whilst we clear away these sticks, which will come in handily for Widow Lawrence, and we will bring out the forms from the School-house to set them upon their legs."

Now this was very wily of Mr. Emerson ; he had tried the lock of the door on the way to Widow Lawrence's, and knew its condition as well as Mark did, across whom for the first

time flashed the remembrance of his act of mischief.

It was bad enough to go and call Frank Russell, it would be still worse to stay and have his folly brought to light, so he rushed off without more ado, which Mr. Emerson had quite expected.

After Mark had got a little distance into the wood he slackened his pace. It was not quite pleasant to him to think of meeting Frank, and he did not like to own to him that their mischief had been stopped. He was also rather puzzled how to explain the sudden way in which he had struck his colours; so he dawdled along the narrow track, stopping every now and then to gather some flower, or to refresh himself at some patch of strawberries.

But however much he might delay, at length he reached the rising ground overlooking the Russells' clearing, which was on the further side of the pond, and sloped down to the water's edge. He gave his war cry, and then looked out for some signs of Frank, but there were none; indeed, the house seemed quite deserted. There



THE GAMBOLS OF THE OLD RED SCHOOL HOUSE BOYS IN THE POND.



were no signs of human life ; the poultry and ducks were pecking about in the farmyard, the cattle were lowing in the adjoining field, but it did not seem as if anyone had attended to them that morning.

Presently an old man, almost bent double with age, and who could with difficulty move himself about, came up and looked hopelessly at the poor animals.

"They've forgotten you, I suppose, in all this trouble, and how I'm to undo the door and let the calves out I don't know. As for the milk, that must just go." At this moment the old man saw Mark peering with wonder over the fence.

"I say, you boy," he called out, "just you come and open these doors and let the calves out ; my arms is that stiff, I can't. Why, it's you, Mark Acton," he said, as Mark came forth from his nook, for he was an obliging lad, and pitied, though he did not understand, the old man's evident trouble.

"Where are all the Russells ?" he asked, as he prepared to draw back the bolts.

But old Ephraim, besides being old, was very

deaf, sometimes conveniently so; he certainly was on this occasion.

"What, are the bolts too stiff?" he said, "yet I thought it was only I was too stiff myself; boys were stronger, I suppose, when I was young."

"It's not too stiff," said Mark indignantly; "there, see!"

The heavy door swung open as he spoke, and out rushed seven or eight calves in such a hurry to reach their mothers that they almost upset their liberator. Old Ephraim laughed gruffly.

"Haw! haw! they pretty nearly knocked you over, lad; now that you are here you may as well help me to fodder the sheep, and get things a bit straight."

"But what about Mr. Russell? Where is he?"

"Wurzel! we don't give them wurzel now that there's plenty of green stuff about, it would be waste."

"I didn't say 'wurzel,' I said 'Mr. Russell,'" said Mark.

"Didn't ye, then? I thought it was that ye said, but I get powerful deaf; if we stop talk-

ing we shall never get through what we have to do."

Mark was terribly provoked, but either old Ephraim could not or would not hear him. It was not till he had really worked hard for an hour that the sight of a piece of chalk, with which rough accounts were scored up on the barn door, made Mark think of a means of communication with the deaf old man.

He wrote up in very large letters—

"WHERE ARE THE RUSSELLS?"

but whether old Ephraim feared that he would lose his help if he told, and suspected what the boy was doing, or not, it is hard to say; he certainly kept carefully away from that door for some time, but at last Mark brought him up to it.

"Eh! what! didn't you know they've gone to Sherborne to fetch back Frank, if he can be moved, poor lad, which I doubt."

"Frank? moved? why, what's happened to him?" said Mark in surprise. But either Ephraim could not or would not hear him.

Mark in despair had just taken up the chalk to write his question, when a buggy drove in at the gate ; in it was the young farmer who owned the adjoining farm.

"Well, Mr. Pratt, is it from Sherborne you are come?" said Ephraim, hobbling towards him with difficulty.

"That's it," said Mr. Pratt, with a nod of the head.

"Did you see the master and missus there?"

Another nod for answer ; then came the question, in a voice which might be heard for miles—

"How have you got on? I promised Mr. Russell I'd look things up a bit, as he can't be home just yet."

"Not home ! Can't they move Frank, then?"

"Not possible ; it's not likely he'll live out the day."

Old Ephraim wiped away a tear. "Poor little lad, and it was a brave death," he said.

Mark came forward from the place where he was standing, trembling with excitement.

"What's happened to Frank?" he asked.

Mr. Pratt looked him over coldly ; he had

suffered very considerably from Mark's pranks, and was not inclined to be pleasant with him.

"He's met with an accident at Sherborne, and is not likely to live out the day," he said; "but we don't want you here; you just go along with your business; we've had enough of you first and last."

Mark obeyed, not from any spirit of obedience, but because the longing was so strong in him to speak to Frank, and the idea had flashed across him that if he could catch the mail stage at Norton's Bluff he might still see his playfellow once more. He rushed down to the small wooden landing-stage, and in a minute or two had the boat afloat, and was sculling with might and main over the pond; but he made little progress, for he was not much accustomed to managing a boat, and had never been out alone, nor did he know one peculiarity of the pond.

In one part—the simple dwellers on its shores did not know what caused it—was a strong current, which almost formed a whirlpool; drawn in by this eddy, blocks of wood, stumps

of trees, and decayed branches had made a sort of island, without any safety or solidity on its surface. Woe to the boat dashed against its prickly shore !

Yet towards this island—if such it could be called, as there was no real land on it—Mark was being carried swiftly.

CHAPTER X

ADRIFT

MARK could swim like a fish, but still his swimming powers would avail him little before the current which surrounded Snag Island ; it was nearly half a mile from shore too, so that there would not have been much use in making the attempt ; but indeed Mark never thought of it. It was not till he had been some time in the water that he noticed, first, that he was making no way, then that, even worse, he was losing it, being gradually drawn in by the current.

He rose up in the boat, and tried more vigorously than ever to get out of the sweep of the water, but to no purpose ; soon he saw that his sculling was actually of no use, for swifter and swifter the frail boat was swept along—he feared

that every moment it would be upset against some projecting stick or piece of timber ; and at last these dangers grew so many that it was all he could do with his scull to keep the boat upright. It was almost a relief to him when the tiny skiff was swept up amongst the branches, and so firmly wedged that he could neither get backwards nor forwards. He knew that he should not have to remain there more than a few hours, and had it not been for the strong desire he had to get to Sherborne he should not have minded that. A boat always crossed within hailing distance of Snag Island at two o'clock in the afternoon with letters and bread for the further side of the pond, so Mark knew he could swim off and reach this ; but he had not so long to wait.

He soon saw a small bark canoe, with a woman and a boy in it, paddling towards him, and determined to try to get taken off in it ; but when at last he contrived to make the woman see where he was, she only held up her hands in dismay, and cried out in French—"What do you there ?"

Now Mark had picked up a few words of French from the sons of the French "habitants"

who form so large a part of the population of Lower Canada, but his knowledge was not sufficient to hold a conversation, so he only shook his head, and called out pitifully enough, "Sauvez moi !" ¹

"Pas possible de ce côté-ci !" cried the woman. "Grimpez de l'autre côté." ²

Mark did not understand, but the boy in the canoe called out "other side," and the Indian squaw made signs that she was going round to a side of the island where the current was less dangerous, and that Mark must try to make his way over the spars. What a climb that was! It was like a nightmare. Every time Mark fancied he was on the point of getting a secure foothold on some piece of wood, over it would go, and down it would roll, giving him not a few blows and hard knocks, but he did not care much for that.

At last he got on the most accessible side; then the lad called out, whilst he and his mother paddled vigorously to keep clear of the current—

"Pouvez-vous nager ?" ³

¹ "Save me !" ² "Not possible that side ; climb on the other side." ³ "Can you swim ?"

Mark shook his head—he could not understand.

“Can you——?” The French boy filled up the gap with an imitation of swimming.

“Yes,” answered Mark.

“Venez donc !”¹ cried the woman.

“Take care !” shouted the lad in the canoe.

Mark knew well enough the danger that lay in his leaping in, lest there should be a branch hidden under the water, so he climbed out as far as he could over the stumps and branches. Happily the water was so transparent that he could see to a good depth, notwithstanding the rapid current. He slipped off into what seemed to him the most clear spot, and struck off for the canoe. Unhappily for him the eddy dashed him against a sharp, broken branch, and struck his arm, giving it such a blow that after a few strokes he found it becoming quite weak and helpless ; the water seemed to bubble and curl more violently than ever round him, but he managed to raise a feeble cry for help before he felt the cold lake closing over him.

The Indian and her half-French son were

¹ “Come, then.”

watching with intense excitement from their frail bark ; they had found themselves being drawn in by the force of the whirlpool, so stood out a little way from Snag Island.

When they heard Mark's faint cry the lad exclaimed—

"He has hurt himself, he cannot swim ; I must go to his succour."

"Go, then, my son," said the Indian calmly, "but take care he does not lay hold of thee."

"Have no fear, my mother," said her son, as he leaped out into the pond, or, as we in England should consider it, lake, and swam with swift strokes towards sinking Mark, who by this time, perhaps happily for himself, was senseless, so that he was not able to help or hinder the young lad's attempt to save him. Pierre, for such was his name, managed to get hold of him, and with difficulty dragged him towards the canoe, into which he was lifted senseless.

"Poor child, at least he has broken his arm against those dreadful boughs," said the Indian. "Row, my boy, towards Garson's clearing ; there they will take him in and attend to him."

"It is not a broken arm, mother," said Pierre ;
"see, it bleeds !" So it was, bleeding copiously,
for the blood had cut one of the veins in the arm.
The woman tore a bit off her petticoat and bound
it up. As she was doing it she exclaimed—

"Ah, Pierre, I am thankful we came this way.
Why, this is the lad that saved our little Marie
last summer !"

"No ! is it really ; are you sure ?"

"Quite sure ; I could never forget the face of
anyone who had done such a good work as that
for me. Poor child ! but for him she would
have perished."

The dusky-hued woman held the boy's sense-
less form tenderly on her knee, and did her best
to restore him, whilst Pierre paddled dexterously
across the pond. Before they had reached the
shore Mark began to revive, and as the gunwale
of the canoe grounded on the shelving shore, he
opened his eyes with the question—

"Where am I ? What has happened ?"

"You are safe, my child, we have rescued
you ; we are taking you to Garson's Farm to have
your clothes dried and your wounds attended to.

Do you not remember me? I am Marie's mother."

Mark lifted himself feebly, and sitting up tried to shake off the strange feeling of apathy which overwhelmed him.

"Not to Garson's, please," he said; "I want to catch the mail stage at that bluff, if it has not passed."

"It has not passed, but neither are you in a fit state to go there; you ought to go home and change your things, and have your wound attended to," remonstrated the squaw.

"I must get on to Sherborne, I cannot wait, I have a friend dying."

The Indian shrugged her shoulders; she and Mark only partially understood each other, but she gathered enough to know that he had no intention of having himself attended to.

"My friend," she said, "you will have the fever if you do not take care."

But Mark's petition to be landed where he wished was so urgent that he prevailed. In a few minutes more he was standing on the shore, and had given the warmest thanks to his rescuers,

who were paddling away toward the part of the bush where their own settlement was, though Marie's mother often looked wistfully after the pale-faced boy who was sitting wearily on a log of wood waiting for the stage.

What she said was quite true. Mark had saved her little girl's life the summer before at the risk of his own, when she had been attacked by a fierce dog, and he had afterwards carried the terrified little thing all the way up to the Indian camp. It was just one of those points which redeemed his character—that he was so tender and kind towards small children, old people and animals, all of whom knew that the boy who was thought so troublesome was always ready to do them good service.

"It's a pity! it's a pity!" said the squaw, as the distance between them and the injured boy increased. "Why should he want to get to Sherborne so much?"

Mark himself would have felt it hard to explain; all he knew was that he had parted from Frank in anger, and if he were dying he should like to see him and make it up before he died.

He seemed likely enough to gain his object, for the great waggon came lumbering up a few minutes after the canoe had departed, and the driver gave him a lift willingly. Once on the road he seemed to have very little care for anything else; a strange stupor was creeping over him, which prevented his answering the driver's questions coherently, or attending at all to the road; his arm was very painful, yet in spite of the pain he slept.

CHAPTER XI

A CHAPTER OF ACCIDENTS

WE left Frank Russell some time ago jogging along towards Sherborne in an anxious frame of mind. The thought was constantly with him, If only he had not made that rash promise ! But now it was too late for such an "if" to be of any use.

He surprised the waggoner by his silence, and at last he gave up all attempts to amuse him, and they travelled on till they reached the outskirts of Sherborne. Here the driver pulled up his horses, or, as in that part of Canada they called them invariably (even applying the term to a single horse conveyance), team.

"You'd better wait here for your father," he said. "If I meet him in the town I'll tell him ;

you're less likely to miss him than if you went further into the town."

Frank jumped down; he felt this was true, as he would be almost sure to miss his father in the network of streets, and Russell must pass this way; so, after thanking the driver for the lift, he climbed up on the fence, and seated himself on the top. It was rather a lively spot, for between him and Sherborne ran the Grand Trunk Railway, and although the traffic on this railway is small indeed compared with that on our English lines, still there was a chance of seeing a train pass—an event in the life of a boy who lived so far from any station or railroad.

There were some small cottages on the opposite side of the line, very tumble-down and untidy-looking; they belonged to some thriftless Irish labourers; and Frank was soon employed in trying to kill time by counting all the various devices by way of repairs of the rough-and-ready kind—windows stuffed with rag or pasted up with paper; palings mended with string; the want of a lock or catch to the rickety gate supplied by a rusty knife passed through

the hole where the latch ought to have been. "Nice tidy sort of people those!" said Frank to himself.

A tiny child's head popping suddenly over the other side of the gate showed why it was fastened, but evidently the small mortal for whose benefit the precaution was taken did not value it, for she poked most patiently at the knife with a stick from the other side, occasionally varying her mode of attack by a violent shake.

Her attraction to the outside world was evident—a speckled hen, with a brood of tiny chickens, was pecking about in view of the child, whose great aim was to get at them.

Frank watched her useless efforts for some time with great amusement, but presently another object attracted his notice, for towards him a train was coming, the light wood sparks flying out on either side of the engine; and crossing the fence he got on to the bank immediately overhanging the line to see more plainly.

The train was only a few hundred yards off, when to Frank's dismay the child contrived to poke out the fastening of the gate, and, heedless

of trains, anxious only to secure the hen and chickens, ran straight on to the line.

Without an instant's thought or hesitation Frank rushed down the slope, seized the child, just as the engine came panting up, and clasping her in his arms threw himself, as his only chance for their lives, flat upon the ground between the rails.

In many cases this might have answered, but the engine was unusually low, and the part of the line where Frank had thrown himself was rather raised.

When the train was stopped at some distance from the accident, and the conductor with some of the passengers returned to the spot where the children lay, they found the little one lying safe under the protecting arm thrown round her by Frank; she had fallen in a slight dip of the ground, which most likely saved her life, and though terribly frightened by the noise made by the train passing over her, she was otherwise uninjured. Not so Frank; his head was much crushed by the projection at the bottom of the engine, and the arm which he had thrown over

the little girl to keep her quiet was broken. They lifted him up and carried him into one of the untidy, forlorn-looking cottages, and there he might have lain unclaimed and unknown, as he was senseless and so could not tell who he was, but providentially his own father came by just then, and was moved by curiosity to fasten his horse up to the fence and go down to see what had made the train stop at this unwonted spot.

He found a crowd of people talking and weeping, many of them gesticulating with vehemence which could only be Irish or French, but the brogue betrayed it to be the former.

The mother of the rescued child was rejoicing with the same breath over the safety of her little girl, and lamenting loudly over the boy's apparently dead body.

Mr. Russell forced his way into the crowd ; what was his dismay in finding in the injured lad his own son !

"How ever did the boy get here?" he said, turning with indignation to the crowd, as if they had anything to do with it.

"The little 'un opened the gate and got out on

the line, and yon lad saved her, but I fear it is likely to cost him his life ; hope he's nothing to do with you, sir," said a man who had been among the passengers in the train.

"He's my only child !" said Mr. Russell bitterly. Through the door of the wretched shanty to which the rescued child belonged he saw more tiny heads peeping and peering. Why had one life out of the many been spared, and his and the mother's only son been taken away ? He needed no doctor to tell him that Frank's hours, almost his minutes, were numbered.

Some one in the little throng of bystanders had gone for a doctor ; the father thought of someone yet more needed.

"It is too late for a doctor," he said ; "is there no one here who would drive to Russell's clearing and bring the child's mother ? Heaven knows how he came here ; I left him at play only a few hours ago."

Frank's body had been carried with care into the shanty ; the train could be delayed no longer, but the passenger by it who had explained the accident to Mr. Russell offered to drive over for

the poor lad's mother, and he was soon spinning along the road. He was scarcely out of sight when the doctor came, but he shook his head over the white face and helpless figure. He promptly turned out the crowd of neighbours who had only come from curiosity to see what was the matter, and carefully examined the injured lad, whilst his father stood by in the greatest anxiety.

"I can't do anything for him," he said; "we can only hope that he may pass away as he is now, and be spared any further suffering."

So the sad day went by, the father sitting at the bedside of his unconscious son, vainly trying to be composed. The bright stars came out and twinkled in the unclouded sky, then the dark blue faded into paler grey; the lustre of the stars was dimmed, as one by one they seemed to close their sparkling eyes in sleep, and the moon sank in the heavens; and just as the sun was ready to leap out like a giant refreshed with strength behind the gnarled, scorched fir-trunks, there was a woman's step on the rickety stairs, and Mrs. Russell stood, pale, silent, and hopeless, beside the

boy who but yesterday had said "perhaps in future he might stay at home and help his father," but in reality would never cross that home threshold again.

Even his mother's soothing voice and hand did not rouse the senseless boy; she looked round with horror at the squalid, dirty room in which he was lying. Her husband understood the look.

"There is no good moving him," he said; "it is only for a little while." There was a choking in his voice as he said this. "He will be taken at once if he is moved."

So the weary hours of watching passed away. Towards the evening of Monday there was another step on the staircase—a boy, blood-stained, with white, tired face, stood by the bedside. It was Mark.

"Is he alive, Mrs. Russell?"

"Just alive, that is all," came the tearful response.

There was a slight movement in the prostrate form, a feeble attempt to raise the drooping eyelids, then in a weak voice the question—

"You didn't do it, Mark?"

"No, I didn't; forgive me, Frank, forgive me!"

There was a bright, though feeble smile, then the low cry of "Mother!"

Mrs. Russell bent over her dying boy; it was his last word; in another minute all was over for this life with Frank, and Mark was weeping over his first deathbed.

CHAPTER XII

RECOVERY

MARK never knew how the next few weeks of his life passed. He had been very hot with the work at Russell's clearing, and his efforts to keep the course off Snag Island, and his leap in his heated condition into the lake, together with his injured arm, had been enough, as the Indian squaw predicted, to bring on fever. Added to this was the grief at Frank's death, with the knowledge that he was in a great measure answerable for it, as, had it not been for his mischievous designs on the Red School-house, it is not likely Frank would have been anywhere near the railroad at the time of the accident.

Mr. Emerson and the rest of Mark's friends had remained for some time about the Red School-

house, opening the door (a difficult task) and examining the forms and school appliances.

Mr. Emerson would have liked if possible to wait till Mark's return to carry the faggots to Widow Lawrence's, but at last all his devices for employing the boys came to an end. So, desiring each to take an armful of the brushwood, and taking one himself, he led the way to the turnpike.

Widow Lawrence greeted him with the tidings from Sherborne, which Mr. Pratt had given on his way to Russell's farm.

"To think of it, sir ! Frank Russell, that was as well and hearty as any of them lads only yesterday, called away in this sudden manner !"

"It is dreadfully sudden," said Mr. Emerson in a shocked tone ; he was thinking less about Frank's death than of Mark, for he knew already from what he had seen of the boy how keen would be his self-reproach at having parted from him in anger.

The lads stood round speechless and terror-stricken ; it might just as well have been one of themselves, only they felt doubtful in their minds whether they could have done so brave a deed.

They dispersed quietly enough, and Mr. Emerson, having returned and locked up the Red School-house, went off to the Russell's farm to find out what he could about Frank.

There was not much to learn; but later in the afternoon came tidings of Mark's journey to Sherborne. And late in the evening, as Mr. Emerson was standing at the turnpike, hoping to gain tidings from someone, up drove a cart in which were Mr. and Mrs. Russell.

Mrs. Russell was supporting Mark in her arms, for by this time the fever which was creeping over him made him so ill he could not sit without help. Behind the seat was the hastily made coffin containing Frank's body; the bereaved parents were taking it home that they might lay it with others of his kindred in the spot devoted to graves on the sunny hillside, but unconsecrated. When Mark saw Mr. Emerson, it seemed suddenly to rouse him into a state of terrible excitement. Before Mrs. Russell knew what he was about, for her mind was so much occupied with her great grief that she was looking after the sick lad in a mechanical way, Mark had

jumped out of the vehicle and was standing by Mr. Emerson's side. "I have brought Frank, sir, as you told me," he said; "are you waiting for us?"

"He's clean off his head," said Mrs. Russell, wringing her hands. "Did you ever know such a heap of trouble—my poor lad, and now, Mark," she said, bursting into tears as she looked at her sad burden. "However shall we get this poor fellow to his grandfather's? and he and Frank such friends too!"

Incoherently as Mrs. Russell in her trouble expressed herself, Mr. Emerson saw that Mark was quite unfit to be jolted any further; certainly he could not be taken two or three miles through the rough bush road which branched off just below the turnpike to his home. The idea came into the master's head that he would take him to the Parsonage and look after him himself; it was only a short distance, and he had no doubt Mr. Seymour would agree.

It was with some difficulty that he persuaded the feverish boy to go with him—he was full of strange fancies about Frank and the Red School-

house ; but little by little Mr. Emerson got him there. His strength held out till he reached the Parsonage gate, then he reeled and tottered, and would have fallen had it not been for the master's protecting arm. Mr. Emerson and Mr. Seymour carried him in and put him to bed, and there he lay for many weeks between life and death, talking constantly of Frank and imagining the Red School-house in flames, or once more going through his escape in the lake.

At length there came a day late in July when the fever seemed to have left him. There had been a heavy storm with an unusual shower of rain, just enough to damp a patch of grass which was lying outside the Parsonage, and to fill the air with sweet, cool fragrance.

Mr. Emerson sat reading by the window, looking upon the same scene which had drawn him out into the bush the morning of poor Frank's death. There was a rainbow spanning the water glittering in the distance. Mr. Emerson sat looking at it, scarcely daring to move lest he should disturb his sleeping patient, but thinking to himself how

over the darkest clouds of sorrow the bright hues of the rainbow seemed to shine for the Christian, when a slight movement in the bed made him look up.

For the first time for weeks he met Mark's eyes looking sensibly at him.

"It is raining, is it not? How cool and fresh it feels!" said the sick boy feebly. Then recollection coming back, "Where am I, Mr. Emerson?"

"You are at the Parsonage; you have been very ill, but do not talk or think now, if you can help it. I have some food ready for you, take it, and try to get to sleep again."

And Mark followed the advice as far as he could, though it was hard work to do so, and he could not keep from saying, "I have had such horrible dreams, Mr. Emerson. I thought Frank Russell was dead."

"Never mind your dreams—now you are better they will not come; try to forget them," said Mr. Emerson.

Time enough for him to know how much of truth there was in these dreams when he got

stronger, he thought, and Mark was too weak to pursue a train of ideas. Tranquillised by the master's words, he dozed off again.

How tedious his recovery was to a boy of his active nature ! With reviving strength came returning memory, with its sharp and bitter pain ; but now he found the use of having such men as Mr. Seymour and Mr. Emerson about him, for they did their best to keep him from viewing the past in a morbid spirit.

It was repented of and surely forgiven, and though it could not be forgotten, it was not well to dwell too much upon it.

" Let the dead past bury its dead. There is too much before you, Mark, for you to waste your time by thinking of what is behind ; you must stretch forth your hands to that which is before you, the crosses you will have to take up, the work you will have to perform for your Heavenly Father. Your life has been spared because you have your share of the great work still to do, and you must do it all the more earnestly to make up for the lost time." It was Mr. Seymour who spoke. Mark was sitting for the first time, propped

up by pillows in the window, looking weak and rather miserable.

"I don't seem much like work of any sort yet awhile," he said, looking with great scorn upon his hands, whitened by illness, and feeble and nerveless.

"Never mind, you will soon be stronger. Some of the boys are coming to see you to-morrow, and your grandmother is coming again this afternoon. She is very anxious to get you home ; she says they miss you terribly."

"Poor old Granny !" said Mark, smiling a little, "she always thought I did a great deal more than I did ; but I shall be glad to get to the old place again. I did not think I ever should have wanted something to do so much."

"In a day or two we shall have you out ; you will soon pick up your strength then."

But Mark only sighed ; life seemed rather a burden ; he never had cared for reading, and indeed could not read with very great ease, and Mr. Emerson had exhausted all the books at the Parsonage of an amusing nature, and did not

find him inclined to listen to anything requiring thought.

Indeed, though the boy was wonderfully patient and quiet, he was rather an anxiety at the Parsonage, as it was evidently bad for him to be left much to his own thoughts; he was too much disposed to brood over what had happened, and that kept back his recovery.

CHAPTER XIII

CHANGE

MARK started for home the next day, and certainly got on better than he had done the time before, for he was quieter, and did not lead his younger brother into such mischief.

Still he found the life rather irksome. You must not suppose from the account of him at first, as in ragged attire and without shoes and stockings, that he did not possess good clothing ; but he hated the restraint of clothes of which he had to take care, and preferred carrying his boots to wearing them ; indeed, I think he would have envied the little boys in the Indian village of Lorette, who only a few years ago used to shoot for pennies with crossbows in the road above the Chaudière Fall, with very little, if anything, on

them but the garb provided by nature. Now, however, Mark found his feet had become so tender with want of use that he was glad enough to wear shoes like his neighbours; although at first he complained bitterly of "their being so stiff," he soon grew used to them.

The very day the month of his visit to his home was over his grandfather appeared ready to claim him. His parents, who had found out the mistake they had made in giving the charge of one of their children out of their own hands at the early age at which they had parted with Mark, wished him to remain at home, but the old man would not agree.

"We have had the trouble of his childhood, and now we ought to have the use of his boyhood," he said. "I couldn't have believed we'd have felt the miss of him so much. He is looking hearty again now."

Mark could not help feeling pleased at hearing he was missed, and prepared with pleasure to return. He was too much of a guest at home for his brothers and sisters to care as much as they would have done in many cases, but they did

care much more than might have been expected, for they found Mark a valuable playfellow ; and little Mary, the youngest, cried so bitterly at his leaving, that Mark begged to take her back, for she clung round his neck and would not be taken away.

But Mrs. Acton shook her head decidedly.

"No, Mark, it's quite enough to have lost one child ; and although you've been a good lad this visit, I can't help saying it is not quite as if you were one of us, and I'll never with my own free will part with another."

"Only for a visit, mother ; she shall come back very soon, sha'n't she, grandfather ? but grandmother has never seen her, and she can't come over here."

Old Mr. Acton pleaded also, but his daughter-in-law was firm.

"No, father ; I don't mind taking her over at Christmas for mother to see, but I won't let her go alone to be spoilt and get into wild ways, as she would be sure to do with you. Just see how you've spoilt Mark !"

"Oh, mother !" said Mark in rather a hurt

voice, for he thought he had fairly earned a good ticket.

"I don't mean that you are not very much improved, but there's plenty of room for improvement still, so don't go thinking yourself perfect yet."

The fact was, poor woman, she was very much grieved at finding how little Mark valued his home, and at his joy at meeting his grandfather; but it was a pity, for Mark left home with a sense of injustice, and a feeling that he was not understood, which took from him any home-longing he might otherwise have had.

So he and his grandfather jogged home together over the rough corduroy road, very full of fun. By the time the pond came in sight, with its well-wooded banks, Mark had shaken off the feeling, and was again longing for his wild bush life, and rejoiced to be free of town.

"Look, grandfather, there's the corner where the crow made her nest last year. Why, what a lot of weed there is on the pond, to be sure! Oh, it does seem nice to be at home!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE SILENT WAR-CRY

OLD Mrs. Acton was waiting outside the door, all anxiety to see her grandson. His mother was not far wrong in saying that the old people spoilt the lad. He felt that here he was somebody, while at home he was nobody, and it was bad for him.

"Well, Mark, I'm glad to get you back ; you're looking like yourself again," she said, as Mark embraced her affectionately, for he was delighted to be back.

"Oh, I'm glad to be back too ; I'm pretty nearly tired of town life. You couldn't so much as squeak without frightening someone."

"Some of the boys talked of coming over this evening."

"All right ; but I don't mean to waste my time with them as I did. I'm getting of an age to be useful now."

"I'm sure you're useful enough," said the grandmother ; "when you're young is the only time you're likely to find amusement ; you'll have plenty of hard work by and by."

"Nay, but the lad's right," said the old grandfather, who, though, like Mark, he had been hurt by his daughter-in-law's speech on parting, felt that it was partly true—they had done their best to spoil Mark. "He's getting of an age to be useful, and there's many things he could do ; it'll be better for him than running about as he has done, so far."

One of Mark's old occupations here proved so irresistible that he could not even wait to put on common things, as his grandmother wisely suggested, before he ran off to help old David, who was about to bring the cows home for milking. Away he ran down to the pasture where the cattle were feeding, and great was his delight at finding that his favourite cow, "Mavoureen," so named by an Irish labourer who had been with them

when she was calved, had not forgotten him during his absence, but pushed against him with her horns, and did her best in cow fashion to show her affection.

"After all, animals are best," he said; "they always seem glad to see one."

He did not stop to take a turn at the milking, as he remembered his best clothes, and was as yet in too good training to rummage about as he had done, although he could not help swinging himself on one of the horses and having a gallop round the road and clearing.

"Bless the boy! he's as wild as ever," said his grandmother, looking pleased at the fact, for she did not care for a tame boy.

Just as the horse had come to its starting-point Mark saw the six other boys coming towards him in full force.

"Why, Mark, why didn't you give your war-cry?" asked Ned as he came up; "we've been expecting to hear it all day."

"I don't think I shall ever give it again," said Mark sadly. The sight of his six companions reminded him of the missing one who would

never join their sports again, and his eyes filled with tears which he could scarcely hide.

"I hope you're not going to turn good boy and spoil all our fun," said Ned Barton; "the master's bad enough, without having you as a sort of second master, to say we mustn't do this, it is wicked; or we mustn't do that, it is wrong!"

He folded his hands before him as he spoke, in "goody" style, and rolled his eyes upwards.

"I'm sure we like the master very much," said another of the boys. "Of course he can't be quite like one of ourselves, but I know for one I should be precious sorry if he went away."

Mark felt so furious with Ned's manner of talking that he thought if he stayed longer he should come to fisticuffs, which he did not care for.

"I say, don't you mind him," said Henry aside; "he's as spiteful as he can be because you've come back, and he knows we care for you more than for him. I'll tell you something: I don't think he'll be here much longer, for his father's failed, and there's a bailiff down on the

farm, and we hear that it's going to be sold, and the Bartons will move farther west."

"And a good job too," said Mark, who had always disliked Ned, and found him more unpleasant than ever. "I don't care how soon they go."

"What's that you're saying?" asked Ned.

"That stinging-nettles are troublesome, and the sooner they're out of the way the better."

"Do you mean I'm a stinging-nettle?" said Ned furiously.

"Something precious like it," said Walter.

Ned made a pretence of being inclined to fight, but after all seemed to think the odds were too much for him, so, with a little bluster, he quieted down, and the party of lads walked to the house, where Mrs. Acton had got some tea for them, for she was anxious to make Mark's return as pleasant as she could.

"The corn is ripening, lads," she said, when she saw her young guests' appetites were satisfied; "it will soon be fit for husking; when it is I hope you'll all come to the husking party."

"We've a beautiful patch of it, Granny," said

Mark. "I was looking at it just now, and peeped into one of the cobs; it is turning quite yellow."

"Well, you all be good lads and make yourselves of use, and you shall come."

"I sha'n't be here," said Ned.

"Is that so?" said Mrs. Acton; "where are you going?"

"My father is going to join a brother in Ontario; we start in about three weeks' time."

"It's a fine place, I've heard, for getting on," remarked Mrs. Acton; but none of the party expressed any sorrow at the departure of the Bartons.

CHAPTER XV

AN UNWILLING VISITOR

THE six boys were not the only visitors who came to see Mark that evening ; they were just taking their departure when Mr. Emerson appeared.

"I thought I would just look you up, Mark, for otherwise you are not likely to remember that school to-morrow is at ten, and I know how sorry you'll be to miss it after your long, and I am sure unwelcome, holiday," he said, with a very mischievous look.

"I don't think there's much use his beginning till next week," said Mrs. Acton. "I promised Mrs. Russell he should go over there and help with some of the chores ; they miss poor Frank sadly."

"I couldn't go, Granny," said Mark hastily. "I couldn't see them without him ; it's too much to ask."

"Mark, I want to speak to you," said Mr. Emerson quietly. He had been watching the other boys vanishing towards the bush when Mark answered his grandmother, and saw by her manner that the old lady would yield immediately to her grandson's whims. He drew Mark a little aside. "You're a foolish boy, Mark, about the Russells," he said ; "they have no idea that you had anything to do in any way, however remote, with their boy's death. You know, I think you take rather a morbid view of your share in it. We are sometimes inclined to think more severely of our faults because the punishment seems very prompt and severe ; but as to what you say about its being your fault that Frank was near the line at the time, if he had not been there the child would have been killed ; as it is, he met with the end of a hero."

He waited for some remark, but the boy's heart was too full of sorrow for his lost friend

for him to answer, so the schoolmaster went on—

“You ought to think of him as he is at present—full of rest and joy and happiness, waiting only for the final resurrection of the body to be complete—not of the past, if you can help it at all.”

“I cannot help it,” said Mark.

“Well, then, turn your thoughts about it into a lever for pushing you into the right direction. If you feel that it is your fault which has robbed the Russells of a son, try as far as you can to supply his place by doing the work he used to do ; but, above all things, do not tell them that you consider you had anything to do with Frank’s death—it would only add to their sorrow, and take away from your power of comforting them. As it is, they look upon you as their son’s dearest friend, and your grandmother is right in saying that Mrs. Russell is longing to see you.”

Finding Mark was still silent, Mr. Emerson continued—

“You see, having nursed you through your illness, I feel more like an old friend than I

should otherwise do, and I speak like an old friend."

Mark did contrive to mutter a gruff "Good-night" and "Thank you," and then got away as soon as he could, thinking Mr. Emerson very cruel to expect so much of him.

The master did not see him again that night. Old Mrs. Acton was rather inclined to be angry with Mark for what she considered his rudeness in running off, but Mr. Emerson quite understood him.

"Leave him alone, he'll come all right; there's the makings of a fine fellow in him yet," he said, as he took his departure, feeling pretty sure that Mark would follow his advice, and go to see the Russells the next day.

He was right. As soon as the many odd jobs about the farm were done next day, Mark said abruptly to his grandfather—

"Granddad, I think I'll just step up and see the Russells; I hear Mr. Russell has been asking for me. If I find I can be any use I'll stop up there an hour or two, and do a few odd jobs for them."

"That's right, my lad, they'll be powerful glad to see you, and David and I can get along now without you."

And away Mark went, but it was not with any great pleasure that he drew near the spot where he had learnt the news of his companion's accident.

He felt very much inclined to linger in the hollow between him and the farm, where in early days beavers had made their clever dams and houses, but they had long since been destroyed by the settlers, though the lads cherished hopes of their return.

At last he came in sight of the farm, and he stopped for a minute to gain courage before going on.

How quiet and deserted the house looked ! In old days this had been the place where Mark had given his yell, and then Frank used to come tearing down from wherever he happened to be, and the two would go off together. Instead of this Mark saw Mr. Russell standing leaning over the fence, with the air of a man who took no interest in what was passing around ; his

eyes were bent on the ground, and he paid no attention to what was going on, though just in front of him the sheep had got into and were trampling down a piece of land on which buckwheat was growing. This caught Mark's eye ; he ran up hastily.

"See, Mr. Russell, the sheep are in the buckwheat."

"So they are ; will you help drive them out ? Oh, I didn't see you, Mark, I thought it was one of the others ; it's a while since you came down here—not since my poor boy was taken away. Oh, Mark ! what's the use of striving and struggling as I and his mother have done, up early and late to bed, and this the end ?"

Mark made a dive after the sheep by way of hiding his feelings, and after a time got them out.

"They've done a good bit of mischief, Mr. Russell," he said, as he came back, hot with running.

"Well, it don't matter much," said Mr. Russell wearily, "there's no one to whom it'll make much odds."

Poor Mark, this was very trying for him, and

at that moment he saw Mrs. Russell coming to the door of the house.

"Whatever shall I do with two of them at once?" he said in an almost comical tone of despair.

But he need not have feared; Mrs. Russell took her trouble far more bravely than her husband—not that she felt the blow less, but she knew whose Hand dealt it. From Mark's words, and from what she had gathered from Mr. Emerson and Mrs. Acton, she guessed that Mark felt himself in some way to blame for his comrade's death, and she had not forgotten that Mark had almost lost his life in his efforts to see Frank before his death. She was resolved to let him see that she did not blame him, and that she felt the greatest affection for the friend of her dead son.

She came forward when she saw him talking to her husband.

"Well, Mark, my boy, I'm glad to see you about again and looking so well," she said. "I see Russell's been making you have a fine run after the sheep; come in and get a glass of milk."

Mark obeyed, wondering at the cheerfulness with which she spoke, though she was much changed by the sorrow which had fallen on her. Mr. Russell remained standing by the fence, not seeming to care much for anything.

"That's the saddest part of all," said the wife, nodding towards her husband, "he do take it so heavy. You must step up and see us often, Mark; maybe you'll rouse him up a bit, which I can't do. And, after all, our dear Frank would not like us to grieve as those without hope."

She spoke of him so tenderly, yet so calmly, as one who liked to utter the dear name, that Mark could hardly keep back his tears.

"His father can't bear his name mentioned," said Mrs. Russell sadly, "and I like to think of him and to talk of him, dear lad, he was such a good boy at home. Little I thought when he was here that last evening, and in such haste to be gone, that he would never be here again; but it's happier and better for him, I know. Try to think of that. Would you like to see where they have laid him?"

Mark nodded ; his heart was too full for speech.

"We must slip out at the back, lest the father should see us ; he can't bear the place, but it's my great joy to go there."

She put on a shaker—one of the queer, Quaker-like bonnets worn by country women in Canada, but which are not nearly so picturesque as our "sun-bonnets"—and led the way up the hillside to the little farm cemetery, where more than one old friend and neighbour lay. The grave looked fresh and green ; over it a hemlock waved its delicate fringe, the lower boughs almost sweeping the mound. Mrs. Russell had brought a quantity of maiden-hair fern from the wood, and had planted that and flowers round ; it looked a quiet, peaceful resting-place.

"I hope some day," she said, "that we may have a church here ; it would be a beautiful place, and this would be the churchyard. Ah ! no wonder you boys get so wild and careless, when you've so little of that to keep you straight. It is wonderful what a much greater chance boys in the old country have with their churches and

schools, and all the rest of it, if only they cared to profit by it."

They stood in silence for some minutes.

"I should like to have a hand in building that church," said Mark, as at length they returned down the hill, hushed and comforted; for the first time the boy had realised that his friend was not dead "but sleepeth."

CHAPTER XVI

A CANADIAN WINTER

THE short Canadian autumn had changed into the dreary winter ; the crimson, brown, and tawny leaves dried and dropped from the trees, making a gorgeous carpet in the woodland glades ; then curled up as the frost grew keener and keener, and lost their wonderful beauty. The woods grew stiller than ever, even the chip-munick becoming less active, and spending more time in the nest of moss he had made in the hollow of a tree. The sun rose in a fiery ball out of the midst of a hazy sky ; there was going to be snow, said the weather prophets, but as yet none had fallen.

Flocks of snow birds had already been seen afield ; soon they would be dotting a waste of

white with black; the wind sang through the telegraphic wires which passed from Sherborne to Lake Memphrita. Outside their buildings farmers might be seen examining and repairing their old sledges, or strengthening some weak spot in their fences, likely otherwise to fall if the snow should prove heavy, or the frost severe. There are very few fences which will stand the severity of a Canadian winter. Walls get thrown by the frost; snake fences made by logs laid zigzag one upon another, in the fashion in which we used to build bricks as children, are the best, as palings would be too expensive for the amount of space requiring covering.

There was a merry group round the school-house door when ten o'clock arrived on the day of which this chapter is to give the history—boys of all ages with warmly clad limbs and bodies, and woollen or fur caps pressed down as far as possible over their ears; little girls in woollen hoods with clouds on—in all about thirty children, varying in age from six to thirteen, and not only of the poorer but of the farmer class. There little Annie Pratt and James, the missionary's only son,

might be seen in company with the squatters' children or the labourers', even in dress but little to be distinguished from them.

Some of the children had come nearly two miles ; little Annie's home was rather more than two miles from the school-house. She had once been a great pet of Mark's ; she was a dear, bright little thing, and when she was much smaller Mark had often carried her to school, but now, to Annie's sorrow, her old protector kept away from her, and she scarcely saw anything of him.

She did not know how her father was doing everything in his power to prevent Mark's regaining his character, but the boy did ; he knew that many people looked askance at him after seeing Mr. Pratt shake his head in that knowing manner, and more than once the farmer had said openly to Mark that he did not believe in him. It worried and annoyed the boy a great deal, and as he could not look at little Annie without thinking of her father, whom she was very like, he kept out of her way.

This troubled the little maiden, who hovered about for some time hoping that Mark would do

more than simply say "good morning," but as he did not she crept up to his side.

"What are you angry with me for, Mark?"

"I'm not angry with you at all, Annie," said Mark rather stiffly; "what makes you think so?"

"You're different from what you used to be," said Annie, with her eyes full of tears; "you used to seem ever so much kinder."

"I didn't mean to be unkind, Annie," said Mark, his heart softening at the sight of his playfellow's tears, for after all it was rather hard to visit her father's faults upon her innocent head; still he did not feel inclined to thaw yet. "I've been so busy lately; there's such a lot to do."

"You've not such a lot to do just now," said the little girl pettishly, "and you always go part of the same way that I do, but you never go with us now, and yesterday I'd a real fright, for the great dog at Lucas's came out, and Jim and Hugh ran away and left me alone with Lizzie, and if a man hadn't come out I don't know what we should have done; you used always to take us past there, because of the dog, you know."

"But you're getting too big to mind the dog,"

said Mark; "you ought to be able to go that little way alone."

"It isn't a little way; it's going on for three miles; we come farther than any children but the Poitiers, and they come with us generally."

"There are enough of you to take care of each other," said Mark; but still his heart smote him for his unkindness to his little companion.

At this moment Mr. Emerson appeared and unlocked the door, and in rushed the children, who were not sorry to get out of the cold, though some of them had been amusing themselves at hop-scotch in the playground.

Mr. Emerson had carried one of his plans out; he had got the boys to make a little garden round the school, which, notwithstanding straight paths, looked bright in the autumn, though the beds were as yet entirely filled with the large maiden-hair fern and lastrea from the bush, with the moccasin flower and other wild but scentless woodland beauties. The beds were empty, but still a source of amusement for the boys, who tried over how many of them they could jump at one leap without touching the border.

The forms were soon full, and for some hours nothing was heard but the sound of voices reading or repeating a lesson. All was quiet industry, for though Mr. Emerson was so kind out of school, he could be strict enough at proper times and seasons, and the children all recognised the fact.

Midday came, and the children prepared for their game in the playground, and dinner, which all had brought with them; but on opening the door what was their dismay to find the ground already deeply covered with newly fallen snow !

After the first surprise they were delighted. The Canadian snow is so hard and crisp that it does not wet like English snow; you may be covered with it when out, but it does not melt till you get into a warm room.

The Canadians make use of their snow for purposes of cleanliness; they use it instead of wet tea-leaves for their carpets, and nothing is so good for brushing stuff or cloth clothes with, so that several of the children who had been accustomed to rolling in the snow, and then being well

brushed, took kindly to the soft white carpet lying at their feet.

"I've thought of capital fun for this afternoon," said one of the boys. "There's the slope yonder, down which you rolled Ned Barton last summer, Mark ; let us roll one after another down that."

No sooner said than done, and soon all the children were busy with their new game, amid shouts and peals of laughter, for the snow was only a few inches deep ; though the clouds looked heavy, it had stopped falling for a time.

When it was time to begin lessons again Mr. Emerson looked rather grave, and called Mark aside.

"I can't make up my mind about the weather," he said ; "if you think we are going to have more snow, it will be almost better to send the children home ; some of them have so far to go."

"My grandfather said this morning we should have snow, but it seems to have stopped now ; I don't know that we shall have more."

"Well, I daresay you know best what will happen in this part of the country ; I should have thought myself that we were in for a very heavy storm."

"Oh, I don't think so," said Mark; "look, the clouds are quite breaking over that fir; we may not have any more snow for a day or two—it's too early yet; we scarcely have any deep snow till towards Christmas, and this is only the second of December."

Mr. Emerson re-entered the school, which was rather in an uproar, for the children were brushing the snow from each other, and there was a great deal of fun and laughter going on, but it ceased immediately on Mr. Emerson crying "Silence!" and soon the conning of lessons was the only sound.

Once or twice Mr. Emerson went to look out, but all was quiet, and the snow had ceased to fall, so after his third visit he began to think his alarms needless, and threw himself with all his heart into a history lesson which he was giving, and in which the children became really interested, so vivid was the picture he gave of the scenes and events of the portion of which they were reading.

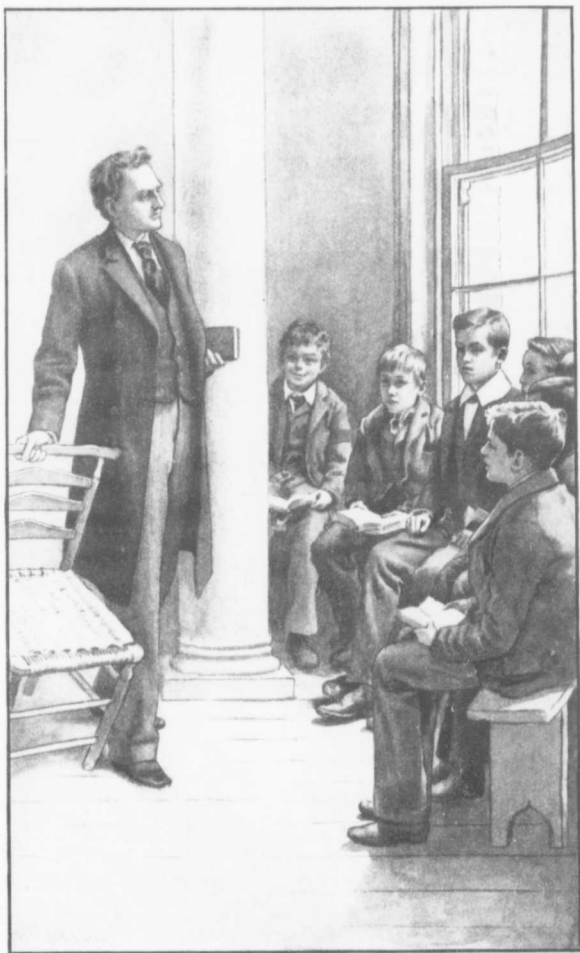
CHAPTER XVII

SNOWBOUND

THE history lesson was over, the boys yawned and stretched themselves after their unwonted attention, the girls whispered one to the other. Mr. Emerson put his book back into his desk, and going to the school-house door looked out, whilst a breath of cold air swept round the school-room. After a minute the master called Mark to his side, and his voice was rather anxious. Mark joined him at the door.

"What is it, sir?"

Then he gave a low whistle of surprise. During the history lesson the snow had come down with its noiseless fall, and where only an inch or two of snow had been it was now two feet deep, and was still falling so thick and fast that it was



"COULD YOU NOT THINK OF SOMETHING TO TELL US, SIR?"



impossible to see more than a few feet before them.

"What can we do, Mark ? It will be impossible to send the children home in such weather."

"It won't last for long at this rate, sir. It will pass if we can keep them back."

"Well, we must do what we can. If we look out for the mail stage we may pack a few of them off in that way, and I must take the children to the creek, and you could take those that go your way. But I don't think we can get away at all if this goes on ; it will soon be too deep for walking in."

"Could you not think of something to tell us, sir, that would keep them all quiet till the storm passes ? It isn't likely to last so early in the season."

"Well," said Mr. Emerson, after a minute's thought, "one thing is certain. You could not any of you leave at present, so you must make yourselves as happy as you can. Perhaps some of the parents of the children may fetch them."

"Could you not think of something to tell us, whilst we are waiting ?" said Mark again.

Mr. Emerson had closed the door and stood leaning against his desk, whilst the rest of the children looked on inquiringly. He thought for some minutes, but do what he would he could not think of anything which was not connected with snow accidents. He remembered having heard the winter before of a poor dog having been frozen as it was trying to get to a place of shelter, and being found in the morning stiff and stark, with one little paw raised in a last effort. He remembered having heard of a whole school lost in the snow on their way home the winter before, which had been unusually severe. He had himself been paying some New Year's calls on the very day when the storm was at its worst, and did not forget what the difficulties had been, even in a town, in forcing his way through the high drifts in that storm.

Such were the only tales which would come to him, and as he by no means wished to alarm his scholars, he kept them to himself; but story-telling was impossible. He was just about to say so when the school-house door was opened, and a man entered in full winter dress, with his cap

carefully tied over his ears, to keep them from being frost-bitten, his coat girdled with a red scarf round his waist ; moccasins, and huge gloves.

"I've come for my children," he said ; "I thought I'd better bring the sleigh along, as they can't walk. If you've any others for our parts I'll take them, but they must make haste, for it's difficult work getting along, with no track, and the snow so drifting."

Mr. Emerson called him aside.

"What had I better do ? I can't send the children home in such weather."

"No, that you couldn't ; it would be as much as their lives were worth. I think it will take you a good half-hour to get to Mr. Seymour's yourself ; I should think likely enough the parents would fetch them."

"And if they don't, and I have to keep them here all night, what will the end of it be ?" said Mr. Emerson in a tone of great anxiety.

"How are you off for wood ?"

"Oh, we've a good lot, but then there will be nothing to give the children to eat, and it's hard for the little things to sit up all night."

"It would be still harder for them to be lost in the snow. No, likely enough the parents of most will fetch them, and if you'll take my advice you'll stay where you are for the present. As luck would have it I was taking some bread to Mr. Smart's—his wife always gets us to bake for her; she is a poor, helpless sort of body who does not know much of managing, but I can't get there because of the drift—it's up four feet already; so I'll leave that with you; I mustn't stay now."

He began carrying the children to the sleigh, and when the master saw how deep the snow was, how the farmer sank in it up to his knees, and the length of time it took him to carry his burdens, he felt that his advice was good.

The boys from Talbot's Creek scrambled into the sleigh themselves of course, then there was the turning to go home; the horses plunged into the drift, the snow dashing over their heads, Mr. Talbot doing his best to soothe and encourage them with his voice.

"We must certainly make up our minds to remain here," the master thought; so, calling the

children round him, he explained to them what had happened.

"We must make a picnic of it," he said, "and if we keep up a good fire we shall manage pretty well."

The children were most of them delighted ; one little girl cried from fright, for she did not relish the idea of being away from her home and warm bed for the night. One boy said in a tone of great sorrow—

"I'm pretty nearly sure father'll fetch me, and it would be such a lark to stay here with you all !"

"I'd rather have larks of another description," said the master ; "you must make up your minds to a hungry time, as, unless some of you go, there won't be much bread."

At this moment fresh sleigh bells were heard, and another sleigh drove up.

In the course of the next hour twenty-five out of the thirty children were carried off. It was now getting quite dusk.

"I know father won't fetch me," said little Annie Pratt sadly. "He's gone to Sherborne till to-morrow, and taken two horses and the big

sleigh, and the other horse is sick. I must stay all night, I suppose."

"Never mind, Annie, we'll get on famously, and to-morrow morning the snow will stop, and we will get home."

So the party settled down to await what the next few hours might bring forth; the children, in the ignorance of childhood, considered such an out-of-the-way event as amusing as a camping-out, and only feared lest they might also be fetched by some anxious parent.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN DANGER

MR. EMERSON was particularly anxious to prevent anything like a panic, and he wanted the children to keep warm, so he made them play all sorts of games, and the old school-house rang with their laughter.

He made the most fun he could out of the picnic, but they were all dreadfully thirsty, for of course there was no water to drink, and no vessels to melt the snow in, and snow eaten does not quench thirst.

"We shall have to drink the ink," said Mark, with a sly twinkle in his eyes.

"I don't think that would quite do; the materials of which it is made are not exactly wholesome."

"We might fill the wood-box with snow and melt it that way," said Mark.

"Not a bad notion, Mark, though the wood-box is very dirty ; but we will do our best to clean it."

It was quite an amusement and occupation filling the wood-box, but the snow took a long time to melt. Mark came and called Mr. Emerson aside.

"It's stopped snowing, and it's a moonlight night, sir ; would it be safe to go home ?"

"I think not ; better wait now till to-morrow. Very likely by that time they will send for the rest of the children. We are safe here, though not quite comfortable."

"Do you think we are safe, sir ?"

"What do you mean. We can't starve during the next few hours ; we shall get relieved to-morrow."

"Do you remember what you said when I climbed on the bell turret last summer ?"

"Yes, that it was not strong enough even for your light weight."

"Well, I think the snow is shoving the house down ; it's drifted all on one side of the roof, and

I think if we've any more the crazy old building will come down."

"Then they can't have done more than make it a bit decent. Last year I thought they'd repaired it; but you are right, there is less danger for us out in the snow than here. At any rate, unless we have more snow it'll stand well enough. I'll take one of the children and get to Mr. Seymour's, and we'll come back for the rest of you."

"We couldn't take more than one child each," said Mark, "and it would not do to leave the rest alone, and they're too small to walk. I think what you say is true; you're taller, and would get through quicker, so I'll remain; but I wish we had seen what was happening sooner."

"It's too late to wish, we must act," said the master. "I think if we could prop up the wall from the inside with the forms balanced on end and pushed in place by my desk it would be some help."

"We might use the desk at one end and the wood-box full of wood at the other, but I can do that whilst you go; it will save time. Who will you take?"

"Little Mary Grey, she's weaker than the rest, and her mother's a widow, and has none beside her ; we mustn't dawdle."

Mary was called out of the group who sat huddling round the stove, looking rather forlorn and scared, for they caught enough of what was being said to know there was some danger hanging over them, though they did not know what. It only took a few minutes for Mark to wrap the little girl up, whilst Mr. Emerson was making a temporary prop for the wall.

"There, that'll be safe for a time if we have no more snow," he said. "It's a great comfort, Mark, to be able to leave you to take my place ; I wish it could have been otherwise, nevertheless. Don't let the fire go down."

"All right, sir." In another minute Mr. Emerson, with his little scholar in his arms, had started, but in the uncertain light the first step plunged him in the drift up to his waist, and he got out with difficulty ; he walked or rather waded along more cautiously, prudence restraining him whilst anxiety urged him on.

Even alone it would have been hard work. It

seemed marvellous that the snow could have fallen in such quantities ; but it was not so much the quantity as the way in which it drifted which caused the difficulty and risk.

The wind was very high, and beat on Mr. Emerson's back with icy chilliness. As he got near to the snake fence leading from the school-house to the road, he began to wonder whether Widow Lawrence's would not be nearer than Mr. Seymour's ; but then he remembered he could get no help there, which was what he wanted, so he stuck to his first idea. It seemed to him that already he had been some hours struggling through the drift without making much way, when the snow began to fall ; then he noticed a well which he knew was close to Mr. Seymour's ; this cheered his heart. Weary and almost exhausted, he struggled on, and in a few minutes reached the Parsonage door in safety.

"Mr. Seymour," he exclaimed, as he entered the small parlour with his snowy burden, "we must go off to the school-house at once, if you can come. I have left four of the children there

with Mark Acton, and there is every chance the building will blow down on them."

"You don't say so!" cried Mr. Seymour, jumping up and beginning to wrap up, whilst his wife took little Mary in her arms and removed her snowy things. It had taken Mr. Emerson nearly half an hour to come the distance which he could usually traverse in ten minutes, and he was very much exhausted.

"Take some hot coffee before starting," said Mr. Seymour; "it will save you time in the end, by putting fresh strength into you"—advice which the master thought it well to follow.

It was very fortunate that two strong, burly farmers had sheltered themselves from the violence of the storm at the Parsonage; their weary horses were put into the sleighs again, and in a quarter of an hour the whole party of men were on their way to the school. But they found it very much harder work than Mr. Emerson had done; the storm raged more furiously than ever, sweeping the snow in the faces of themselves and their horses with blinding force. Trees were falling round them on all sides, rushing and

roaring as they gave way to the will of the fierce December wind.

"What will become of those poor children if one of these trees should fall against the school-house?" said Mr. Emerson.

"We can only leave them in God's hands, in whose keeping they are safe," said Mr. Seymour. And both the men bowed their heads in prayer as the storm swept more wildly round them.

The horses could scarcely go even at a foot's pace, and they had to beat the track out; and scarcely were they passed when all traces of their passage were swept away. Several times the men had to get out to drag the horses out of some drift in which they were struggling, and to lift the sledge out of the place where it was jammed.

But at length, in spite of the difficulties, they came in sight of the school. They fastened the horses up to the fence, though there was little enough fear of the poor beasts moving, and scrambled over the fence; but scarcely had they reached it when a gigantic fir swept across the playground; the stem fell beyond the school, but the boughs struck upon the already overladen

roof. To the men's horror, before they could reach the door the whole building fell over.

In the meantime, as soon as Mr. Emerson had left him, Mark, who was a quick-witted boy, began to think how he could best ward off the danger, for he saw in what a rickety condition the building was.

He put two or three of the strongest forms as supports, and then made a species of pent-house with the remainder of the desks at the further side of the room, to which he persuaded the rest of the children to creep, fancying that this might prove some sort of protection against the falling roofs and boards.

He made all the children help ; it kept them quiet, and stopped them from thinking, and young as they were they were quite conscious that there was something to fear.

"We had better put on all our things, so as to be ready when Mr. Emerson comes," he said, when he had done all that seemed to him possible to ward off danger ; so they all dressed and got under their pent roof. Mark was the last to go in. He stood looking at the stove. The idea

had suddenly flashed into his mind that if anything happened the lighted stove would be an additional cause of danger.

He looked at the wall ; it was sloping more and more, though its decline was gradual ; but the maps now hung out from the wall at the bottom several inches. He calculated by a large map of America how much it had yielded since Mr. Emerson left.

"No, I will leave the stove as it is ; if anything happened with it in full work it would be worse than anything," he said to himself.

"But, Mark," said a little voice at his elbow, "Mr. Emerson said you were to keep it up."

It was not conscience, but Annie Pratt who spoke.

"Yes, Annie, but I don't think he ever noticed what I do now. If the house comes down, it will be sure to catch fire if the stove is burning."

"I think we ought to do what we're told," said Annie doubtfully.

Mark wavered. He got some wood ready, then put it down, and thought—doubted. Finally he opened the stove door, and without allowing

himself another moment for thought he threw the logs on, then bolted the door with care.

"Now, Annie, we had better get behind our barricade," he said.

"What a fearful wind it is, Mark! Don't you feel frightened?" said Annie, shivering as the wind roared over the house.

"Oh, Mark, I'm so frightened!" said another of the children, who was crying for fear.

"Let us pray to God to keep us," said Annie, and, clinging together, the small group repeated the Lord's Prayer.

They had scarcely reached the middle of it when Mark cried out, "Down with you all! down with you!"

The next moment came the fall of the Red School-house, and in another minute the danger Mark had feared had come to pass—the fallen stove had set the school-house on fire.

CHAPTER XIX

THE END

THE children in the house and the men outside saw what had happened at the same time. The children clung to each other in fear under their very insecure barricade, whilst the "fire wave" shot up with a lurid glare into the dark, wintry sky.

Mr. Seymour and Mr. Emerson rushed forward to the side of the school where the drift was least, hoping to remove the fallen timbers in time ; but had it not been for Mark's obedience to Mr. Emerson's directions it is doubtful whether they would have succeeded. As it happened that secured the safety of the whole party.

Some men from the Sherborne Fair were passing along the turnpike ; ordinarily they would

have turned off without being near enough to the school-house to know what was happening, but their attention was attracted by the vivid light in that direction. Feeling that something must have happened, they urged their horses towards the wooden building, in spite of the storm, which raged more fearfully than ever. At the sight of the two sleighs standing there they hitched their horses up to the post, and made for the scene of the fire.

All was silent in the school-house. The children were too utterly terrified even to scream. The four men who had arrived first were working wildly to remove the fallen timbers before the fire should reach the spot, for it was spreading gradually, though slowly. Happily they had brought tools down with them, and their efforts were spurred on by Mark's shouting out to them that so far they were all right ; but by this time the children had recovered from their first fright, and were shrieking and crying piteously in a manner which went to the hearts of those who were labouring for their deliverance.

The addition to the band of labourers made

the work go on much more rapidly, but it seemed almost labouring against time. The fire was curling and creeping closer and closer, and the children already felt its hot wind sweeping past them.

Providentially the men had begun removing the timbers at the point where they were supported by the end of Mark's barricade. Just when it seemed that the case was hopeless, they dragged away the woodwork which had covered the end; in a few minutes more the children were pulled out, alive, though all more or less injured. Tenderly and gently they carried them to the sleighs, and then started on their homeward road, a journey easier now since the wind was with them, not against them.

Mark was the most injured of the party. In trying to protect Annie from the falling roof—for they were scarcely under the barricade when it gave way—the corner of the frail barrier was dashed against him, and as he happened to be holding his arm out for the little girl's shelter, it was broken by the shock.

The barricade had been thrown forward by the

fall of the roof, and had injured all the children more or less, although not so seriously as would have been the case had the whole building fallen upon them.

Mr. Seymour had remained behind with five of the men to see the fire fairly out, lest it should spread ; not that there was much danger in the snow-clad condition of the country. Indeed, had it not been that one side of the school was quite free of snow owing to the drift, it is not likely it would have caught fire at all. As soon as the danger was over these men followed to the Parsonage, which they found turned into a temporary hospital. As they came in Mrs. Seymour was binding up little Annie's eye, which had been badly bruised. One of the men started forward—

"Why, Annie, child, it's never you ! What a mercy it is we came the way we did !"

"Father !" cried Annie, bursting into tears again at the thought of the dreadful fear of the last few hours.

"Come, you mustn't cry, Annie ; it'll make your eye worse," said Mrs. Seymour soothingly.

"It's a mercy the beam did not strike her more heavily, or she'd not be here now," she said, turning to Mr. Pratt.

"Mark put out his arm to stop it when he saw it coming," sobbed Annie. "I expect that's how he broke his arm."

"Stuff and nonsense!" growled Mark gruffly.

Mr. Emerson set Mark's arm to the best of his ability, for necessity had made him, as he once declared, "Jack of all trades"—we will not add, "master of none." His patient was now struggling hard against the feeling of deadly faintness with which he had battled so long for the sake of his young companions. He had fainted immediately on feeling that the responsibility was off his shoulders, but the pain of having his arm set had roused him a little; still Mr. Emerson had only time to carry him to the room where he had been ill so long, before he became insensible again.

Mr. Pratt had helped to move him, and as he put him in the bed which had been prepared for him, he could not help saying, "Well, after all, I've been hard upon Mark Acton; there's a great

deal more good in him than I'd have believed possible," which he meant for high praise, but Mr. Emerson thought it far less than the occasion demanded, seeing that Mark had saved the life of the farmer's only child.

By the time the snow was fit for sleighs to travel on with comfort, all the children were sent home. Annie had a dreadfully black eye, and the others were more or less bruised ; but even Mark was taken back to his grandparents, who were feeling most anxious about his safety, since in the dazzling whiteness around, the flames of the old school-house had been seen for a great distance. The other children were also received by their relations with the greatest thankfulness, as almost restored to them from the dead.

Of course it was some time before Mark was able to use his arm, and the enforced idleness was a great trial to one of his active nature. But on the whole it was a bright period in his life. He felt deeply thankful that he had been able to save little Annie, and had gained the respect of those around him. Very different were his feelings from those after poor Frank's death, when

the sense of all he had to do in the matter had overwhelmed him in despair, and but for Mr. Emerson he would have given up all hopes of being better.

Now he knew that he had pleased his grandparents, and his father and mother, and that God had given him a chance to redeem the past, and to begin a noble and manly life.

* * * * *

There was a very large New Year's party held at Mr. Pratt's very early in January. All the people in the neighbourhood were there, and the Actons among others. Mark looked still somewhat pale, and wore his arm in a sling, and it must be owned his friends and neighbours did their best to spoil him by making him quite the hero of the night. In the course of the evening there was a good deal of talk amongst the men of the party who were ratepayers as to the raising of the new school-house, which it had been decided must be built as soon as the weather permitted.

"There's something we want even more than a school," said Mr. Seymour.

"What's that?"

"A church where we can teach our young people what is more the groundwork of a good citizen's character than any learning of a secular kind—how he may best serve God, and what is the bond of union which leads us to love our neighbour as ourself."

And this idea, born of the destruction and rebuilding of the old Red School-house, was in course of time carried out. A pretty wooden church stands near where Frank Russell was buried, and Mark had a great hand both in building and in collecting funds for its support.

He has turned out a fine fellow after all, and perhaps there is no one more respected in the neighbourhood of Sherborne than "The Wild Boy."

THE END.

