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THE CRIMSON SIGN

By

H. A. CODY

Author of "The Frontiersman," "Glen of the High North,"
"The King's Arrow," "The Master Revenge," "The Girl at Bullet Lake,"
"The Touch of Abner," Etc.

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TO
THANE
MY LITTLE GRANDSON
THIS BOOK
IS
AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

FOREWORD

Someone has said that history is fiction, or words to that effect. This is a rash statement. It is truer to say that history is mixed, more or less, with fiction. The historical novelist candidly uses both. Many writers have done so, and are doing it to-day. A scrap of history here, a juggling with dates there, compounded with a liberal supply of fiction, make up their brain creations. For to them the story is the thing, although bits of history are thrown in to give zest and a semblance of reality. And this method is not altogether without value. People reading fragments of history, highly colored though they may be, obtain fleeting glimpses of other days, other manners, and are often induced to study those periods in more solid and enduring works. Henty mingled fiction with history, and so did Sir Walter Scott. Many have entered the grand palaces of history through the lowly porches of the so-called historical novels.

Such is my humble aim. This book deals with incidents in the history of Acadia which have been almost overlooked in the press of more stirring and spectacular events elsewhere. Villebon in his little log fort on the Nashwaak, a tributary of the Saint John River, trying to govern a vast wilderness with but a handful of men, is pathetically real. The D'Armours brothers, the first farmers on the river, come before us from the past as examples of the trials of those early pioneers. And Madame Louise, called the "Acadian Cleopatra," rises as a living personality, who gave the authorities no end of trouble. The beautiful and adventurous Judith la Valliere, betrothed to Villieu, lieutenant to Villebon, deserves a high place among the brave women of Acadia. The rangers, the *Coureurs de bois*, were not all renegades, but many of them were men of noble birth and character who chafed at the cramping restraints of rulers, and fled to the woods for freedom of mind and body. The rest may be considered as fiction, but to the discerning mind its reality is obvious. Upon that period, not only of adventure and romance, but of suspicion, intrigue and cruelty, the imagination may be allowed to play where history is silent.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
I. WHEN THE RAIDERS RETURNED	1
II. THE COMMANDER	11
III. AN ACADIAN CLEOPATRA	21
IV. DOWN BY THE RIVER	29
V. PIERRE, THE HUNCHBACK	37
VI. WHEN THE GLASS SHATTERED	47
VII. AT THE JEMSEG	57
VIII. THE TRAIL OF HOPE	66
IX. HUMAN DEVILS	77
X. JUDITH LA VALLIERE	87
XI. BY THE CRIMSON SIGN!	94
XII. PETE KING'S VOW	102
XIII. THE BEACON LIGHT	110
XIV. THE CHALLENGE OF LOVE	120
XV. LOYALTY	129
XVI. STARTLING NEWS	140
XVII. AN ARROW FALLS	148
XVIII. AN ENEMY VISITS THE FORT	156
XIX. READY FOR THE BRIDE	166
XX. ASK VILLIEU	176
XXI. IN PERIL OF WATER	190
XXII. THE ENEMY IS NEAR	199
XXIII. THE NIGHT ALARM	209
XXIV. AN ARROW STRIKES	218
XXV. AN END TO WAITING	226
XXVI. A STARTLING ORDER	233
XXVII. SERIOUS NEWS	246
XXVIII. FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH	254
XXIX. TEMPTED	263
XXX. TRAPPED	271
XXXI. IN THE NICK OF TIME	281
XXXII. THE RANGERS STRIKE	288
XXXIII. TILL DEATH	296

THE CRIMSON SIGN

CHAPTER I

WHEN THE RAIDERS RETURNED

He was perched high upon the branch of a towering pine tree, his eyes fixed upon the river which wound like a silver thread through the forest wilderness. There were trees everywhere, trees covering the arching hills, trees in the crouching valleys and standing like great sentinels along the river's banks. No sign of human life could be seen, and silence reigned supreme along the Saint John River in Acadia in the summer of sixteen hundred and ninety-six.

Seeing nothing of importance along that great inland waterway, Grey Martell was about to leave his lofty position when a large eagle swept by on strong majestic pinions, headed westward. It fascinated the watcher and thrilled his soul with a sudden interest.

"Ah, if I could only fly like that, it wouldn't take me long to be away from here!" he exclaimed. "At the rate that fellow's travelling it shouldn't take him long to reach Fort Reliance. I wonder if Helen will see him."

Reseating himself upon the branch which he had partly left, he thrust his hand into a pocket of his buckskin trousers and brought forth a piece of worn soiled paper. As he unfolded this, several capital letters were exposed to view. They formed no words, and seemed meaningless. But to the young man they evidently meant a great deal, for his eyes brightened as he looked at them. Then a smile overspread his healthy sun-browned face.

"Wouldn't Peter King like to know the meaning of these words. But he never will, although he has tried hard to find out. He can boast all he likes about his knowledge of the woods and their secrets, but he can't understand these. Poor Pete!"

A low whistle drifted up through the branches of the pine, causing Grey to thrust the paper back into his pocket. In another minute he was descending the tree from limb to limb. Swift and noiseless as a panther he moved, and when at length he dropped upon the ground he looked cautiously around. This was due to the spirit of alertness which had been instilled into his soul during the years of his wilderness life. When unseen dangers lurked on every side caution was necessary. And it was so now when at any minute the hated enemy might appear.

As Grey Martell stood in this watching attitude, he presented a striking picture. Tall, lithe, and straight as an arrow, his well-shaped head poised upon strong square shoulders gave him a commanding appearance. The sleeves of his brown shirt were rolled to the elbows, exposing sun-tanned arms of great muscular strength. A light deer-skin cap rested jauntily upon his head, on the right side of which was fastened a small blood-red feather. This distinguishing mark was known far and wide, a pride to all entitled to wear it, but a menace to all enemies of the League of the Crimson Sign.

Again came the whistle, low and commanding. Grey smiled as he turned, glided among the trees and made his way carefully down a steep bank. He stopped at last by the side of a man sitting on a log holding a frying-pan over some hot coals. Close by flowed a placid stream, a tributary to the main river. A birchbark canoe, drawn up on the shore, contained several bundles of provisions and blankets, while two muskets were lying nearby ready for any emergency.

"Is supper ready?" Grey asked. "That meat smells good."

"And it's as good as it smells, my boy. It's as tender as a chicken. Try a piece."

Pete King was a powerfully-built man, with great chest and muscular arms. His wealth of iron-grey hair, beard trimmed to a point, and large moustache gave him the appearance of a Viking warrior of olden days. He was dressed in an old well-worn buckskin suit, and his feet were encased in deer-skin moccasins. His forehead, though not high, was broad, and his shaggy eyebrows formed a heavy canopy above his keen gray eyes which peered watchfully over his arching rampart-like nose. He was a king in more than name. He was a monarch among men, where strength, endurance and a shrewd active mind counted for more than a royal sceptre held in a jewelled hand.

As Grey began his attack upon the meat and a slice of coarse bread well soaked in gravy, Pete watched him with a humorous twinkle in his eyes.

"I was afraid you had tumbled out of that pine, my boy."

"What made you think that, Pete?"

"A mighty good reason. When a lad like you sits dreaming high up in a tree, there's no telling what might happen."

"But I wasn't dreaming, Pete. I was watching the river, as you ordered."

"And didn't see anything?"

"Nothing of the enemy. But I saw a great eagle flying westward."

"And your thoughts went with it, I suppose?"

"They did, and if I had wings like that bird I'd soon be out of here."

"Yes, I know. You've often told me that before. And you always feel worse after you get a letter from your dream, though it's been some time since you got the last one. It must have had more love-charm in it than the others, for it's taken longer to wear off."

"Wouldn't you like to know what it's all about, Pete?"

"Oh, I can guess pretty well. But how you can make sense out of that jumble of letters is more than I can understand."

Grey laughed as he laid his iron plate upon the ground and drew the letter from his pocket.

"I'm going to tell you something about this, Pete. It is our code system. Only Helen and I know what these letters mean. We have been communicating with each other in this way ever since our fathers became enemies, and Colonel Garland refused to let me visit Fort Reliance."

"It's a wonder the Colonel didn't find out and stop the letters."

"Oh, we have good friends who are helping us. The soldiers at the Fort would do anything for Helen."

"H'm, trust a woman to bewitch men. It won't be well for them if the Colonel ever hears. He's a very stern man."

"Indeed he is, and that was the cause of the trouble with my father. In fact, they are both hot-headed, and—"

"Yes, yes, I know all about that, my boy. Your father was perfectly right, though, in asking the Colonel to send soldiers to protect his trading post from the French and the Indians. But it's none of my business why the Colonel refused. Now, let me hear what that girl has to say."

Grey smiled a little at his companion's curiosity, and remained silent for a while.

"All right, you needn't tell me if you don't want to," Pete declared. "I don't care. Anyway, an old man such as I am should not bother about a silly love letter."

"It's interesting, though, and I know you are anxious to hear. Helen says it's a shame that we have to be kept apart and can't see each other because our fathers have quarrelled. She would like to run away and come here."

"Well, well! So that's what she says, eh? Come here! Lord! What would we do with her?"

"I guess you needn't worry, Pete. She can't come, so that's the end of it."

"True, true, and I'm mighty glad. A girl would turn the heads of our men, and they'd soon be fighting with one another over her. And, besides, we're living too risky a life to be bothered with a girl. But, there, that reminds me, you'd better have another look down the river. We can't tell what minute the raiders might show up. They've been gone about a month, and we've been hanging around here for almost a week. And no matter how they return, it won't be easy for us. If they've been successful, they'll be so full of cussed impudence and pride that they'll try to drive us out. And if they are defeated, they'll strive to wreak their revenge upon us."

"But we'll be able for them, Pete," Grey reminded. "Remember the Crimson Sign."

"I know that, my boy. I'm not forgetting the blood-red feather. It was a bright idea of mine, and it's worked well. It's a good sign for our League. Yes, light and swift as a feather in an eagle's wing must every member be. And each has his dyed with his own blood."

Grey smiled as he lifted his cap from his head and stroked the little emblem.

"It was a proud day for me, Pete, when I earned this."

"And to me, as well, lad. But I was prouder of the way you bore the blood-letting. You stood it like an old ranger, and never winced, although I knew it hurt. It made you one of us by the tie of blood. And by this Crimson Sign we are going to win this land and establish peace and justice in the place of tyranny and war."

"Do you think we can ever do it, Pete?"

"Do it? Certainly we shall. We are steadily winning the confidence of the Indians. They are getting tired of the way Villebon has treated them. He doesn't give them as much as we do for their furs. And, besides, he takes them off on those raids along the New England coast which they do not like. We shall soon be so strong that Villebon will be forced to leave."

"He's a very determined man, though, and he will fight hard to hold this country."

"Oh, he's only a tool. It's old Count Frontenac who is driving him on, and back of him is King Louis of France with his gang of mistresses. I've heard it said that a woman rules the King from her bedchamber. Yes, when there's any trouble you may depend upon it there's a woman somewhere back of it all."

"But surely all trouble is not started by women, Pete."

"Maybe not all, but most of it. And it's a female that's unsettling your mind and making you restless."

Grey's eyes opened wide in amazement, for he had never heard Pete King speak in such a manner before. The old ranger noticed his surprise and smiled.

"There, that's enough about women, my lad. We have other things to think about now. Get away to your look-out."

"I have been perched upon that old pine for the last week, and am getting sick and tired of the job."

"I suppose you are. But you'll have to keep it up a little longer. If I could climb like you I'd take your place once in a while. But I'm too clumsy and stiff, and my head gets unsteady when I go too high. I'll do my part on the ground while you do yours in the air. But don't lose your head dreaming about that girl. Many a better man than you has had a bad fall through thinking too much about women."

"Are you speaking from experience?" Grey laughingly bantered. "You have hinted several times about the same thing."

Pete King made no reply, but a sober expression came into his eyes as he looked out over the river. Grey watched him for a few seconds, and then without another word sped up the bank and disappeared among the trees. Slowly Pete gathered up the few dishes, carried them to the shore and washed them, using sand for soap. He was in a most thoughtful mood, and after his dish-washing was over, he seated himself upon a big stone and remained lost in thought.

As he sat there he was no longer Pete King, the daring leader of the League of the Crimson Sign, the dread of Villebon and his men at the Fort on the Nashwaak. He was a young man again, in Old England, living in a cosey vine-clad cottage, proud of his comely wife and fair-haired boy. But that was long ago, and what changes had taken place since then! Instead of the life he had planned, he was nothing now but a forest ranger, leading a band of men as reckless as himself. And it was all because of one woman who had proven unfaithful. His face hardened as he thought of her. Then a softer expression came into his eyes as he remembered the boy. It was a mercy, perhaps, that he had been taken before he was old enough to know of his mother's shame. Often the longing had come into Pete's heart to visit his old home, go to the graveyard and look upon the little mound where his child had been buried. It came to him again as he sat there by the river. He saw the place, the old stone church, covered with ivy, the trees and that little grave.

He was aroused from his reverie by Grey's sudden appearance as he came bounding towards him from among the trees.

"They're coming, Pete!"

The old ranger was on his feet in an instant.

"Where?"

"Above Point Aux Chenes."

"Ah! They'll soon be here, then. We must hide the canoe. There is no time to lose."

Quickly covering the last remnants of hot coals with sand, and gathering up their few belongings which were lying about, they bore the craft speedily up among the trees and concealed it in a deep gully under a tangle of low thick firs and spruces.

"That's good," Pete declared. "I've had my eye on this spot for some time. Let's get down to the river and watch for the raiders."

With muskets in their hands, they sped among the trees and stopped only when the bright sheen of water beyond met their eyes. They advanced more cautiously now, and when they came to the top of the bank they looked keenly down stream. In the distance, away to the left, they saw the raiders. Crouching low, they crept forward and took up their position behind a big rock surrounded by a mass of bushes. This was an excellent hiding place, as from here they could watch quite unobserved.

Silently and swiftly the flotilla of war canoes swept up stream, wedge-like in shape, resembling the formation of a great flock of wild geese winging northward. As the leading canoes approached, the watchers behind the rock crouched still lower.

"Something's happened to them," Pete whispered. "They've had a reverse. I can tell it by their silence. Villieu and Foulette are in those leading canoes. I wish I could see their faces. And won't Villebon raise hell when they reach the Fort."

"Most likely he'll try to take revenge upon us," Grey replied.

"I wouldn't be surprised, for he'll have to do something to satisfy old Frontenac. That devil's back of this whole raiding business."

The canoes were now opposite the big rock, and were keeping close to the western shore in order to avoid the ebbing tide which here was running strong. The forms of the men swaying to their paddles could be easily discerned, although their faces could not be clearly observed at such a distance. There were thirty crafts in all, containing about two hundred men, most of whom were Indians. Pete watched them with critical, contemptuous eyes.

"The skunks!" he growled. "It seems to me they have a captive, and a woman, at that."

"Where?" Grey asked.

"In that canoe to the left of the leading one. Don't you see her?"

"I do, and it is a woman, Pete. I can only see her head and shoulders."

"May God help her, lad, whoever she is. And if she's young and beautiful she's doomed among those devils."

Grey made no reply, but kept his eyes fixed upon that crouching figure so long as the canoes were in sight. He wondered who she was, and what the raiders intended to do with her. A great desire came into his heart to go to her rescue. He mentioned it to his companion.

"I was thinking of the same thing myself," the old ranger replied. "She must be an English woman, so it's our duty to do all we can to save her from those devils. But we'll need help, so let us get on our way back to the Saganic. We've got nasty work ahead, it seems to me, and we have no time to lose. Most likely Villebon will soon be on the move against us, so we must be ready."

CHAPTER II

THE COMMANDER

The commander of Fort St. Joseph on the Nashwaak River was greatly troubled as he sat in his office poring over several papers lying on the table before him. They had been brought that day by a courier from Quebec, and contained special instructions from Count Frontenac. One, especially, caused his brow to knit with perplexity and his keen eyes to gleam with anger.

"The Governor is asking the impossible," he muttered. "He demands that I exert greater efforts to harry the New England coast and destroy the English forts. Mon Dieu! haven't I done everything in my power, and the raiders I sent thither have now come back practically defeated. The Indians are restless and want to return to the Meductic. I can't keep them any longer. What am I to do? I have explained my situation to the Governor, but he is merciless."

The commander rose to his feet, walked across the room to a window near the door and watched the scene in the large square outside. There he beheld a long row of Indians squatting upon the ground enjoying the food that was being given to them by a number of soldiers. An expression of annoyance overspread his face. To have their bodily appetites satisfied was all that interested these savages. So long as they were well supplied with food and presents they professed to be his friends. But he knew from considerable experience that on the slightest pretext they might turn against him and join the English. He had held them so far, but how long that would continue he could not tell. After this unsuccessful raid they were restless and anxious to return to their villages.

Sieur de Villebon remained at the window for some time in deep thought. His well-proportioned form was drawn to its full height, and his strong intellectual face was marked with care. He was dressed in full uniform, in keeping with his position, in order to impress the Indians. His grand appearance, wonderful dress, courteous manner and friendly words appealed strongly to their simple minds. But they also knew that behind his outward display and suave speech was a man of indomitable courage, with a heart of steel and a firm inflexible will, who could be very gentle to those who obeyed his commands, but revengeful and cruel to his enemies, or anyone who attempted to oppose him.

It was well that the natives could not read the heart of the commander as he stood watching them. To him they were nothing but contemptible pawns in the game he was playing. He fed and flattered them for their services alone. But he had greater ambitions than to remain for any length of time in charge of a small wilderness fort. He longed to be the ruler not only of Acadia, but New England, as well. His mind was set upon the capture of Boston, and the last band of raiders he had sent forth was merely to clear the way, destroy the English forts along the coast, preparatory to his great conquest. With such victories to his credit, his great ambition would be thus accomplished, and all, even his King, would be deeply impressed.

Now, however, his hope of supremacy was far from bright. The raiders had returned without accomplishing anything. They had been repulsed by Colonel Garland in their attack upon Fort Reliance, and the Indians had become discouraged. They had brought back only one captive, a girl, so he had been told, but his mind had been so greatly disturbed that he had not given her a second's thought. He had hoped for many captives and scalps, with news of victory to satisfy the Governor at Quebec. What was a lone girl to one who desired so much?

As Villebon thought of these things his heart became bitter within him. He longed for revenge. If he could not capture Boston and the forts along the coast, there were enemies not far away whom he was anxious to punish. The League of the Crimson Sign had been a thorn in his flesh for some time, but so far he had not been able to prevail against these independent rangers. He had offered a reward for the capture of Pete King, but nothing had been done, for the loyal Frenchmen and Indians alike were unwilling to attack the outlaws, as Villebon termed them. He often wondered why, and at times he became suspicious of his own men, especially Villieu. Although the latter was outwardly courteous and loyal, Villebon did not like his friendliness with Sieur de La Valliere, of Chignecto. It seemed as if the two were plotting against him, although he had no definite proof.

And the same was true of others. While he himself wrote letters to Count Frontenac, complaining about the D'Armours down river, he knew that they were doing the same about him. That he was watched, and everything he did was reported to the Governor, he was well aware. But he could do nothing to prevent this spirit of fault-finding and mutual recrimination. Yet what could he expect when it was nurtured at Quebec where Frontenac and the Intendent kept watch

over each other, and made reports of all that transpired to the French ministry at home. It was, therefore, but natural that what took place at headquarters should be carried on in every outpost of Acadia.

As Villebon thus watched and meditated, he saw Villieu coming towards him. He frowned, for he was in no mood to receive the man he disliked. But when his lieutenant entered, the commander was seated at his table, apparently deep in the letters lying before him. He returned the salute his officer gave, and motioned him to a seat.

"Your visit is timely, Villieu, and I have been wondering why you did not come to me sooner."

"I do not like to be the purveyor of bad news, Monseigneur. I leave that to Foulette. It suits him better."

Villebon shot a swift glance at the tall haughty officer. He did not like the tone of his voice.

"Why have you come to me now, then? Have you any good news to offset the bad I have recently heard?"

Villieu smiled and stroked his black moustache.

"The Indians are anxious to see the commander. They wish to behold him in his full uniform of office, and listen to his words of wisdom before they leave for Meductic."

"Ah, I supposed that was why you came to see me. Yes, I shall go, presently. But they can wait a while. I am anxious to hear from you what happened along the coast."

"Hasn't Foulette informed you, Monseigneur?"

"He told me something, but I wish to hear what you have to say."

"I am afraid I can add very little. The whole affair was a failure. We tried to surprise several places but met with no success. The English were alert and well prepared."

"Did you make any attacks?"

"We had no chance until we reached Fort Reliance. We stormed the place, but were repulsed and lost several men. It was stronger than we imagined. We might have succeeded if some of the Frenchmen and Indians had not been so half-hearted."

"So that was the main reason. I had considerable difficulty in persuading the Indians to go on that raid. They are half inclined to favor the English, and they dislike fighting against them."

"You know the reason, Monseigneur?"

"I do. The English give them better prices for their furs. It is all due to Pete King and his gang of outlaws. They must be driven from the country. That League of the Crimson Sign must be crushed, and at once."

Villieu concealed a cynical smile as he listened to these emphatic words.

"And how is that to be accomplished, Monseigneur? We cannot persuade the Indians to undertake the task, and it would be folly for us to go against the rebels with the few men we have here. Is there not some better and easier way?"

"I know of none. Do you?"

"Why not come to some understanding with the League of the Crimson Sign? Establish trade boundaries. This country is surely large enough for all. Let Pete King carry on his trading to the north and east of the Saganic, and that would leave you all the vast region to the west with the Saint John River and its tributaries. That should be enough to satisfy any man."

"It would suit me, Villieu, but not Count Frontenac. He has ordered that the English be driven out of this country, so what am I to do? Here are letters I have received from him to-day, demanding that more drastic measures be taken against the enemy. And what irony that they have arrived at this time when you have returned from your unsuccessful expedition along the New England coast. If I had even several scalps to send to the Governor at Quebec they would prove to him that something is being done. But, Mon Dieu! I have nothing."

"Except a captive girl, Monseigneur."

"Ah! I had forgotten about her. Where is she?"

"With Gabriel Sorrell at Madame de Freneuse's place."

"Why did you leave her there?"

"She belongs to Sorrell, as he captured her. That is always the way, you know. The captor keeps his prize."

"Yes, yes, I know. But under the circumstances she should have been brought here. But, then, it doesn't matter. The news of the capture of several English forts, together with a string of scalps, would alone satisfy the Governor."

"Perhaps this girl might satisfy him."

"No. The Governor is not that kind of a man." Villebon's voice was sharp, and Villieu smiled.

"I did not mean that, Monseigneur. But if he knew that the girl is Colonel Garland's daughter it might somewhat appease him."

At these words Villebon forgot the dignity of his position and leaped to his feet. His astonishment was great, and his body trembled from his excitement.

"Colonel Garland's daughter!" he cried. "It can't be true. No, no."

"But it is, Monseigneur. She was captured and is now, no doubt, with Sorrell."

For a few seconds the commander stared at his officer, and then slowly resumed his seat. He seemed like a man in a dream.

"It must be true. Yes, yes. But tell me about it, Villieu. How did it happen? What strange circumstance would permit such a man as Garland to allow his daughter to be captured?"

"There is not much to tell. We surprised Fort Reliance, and came upon it from the woods. The attack was totally unexpected, so the Colonel's daughter and several others were making merry in a house a short distance away. Upon our approach they fled to the fort, and all escaped except the girl and an older woman. The latter tripped, and as the girl stopped to help her, she was captured by Sorrell."

"I see, I see," and Villebon stroked his pointed beard. "And what happened to the older woman?"

"You can easily guess, Monseigneur. She was not beautiful like the girl."

"I understand. But why was not her scalp brought to me?"

Villieu shrugged a shoulder.

"Would you offer the scalp of an old woman to Count Frontenac? You would be the laughing-stock of all at Quebec."

"True, true. But I am anxious to see Garland's daughter. Is she beautiful?"

"Words cannot describe her, Monseigneur. Her eyes, her face, her hair, the poise of her head, and her form, Mon Dieu! I cannot express what she is like. You must see her yourself and then you will know."

"I must, Villieu, and as soon as she can be brought here."

"But she belongs to Sorrell, and—"

Villebon interrupted him with an impatient gesture.

"I am commander here, remember, and my word is law. The girl must be brought to this fort, otherwise she may escape."

"That is impossible, Monseigneur. She is as safe with Sorrell as if she were here."

"I am not so sure of that. The D'Armours are not to be trusted. I have suspected them for some time of being in close touch with the League of the Crimson Sign. It would be quite easy for them to hand the girl over to Pete King and his gang."

He paused abruptly and remained lost in thought. Then his face brightened, and he struck the table with his right hand.

"I have it! Yes, I have it!" he exclaimed. "It is a great idea. I shall let the girl stay where she is for a few days and see what the D'Armours will do. If they attempt to effect her escape, I shall know for sure that they are traitors to me, and I shall deal with them according to their deserving. Look, Villieu, I want you to see that the girl is closely watched. Keep a sharp eye upon the D'Armours, too, especially the ones at the Jemseg. They are all cunning rascals, and Louis D'Armours and his wife annoy me greatly."

"What about Madame Louise at the Oromocto, Monseigneur? Can you trust her?"

A flush of annoyance overspread the commander's face.

"She is an Acadian Cleopatra, a she-devil, if ever there was one. Since her husband's death she has made no end of trouble. I don't know what to do with her. She keeps Count Frontenac informed of all that takes place here, and does everything in her power to injure me, while I am unable to retaliate."

"It's because of her remarkable beauty, Monseigneur. She fascinates everyone, both officers and men alike."

"She bewitches them, for she is in league with the devil. She influences Count Frontenac and the Intendent, as well, and they believe every word she says. But if I can catch her trying to effect Colonel Garland's daughter's escape, it may open their eyes. That is my only hope, so attend to the matter at once, Villieu. I must go to the Indians now, as, no doubt, they are becoming impatient."

The officer bowed, and was about to retire when Villebon detained him.

"Just a minute. Do you think there is any possibility of Colonel Garland coming to rescue his daughter?"

"Not the least. He knows what happened to Major Church when he attacked us."

"Quite true. But what will not a man do to save his daughter? Garland is a devil of a fighter, and the men he leads are the same. He would not make Church's mistake and come up the river in a grand style. Oh, no, he would come by way of Chignecto, enlist the aid of the League of the Crimson Sign, use the inland waterways, and sweep down upon us with a strong force. We must not be caught off guard, I wish you to see that most reliable couriers are immediately dispatched to keep strict watch upon Pete King's movements."

"I shall do what I can, Monseigneur, but it will be a risky task to send couriers out over the country, for Pete King's men are everywhere, and know all that is going on. However, I shall do what I can."

"I know it is risky, Villieu, but risks must be taken in times such as these. Send the men, anyway. It will be better for them to be busy than wasting their time idling here. And, by the way, find out what you can about de La Valliere, of Chignecto. He is a very ambitious man, and anxious to become governor of Acadia. I am suspicious of him. He would not hesitate to make use of the English if he thought he could further his designs?"

"You seem to have many enemies, Monseigneur."

"I have, indeed. I am surrounded by them, and at times I hardly know who are my friends."

As Villieu left the building, a peculiar expression gleamed in his eyes, which it was well for him that Villebon did not see and understand.

CHAPTER III

AN ACADIAN CLEOPATRA

All the inhabitants at the Oromocto were standing upon the bank eagerly and anxiously watching the war canoes as they swept up river. They were only about fifteen people, mostly women and children, as the few men able to fight had gone with the raiding expedition. And had they come back? That was the question now in the minds of the wives and the children as they stood there with eyes fixed intently upon the rapidly-approaching flotilla. Through long weeks they had waited and prayed for the safe return of their loved ones. They knew of other expeditions that had gone forth, and some of the men had not come back. So now that the canoes were near, what news would they bring?

A little apart from the others stood Madame Louise D'Armours. She spoke to no one, and her face showed no sign of emotion. She might have been watching some canoes besporting themselves upon the river for all the interest she seemed to show. But this silent woman was keenly alert to all that was taking place. Every minute she expected the canoes would turn shoreward, and either ringing shouts of victory or war cries of anger would rend the air. But as the crafts kept on their way and no salutation was given, she understood, and a glow of satisfaction appeared in her eyes. Villebon's raiders had been defeated, and she was glad. It was some compensation for the lies he had told Count Frontenac about the D'Armours. She longed to see the commander and gloat over his consternation when the war party reached the fort on the Nashwaak and reported their failure.

So taken up was she with this thought that she hardly noticed when one canoe detached itself from the others and headed for the shore. But when it touched land and the women and children ran down to meet it, Madame Louise stepped forward. She was not concerned about the welcome the men were receiving, for her eyes had caught sight of someone seated in the bottom of the canoe. At first she imagined she had not seen aright, or what she beheld was only a vision. But as she looked at Helen Garland a feeling of awe came into her cold heart. And there was reason for this. The captive was no ordinary girl. Strength of mind, dignity and refinement were plainly stamped upon her face of outstanding beauty. Her long dark unbound hair flowed in rippling waves over her cheeks and shoulders. Her mouth, in calm repose now, was expressive of sweetness and laughter. All this Madame Louise quickly noted. But it was the girl's eyes which held her spellbound. They were questioning eyes, guileless as those of a child, silently appealing for help. For a moment the heart of the staring woman upon the bank was strangely moved. The sight of this girl stirred for a few fleeting seconds the faint flickering embers of nobleness and purity within her soul. This was quickly succeeded, however, by the spirit of envy. She realised that the captive possessed something which she herself could never have again. It angered her, and a desire entered her heart to make this girl like herself.

At Gabriel Sorrell's order, Helen Garland rose to her feet and stepped ashore. She was much cramped from sitting so long in the canoe, and she swayed a little from weakness. Noticing this, Madame Sorrell placed an arm tenderly about the girl's body. She was repaid with a grateful smile, and a firm white hand clasped her own, hardened and rough through toil. In this woman the girl knew she had a friend, and the thought comforted her burdened heart.

Madame Louise in the meantime was talking with Gabriel, asking him questions about the captive. When she learned who she was, her interest increased. Here was no common girl, but the daughter of a noted English commander. She thought of the officers at the Nashwaak, and of others who occasionally came to the river from Quebec. What effect would this girl have upon them? Hitherto she herself had been the object of their attention and admiration. They had been fascinated by her charms, and she was known as the most beautiful woman in Acadia. Now, however, she would have a rival, and in her mind she could see her own light dimmed in the presence of this new luminary. Beautiful women were rare in Acadia, especially in the great region along the Saint John. The fame of this English girl would soon be known in Quebec, and officers would find no end of excuses for visiting the river. They might come even from Port Royal. A fierce jealousy burned in her heart as she thought of these things while listening to Gabriel.

"It was well that the girl fell into my hands, Madame," he declared. "If Foulette had captured her, Mon Dieu! But I have kept her safe, though it was hard work at times."

"Did Foulette try to get her from you?"

"He did, and I almost laid my hands upon him once. If it hadn't been for Villieu I do not know what I should have done."

"Ah! So Villieu was friendly to the girl?"

"He was, but not like Foulette. He only wanted to save the girl from harm. Villieu is an honorable man, and after the way he helped me I won't listen to a word against him."

"But Villebon doesn't like him, Gabriel. He feels he is not to be trusted."

"I don't know anything about that, Madame. All I know is that Villieu acted very honorably towards this English girl."

All had been listening eagerly to this conversation except Helen Garland, as she did not understand a word that was being said. She was very tired, weak and lonely. But for the presence of Madame Sorrell she felt that she could endure no more. Her nerves were strained to the breaking-point. She longed to hear her own language. But all around her spoke in another tongue.

And while she stood there, wondering what would happen to her, a boy came limping forth from the rear of the assembled people. He was about ten years of age, and he advanced timidly as if afraid of his boldness. His face was pale and careworn, his clothes old and in tatters, and his feet were bare. But all these were at once forgotten by the brightness of his eyes. They were filled with an intense eagerness as he approached the girl. All were watching him, wondering what he intended to do. When a few feet away, he stopped and looked up into the captive's face. He then took a step nearer, reached out a trembling hand and touched her dress, as if she were some divine being. But when a smile illumined Helen's face, his awe vanished and his eyes grew bright with joy.

"Are you English?" he asked in a quivering voice.

At the sound of these words Helen Garland started and looked keenly and hopefully into the boy's face.

"I am. Are you?"

"Yes, and I am 'young English' here, but my right name is David Hardy. I was captured by Indians over three years ago, and have been with the French ever since."

"What place is this?" Helen inquired. "And who is that beautiful woman?"

"This is the Oromocto, and that woman is Madame Louise D'Armours, who owns a great deal of land. Her husband died after the attack upon the Nashwaak Fort. We all work for Madame now."

Madame Louise was becoming impatient at this conversation which she could not understand, although she heard her own name mentioned. She told Gabriel and his wife to take the girl to their house, and she sent the rest away, except David whom she ordered to remain. As Helen listened to her stern voice, and caught the cold gleam in her eyes which were fixed upon her, a new fear came into her heart. She intuitively knew that this woman was her enemy, and wondered why. She longed to ask David more about her, but there was no opportunity. Silently she walked by the side of Madame Sorrell along the little path which wound its way among the trees. In this woman, anyway, she had a friend, and that meant a great deal to her just then.

Madame Louise stood watching the girl until she disappeared among the trees. She then turned to the waiting lad.

"Young English, what did that girl say to you?"

"Not much, Madame, for there was little time. She asked the name of this place, and your name, too. She said, 'Who is that beautiful woman?'"

"It could not have been me she meant, young English. It must have been Madame LeRocher. I am not beautiful."

"But you are, Madame, the most beautiful woman I ever saw."

"More beautiful than that English girl?"

David looked quickly up, and his pale face flushed with embarrassment. Young though he was, he understood this woman better than she imagined. Three years of captivity had schooled him in the art of subtlety and evasion. To save himself from extra abuse he had outwardly seemed to hate the English and the religion of his own people. He had united with the others in their rejoicing when any news of French victories had been received. But in his heart he was English,

and the hope of escape from his bondage was seldom out of his mind.

And besides this, he was well aware of the duplicity of Madame Louise and those around him. While pretending to be loyal to the commander at the Nashwaak, they were constantly working against him in their letters of complaint to Count Frontenac, as well as in their illegal fur-trading with the Indians.

At Madame Louise's question, however, he became confused. The sight of Helen Garland had thrilled his very being, and stirred to a flame the spirit of loyalty to his own race. The shallow veneer of pretence disappeared, and he was again the honest lad he had once been. How could he lie with the thought of that beautiful girl in his mind? By the side of her Madame Louise seemed ugly.

The woman noticed his embarrassment, and frowned.

"I understand, young English," she coolly said. "You are afraid to speak the truth. But, never mind. I cannot blame you. I am getting old, I know."

"But you are very beautiful still, Madame," David hastened to assure her. "Only, only, that girl is different. She seems like the Holy Virgin whose picture you have in your house. She looks so good."

Madame Louise stared at the boy as a new idea flashed into her mind. She then smiled upon him, and her whole nature appeared to change.

"You are right, young English. That girl is like the Holy Virgin. She is so good that I desire to be like her. And I want you to help me."

"How, Madame?"

"By being much with her, listening to what she says, and then telling me. You see, I have lived so long in this rough country that I have almost forgotten what fine ladies say and do. But that English girl knows. She has lived all her life with people of great importance, so she understands their ways and what they talk about. And, then, as she is so good I want to learn the secret. You must find all this out for me, but she must never know that I have asked you to do it. She might be frightened, for very good people are so timid about telling of their goodness."

David's eyes were now big with wonder and joy.

"Do you mean, Madame, that I am to be much with the English girl, and talk with her?"

"That is what I mean. I know you can be trusted, and I shall let you off from work in the fields while she is here if you do what I say. And there is something else. As that girl is so good and beautiful, people from the fort will most likely come to see her. You can tell me who they are, and what they say to one another about her."

"When shall I go, Madame?"

"In the morning. The girl is very tired now, so she will need to rest. She will be glad to talk with you, as you are the only one here who can speak English. So go, now, and finish your work in the field. I may have something more to say to you in the morning."

David limped away, happier than he had been since his capture three years before. Madame Louise had spoken kindly to him. The English girl's influence must have made the change, so he imagined. But had he known the thoughts of the silent woman standing motionless upon the bank, his heart would not have been so light.

CHAPTER IV

DOWN BY THE RIVER

When David visited the Sorrell house the next morning he was surprised to find Helen Garland assisting Madame Sorrell in the kitchen. He hardly recognized her at first, so greatly was she changed. Instead of the Madonna-like being he had seen the day before, she was now a bright animated girl, with her hair neatly arranged, her cheeks aglow with health, and her eyes beaming with interest. The rest of the past night, together with the kind hospitality of the Sorrells, had wrought this transformation.

David's heart quickened as he stood at the door and watched her. Never before had he beheld such a vision of beauty, so he thought. And when Helen saw him and smiled a glad welcome, he became suddenly confused. He glanced down at his ragged clothes and scarred bare feet. What must she think of him? he wondered. For an instant the idea of beating a hasty retreat came into his mind. This, however, was immediately dispelled as Helen laid down the dish she was wiping and came quickly forward.

"Oh, I am so glad to see you," she accosted. "I was hoping you would come, for there is no one I can speak to here. Dear Madame Sorrell and I have been talking by signs."

These friendly words placed David at his ease, and soon he was seated at the table enjoying some food Madame Sorrell placed before him.

"You look hungry, young English," she said. "I don't believe you have had any breakfast."

"I couldn't eat any, Madame," David replied. "I was thinking about her," and he motioned to Helen. "Isn't she wonderful?"

"Indeed she is, and we must do all we can to protect her. It was fortunate that she fell into Gabriel's hands. This is a bad country for such a girl, and she is never safe from danger."

"I will protect her, Madame," and David straightened his little body as he spoke, and doubled up his fists. "I will fight for her."

"I know you would, young English," and the woman sighed as she thought of what had happened to her own daughter. "But what could you do against bad men? I am afraid we shall have visitors from the fort before long."

A sudden fear leaped into the boy's eyes.

"Foulette?" he asked in a low voice.

"Ah, I see you understand. Yes, Foulette, most likely, and others, too."

"Then, we must hide Mademoiselle where they cannot find her."

Madame Sorrell smiled at the lad's simplicity.

"Hide her! Mon Dieu! where could we hide such a girl?"

David made no reply, although his mind was very active. He glanced at Helen who was watching him. Oh, if he were only a man, and strong, he could take her away and keep her safe from bad men. And he knew where he could go. Pete King and his rangers would protect her. And why should he not take her to them? He knew the direction, off there to the east where the sun rose every morning. How often he had dreamed about the League of the Crimson Sign, and longed to be a member. In his mind those men were most wonderful heroes, true and just, and not like the ones at the fort who were always going forth to capture and to kill. Yes, he would take the girl there as soon as he could.

This idea gave him much comfort, and he became quite happy. What a joy it would be to save such a girl. Although young and weak in body, he possessed the spirit of true chivalry which animated the hearts of knights in all ages. He knew nothing about them, it is true. But such a spirit does not need any special age or place, and may be found in a humble captive lad in a vast wilderness as well as in the courts of mighty kings.

He was aroused from his dream by a light touch upon his arm. Startled he looked quickly up into Helen Garland's smiling face.

"Will you come with me outside?" she asked. "I wish to see what this place is like, and there are some things I want to talk to you about."

"Suppose we go to the river, Mam'selle," David suggested. "It is nice and quiet there. And we can watch if the bad men come."

A sudden expression of fear came into the girl's eyes at these words, and she looked keenly into the boy's face.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "Are there bad men here who would harm me?"

"I will tell you when we are by ourselves, Mam'selle. You follow me and I shall lead the way to the shore."

It was a beautiful spot on the bank of the river where David at length stopped and motioned his companion to a grassy place under the shade of a big tree. Hardly a ripple ruffled the water on this perfect summer morning. The great trees were mirrored in the clear depths, while birds flitted from branch to branch. Butterflies zig-zagged through the air, and various other little winged insects darted here and there. Peace was everywhere on river and land. But Helen's heart was somewhat disturbed. The words David had uttered made her afraid.

"What did you mean by 'bad men'?" she questioned as she seated herself upon the grass.

"The men at the fort, of course. They know you are here, and they will come, most likely, to see you."

"Why should that matter?"

"It might not," and the boy sighed. "But Madame Sorrell is afraid of them. She had a beautiful daughter once, and men came to see her. She is dead now."

"Oh!" This exclamation was almost like a cry of pain.

"Did something stick into you, Mam'selle?" David asked. "Maybe it was a sharp root."

The girl, however, hardly heard what he said, for she was thinking of other things. She knew now what he meant by the bad men. She had seen them in the canoes, and she was not altogether ignorant of how Gabriel had defended her from them. But here in this lonely place, it was hard to tell what might happen. She turned impulsively to her companion.

"I must get away from here," she declared. "Where can I go to be safe from those men? I know you will help me, for you are English."

"I will do all I can, Mam'selle. But this is a very big country, with woods everywhere."

"I would not mind that, David, so long as the bad men could not get me."

"But they might. They travel through the woods, and maybe they would follow you. There are bears, too, and it is so dark among the trees at night. You are always hearing sounds and seeing terrible things. Oh, I know." The boy shivered and his face grew a shade paler as past memories rose before him.

"But what can I do?" the girl insisted. "I must go somewhere before the bad men come."

"The Saganic is the only safe place, Mam'selle. But that is a long way off."

"How far is it?"

"I do not know, but it is towards the rising sun. I was never there, and I never saw Pete King. But the soldiers at the fort hate him and his rangers. They say he always goes from place to place with a man called Grey, who is a great fighter and very strong. I hope he will come and take me away from here some day."

David shrank back a little, startled by the girl's intense excitement. She was standing now, and trembling.

"You needn't be afraid, Mam'selle," the boy assured her. "The men of the League of the Crimson Sign will not hurt you."

They will save you, maybe."

"I know, I know it," Helen cried. "I must go to them at once. And you spoke of a man called Grey. What is his other name?"

"I never heard it?"

"And what is he like?"

"The soldiers say he is tall, straight, and stronger than any other man."

"Has he dark curly hair and blue eyes?" the girl eagerly asked.

"I do not know. Anyway, the soldiers at the fort are afraid of him."

Helen stood for a while staring out upon the water, lost in thought. The light of hope illumined her eyes.

"When can you take me there, David?" she at length asked.

"I do not know, Mam'selle. It will be hard for us to get away from here. I am a captive like you, and if I run away and am caught, I shall be beaten, and will have to work harder than ever."

"Who will beat you? Madame Louise?"

"Oh, no. It is Monsieur LeRocher who will do that. He is very cruel to me sometimes. Madame LeRocher is kind, though, but she has to do what her husband says."

Helen reseated herself upon the ground and invited David to a place by her side. She was calm now, for her sympathy had been aroused by this unfortunate lad. His troubles made her almost forget her own.

"What a terrible time you have had, poor boy. How long have you been here with these French people?"

"Three years, Mam'selle. But I was some time with the Indians, and was almost dead when Monsieur D'Armours bought me from them."

"Has Madame Louise a husband?"

"She did, but he is dead now. After his death Madame let Monsieur LeRocher have me, although I still belong to her in a way."

"And you have met no English people since you came here?"

"Not until you came. But I was here when the English came up the river to attack the fort, and I was sure that they would beat the French and save me. But they didn't, and I felt worse after they went away. We were all hiding in the woods when the English soldiers came, so they did not know anything about me. I lost all hope then."

"It is a wonder you didn't forget how to speak English, David."

The boy smiled, and a slight flush appeared upon his cheeks.

"I always talked to myself in English, Mam'selle. I did not want to forget."

"How did you do that?"

"When by myself at night before I went to sleep. I always say my prayers in English, which my mother taught me. I know 'Our Father', and 'The Lord is my Shepherd'. I have always said them, and some prayers I made up myself. And when I could, I talked to myself in English without anyone hearing me, going over the things I would say when I should escape."

A mistiness came into Helen's eyes as she listened to the lad and noticed the light of animation upon his face. His courage rebuked her. For years he had been a captive, and through all that time he had kept the fire of hope alive in his heart. How she longed to be like him.

"Where is your home, David?" she asked.

"I have no other home than here," was the low reply. "I had a nice home once, but the Indians burnt it, and I don't know what happened to my parents and brother. Maybe they were killed. I am going to look for them some day when I get away from this place."

"We must help each other, David. We are both captives, so we must do all we can to find Pete King, and—and that man Grey. We shall be safe then. I am willing to risk everything if you are."

David, however, did not hear her, for he was staring up river. At once he sprang to his feet.

"They are coming!" he excitedly cried. "Look! Look!"

In an instant Helen was by his side, her heart beating fast.

"Who are they?"

"Men from the fort. I know their canoes. Let us go away."

"Are they the bad men?"

"I guess so. Come."

CHAPTER V

PIERRE, THE HUNCHBACK

The presence of Helen Garland at the little Oromocto settlement was a great annoyance to Madam Louise D'Armours. During the next two days her life was made miserable by what she saw and heard. Men from the fort visited the Sorrell house, but they did not come to see her as formerly. She knew the reason. It was the English girl who was the attraction, and a burning jealousy filled her heart. To her proud and imperious nature it was almost unbearable to be outshone by another, and a captive girl, at that. Her jealousy increased to hatred, and this led to more terrible thoughts. She must get her rival out of the way. But how was this to be accomplished without bringing suspicion upon herself? Desperate woman though she was, she well knew that the girl was a very important captive, and she often wondered why Villebon did not take her at once to the Nashwaak and keep her under strict guard. Should anything happen to her at the Oromocto it would bring down upon the inhabitants not only the vengeance of Villebon but of Count Frontenac, as well. In vain she racked her brain for some scheme to get clear of the girl without arousing suspicion.

David kept her informed of what he saw and heard. But she longed to know more. Madame Sorrell came to see her the second morning after Helen's arrival. The good woman was greatly worried.

"I do not know what to do, Madame," she confided. "Men from the fort keep coming to our place all times of the day and night. They say they want to talk to Gabriel about the raid they made upon Fort Reliance, and the cause of their defeat. But we know it is the English girl they come to see."

"Has Foulette been there?" Madame Louise asked.

The visitor's face darkened, and her usually calm eyes glowed with anger.

"No, that brute doesn't dare to come. I believe Gabriel would kill him if he did. You know what he did to our little Julie."

"Yes, yes, I know all about that sad affair. And so you think something may happen to the English captive?"

"I am afraid so, Madame. That girl is too beautiful to be in such a country as this. Mon Dieu! most men are more like wolves than human beings. I am at my wit's end to know how to save her."

"Is there any way we can hide her, Marie? We might send her to some place where she could not be found."

Madame Sorrell held up her hands in despair.

"Where can we send her, Madame?"

"What about the League of the Crimson Sign? She would be safe among her own people, would she not?"

A frightened expression came into Madame Sorrell's eyes, and she glanced anxiously around.

"Be careful what you say, Madame. If Villebon should hear your words it would not be well. He is hard enough on us as it is, but if you send that girl to the Saganic, I tremble to think of what he would do to us."

"You are quite right, Marie. We must be careful. But, perhaps, we could do something without arousing suspicion. Suppose the girl disappeared and left no trace, that would be different."

"Ah, Madame, she could not leave this place alone, and who would go with her?"

"But suppose Pete King and his men came and carried her off some night? That would be very easy, and no blame would rest upon us. Have you thought of that?"

"I have, Madame. But how are we to send word to the Saganic? There is no one here who could go. It is a long way off, and something might happen to the girl before the men of the Crimson Sign could come, Dear me, I don't know what to do!"

Shortly after noon Pierre Goutin arrived from the Nashwaak. He had taken a supply of eggs, butter and meat from the

Jemseg to the fort the previous day, and had spent the night at the house of his sister, Madame Bedard, wife of the fort armourer. Pierre was a man well past the prime of life, wizened, and so stooped by hard labor that he was generally known as the "hunchback". He was true as steel to his friends, a great lover of children, and anxious to help all in trouble. His nature was almost childlike in its simplicity, and his big mouth would expand to a grin of delight when he saw or heard something new. To the D'Armours brothers and their families he had the unreasoning faithfulness of a dog. Their enemy was his enemy, and when occasion required he could be like a lion in defence of its brood.

Madame Louise had known Pierre all her life, and knew that he could be trusted. She had always looked forward to his visit every week, and sometimes twice a week on his way to or from the Nashwaak with supplies. From him she heard about her sister at the Jemseg, as well as the latest news from the fort. So on this day she had his dinner ready, and while he ate at the kitchen table, she seated herself nearby and listened while he told her about what Madame Marguerite had been doing during the past week, the quaint things the children had said, and various farming incidents.

Madame Louise was forced to be patient, for she knew that Pierre would tell her no fort gossip until he had finished his recital of the affairs at the Jemseg. It was always his way, for what was nearest his heart had to be related first. Everything else, no matter how important, had to wait.

"And what is the news up river?" Madame Louise asked when at length her visitor shoved back his chair from the table and drew forth his pipe.

"What news, Madame?" Pierre's mouth opened in an expansive grin. "Why, you have the news here."

"The news here! What do you mean?"

"That English girl, of course. She is all the news at the fort. Everybody is talking about her. I hear she is very beautiful."

"Ah, so her fame is on the lips of all! I am not surprised. But why does not Villebon take her to the Nashwaak? His men would not have to travel so far to admire her beauty."

Pierre looked cautiously around, and then lowered his voice.

"It is not just to see the English girl that they come. Ah, no, it is more than that. It is to spy upon us."

Madame Louise started and looked keenly at her visitor. She then rose quickly to her feet and laid a hand upon Pierre's shoulder.

"Villebon suspects us? Is that what you mean?" she whispered.

"It is just that, Madame. The commander is leaving the girl here for a few days, thinking that, perhaps, we might help her to escape to the Saganic."

"The villain! The base coward!" The woman's hands clenched hard, and her eyes glowed with a fierce light. "He hates us for interfering with his fur trade. But as he cannot stop us, he is now trying this scheme to entrap us, and then charge us with disloyalty and treachery to France. Oh, the devil! I would like to get my hands on him and tear the eyes out of his head."

Pierre grinned with delight, for it always pleased him to see Madame Louise in a rage against Villebon. She looked so wonderful then, and even Cleopatra in her frenzy of fury could not have surpassed this Acadian Cleopatra of the Oromocto.

"You could do it, Madame, and I wish you had the chance. But we must be most careful. Villebon is a very hard man, and he is driven on by Frontenac. If that English girl should escape, it will be bad for us."

"But she must escape, Pierre. I don't want her here. She is too beautiful, and that makes her dangerous."

Pierre's eyes narrowed a little as he looked at this aroused woman. With quick intuition he began to understand what had not been said in words. Madame was jealous of the English girl. That was it. Again he grinned, this time with pleasure at his own shrewdness. He arose to his feet and picked up his hat.

"I must be away now, Madame. There is much work to be done at the Jemseg. We are in the midst of haying, and we are

all too few."

But Madame Louise detained him.

"Just a minute, Pierre. Who told you this secret?"

"My sister Rosette. She has no love for Villebon and his officers, as you well know."

"I do. The commander suspects her, too. Suspicion is everywhere in this country. The air is polluted with it, and we are breathing it all the time."

"And you know where it comes from, Madame?"

"I certainly do. What can we expect when the atmosphere of the Court in France is foul with suspicion?"

"And Quebec, too, Madame."

"Yes, and Quebec. No place is free from it. Mon Dieu! how often have I longed to go where people are not forever spying upon one another."

"You would never find such a place, Madame, for you would carry it with you. It is in your system. Your sister's is the only house where you do not feel and breathe the spirit of suspicion. But it would not be so if you were there."

Instead of being angry at these plain words, Madame Louise smiled. She knew they were true, and that she would be unhappy in any other atmosphere.

"Ah, Marguerite is different from all others in this country, Pierre. She was always so good and gentle, while I—"

She was interrupted by a knock upon the door facing the river. Opening it, to her astonishment she saw Villieu standing before her. Pierre, having caught sight of the officer through the window, hastily left the kitchen by the back door, wondering greatly as to the meaning of Villieu's unexpected visit to the Oromocto.

As he walked towards the river, he heard children's voices. They came from a beautiful grassy spot behind a row of bushes. Pierre could never resist the compelling lure of little children. Where they were he longed to be. His hand moved to a pocket of his rough jacket and he smiled in pleasant anticipation. He knew what would please them and cause them to dance in glee upon the grass.

Keeping himself out of sight, he glided cautiously towards them. At length he stopped and peered through the bushes. Yes, they were there, a little group under the shade of a big tree, and among them he beheld the English girl. Lizette and Barbe D'Armours were seated by her side, while the boy Noel was playing with David nearby. It was a beautiful scene of peace and happiness, and Pierre's heart beat faster than usual as he watched. But it was upon Helen Garland that he kept his eyes fixed, and he at once knew that what he had heard about her had not been exaggerated.

Presently a sense of pity and concern swept upon him. What chance would such a girl, and a captive, at that, have in a wilderness country, where those in authority were more like beasts of prey than human beings? He thought of the fate of young Julie Sorrell. And the brute who had ruined her and caused her death was still alive and strutting pompously around. Most likely he had his lustful eyes upon this English girl, and would not be long in seeking her. As Pierre thought of Foulette and his evil deeds, his wrinkled face became very grave, and fear tugged at his sympathetic heart.

It was not natural, however, for Pierre to remain long in such a mood, especially when children were near. They always dispelled the evil spirit from his heart, and he became as one of them. So as he watched the little ones, a smile overspread his face like sunshine breaking forth from beneath a dark cloud.

Moving a little nearer, he drew from an inside pocket of his jacket a quaint wooden fife, his precious possession. Placing this to his lips, he began to play a lively and familiar air. No sooner had the first notes sounded out than the children started in pleased surprise. The girls sprang to their feet and chased the boys as they raced towards the concealed musician. When they had found him, they pounced upon him and dragged him forth from behind the bushes with laughter and shrieks of joy.

Helen watched them with considerable interest, wondering who the visitor could be, and why the children were so

delighted at his presence. But when she saw Pierre as he was led somewhat reluctantly towards her, a smile overspread her face. He looked so odd, almost grotesque, as he grinned and made pretended efforts to escape from his young captors.

It was David who introduced him to Helen.

"This is Pierre, Mam'selle. He is everybody's friend, and I know you will like him. He speaks a little English."

Helen at once stepped forward and held out her hand. Pierre took it, lifted his hat and made a most profound bow.

"Bon jour, Mademoiselle. Me verra glad meet Anglais girl."

"And I am glad to meet you and to hear you speak English," Helen replied.

"Oui, oui, me spik leetle Anglais. David heem show me."

"Is this the man you told me about?" the girl asked turning to David.

"He is, Mam'selle. I taught him some, but he learned most from—"

He was rudely interrupted by Pierre's hand laid heavily upon his shoulder.

"Be careful," he whispered. "You know what I mean." He then turned to the other children. "Get out there and dance while I play. Hurry up, for I cannot stay long."

Helen sat down again upon the ground and watched with interest the animated scene before her. She looked, especially, at the musician, and noticed how his eyes shone with pleasure as he played. She liked his face, and believed that he could be trusted. After all, this was not such a bad place to which she had come. The Sorrells were good to her, the children were delightful, and now she had found another friend in Pierre. She had not yet come across any evil people to harm her.

At once Madame Louise, that cold stern woman in the house over yonder, flashed into her mind. The thought of her caused a sudden fear to come into her heart. Why it was so she could not tell. But it did, and her pleasure in watching the happy dancing forms before her vanished. She felt that notwithstanding the calmness and beauty of nature about her, she was surrounded by enemies who were planning her destruction.

CHAPTER VI

WHEN THE GLASS SHATTERED

In the meantime Madame Louise D'Armours was entertaining her guest in the house. She was pleased at the officer's visit, and at once led him into the room adjoining the kitchen which was reserved for special occasions. And this was one of them, for she well knew that Villieu had come to the Oromocto on important business. Although he smiled pleasantly at the bright welcome he received, this shrewd woman knew from his manner that something of an unusual nature was troubling him. She was in her most fascinating mood now, with no trace of the cold and haughty manner she had presented to Helen Garland.

Having motioned her guest to a comfortable chair, she left the room and returned in a few minutes with a bottle of wine and two small glasses. Villieu's eyes brightened as she placed them upon the table, quickly and deftly uncorked the bottle and poured forth the gleaming wine. Then lifting a glass in her right hand, she held it aloft.

"To your health, Monsieur."

Villieu was on his feet in an instant, with the other glass in his hand.

"And to yours, Madame," he responded. "Health and happiness."

Madame Louise smiled as she drank and placed the glass upon the table.

"Be seated, Monsieur. I suppose we should drink to the health and prosperity of the King and Count Frontenac."

"And to Villebon, Madame."

"Why, Monsieur?" The woman's voice was stern as she asked the question. "Do you wish him health and happiness?"

Villieu glanced quickly and nervously around.

"Be careful, Madame. Walls have ears, remember, and it would not be well should Villebon hear you say that." Again he raised the glass to his lips. "Ah, your wine is excellent, Madame. Choice Burgundy! I have not tasted its equal since I left France." He re-filled the glass and sprang to his feet.

"Health and happiness to Monseigneur Joseph Robineau Sieur de Villebon, Commander of Acadia," he cried.

Madame Louise stared at him in surprise. What did the man mean? She knew his attitude towards Villebon, and why, then, should he drink to his health and happiness? But as Villieu resumed his seat, she detected the mocking expression about the corners of his mouth, and knew that his words belied the feeling of his heart.

Seating herself near the table, she waited for him to explain. Villieu could easily tell from her questioning eyes how great was her curiosity. It was quite agreeable to his nature to keep this woman in suspense. He knew her better than she imagined. And he was also aware that if it suited her purpose she could be as treacherous to him as to Villebon or anyone else. He glanced languidly around the room.

"What a comfortable place you have here, Madame. Everything is so new, fresh and clean."

"It should be, Monsieur. The house has not been long built."

"You are a remarkable woman. To think that in such a short time after the English burnt your house, you should have one like this erected! It is quite unusual."

"Don't you consider a woman capable of accomplishing things as well as a man?" Madame Louise retorted. "What else could I do? With my husband dead, and my children to look after, was I to sit down and lament in the ashes of my former dwelling?"

"You didn't, anyway, Madame, no matter what other women might have done. And your furniture, the chairs, tables and sofa are the best in this country. You live like a princess."

"Perhaps so, even if I do not feel like one. But I like to have my house as comfortable as possible, although it cost much to bring these things from Quebec. I could not have obtained them without the help of influential people there."

"And that was the way, I suppose, you came by such excellent wine, Madame? Pardon me if I fill my glass once more. And may I fill yours? I wish you to drink to the health of another—to the girl who is evidently doomed to be my wife."

"Ah, to Judith la Valliere, Monsieur? With pleasure I shall drink to her health and happiness."

Both rose to their feet, glasses in their hands. Villieu held his high, hesitated, and then in a cold bitter voice cried,

"To the health of the English girl, Mademoiselle Garland, now at the Oromocto."

From Madame Louise's nerveless hand the glass fell and shattered to pieces upon the floor. Villieu smiled as he noted the startling effect of his words.

"I see you are surprised, Madame."

The woman's eyes flashed with anger, and her lips expressed her scorn.

"Surprised, Monsieur! After this I shall not be surprised at anything. So you have given up the fair Judith, one of your own race, for the English girl. You are a traitor! I did not suspect you of such treachery."

"Neither did I, Madame. But when Monseigneur Villebon commands, what am I to do? I am helpless."

"Explain, Monsieur, the meaning of your strange words. Villebon commands!"

"He has. But let us be seated, and after I have had another draught of your excellent Burgundy, I shall enlighten you fully."

Filling his glass, he drained it to the last drop.

"Ah, that is stimulating. Wine is good for the nerves, and mine are badly shaken. And Villebon is the cause. He summoned me before him last night and announced his diabolical scheme. He hates Colonel Garland, and now that his daughter is a captive here, he has concocted a suitable revenge upon her father. He dislikes me, too, so he has included me in his plan. He knows that I am betrothed to Judith la Valliere, and he does not approve of our marriage. Villebon is well aware that her father has great ambitions, and if I marry his daughter, I shall be bound to him, and so will naturally abet him in his efforts to become commander of Acadia."

"Ah, I begin to understand now," Madame Louise replied. "Villebon is planning to have revenge upon Colonel Garland, and at the same time to strike at you and la Valliere."

"That is it, Madame. Villebon has ordered me to marry this English girl just as soon as Father Elizee returns. Mon Dieu! was ever any man placed in such a position? What am I to do?"

"Did you agree to marry the English girl, Monsieur?"

"Agree! There was no agreement about it. I was not even asked my opinion, but commanded."

"And didn't you protest? You surely have some right to chose the girl you wish for wife."

"Not in this country, Madame, where one man rules, or tries to rule, and who is actuated by revenge. Love is nothing to him then."

"Do you intend to obey him, Monsieur?"

"What else is there for me to do?"

"But will Father Elizee agree? Will he perform the marriage when he understands the circumstances?"

"I have thought of that, but see little hope. Father Elizee is a good man, who interferes with nothing apart from his office as priest and spiritual adviser. But Villebon is shrewd and may be able to make him think it will be good for the English girl's soul to marry me, and in that way to bring her into the fold. She may be even forced to renounce her own religion

before our marriage."

"Would she consent to do that? The English are as determined as we are in religious matters, and this girl, no doubt, is the same. If she is anything like her father it will be difficult to get her consent."

"She will not be asked, Madame. She will be ordered. Father Elizee will attend to that."

"He won't be willing, Monsieur, to do such a thing."

"He may not be willing, but he will have to do what Villebon says, so that will be the end of it. I see no way out of this difficulty."

"Why did you come to me, then, Monsieur?"

"Because you are a clever woman, Madame, and I need to consult some one who has brains. Do not think this is mere flattery, for it is not. It is a sincere tribute to your ability. I believe yet that you can help me out of my trouble."

A smile flitted over Madame Louise's face. These words pleased her vanity. It was a triumph to have this noted officer seeking her assistance.

"Women are of use sometimes, Monsieur," she bantered. "But men are not always willing to follow their advice."

"That is quite true, Madame, and there may be reasons. But women are generally wiser than men in heart-affairs."

"But this has nothing to do with the heart. Love does not enter into it at all. It is a command, and love can never be commanded. Villebon has ordered you to marry against your will. He has not considered your feelings, so why should you consider his? He would use you merely as a pawn to have revenge upon an enemy, and injure you, as well. So would Count Frontenac, and all others in authority. To gain their own ends they would do anything. They have always done so, and what can they expect if we do the same? If anyone, no matter how innocent, stood in their way, they would soon get rid of him."

Villieu started and looked keenly at the woman. The meaning of her words was quite apparent.

"But, Madame, I am not a devil, if others are."

"I did not imply that you are, Monsieur. But you do not always need to be a devil to get rid of one who stands in your way." She had bent her head, and was speaking in a low voice. "This English girl is in your way just now. Through Villebon's diabolical scheme she comes between you and the fair Judith la Valliere. You must get rid of her. She must disappear. You have come to me for advice, and I have given it."

"But it is terrible advice, Madame. I am no saint, but I could not do any bodily harm to that English girl. If I were not betrothed to Judith, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to marry such a girl, even though she is not of my own race. *Sacre bleu*, how beautiful she is! And what courage is hers! You should have seen how she bore herself after she was captured. She did not weep and lament, but stood calmly erect before us all. And her eyes! I shall never forget the way she looked at her captors. No, no, I wish no harm to a girl like that."

As Madame Louise listened to these glowing words, a cold, cruel expression came into her eyes. She could not bear to hear such a rhapsody about another of her own sex, especially the English girl to whom she had taken such a strong dislike.

"I fear it would not be pleasing to the fair Judith, Monsieur, should she ever know of your unbounded admiration of this English girl.

"You think so, Madame? It is quite evident, then, that you do not know Judith la Valliere. She is different from what you imagine. To praise another of her sex causes no jealousy to such a noble nature as hers. On several occasions I have told her about you, and what a beautiful woman you are, and I wish you could have seen the light of pleasure in her eyes. And it will be the same, I am certain, when I tell her about Mademoiselle Garland."

Madame Louise's face flushed at this rebuke, and she bowed slightly. She was visibly annoyed.

"I hope to meet her some day, Monsieur. And I can well comprehend why you are so loyal to her, notwithstanding the

charms of the English captive girl."

"I hope you will, Madame, and I am sure you will like her. If we could only get Mademoiselle Garland to the Chignecto she would be safe there. Sieur de la Valliere would look well after her, and return her to her father, for he has no love for Villebon."

"Why not send her there, Monsieur?" Madame Louise eagerly asked. "That would solve your difficulty."

"It would, indeed, but how is it to be accomplished? If that girl were allowed to escape while she is here, Villebon would blame you, and, Mon Dieu! he can be cruel."

"I know that only too well, Monsieur. But suppose she escaped without our knowledge, carried away, stolen in the night, for instance. Have you thought of the League of the Crimson Sign?"

Villieu started, and looked intently at the woman.

"No, I never thought of them, Madame. But how could we get word to them?"

Madame Louise looked cautiously around, and when she spoke her voice was merely a whisper.

"They are never far away. They are always nearer than you think, especially at the Jemseg. My sister and her husband are in close touch with Pete King. And, besides, there is that short portage to the Washademoak. It would be quite easy for the girl to go that way."

"But how could she go? She could never find her way alone?"

"Certainly not. But Pete King and his men would look after her."

"And suppose they should come too late?"

"We shall have to depend, then, upon that young English boy to take her. He knows the way, and he has been already speaking to the girl about that very route. He tells me everything he and the girl talk about."

"Yes, that might be done, Madame. But what would become of the two if they did not reach the Washademoak, or if the men of the Crimson Sign did not meet them there?"

"I am not worrying about that, Monsieur. It is not likely they would ever come back, so you would be free from your difficult situation."

Villieu's face darkened, and a feeling of disgust for this woman came into his heart. He understood quite well now that she was jealous of the English girl, and would be willing, if necessary, to sacrifice two innocent ones to satisfy her passion. And she would be as ready to turn against him. He had always known that she was a dangerous woman, and he had hesitated before confiding to her his trouble. But he never realised the depth of her baseness until now, and longed to have nothing more to do with her. At present, however, he needed her, so it was advisable to conceal his feeling of repulsion.

"I trust, Madame, that we shall not be forced to carry out your last suggestion. I have confidence in Pete King and his men. When they learn that the English girl is here, they will rescue her, most likely, without any assistance on our part."

"It must not be from here, Monsieur," the woman hastily replied. "I shall send the girl with young English to the Jemseg. My sister will know what to do, for I shall write to her and explain matters."

"And let Madame Marguerite bear Villebon's wrath?" Villieu sternly retorted.

"There will be no danger to her, Monsieur. It will be much easier for the girl to be rescued from there than from here. The portage begins at the Jemseg, remember."

"Very well," and Villieu sighed. "I shall leave it to you, Madame. When can you send the girl away?"

"At once. It will take but a short time to get her ready."

CHAPTER VII

AT THE JEMSEG

"What is the English girl like? Is she beautiful?"

Pierre, the hunchback, looked down upon the animated faces and eager eyes of Charlotte and Marie D'Armours. He grinned with delight at the curiosity of these little maidens. He liked to have something new to tell them, and never before did he have such an interesting subject.

"Why, what do you think she is like?" he asked.

"I do not know," Charlotte replied, "for I never saw an English girl. Tell us about her, Pierre, please do."

"Tell you about her, eh? Well, how shall I begin? What shall I say first?"

"About her eyes. What color are they?"

"What color? Now, let me think, for I am not sure. Maybe they're green like the eyes of a cat."

Again he grinned as he looked at the faces of the astonished girls.

"No, I guess they're not green. They are blue, as blue and clear as the sky on a summer day."

"Oh, I am so glad!" and Marie sighed her relief. "Blue eyes are lovely. What is her hair like?"

"I can't remember exactly, but I think it's yellow, with streaks of red and black through it."

"Oh!" both girls exclaimed in dismay.

"No, no, I guess it's not like that. I was just teasing you. But it is so wonderful and beautiful that I cannot describe it. No, no, I could never tell you. You must see her for yourselves, and then you will know."

"Is she as beautiful as our mother?" Marie asked.

"Oh, no. Although the English girl is beautiful, there is no one in all the world so beautiful to you as your mother."

Madame Marguerite D'Armours smiled as she watched the little group and listened to their conversation. Her eyes expressed her love as they looked upon her two young daughters. She thought of the captive English girl. Suppose Charlotte or Marie were seized and carried away by an enemy! How terrible that would be. How could she endure it.

The long hot summer day was ended, and Madame D'Armours was enjoying the refreshing coolness of the evening upon the bank of the small Jemseg stream, which flowed into the Saint John River a short distance below. She was tired, for she had been busy from early morning attending to her household duties, making butter, looking after the poultry, and helping her husband and his few men in the hayfield during the afternoon. Pierre had been absent, so someone had to take his place. So now it was pleasant to rest for a while here with her two little children, and listen to their talk with Pierre.

Several times Madame Marguerite glanced towards the barn to see what the men were doing. It was a fair scene which met her view wherever she looked. Before her, across the narrow stream, was a wooded island. To the left great acres of level lowlands stretched far and wide, which were covered deep by the freshet each spring. Now, however, they were robed with tall grass, except for large patches of oats, wheat, Indian corn, and peas. There were sixty-five acres in all under cultivation, including those on the uplands which sloped back to the dense forest. Much of this land had been cleared years before when Sir Thomas Temple was in command of the fort here, and later when Sieur de Soulanges held sway. Nearby were the ruins of the old fort, and Madame Marguerite often thought of the lonely life which Marie Françoise, wife of de Soulanges, had led there years before. Many a time she had told Charlotte and Marie about that brave woman, and they were never weary of hearing about the little Louise Elizabeth who was but an infant when the rough Dutchmen came in the frigate, the "Flying Horse," captured and destroyed the fort, and carried de Soulanges away captive to Boston.

That was over twenty years ago, and now all was peace at the Jemseg. But Madame Marguerite well knew that trouble

might come at any moment. She remembered only too clearly how the English had come up the river two years before, and all at the Jemseg had fled to the Big Lake. And they might arrive again, and very soon, for Colonel Garland would surely come with a strong force to rescue his daughter. She sighed as she looked around. How hard she and her husband, Louis, had worked to make for themselves a home here in the wilderness where they would be free. But dangers were ever around them, not only from the English, but from Villebon, as well. She knew how the latter hated them, and was constantly complaining to the King in France, as well as to Count Frontenac. Villebon had charged that they were lawless and given over to licentiousness, followed the ways of the Indians in living a wild life in the woods, and were not tilling the soil. All this was hard to endure. She was a woman who loved peace, and the quiet home life with her husband and children. She hoped that some day they would have money enough to go back to their old home in Sunny France. She could not bear the idea of her daughters spending their lives in Acadia, constantly surrounded by dangers. She longed for them to have a better education than she could give them. They had no suitable companions with whom to play. Pierre was their chief play-mate, and she knew that he could be trusted. But they needed girls of their own age and social standing.

She was worried, too, about her sister at the Oromocto. She loved Louise, but their natures were so different that they had very little in common now. Once they were as much together as possible. She had always known that Louise was impulsive, passionate, and fond of the officers who came to the river. Since her husband's death she had become reckless, and was constantly stirring up trouble, spying upon Villebon, and reporting every incident to Count Frontenac. In doing this she was not only endangering herself and those at the Oromocto, but all at the Jemseg, as well.

Madame Marguerite thought of these things by day, and often at night. She could not get them out of her mind. So not even the peace that surrounded her this beautiful evening, and the happy group nearby, could dispel her oppressive fears. Many times she and her husband had talked together, and wondered what they could do to check Louise in the wild course she was pursuing.

The long twilight steadily deepened as she thus sat musing. The children chatted with Pierre or danced gaily to some lively tune he played upon his fife. He had taught them all he knew, and he was greatly pleased as he watched their flower-like forms moving so gracefully upon the soft grass. The glory of the western sky was slowly fading, the gold and crimson shading softly into mauve and dull gray. The sound of waterfowl drifted up from the marsh-lands, sleepy birds cheeped in the branches of the trees, and nighthawks flitted to and fro.

Madame Marguerite rose to her feet. It was growing late, and the children must get to bed. They never seemed to tire so long as they had some one to play with them. She had taken but a step forward, when she stopped abruptly. She had caught sight of a moving object upon the water coming slowly towards them. Instantly she was the pioneer mother, always surrounded by dangers, and never knowing when the Indians might make an attack. Perhaps they were coming now.

She hurried to the little group, and placed her arms around the girls. They noticed her excitement, and asked what was the matter.

"There is a canoe coming up the river," she explained. "It may be from the fort, but one can never tell. Let us go to the house."

Pierre was now peering keenly through the deepening gloom. He said nothing until the craft had come nearer. Then he gave a shout of joy.

"They are the English captives, Madame!" he cried. "Don't you see them? They paddle as if they are very tired."

Placing his fife to his lips, he began to play loud and fast. It was his welcome to the visitors, and it was needed more than he imagined.

When the canoe ere long touched the bank, Pierre seized it and drew it up half its length. David at once stepped out, followed by his companion. Madame Marguerite came forward, gave David a word of greeting and turned to the girl. And she then did what her sister Louise had never thought of doing. She caught the girl's hand in hers, looked into her eyes, kissed her upon the cheek, and bade her welcome to the Jemseg. It was her heart which compelled her, a heart full of love for the unfortunate. And this was just what Helen Garland needed. She was tired and lonely, so throwing her arms around Madame Marguerite's neck, she clung to her like a child to its mother.

It was David who explained about their voyage from the Oromocto that afternoon, and what a long hard paddle it had been for them.

"Mam'selle helped me all the way, Madame, and she is very tired."

"But why have you come here, young English? Does my sister know?"

"Oh, yes, for she sent us. And here is a letter for you. She told me to give it to no one else, as it is very important."

Taking the letter, Madame Marguerite slipped it into the bosom of her dress. She would read it later when alone. And, besides, it was too dark now.

"Come, we must go to the house," she ordered. "It is getting late, and there is a dampness in the air."

The girls had taken possession of David, and as they walked by his side they watched the English girl with their mother. Pierre followed, his flute in his hand, ready to play at the least opportunity.

Louis D'Armours was awaiting them at the house, and Helen was pleased at his courteous greeting. She liked him at once, so kind and noble did he look. The large room, which served as kitchen and living-room, was home-like, and everything was as clean as hands could make it. When the candles were lighted, Madame Marguerite spread the table with a fair linen cloth, served cold meat, bread and milk for her guests.

"You must be hungry," she said to David. "And the English girl looks tired. I wish I could talk to her."

"We are both hungry and tired, Madame," the boy replied. "We have eaten but little since leaving Oromocto. I do wish you could talk to her, for she knows so much, and has seen such wonderful places."

While Helen and David ate, the two little girls sat at the end of the table. They kept their eyes fixed intently upon Helen, and watched her every movement. She was the first English girl they had ever seen, and nothing escaped their sharp little eyes. To them she was like a wonderful being from another world, and when she occasionally smiled upon them, they were delighted. At first they were shy, but by the time the meal was ended, they were standing by Helen's side, looking up into her face. In a few minutes they were firm friends, and with David to act as interpreter they began a lively conversation. Then the visitor had to be shown marvellous wooden dolls, cradles, and baskets made by Indians to hold the clothes. There were other things, as well, which had to be exhibited, all precious to the children, especially three kittens in a basket near the large fire-place.

Tired though she was, Helen took a keen interest in everything, and by her manner showed the little ones her pleasure. But she was not unmindful of the father and mother as they sat at the table, reading by the light of the candle the letter from Madam Louise. Once while seated on the floor with a kitten on her lap, she watched them. She noticed the serious expressions upon their faces, and believed it was due to the letter they had received. Did it have anything to do with herself? she wondered. Or was it about the unsuccessful raid that had been made along the coast? Perhaps it told of the bad men who were prowling around of whom David had told her. But why should she fear dangers? With the exception of Madame Louise, she had met only with friendly people both at the Oromocto and here at the Jemseg. Surely they would protect her and see that she was safely returned to Fort Reliance. If she ever had any doubt about this it was now dispelled as she watched Louis D'Armours and his wife. They looked so true sitting there in the circle of light, conversing with each other in low tones. And these, as well as all other French people in Acadia, were enemies to the English, so she had been taught. They had gone forth from this river with Indians to raid towns and villages along the coast, to kill, to scalp, and to take prisoners. And they were white like her own race, they were friendly, and had quiet homes and little children to love and tend. Why should not the two races live in peace and harmony? Why was war necessary?

Helen thought of these things as she fondled one of the kittens. But it was later when in bed, having been lovingly tucked in by Madame Marguerite, that the senseless barbarity of the race-strife stirred her heart with indignation. From a child she had lived among soldiers, at forts, in the midst of fears and alarms. She had known no other world, and always the French and the Indians had been the terrible enemies. But now she was in the midst of her foes, being kindly treated. Why was it necessary to fight with such people? There must be something wrong somewhere, she felt sure.

Thinking thus, she fell asleep, and dreamed that she was being captured by bad men. As they were carrying her away, several members of the League of the Crimson Sign, led by Grey Martell, fought their way to her side and rescued her

from her enemies.



CHAPTER VIII

THE TRAIL OF HOPE

Awaking with a start, Helen sat quickly up. At first she thought it was morning, so bright was the room. She soon knew, however, that it was the light of the moon streaming in through the one window the room contained. The dream was so vivid that she glanced somewhat nervously around as if expecting to see the men who had seized her. And how real Grey had seemed. And he was even now somewhere over there towards the west. David had pointed out to her the direction of the Saganic. If Grey only knew that she was a captive, and at the Jemseg, how soon he would come for her. Nothing could stop him, she felt sure. How good it would be to see him by her side and feel his strong arms about her once again.

Leaving the bed, she went to the window and looked out. How peaceful was the night. The window was at the back of the house, and from here she could see the barn with cattle and sheep nearby. Not far away were the great woods, and as she looked upon them, her dream returned. The forest had always impressed her with fear. Dangers lurked there, and more than once she had seen cruel enemies leap forth from its silent depths, as on that night she had been captured. And, perhaps, they were over there now, prowling about, ready to attack.

And as she looked, she was sure she saw forms moving along the dark border of the woods. She strained her eyes in an effort to see better. But nothing more could she observe, so at length decided that she had been mistaken, and that it was nothing more than imagination. The crow of a rooster startled her, which was at once answered by another. She smiled at her foolish fears. It was daybreak, and she was glad, for she knew that she could not sleep any more.

Dressing herself, she sat by the window and watched the far-off eastern horizon as it slowly brightened into day. It was a long and lonely vigil. She thought of her father and mother at Fort Reliance. How great must be their agony of fear on her behalf. She thought, too, of Grey Martell. He was her only hope of rescue now. But how was he to know about her plight? Who would take him word?

During the next two days Helen seemed to be living in a fairyland. Sunshine from morning until evening, birds singing, wild flowers rioting on all sides, and the voices of happy children were ever around her. After her years of confined fort life this was a novel experience. It was a relief not to see soldiers. There was no sign of warfare here, and the only weapons she saw were two or three muskets hanging on the wall of the house. The world of strife seemed far removed from this beautiful region. During the morning the river was like a mirror, unruffled by a ripple until a gentle breeze winged in from the sea on the flooding tide. The many acres of low meadowland, stretching southward along the river, dotted with great trees, shimmered beneath the sun's bright rays, and filled the air with their sweet perfumes of various flowers and plants. In the ponds, hidden by the tall grass, wild ducks and other fowls were often heard. It was a veritable paradise, and here a few people lived and worked apart from the busy world beyond.

And in this place Louis D'Armours had established his home near the ruins of the old fort which had witnessed many stirring events years before. He wished to live in peace, and cultivate as much land as possible on the large seigniory which had been granted to him. As *Sieur de Chauffeurs* he was an important personage, and the few families who worked for him respected and admired his ability, as well as his gentle courtesy and kindness. He was ably supported by his young and beautiful wife, and when their two children arrived, their cup of happiness was full to overflowing.

Thus this pioneer farmer of the Saint John River lived a peaceful and a thrifty life until disturbed by accursed war between two nations contending for Acadia. Then when supplies were needed to feed the soldiers at the Nashwaak, greedy eyes were cast upon the rich acres at the Jemseg. Wheat, Indian corn, peas and other produce were demanded, besides cattle, hogs and fowls. And for these Louis D'Armours received what Villebon felt inclined to pay. Conditions became unbearable, and complaints were sent to Count Frontenac at Quebec. Louis told the Governor most plainly how he was being robbed and oppressed, and if something was not done to give him relief he would be compelled to leave the country. In due course Villebon heard of these complaints, and his anger was aroused against D'Armours. He charged him to Frontenac with trading unlawfully with the Indians, and giving them rum in exchange for valuable furs, with neglecting his lands, and being seditious and lawless. It was little wonder, then, that Louis D'Armours and his wife hated Villebon, and were in secret touch with the League of the Crimson Sign. They could not tell when the commander at the Nashwaak might undertake to wreak his revenge upon the little settlement at the Jemseg, so in Pete King and his men they saw their only hope of assistance.

It was about the time of the return of the raiders that matters had almost reached the breaking-point. Louis D'Armours had refused to join the expedition, and Villebon had been unable to force him. But he was harder than ever, and demanded greater and choicer supplies. If they were not delivered promptly, he sent men to the Jemseg to carry off whatever he wished. Louis, accordingly, found it better to send Pierre with supplies than to have them taken forcibly. But it was most galling to have their best beef, butter, eggs and fowls go to feed the insolent soldiers at the Nashwaak when quite often they received nothing in return. Louis and his wife realised that this state of affairs could not last much longer, although they seemed helpless to do anything to protect themselves. Villebon was too strong to oppose openly, and even with Pete King and his band from the Saganic they knew that they would be too weak to accomplish anything. And, besides, Count Frontenac might send men from Quebec to support his commander in Acadia should rebellion break out.

Of all this undercurrent of bitterness Helen Garland knew nothing. The D'Armours seemed happy and contented. Her first day was filled with a succession of wonders. There were so many things to see, and the children led her from place to place, while David explained whatever she did not understand. But best of all she enjoyed being out in the field where the haying was going on, and watching the great loads being drawn to the large stacks by the slow-moving oxen. At times she and the children were permitted to ride upon the hay. As the cart swayed and rumbled over the uneven ground, the little ones shrieked with delight and fear, to the amusement of the driver. Helen's eyes sparkled and her cheeks glowed with animation. It was all a wonderful experience to her. It was a pleasure to Louis and his men to have this beautiful girl in their midst. She brought a new radiance into their quiet humdrum life which was most welcome.

But although Helen appeared to be perfectly contented, she could not forget her home far away, and the terrible anxiety her parents were undergoing. Neither could she free her mind from the dream of the previous night. She thought of what David had told her about the bad men at the fort, and of what had happened to the Sorrell girl. Would they come to the Jemseg? she wondered. And if so, how could she escape their attention?

And David was thinking of the same things. He kept as close to the girl as possible, limping along by her side, and talking at times to her about their plans for the future. Once when Helen mentioned how nice it was in this place, and how kind all were to her, the boy sighed and his face grew grave.

"These people are very good, Mam'selle. They will not harm you any more than one of those little chickens over there. But what can they do if the bad men come from the fort?"

"Do you think they will come, David?"

"I am sure they will. They may come at any time, so we must be ready."

"But what can we do?"

"Run away, of course. Over there behind the barn the trail to the Washademoak begins. I have hidden a blanket and some food in the root of an old tree. When the men come, we must go at once."

"But will they not follow us?"

"Maybe so. But they won't know for a while where we are. They will hunt around, and when they think of the trail, we shall be well on our way. It won't take us long to cross the portage, and then we shall be safe."

"With the League of the Crimson Sign, David?"

"Yes, with Pete King and his men. They are over there, and are always going up and down the Washademoak. They will be sure to see us."

To David the land towards the east was a region of bright hope. He had thought about it so long that in vision he saw it as a place of wonderful things, where men were strong and noble, and where evil did not exist. The English were there, and to him that was all sufficient. Merely to reach the water beyond, and all his troubles would be at an end. He had often longed to escape, and he surely would have made the attempt but for the thought of the silent forest. He shivered whenever he looked upon it and imagined himself in the dark depths alone at night. There were bears and all kinds of wild monsters prowling around, who would eat little children, so the Indians had often told him. And they were especially fond of boys who ran away from their masters. Such stories, more than anything else, had kept him from running away both from the Indians and the French.

Now, however, it was different. With such a companion as Helen Garland he was quite willing to brave any danger. He looked upon himself as her champion, and although weak in body he was strong in heart when faced with this new responsibility. In fact, he was very eager to be away upon the adventure which would lead them out of bondage to the region of his heart's desire.

It was the second evening that a canoe arrived from the Nashwaak with Foulette and several men. David was the first to see them, and he believed that the critical moment had arrived. He hastened in search of Helen, and fortunately found her alone out in the field watching the cows as they trooped in from the pasture. She was startled by his excited manner, and surmised that he carried important news.

"They have come, Mam'selle!" he panted. "They are just landing. You must hurry away to the woods."

Impulsively the girl caught the boy's hand in hers.

"Don't leave me," she cried. "Let us both go together."

A thrill came into David's heart at this appeal. He felt like a knight of old defending a fair maiden.

"I will go with you, Mam'selle, and show you the way. But I must find out what those men are after."

"But you will not leave me? Promise me that."

"No, no, I will stand by you, so do not fear. I will look after you."

"We must be careful, David, and not let anyone see us."

"There is no one near now. The men are down getting in that last load of hay. I'll go with you first and show you the way."

Together they hurried across the field at the back of the barn, and when they reached the woods, David stopped at an opening among the trees.

"This is the beginning of the trail," he explained. "The blanket and food are in that old hollow stump. You stay here until I come back. But if you see any of those bad men, run along the trail and I will catch up with you. Don't go too far. You may have to hide, so I will give two short whistles."

"Don't be long," the girl pleaded.

"I will be back as soon as I can. But I must find out what Foulette and his men are after."

Left alone, Helen sank upon the ground at the foot of a big spruce tree. Her heart was beating fast, and she felt timid. The forest looked so dark, and she could not tell what dangers lurked within its deep silent depths. But it was far better to trust to whatever might be there than to merciless men. She thought of the two happy days of peace she had spent at the Jemseg. Was she now to be plunged into the midst of trials and dangers? Oh, if Grey only knew of her troubles how soon he would come to her. But he was a long way off, and she had only little David upon whom to depend. But, perhaps, the men were not after her, so it would not be necessary to spend the night in the woods.

The time dragged slowly by as she waited there crouched upon the ground. The darkness deepened, and every sound startled her. She could hear the voices of men over at the barn, and the occasional call of one cow to another. The air was becoming chilly, and at times she shivered.

At length when she was beginning to fear that David would not return, she heard two sharp whistles. Springing eagerly to her feet, she saw the boy limping towards her as fast as he could.

"Did you think I was never coming?" he asked.

"You were a long time. Did you find out anything?"

"I did. They are after you."

"Oh!" Helen placed a hand upon the lad's shoulder. "You heard what they said?"

"I heard enough, though they didn't know I was listening. We must get away at once."

"What do they want me for?"

"Villebon has sent for you. He wants to marry you to Villieu."

Startled and amazed, Helen felt a sudden weakness come upon her. She leaned upon David for support.

"Don't faint now, Mam'selle," he pleaded. "You need to be strong."

"I know it, David. But what you tell me is terrible. Why does Villebon want to make me marry Villieu?"

"To spite your father, so Foulette said. I couldn't hear all he told Madame. Anyway, he has come for you to take you back to the fort."

"To-night?"

"No, he is going to wait until morning."

"He will have to wait longer than that, David. I shall never marry Villieu. I will die first."

"Oh, you won't have to die, Mam'selle. They'll not get you to-night, and to-morrow we shall reach the Washademoak and be safe. We must get along now."

Taking the food and the blanket from the hollow stump, David led the way into the forest, with Helen close behind. At first it was possible to see quite clearly and to follow the path worn by many feet. But at length it became so dark that only with difficulty could they advance without floundering around among the trees. Then they were forced to stop.

"We'll have to stay here all night, I guess," David declared. "How dark it is!" He was holding Helen's hand, and she noticed that he was trembling. She, too, was frightened, but for the boy's sake she knew that she had to keep up courage.

"We shall stay right here, David, and with this warm blanket we shall be quite comfortable. There is nothing to harm us. People often sleep in the woods at night."

"I know they do, but they are men and have guns. I have nothing but a knife."

"That is a good weapon. But we shall not need it. Let us sit down. I know this is a good place, for I can feel the moss under my feet. We shall have something to eat, too."

In a few minutes they were comfortably seated close together, with the blanket wrapped around them. After he had eaten a little of the food, David leaned his tired head against his companion. He did not feel like a courageous knight now. He was merely a little child depending upon another for help and comfort. But he felt quite safe with Helen's arm around him. He was looking up through the branches of the great trees.

"I see the stars up there, Mam'selle," he whispered. "They have been my friends, and I often thought they were winking at me. They look so happy. And God is up there, too. I wonder if He sees us."

"I am sure he does, David."

"Then why does He let bad men do such terrible things? And why did He let us be taken away from our homes?"

"I do not know, David, but I am sure He will take care of us."

"So do I, Mam'selle. And suppose we ask Him now to keep us safe. Maybe He cannot see us here in the dark among the trees. But if we say 'Our Father' I know He will hear us."

And there in that vast wilderness the two lonely fugitives, with clasped hands, repeated the Lord's Prayer. There was a sob in the girl's voice as she finished, for she remembered how often she had said that same prayer as a little child at her mother's knee. It had not meant much to her then, but now every word was full of a new meaning, and it brought strength and comfort to her soul.

For a while there was silence, both listening to the strange sounds around them, the rustle of leaves, the weird hooting of

an owl, and other noises they could not understand. David pressed closer to Helen's side for protection. Her heart was filled with sympathy for this helpless boy, and thinking of him, she felt stronger to bear her own burden.

"Sing something," David at length sleepily murmured.

"What shall I sing?"

"Anything, but not too loud. The bad men might hear."

Then in a low voice the girl sang, "The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want." She sang it through, and when she had finished, David was asleep with his cares for the present ended. For a while Helen kept her lonely watch. Ere long she became drowsy. Moving the boy a little, she curled up by his side, drew the blanket over them both, and, wearied out, she also slept.

And there in the great forest, with night over-shadowing them, they were safe for a time, safer with the wild creatures of the woods than with human beings who called themselves men.

CHAPTER IX

HUMAN DEVILS

When Helen opened her eyes the sun was sifting down through the branches of the trees. For a few seconds she wondered where she was. Then she remembered, and quickly raised herself to a sitting position. David slumbered by her side. She looked upon his face and noted how drawn and pale it seemed. A great pity for this lad came into her heart. What a hard life he must have led since his capture. And what would happen to him should he again be seized? She could not believe that the D'Armours at the Jemseg would be cruel to him, for they were so kind. But with Villebon it might be different. And what would happen to herself? The commander might confine her in a dark place and force her to marry Villieu. The thought was terrible. No, no, it must not be. She and David would get away at once, and be at the Washademoak when Grey and Pete King arrived. They would surely find them, for David had told her that the men of the League of the Crimson Sign were constantly passing up and down that stream.

Rising to her feet, she looked around to find some water to wash her face, but none could she see. The great trees stood silently around on every side. Birds flitted and chirped among the branches, and squirrels scolded at the intruders in their domain. What time of the morning it was she did not know, although the sun was quite high in the heavens. It seemed a pity to wake the sleeping boy, but there was no help for it, as they must be on their way as speedily as possible. At her touch upon his shoulder, David opened his eyes and looked around, bewildered. He then smiled and sat up.

"I had such a wonderful dream," he explained. "I thought we were safe with Pete King, and he was just going to take us home when I woke. Do dreams ever come true?"

"I believe they sometimes do, and I hope yours will. But we must get on our way now, for those men may follow us."

The boy sprang lightly to his feet, and rolled up the blanket.

"I am ready, Mam'selle, and we can eat while we walk. There is not much food, but it should last us to-day."

Thus along the trail they moved. The ground was rough, but they had no difficulty in following the well-worn track. It was cool in the shade of the towering trees, and although they were somewhat afraid lest they should meet wild animals, they were not altogether unhappy. The sense of freedom thrilled their souls, and the hope of meeting the men who would rescue them was an encouragement. Whenever Helen felt weary the thought of seeing Grey Martell inspired her. How surprised he would be to find her there in the wilderness. It was not alone the exertion of walking which caused the flush upon her face and the animation in her eyes.

David limped ahead, stopping at times to learn how his companion was making out.

"You are doing well, Mam'selle," he complimented as he paused at the summit of a hill they had ascended. "I was afraid you couldn't stand this journey."

Helen smiled as she sat down to rest upon an old fallen tree.

"I can stand more than you imagine, David. If I could only walk in my bare feet like you it would be a great relief. My shoes were not made for a rough trail like this."

"Do your feet hurt you, Mam'selle?"

"A little. But when we reach some water I shall bathe them, and that will soothe them. I am thirsty, too."

"So am I, Mam'selle. But this trail now leads downhill, and maybe there is a brook at the bottom."

"Why don't you call me 'Helen', David? I like that better than 'Mam'selle'. We are just like brother and sister now, remember."

"So we are. And I wish you were really my sister. Wouldn't it be great!"

"Did you ever have a sister?" the girl asked as they once more continued their journey.

"No, only a brother. I always longed for a sister, and I am so glad you will be one to me."

For some time they moved downward, and after what seemed a long way, they came to the valley, and to their delight saw a small brook threading its way among the trees. Eagerly they stooped and drank of the refreshing stream. Then taking off her shoes, Helen bathed her feet, letting the cooling water flow over them.

"What a beautiful place this is," she remarked as she looked up and down the valley. "It is so quiet here, with no bad men to trouble us. Do you suppose they will follow us?"

David, seated by her side, threw a stone savagely into the brook.

"I hope the Evil Spirit will catch them and eat them alive," he cried.

"Why, David!" Helen exclaimed in astonishment. "It is not right to wish such a thing."

"Maybe it isn't, but I don't care. I want something terrible to happen to them. They are bad, and so are the Indians. Oh, if you only knew how I have suffered from those devils. Look at my leg. I shall be lame all my life."

"The Frenchmen didn't cause that, did they?"

"No, the Indians did it. They made me sleep in the snow, and carry meat and wood into the camp when I was sick. And they beat me when I couldn't stand up, and dragged me by the hair of my head."

"Did they really treat you that way! But the Frenchmen were good to you, were they not?"

"Most of them were, but not Foulette and some others. They used to make me wait on them, and cuffed me if I didn't hurry when I was tired. They laughed when I limped, mocked me, and said they would make all the English limp and wait on them some day. Oh, how I hate them!"

Helen was astonished at the fierceness of the boy's wrath. He had risen to his feet and was standing by her side with clenched hands and blazing eyes. His face was paler than usual, and his whole body was trembling from the vehemence of his emotion.

"There, there, David, you must not get so excited," she advised. "Suppose we eat a little and then go on. We have been here quite a while."

"Yes, we must go on, Mam'selle—Helen, I mean. We must get away from those men. I want to tell the English how I have suffered, and they will come and punish Foulette. And if they don't, I will do it some day when I am older."

After they had eaten a small portion of the meat and bread, they continued on their way. The trail now led up a long hill where the walking was harder. But they pressed forward, each encouraging the other. Once they saw a black bear, and often rabbits hopped fearlessly in front of them. They were occasionally startled by partridges which rose on sudden wing with a whirring sound. But no sign of human life did they see, no friendly shelter, and no one to bid them welcome. The whole of this vast wilderness was in possession of birds and wild animals, and man was as a thing of naught.

The length of the journey, the roughness of the trail, and the heat ere long began to tell upon the travellers. David's limp was more pronounced, although he uttered no word of complaint. Helen was tired and her feet sore. Her shoes, torn by stones, roots and snags, were little more than mere shreds of leather. At times they came to moist places on the trail, and then her feet were soothed by the soft mud. Her clothes were torn, and there were long scratches on her arms caused by rough brambles and branches. But through all she remained buoyant and cheerful. The sight of that little form limping bravely ahead inspired her. It would not do for her to falter when he was setting such a noble example of endurance.

At length the trail began to descend, and the walking was less difficult. This was encouraging, and David decided that they were not far from the Washademoak.

"We have been long enough on the way to be there," he declared. "I have heard men say that they have travelled from water to water in two hours. But we have not come very fast."

"I wonder what time of day it is?" Helen replied.

"It's past noon, anyway," and the boy looked up through the tops of the trees as he spoke. "I can tell by the sun. I hope

some of Pete King's men will find us soon."

"What shall we do if they don't?"

"Go to them, of course. We shall build a raft and pole it along the shore. Oh, I know what to do, so you can depend upon me."

"You are a wonderful boy, David. I never thought of making a raft. It is a splendid idea."

"Oh, that isn't much. I know a lot of other things which the Indians taught me. You'll see before long what I can do."

In a short time a sudden opening among the trees exposed a gleam of water ahead. Helen stopped and exclaimed in glad surprise.

"Yes, that's it," David quietly remarked. "We'll soon be there now, and we can then rest."

With the happy unconcern of youth they hurried forward, and soon came in full view of the stream. Hardly a ripple ruffled its surface, and it lay like a jewel amidst its dark setting of majestic trees.

As they reached the water's edge, great was their surprise to see an upturned canoe lying upon the shore, with paddles nearby.

"This is luck!" David exclaimed. "I wonder where this canoe came from. We won't have to build a raft now. Help me to turn it over."

This was soon done, and they were about to push it into the water when loud mocking laughter sounded forth from among the trees. Startled, they straightened up and looked around. To their horror they beheld four men coming towards them, their mouths expanded in broad grins of delight. Foulette was leading, and when he came to David he laid a heavy hand upon his shoulder. His face became suddenly stern.

"So you thought you could escape, did you?" he roared. "Running away with a girl, eh? You'll pay for this."

He gave him a savage shake and sent him sprawling upon the ground. His companions laughed, thinking it a great joke. They advised him to give the boy a beating.

"Oh, there's plenty of time for that," Foulette replied as he turned towards the girl. The look he gave her caused Helen's face to turn pale. As he stepped up to her and caught her by the arm, she shrank back, tore herself from his grasp and stood defiantly at bay. He spoke to her, but she did not understand his words. But David did, and regaining his feet, he limped to her assistance. It was the height of folly for so weak a lad to face such a strong brute. But a burning rage and concern for Helen blinded him to all sense of reason.

"Leave her alone," he cried. "If you touch her, I'll kill you."

Foulette swung swiftly around and seized the boy with a strong grip. But David fought, struggled and bit like a young demon. At first Foulette was amused. But when he felt sharp teeth sinking into his hand, he uttered a cry of pain, and with a savage oath he flung the lad from him. As David scrambled to his feet and started to renew the attack, Foulette lifted his right arm for a blow. He would settle this troublesome boy once and for all. But as his clenched fist descended, it fell not upon the lad, but upon Helen's unprotected head as she sprang forward to David's assistance. She went down in a heap upon the shore, and lay there to all appearance dead. With a great cry David was by her side in an instant. He looked into the girl's white face and shook her.

"Helen, Helen, open your eyes," he pleaded. "Speak to me."

Receiving no response, he turned towards the now silent and frightened Foulette.

"You have killed her!" he shouted. "Oh, you devil!"

And Foulette was more than frightened. He was terrified. If he had killed the girl, how was he to answer to Villebon? No excuse would be of any avail with his stern commander. Colonel Garland's daughter was a most valuable prize. Her death here at the Washademoak would not be such a heart-rending revenge as the one Villebon had planned against his bitter enemy.

Stooping, he felt the girl's pulse. She was not dead, only stunned. His fist must have struck her a glancing blow. That was some comfort. Ordering his men to bring some water, he bathed her face, and as Helen at length opened her eyes, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"She'll be all right in a few minutes," he declared. "Put her in the canoe. We must hurry back to the Jemseg where Madame Marguerite will know what to do with her."

As the men lifted the girl from the ground, David pressed close to the girl.

"Be very careful," he advised. "Don't hurt her. Let me attend to her."

Savagely Foulette turned upon him.

"Get out of the way, you young English devil," he ordered. "You have caused all this trouble. I've a good mind to beat you until you can't stand, and leave you here. But, no, that would be too good for a thing like you. Ah, I know of something better than that."

He looked around until his eyes rested upon a tree a short distance away.

"Tie him to that tree," he commanded. "There is rope in the canoe. The crows and bears will have a good meal for once."

At these words David's eyes dilated with terror. He glanced around as if seeking some way of escape. But the men caught him, dragged him from the shore, and tied him securely with his back to the tree. David's struggles and shrieks were all in vain, for the men only laughed. Foulette, who had been watching, now approached the lad and ordered him to be quiet.

"If you don't stop your yelling, we'll gag you or plug your mouth with mud. You think you're badly used, do you? But you deserve all you are getting for running off with that girl. You showed her the way here, thinking you could escape. But we knew you were headed for this place, so came by water, and were waiting here for some time before you arrived. You expected to meet Pete King and his gang, but you had the surprise of your life instead. And look what's happened to that girl through your deviltry."

David's face was now aflame with passion, and he struggled hard at his bonds.

"You're cowards," he cried. "You think it great fun to abuse a little lame boy and tie him to a tree. But you would run away if Pete King and his men came here. And they'll get after you and pay you back for what you are doing to me."

Instead of being angry at these words Foulette and his men were highly amused. Hardened creatures were they to whom the suffering of others meant nothing. Living so long in a rough wild country, accustomed to cruelty and savage deeds, their hearts had lost all sense of sympathy for the weak and afflicted. More merciless and unfeeling were they than the Indians they despised. They called themselves civilised men, but their civilization was only a veneer, scarcely skin deep.

So they left the little lad tied to the tree and took their departure, reminding him so long as they were within speaking distance that the bears and crows would soon have a good meal. David watched them, dry-eyed and dumb until they were out of sight. Then the terror of a great loneliness swept upon him. Again he strained at his bonds, but all in vain. Exhausted, his body sagged against the rope, with his eyes turned up stream. Perhaps the men of the Crimson Sign would come soon. That was his only hope. But as the afternoon waned and no human being appeared, his fond expectation vanished. And to add to his agony of mind and body several crows flew by with coarse caws. They were waiting for him, he believed, as Foulette had said. As the sun descended, the trees cast their long shadows out over the water. And among their dark silent depths bears, perhaps, were waiting to join the crows in their feast upon his body. When would they come? After dark, most likely. The thought was more than he could endure. He was tired, anyway, after his long tramp over the trail, and this terrible strain had unnerved him completely. He began to call for help, and this soon developed into wild shrieks. Ere long he began to babble unintelligible words. Sometimes he laughed, but it was a fearful laugh which rent the stillness around him and sounded forth over the placid water.

CHAPTER X

JUDITH LA VALLIERE

When Pete King and Grey Martell arrived at the Saganic from the Saint John River they heard important news. The long expected supply vessel from Boston had arrived at the Petitcodiac River, and was already discharging her cargo. The goods would have to be carried over the portage, fourteen miles long, to the head waters of the Washademoak, and brought from there in canoes to the trading post on the Saganic. This would take considerable time, and all the available men, as the supplies were many, necessary for winter trading. Besides quantities of food, there were bales of clothing, muskets, ammunition, trinkets of various kinds, and the inevitable supply of spirits which must be most carefully guarded.

Grey was worried. He saw an end to his plan of returning at once to the Saint River to learn something about that female captive. Pete King seemed to have forgotten all about her in his interest and excitement at the arrival of the vessel. He began at once to organize his men, giving them strict instructions as to their duties. The majority were detailed for carrying the supplies overland, for which they would receive extra pay for such heavy work, while others were to bring the goods down to the post. Grey was placed in charge of the latter.

"Keep the men busy," Pete ordered. "There is no time to lose."

"But what about that captive at the Nashwaak?" Grey questioned. "Some one should find out who she is."

"There will be time for that, my boy, when we get the supplies down and safely stored. This may be our only chance, for if I am not much mistaken, Villebon will soon be giving us trouble for the defeat of his men along the coast. And this may be the only supply vessel here this summer, as the French frigates are very busy down the Bay, and our other vessel may not be lucky enough to escape."

"What a pity we can't have those goods brought in all the way by water."

"It is, but it's too risky. We're fortunate in having this back door, and several times Villebon has tried to close that. He will be more determined and revengeful now than ever."

"And most likely he will wreak some of his revenge upon that English captive. It isn't right for us to leave her there without making an effort to save her."

"Oh, Villebon will not harm a female captive. I know him well enough for that. He will send her to Quebec, no doubt, and let Frontenac deal with her. Anyway, when we get through with these supplies we shall make a trip down river and learn what we can about her. Get away, now, and keep the men busy. I shall retain several here to help me to strengthen the stockade. There are some weak places which much be repaired. I don't want to be caught off guard."

Grey well knew that it was useless to argue any more with his leader. When Pete King had once made up his mind that was the end of all argument. He had to be so, for with such a band of reckless men to command, any weakness would be fatal. His one great purpose in life was to serve the John Martell Trading Company, so every thing else had to give place to that, even his desire that Acadia should belong to England.

The headquarters of the League of the Crimson Sign consisted of a fort as well as a trading post. This was most necessary in a country where enemies were prowling around. The situation was ideal, on the left bank of the Saganic several miles up from the Washademoak. On a fine elevation near the river buildings had been erected and surrounded by a stout palisade, with bastions upon which small cannon were mounted. The buildings were of logs, and so strongly constructed as to withstand a siege should the palisade be broken through. The main house in the middle of the square was especially strong, with double walls of logs and perforated with loop-holes for gunners. This building was capable of accommodating fifty men in an emergency, although as a rule not more than two score were ever present at one time. The large room was both dining hall and council chamber combined. It was fitted up in almost feudal style, the rough walls adorned with weapons and trophies of the chase. In winter, and whenever the nights were cool, the great fire-place sent forth its genial heat. Here the men gathered, smoked, drank, talked and sang. They were all rough, able-bodied men. Some were cultured and well versed in the ways of civilization. Others were of the ruder sort, mere hunters and trappers. But all were as one here, and apart from their leader there was no distinction in rank. It was a goodly company

of men, liberty-loving, foot free, and with an intense hatred for all forms of tyranny and oppression. To such men the petty jealousies and intrigues of Court life, as well as its debilitating effeminate ways were distasteful and ridiculous. They loved the great wilds of forests, rivers, lakes, hills and valleys. The smoke of the camp fire, the bed of spruce or fir boughs, the mystery of adventure on long silent trails, and the meeting together occasionally at the Saganic were all that they desired. They were peace-loving men who disliked to be driven like slaves to war. But they were no cowards or weaklings, and when forced to fight they fought like fiends incarnate. Any man of a craven spirit was dismissed from the band and never allowed to return. Each wore the Crimson Sign upon his cap, and it was a constant reminder who and what he was.

And with these men Grey Martell had lived for several years. He had become one of them, and he was proud to be enrolled among their number, and to wear the red feather of the League. But his heart was ever calling to the girl far away, as time and separation, instead of lessening, had only increased his love. The sight of that captive crouching in the canoe had stirred his soul to its very depths. He could not explain why, but he had the feeling that she was Helen Garland. Perhaps it was because the heart of love is so wonderfully fearful and imagines all kinds of things for the object beloved. Anyway, it was so with Grey, and as he worked upon the river the impression increased, and his mind became distorted with the idea that Helen Garland was a captive at the Nashwaak, undergoing great hardships. Once the temptation came upon him to steal away alone in the night and hasten to her rescue. Fortunately his reason kept him from such an act of folly, and caused him to wait, though impatiently, until Pete King was ready.

One afternoon he was directing the loading of several canoes at the landing where the bales of supplies had been brought across the portage from the Petitcodiac. He had received a letter from his parents, but of Helen there was no word. He had questioned several sailors, who had come from the vessel, about the raid along the coast, but they had heard nothing except that the French and their Indian allies had been active in some places, especially near Fort Reliance. This news was not comforting, as it merely added fuel to his concern about Helen.

Grey had just turned around after seeing that one of the canoes was properly loaded with valuable freight, when he saw a girl coming towards him around the bluff of a small hill a short distance away. With her were two Indians carrying a canoe. He was greatly astonished. Where had she come from? he wondered. No one had spoken to him about her. If she had come on the vessel, the sailors would have told him.

As she drew nearer he saw that she was a girl of remarkable beauty, with a slightly dark complexion, and hair as black as the raven's wing. Her step was light, and she carried her lithe, finely-formed body with grace and independence. From her manner and the proud poise of her head she was evidently accustomed to command. She was clad in a plain dress, the skirt of which reached a few inches below the knees. In her left hand she carried a paddle, while her right was raised to her forehead to shade her eyes from the sun as she looked at the men upon the bank of the river. When she at length stopped before the astonished young man, a smile of amusement overspread her face.

"Pardon me for disturbing you, Monsieur," she began. "I am Judith la Valliere, and I seek Monsieur King, leader of the League of the Crimson Sign. Is he here?"

Judith la Valliere! At that name Grey straightened quickly up, as a soldier in the presence of his superior officer. And even the men loading the canoes were deeply impressed. They ceased their work and stared at the girl of whom they had heard so much. The fame of her beauty, intelligence, and reckless daring had spread far beyond the Isthmus of Chignecto. Tales of her adventurous deeds had been told and re-told around many a camp fire in the lonely wilderness. She could handle a canoe with the skill of the most experienced voyageur, and even the rough water of the Bay of Fundy held no terror for her. She was equally at home upon the trail, and expert in woodland ways. The spirit of Michel le Neuf, Sieur de la Valliere, whose name was famous from the great Hudson Bay to Quebec, as well as all over Acadia and along the New England Coast, had been inherited in a liberal measure by his daughter Judith. Little wonder, then, that she appealed strongly to the brave and impetuous Villieu, for he found in her a nature in harmony with his own.

The expression of astonishment upon Grey Martell's face pleased the girl, and she smiled.

"A woman is a rarity in this country, Monsieur, I see," she bantered. "Or is it that I look very terrible? But I am quite harmless, notwithstanding my appearance."

These words aroused Grey and he, too, smiled.

"Pardon me, Mademoiselle, but we are all surprised at your appearance here. It is seldom that we have such an

important visitor. Your name and fame have preceded you, so there is an ample excuse for our apparent rudeness. You wish to see our leader, you say. He is at the Saganic. May I show you the way?"

"If you please, Monsieur. I have a special message for him from my father, and it must be delivered as speedily as possible. Mon Dieu! we have travelled hard, and my Indians are almost exhausted."

"Suppose you leave your canoe here and travel with us," Grey suggested. "We are about ready to start. There will be room for you."

"No, no, Monsieur, I must have my canoe, as I wish to go on to the Jemseg to see Madame D'Armours. We will not mind this river after our rough trip on the Bay."

"Very well, Mademoiselle. Follow us, then, and we shall guide you to the Saganic."

Judith la Valliere was much impressed by the voice and appearance of this young man. She knew by his accent that he was not a Frenchman, and surmised that he was an Englishman. When she heard later that he was the son of John Martell, the noted Boston trader, her interest in him increased. If she could gain his goodwill, he might be of considerable assistance in furthering the design her father had in mind, and which was really the cause of her visit to the Saganic.

CHAPTER XI

BY THE CRIMSON SIGN!

For the first time in the history of the trading post on the Saganic a white woman entered the building and sat with the men at the table. It was accordingly a notable occasion to have this girl from the Chignecto with them at their evening meal. Seated at Pete King's right as he presided at the head of the table, she was the centre of all eyes. The men were on their best behaviour, and although loud and rough at times among themselves, they knew how to speak and act in the presence of such a visitor. Chords of memory were stirred, of other days, of mothers, sisters, and girls they had known. Men may think that they can hide themselves in the wilderness and forget the years that have sped. But it is there that former scenes and associations are viewed in a new light, becoming almost sacred with the passing of time. It takes but little then to stir the desires within them for the things which they imagined they had cast off forever. It was so, at any rate, with these men in the company of this beautiful girl from the Isthmus.

It was especially so with Grey Martell. As he sat at the opposite end of the table and watched her, Helen Garland was constantly in his mind. In fact, the two looked somewhat alike, he thought, only Judith la Valliere was darker. But the poise of her head, her eyes, and the lips with the ready smile, reminded him of the girl he loved. What a joy it would be if Helen were present instead of being so far away. But was she? Again he thought of that captive girl at the Nashwaak.

Pete King was unusually silent, and this the men noticed. They felt that he had some important news to impart, and they would know what it was before supper ended. He spoke occasionally to the girl by his side, but only to answer some question she asked. His eyes roamed at times over the table, and he was evidently pleased at what had been prepared by Jean LeMoine, the cook. There was an abundance of good things, including choice trout, wild fowl, such as duck and partridge, and hot Indian corn cakes served with maple syrup. It was a sumptuous meal, for the men always fared well. They took turns in supplying the game, while the flour, sugar, tea, rice, and other foods were provided by the trading company. Rum was also served at every meal, over which the leader kept a strict watch, allowing only a certain portion to each man. The table was adorned with three big wooden candelabra, the largest being in the centre. These had been made with considerable care at the post by several Frenchmen, and when the numerous candles were lighted the room was brilliantly illuminated. Only on special occasions were they all used, as they were this evening, and then the faces of the men and their surroundings stood out with startling clearness.

As the meal progressed, Pete King became more preoccupied than ever. He seemed to take no interest in what was going on around him, and even several of Judith la Valliere's questions remained unanswered. His face was unusually stern and thoughtful, and more than once he glanced at Grey through the flickering candle light. At length he rose to his feet, and all voices were at once hushed. He presented a noble appearance, tall, erect, and powerful, with his massive head crowned with graying hair. He was a worthy commander of the men gathered there, and in him they had perfect confidence. The light of pride shone in his eyes as he viewed them, for he knew they would follow him, even to death. Then his right hand rested upon the mug of rum by his side.

"Men of the League of the Crimson Sign, let us drink to the health of our visitor, Mademoiselle la Valliere."

Instantly every man was on his feet, with mug held aloft.

"To Mademoiselle la Valliere," all shouted, as they clinked their mugs and drank the girl's health.

Although taken by surprise, Judith was equal to the occasion. She rose to her feet and bowed to the men before her.

"I thank you, gentlemen, for the honor you have given me. My father, in whose name I have come hither, will be greatly pleased."

As she resumed her seat, someone shouted:

"Three cheers for Mademoiselle la Valliere!"

Again all sprang to their feet, and the building resounded with cheer after cheer for the guest of the evening. Then followed an old familiar chanson, sung with great vigor, in which all, English as well as French, joined. This ended, the men sat down, filled and lighted their pipes. They had given full vent to their feelings in cheer and song, and were

satisfied.

Pete King, however, remained standing. He watched the smoke ascending in clouds, and wreathing itself in fantastic forms around the light of the candles. He understood the men better than they imagined, and well knew that they were in the right mood to listen and agree to anything he might say. He was a wise leader, and only a man of his ability and shrewdness could have controlled such a band of men in the heart of a vast wilderness.

"Men of the League of the Crimson Sign," he began, "we are honored to-night by the presence of the daughter of the brave and noble Sieur de la Valliere, of Chignecto. This is the first time that a white woman has ever graced this building, and it is a notable occasion. Her mission to the Saganic is most eventful, for she bears tidings of great importance. As you are well aware, this country of Acadia is in the merciless iron grip of Count Frontenac of Quebec. And back of him is the strong hand of Louis the Fourteenth of France, with his minions, mostly favorite women. All who oppose that rule are considered renegades, and are condemned to death. Men are reduced to the condition of abject slaves, and are compelled to take up arms in wasteful and unnecessary war. They are even forced to marry against their will, and for that purpose shiploads of girls have been brought from France as wives for all bachelors. Whoever will not obey is punished. No choice is allowed, for all must bow to the imperious command. To men with the spirit of freedom in their souls this is intolerable, so for protection we have formed ourselves into a League, and have made our headquarters here on the Saganic. But we are not unmindful of the fact that our position is a most precarious one. Villebon, at the Nashwaak, is our bitter enemy, and he is driven on by Frontenac. He stirs up the Indians against us, and any day he may sweep down upon this post in an effort to destroy it and break up our band. We are not in a position to withstand a siege for any length of time against a large force unless we have assistance. And that is now fortunately offered by Sieur de la Valliere, who is ready to join with us. He has been badly treated, for this land which is rightfully his by royal decree, is ruled by Villebon and the authorities at Quebec. With such help, and with many of the Indians on our side, we should be able not only to defend our position here, but to menace the fort on the Nashwaak."

The speaker paused, and his eyes brightened at the eager expression upon the faces of the men before him. He knew how anxious they were for some adventure of wild daring, especially against a harsh and overbearing rule.

"And it is likely that we may have assistance from a most unexpected quarter," he slowly continued. "In the recent raid along the New England Coast, Villebon's men were defeated and forced to retreat. But in some strange manner they managed to capture one prisoner of considerable importance, a girl, the daughter of Colonel Garland, the commander of Fort Reliance."

No sooner had these words left Pete King's lips than Grey Martell was on his feet. His body was trembling, and his eyes were blazing.

"Is it true, Pete King?" he demanded. "Is Helen Garland a prisoner at the Nashwaak? How do you know?"

Pete was not surprised at the young man's excited words and manner. With his hand he motioned him to sit down.

"I have the information from Sieur de la Valliere," he explained. "On their return from the raid, several of Villebon's men left the main band, went to their homes at Chignecto and reported what had taken place. That was how the news was received, so it must be true."

Grey knew that it was only too true. Helen was a captive among the enemy! What would happen to her? The thought was almost more than he could endure. He must rescue her. But how could that be done? Pete King was again speaking, and what he said gave him some hope.

"Colonel Garland will surely come to save his daughter. He may even now be on his way with a large force. He will undoubtedly come up the Petitcodiac, for he knows he can rely upon us for assistance. Thus with Colonel Garland and the aid that Sieur de la Valliere can give we shall be strong enough to overcome Villebon. We must make ready at once. In the meantime, I shall go down river and learn what I can from our friends at the Jemseg. And you men will know what to do. Every outlook hill must be manned, and most careful watch maintained. Set guards far up the Saganic, and on our chosen hills between here and the Nashwaak. We must not be taken by surprise, but be ready when the enemy comes. Men, are you ready for the great fight for liberty and justice?"

As one every man sprang to his feet, held aloft his right hand, and with the fingers of his left touched his forehead. Picking up his cap from the floor, Pete King held it high, and placed a forefinger upon the red feather fastened thereon.

"By the crimson sign!" he shouted. "We shall stand together till death."

"By the crimson sign!" all responded. Then from their lips came their song of defiance:

Swift as the feathers in an eagle's wing—
Yo-ho! Yo-ho! Yo-ho!

We are the League of the Crimson Sign,
We are the men of the Outer Line,
Yo-ho! Yo-ho! Yo-ho!

Light as the feathers on an eagle's breast—
Yo-ho! Yo-ho! Yo-ho!
Go we our way as the wind doth go,
And no man knoweth the way we go,
Yo-ho! Yo-ho! Yo-ho!

Oh, blood is the red of the Crimson Sign—
Yo-ho! Yo-ho! Yo-ho!
Red as the blood which we gladly shed,
Red as the blood on our feathers red—
Yo-ho! Yo-ho! Yo-h-o-o!

When they had finished, Pete King smiled.

"It is well, men. Away now and make ready."

At that minute two rangers suddenly entered the room. They were travel-worn, and showed signs of weariness. They were greeted with words of welcome, for they had been absent many days. They looked curiously upon the girl at the head of the table, and then at Pete. The latter motioned them to a seat.

"Welcome back," he accosted. "You are not too late to partake of our feast in honor of our guest, Mademoiselle la Valliere. There is plenty of food left, so help yourselves. But what news do you bring from the Big Lake? Are the Indians quiet there?"

"Quiet, yes, very quiet, Pete King," Jean Trudeau replied, as he helped himself to some duck. "Mon Dieu! some are so quiet that they will never move or speak again."

"What do you mean?" the leader demanded.

"Just what I said. They've been struck with a plague, and are dying like flies, men, women and children. We saw them with our own eyes, didn't we, Tony?" and he turned to his companion who had forgotten everything else in his hunger.

"Ah, ah, we saw it, all right. A big Injun in good health would suddenly begin to bleed at the nose, then turn blue in spots, and in two or three hours would be dead. It was very sad, my friends," and he gazed around upon the astonished rangers. "We didn't like to stay there any longer, so left, and have been travelling hard ever since."

"Where was that, Tony?" Pete asked, now much concerned.

"Up on the Chimenpy River, not far from Big Lake. Father Elizee, who has been with the Indians for some time, has gone to the Nashwaak for help. He thinks Villebon will be able to give him something, medicine maybe. But I don't think that anything will stop the plague. It will rage far and wide, and many will die."

This was startling news, and the rangers all sat down again to listen to what further information the two rangers had to impart. But they could learn very little more. The plague had come very suddenly, and was spreading from camp to camp. The Indians were terribly excited, and some were fleeing from the place in all directions, except the sick and the dying.

The effect of this news upon the rangers was various. The Frenchmen crossed themselves, as if to ward off the plague

which might now be surrounding them. The English, however, showed no sign of their feelings, but lighted their pipes and left the building to discuss the matter outside. And with them went Grey Martell. He could think only of Helen Garland, a captive at the Nashwaak.

CHAPTER XII

PETE KING'S VOW

Twilight was deepening over the land as Pete King and Grey Martell drove their light canoe down the Washademoak towards the Jemseg. And behind them came Judith la Valliere with her two Indians. She was seated astern, paddle in hand, which she used to good purpose when the mood was upon her. But at times she would remain idle, gazing out over the water, or watching the canoe ahead. And what chiefly attracted her attention there was the form of the young man bending strongly to the paddle. She had taken a liking to him when she had first met him the day before. And she had been greatly interested in his intense concern at the news of the capture of Colonel Garland's daughter. She at once surmised the cause of his excitement, although she had asked no questions. But she did feel sorry for him, and longed to speak to him. But there had been no opportunity. Even when they had stopped to eat a hurried meal on the bank of the river, Grey had kept apart, lost in thought.

Although young, Judith la Valliere had been trained in a stern school. She had known the dangers and vicissitudes of pioneer life. Menaced by enemies on water and land, she had stood by her father in his various enterprises, and had proved her courage, as well as her mental ability, on numerous occasions in trading deals both with the Indians and the whites, especially with the English fishermen in the Bay of Fundy. Possessed of a restless and reckless nature which she inherited from her father, she found a kindred spirit in the daring and determined Villieu. Him she loved with all the passion of her ardent nature. When once their troth to each other had been plighted, nothing could have turned her from her loyalty to the man she loved. Absence only served to increase her affection. She thought of no other man, and even Grey Martell's fine proportion and comely face stirred no emotion within her. She admired him, but that was all, and felt sorry for him in his trouble.

Judith's interest, however, was mostly upon her father's affairs. On his behalf she had taken this long and dangerous journey. She wanted to meet Villieu, of course, to feel his strong arms around her, and to listen to his words of love. But apart from that she needed his advice and assistance. When her father had gained his rightful possessions, then she and Villieu could be married and be together all the time. Business first and love-matters afterwards proved the dominate note in the mind of this practical girl from the Chignecto.

That journey down the Washademoak seemed a long one to Grey Martell. He longed for the wings of an eagle that he might go to the aid of the girl he loved. He paddled hard, and Pete King knew the cause of his unusual energy.

"You needn't break your paddle, my boy," he had once remarked. "You must not get too excited. This business we're upon needs cool heads, steady nerves and strong bodies. If we wear ourselves out on the first lap of our venture, we'll be in poor shape at the finish when we shall, no doubt, need every ounce of strength. So keep calm."

"How can I, Pete, when Helen is a captive at the Nashwaak? If you only knew how anxious and worried I am you would not blame me for paddling hard. Think what might be happening to Helen this very minute. She is in the midst of men who will have no mercy upon a beautiful girl. Oh, the thought drives me almost crazy."

Pete said nothing more just then. He understood how Grey felt, and sympathized with him. But he also knew that he needed strict guidance, or else his impetuosity would ruin all chance of rescuing the girl he loved, and, perhaps, lose his life, as well. Age has something to teach youth, and nowhere was this lesson more necessary than at this time in the wilderness of Acadia.

It was growing dusk as they sped along the western shore of the large basin of the Washademoak, several miles above where it entered the main river. It would be dark by the time they reached the Jemseg, and for this they had planned, as under cover of night they would be safer. Some of Villebon's men might be prowling around, so it was necessary to be most careful and ever on their guard.

The great trees cast their shadows over the water. Pete King guided the canoe within their dark borders close to the shore. The only sounds that broke the stillness were the hoarse caws of a number of crows ahead and the swish of the craft as it sped on its way. Both Pete and Grey were keenly alert now, for they were approaching the end of the overland trail from the Jemseg, and an enemy might be near. The strictest caution was necessary, as they were in the region of extreme danger, and if caught, they knew only too well what their fate would be.

As they thus advanced, their paddle blades caressing the water like softest down, calls and wild shrieks startled them. They ceased paddling and stared ahead. The sounds were not far away, and as they listened almost breathlessly while the canoe drifted, the shrieks changed to weird babblings.

"Somebody's in trouble," Pete whispered. "But it may be a ruse, so we must be careful."

Dipping his paddle softly into the water, he edged the canoe nearer the shore, the sounds still continuing. Closer and closer they approached, but nothing could they see. Reaching at length the landing, they waited for a few seconds, and then Pete stepped cautiously ashore, closely followed by Grey. Moving in the direction of the sounds which were now very faint, they soon came to the tree where young David was bound. With a fierce cry and a savage oath, such as Grey had never heard him use, Pete sprang forward and peered down into the face of the unconscious lad.

"It's the English boy! God in heaven! who could have done this devilish deed?"

He straightened up and looked around, as if expecting to see the villain. And, in truth, it would not have been well for him to have appeared just then. Pete's hands were clenched hard, and his eyes blazed with rage. Such a deed as this was more than he could comprehend. In another minute he was calm, terribly calm, as whipping forth his big hunting knife, he severed the bonds and caught the boy in his arms. Without a word he bore him swiftly to the canoe and placed him gently on board. Judith with her two Indians was anxiously waiting to learn what was the matter. When she saw the helpless lad, she leaped ashore and bent over the little huddled form.

"Who is he?" she asked. "And what has happened to him?"

"I do not know," Pete replied. "But whoever did this will pay dearly for it some day. I shall make it my business to find out, and when I do—"

A cry from David interrupted him.

"No! No!" the boy shrieked. "The crows! The crows! Don't let them get me! Oh! Oh!"

He then wandered off in strange words which the anxious listeners could not understand.

"Poor boy," Judith murmured, laying a hand gently upon his head. "What shall we do with him?"

"Take him to the Jemseg as fast as we can," Pete replied. "We may learn there what has happened. But—" He suddenly paused and a serious expression overspread his face. "Perhaps Villebon has been wreaking his revenge upon the D'Armours, and all have met the fate of this lad, if not worse."

"Why should he do that?" Judith asked.

"Because he hates them. He would like to wipe them all out. They have been a thorn in his flesh for some time, and he has complained very bitterly about them to Frontenac. He believes they interfere with his fur trade and are in league with us. Perhaps this boy was left as a warning to us. We must travel with very great caution now, for we cannot tell what lies ahead."

"Isn't there anything we can do for this boy, Monsieur?"

"Nothing now, Mademoiselle. He will need more care than we can give here. Madame Marguerite will be his best nurse, providing she is at the Jemseg. But if not, we shall have to decide later what to do. Let us get on our way and travel with extra care."

So once more they pushed forward down that silent placid stream. David had sunk into a restless sleep. He did not cry out, but occasionally babbled some unintelligible words.

It was dark when they passed out of the Washademoak into the main river. Then up the latter they sped, mile after mile. The night was clear, and the heavens studded with countless stars. All was still. Peace lay upon river and land. Silently the canoes glided forward, impelled by strong tireless arms. At length the mouth of the Jemseg River was reached, and up that narrow stream the men cautiously made their way. For a while nothing could they see. Ere long, however, a faint glimmer of light streaked the darkness from where the D'Armours' house stood. That was an encouraging sign. There was someone there, anyway. Nearer and nearer they approached, keeping close to the shore. Then suddenly a sound arrested

their attention, and stayed their arms. It came faint and low at first, but increased to a sad wailing note, almost of despair, like some creature in distress.

"It is Pierre, the hunchback," Grey whispered. "He is playing on his fife. He always plays like that when he is in trouble. I have heard him several times."

"I believe you are right," Pete agreed. "He will be able to tell us what has happened. But we must be careful not to alarm him."

Dipping his paddle again into the water he sent the canoe forward until it was but a short distance away from the unseen musician. Pete then gave a low whistle and waited. At once the music ceased.

"Is that you, Pierre?" the ranger asked.

But no reply came from the bank. The canoe moved a little nearer to the shore.

"Pierre," Pete called. "Do not be alarmed. We are friends."

"Who are you?" came the question in a trembling voice. "What do you want here at this time of the night?"

"I am Pete King from the Saganic. Is all well here?"

This was all Pierre needed. With a bound he was at the water's edge, where he caught the canoe and drew it up on the shore. Pete and Grey both stepped out.

"How many canoes have come?" Pierre asked, noticing the second one. "Have all the rangers come to help us?"

"Do you need help?" Pete anxiously inquired. "What has happened?"

"Mon Dieu! Much has happened. Villebon's men have carried away the English girl, and young English is lost. Madame is almost crazy."

Grey Martell reached out and clutched Pierre fiercely by the arm.

"What is that you say? Villebon's men have been here and carried away Helen Garland?"

"Yes, yes, Monsieur," Pierre replied, wincing from the painful grip. "Foulette and some men came, saying that Villebon had sent them to take the English girl to the Nashwaak. But she ran away, and young English with her. Sacre bleu! there was a terrible time then. Foulette was wild with rage. He said that Villebon would kill him for letting the girl escape. But he found her at the end of the overland trail to the Washademoak, and brought her back. But David did not come. Foulette told Madame that the boy had run away and he could not catch him. I feel so bad. That poor little fellow will lose himself in the great woods, and will die. I have come here to-night to play on my fife, for I am very sad. I can't sleep, for I am so worried about my little friend."

"David is there in the canoe," Grey quietly remarked, although a burning rage was seething in his heart. He knew the villain now who had tied that young lad to the tree and left him to perish.

With a cry, Pierre sprang towards the canoe and peered down in an effort to see. Then his hands touched the unconscious lad, and he spoke to him. Receiving no reply, he looked around.

"What has happened to him, Monsieur? Is he dead?"

"No, not dead," Pete explained. "But he has been badly treated, and is unconscious. Carry him to the house and we shall tell you everything later. He needs great care."

As gently as a mother lifts her sleeping babe, Pierre raised the lad from the canoe, enfolded him in his arms, and bore him up the bank. The others silently followed. Pete King walked behind, his heart hot within him. He was certain now that Foulette had done the cowardly deed. It was just like the villain, he well knew, and there in the night he made a solemn vow that one day Foulette would pay full price for his infamy. Pete King was ever slow in making a vow of vengeance, but when he did, he was terrible in its execution.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BEACON LIGHT

Louis D'Armours and his wife sat alone in the room adjoining the kitchen. The children were in bed, and the house was very quiet, almost too quiet. They were greatly disturbed at what had recently taken place. Their hearts were sad, for both were thinking of the English girl who had been taken to the Nashwaak. They were worried, too, about young David. Knowing Foulette as they did, they had little confidence in what he had told them concerning the lad.

"I am afraid something has happened to him," Louis said. "It is hardly likely that he would run away in the woods and leave the girl. He is too brave a boy for that."

"Foulette is capable of doing almost anything," his wife replied. "He was in a very ugly mood when he left here."

"I know he was, and he will carry back a bad report about us to Villebon. The governor hates us, as it is, and he will trump up a serious story against us to Count Frontenac. He will charge us with attempting to effect the escape of the English captive. Oh, I know very well what he will do."

The light of the small candle upon the table threw its flickering beams upon Madame Marguerite's beautiful face. It was unusually pale, and her hands moved nervously in her lap. Her eyes were filled with an expression of fear as she watched her husband. She saw that he was much depressed this evening, and knew the reason. He feared what might happen to those he loved. And how hard they had worked to make for themselves a home in the wilderness. They had not spared any effort, and now that they were prospering they were in danger of losing all, and, perhaps, their lives, as well. To have revenge upon those he hated, Villebon would be willing to do almost any deed of infamy.

"Why cannot we be left in peace?" she asked. "We could be so happy here."

"We shall never be left alone, Marguerite, not while Villebon is at the Nashwaak. My heart is sad when I think of you and our little ones. For myself I do not care so much, but chiefly for you and those helpless children. If I had a body of able men I would drive our enemies out of this country. As it is, I am helpless."

For a while they sat in silence, each thinking of the bright hopes which had animated their hearts when they had first settled at the Jemseg. But those hopes now seemed all in vain. Presently through the partly-opened window came the faint sound of Pierre's fife. They listened intently, and looked at each other.

"Pierre has been acting in a strange manner to-night," Louis remarked. "I believe he is grieving about young English. They were great friends."

Madame Marguerite shivered slightly, and drew the shawl she was wearing up over her shoulders.

"That music sends a chill through my body," she declared. "It is like the wail of a soul in distress. And it is in keeping with the life we lead here. We are always surrounded by dangers. I think of them by day and night. The world is very beautiful, especially at this time of the year, but there is the note of sadness everywhere. I look at the dark forest and think of the unknown terrors lurking there. I watch the river, so quiet and peaceful, and imagine enemies on their way upon that noble stream to destroy us."

"You have been very brave through it all, dear," Louis told her. "I have often wondered at your patience and courage."

"I have tried to be brave, and have never given way to despair until now. I believe this mood is due to Foulette's visit, and the way he took that English girl from us. He was so heartless and brutal. He ordered her about as if she were a dog, and seemed to take pleasure in seeing her suffer. And he and his men would like to do the same to us."

"I know they would, Marguerite, and so would Villebon. But I did admire that girl's wonderful spirit of self-control and dignity. I shall never forget the expression in her eyes when Foulette laid his base hand upon her arm. She shook it off as if it were a snake and fairly scorched him with the look she gave. I never saw anything like it, and the brute slunk away like a whipped cur. How I longed for the men of the Crimson Sign to appear. They would have made short work of the villain."

"Perhaps they will come yet, Louis, and something may be done to rescue the girl."

"It is hardly likely that they know anything about her. We have had no chance to send them word."

"But they know everything that is going on, and I believe they will come. I have great confidence in Pete King."

Just then the visitors arrived at the house. The D'Armours were startled at first, but their fear was at once turned to joy. Hearty was the welcome they gave the weary travellers, and Madame Marguerite greeted Judith in the most affectionate manner. But the pleasure was lessened by the condition of young David. Louis and his wife wished to look after him themselves, but Pierre was unwilling to give him up.

"Let me have him to-night," he begged. "I will put him in my own bed and watch over him. When he wakes in the morning he may be better. Anyway, when he sees me by his side he will not be frightened."

"Very well," Louis agreed. "There is really nothing we can do for him. I shall visit you early and see how he is getting on. Poor boy! What has happened to him?" he asked turning to Pete King.

"Don't ask me now," was the reply. "I shall tell you later when I have better control of myself. We are all very tired."

"And hungry, too," Madame Marguerite added. "You must have something to eat and then you will feel better."

Pete King smiled as he looked at his thoughtful hostess. She was a woman he greatly admired, not only for her beauty but for her courage. She was his ideal of what a wife should be, and it had often grieved him that she should be exposed to the dangers and vicissitudes of a vast wilderness.

Assisted by Judith, Madame Marguerite was not long in preparing a meal of fresh milk, choice homemade bread, butter, and cold meat. As the visitors ate, Louis explained what had happened to the English girl. Grey Martell said nothing, but listened with a heart aflame with an intense rage. He could not trust himself to speak. He must save Helen. That was the one and only thought which dominated his mind. And he would save her. Nothing on earth could stop him. He would take her from those devils at the Nashwaak, and some day he would meet Foulette face to face, and then the villain would answer to him for his cowardly deeds. Every fibre in his strong body urged him to be up and doing, and most gladly would he have started off that very night in pursuit of the enemy. He was well aware, however, that he would have to follow Pete King's cautious guidance, and that nothing would swerve him from his purpose.

For some time they sat and talked of various plans for the rescue of Helen Garland. It was difficult to decide upon what course to follow. That the girl would be carefully guarded within the fort, they were well aware. But first of all it would be necessary for her to know that friends were near, anxious and willing to assist her. If she knew this she might be able to elude her enemies and leave the fort. But how was she to receive such information?

While they were discussing this problem, a sudden idea came into Madame Marguerite's mind. Going at once to a shelf over the kitchen table she brought down a piece of paper.

"We received this from Villebon," she explained. "It is an order for us to account for our stock, the grain and vegetables we raised last year, together with a list of farming implements. He demands this inventory immediately, and we are planning to send it to-morrow with Pierre when he goes to the fort with supplies. Why can we not send a note to the English girl at the same time? Pierre is to be trusted with the message."

This suggestion was received with much enthusiasm. It was considered an excellent idea, although all realised that extreme caution would be necessary.

"It would ruin our hope entirely of rescuing that girl if Villebon should in some way learn about the message," Pete declared. "Someone might see Pierre delivering the letter, and become suspicious. Mark my word, that girl will be most carefully watched."

"I shall write the note," Grey replied. "You can leave that to me. The letter shall be in cypher, so if anyone gets hold of it he will not know what it means."

Judith glanced at Grey, and noticing the strained expression upon his face, surmised the cause. Then a deep sympathy came into her generous heart. Suppose she herself were in the English girl's place, how anxious Villieu would be. She was sure of that. Then a desire came upon her to send some message to her lover. Pierre would take it with the others.

But, no, it would be better not to write, so she decided. She would speak to Pierre, and he would tell Villieu that she was at the Jemseg, so most likely he would come at once to see her. It seemed a long time since they had been together, and she hoped that he longed to see her as much as she wished to see him.

So while they sat and talked, Pierre suddenly appeared at the door. He was trembling, and his face was pale with fear.

"Young English is very queer," he announced. "I can't do anything with him. He won't lie down, but walks about hunting for something, and saying such strange things. His eyes have such a wild look, that they frighten me."

"Bring him here," Louis ordered. He then turned to Pete King. "I can't understand any man doing what Foulette did to that little boy. Only a monster would do such a thing."

"And Foulette is a monster in human form," Pete replied. "But he serves Villebon well, and does his dirty work for him. He would like to do the same to all of us if he had the chance."

A few minutes later Pierre returned, bringing with him young David. The latter did not seem to notice those in the room, but stared straight before him, his eyes filled with a nameless fear.

"The crows! The crows!" he cried. "Big black crows! Don't let them get me! Oh! Oh! Drive them away!"

Gently Pete King placed a hand upon the boy's shoulder.

"The crows won't hurt you, lad. We'll keep them away."

David, however, shrank from him in dismay.

"Leave me alone, Foulette! Don't let the crows get me! They're coming to eat me! And the bears! The bears!"

The great fear that possessed the lad touched the hearts of all in the room. Going to his side, Madame Marguerite enfolded him in her arms, and spoke words of comfort. Gradually David's fears subsided and he nestled close to her like a child soothed after a troubled dream. Although he babbled a little, he no longer cried out. Ere long his head dropped, and soon he was asleep. Madame Marguerite motioned to Pierre, who at once lifted the boy in his arms and carried him away.

The worthy woman's eyes were moist with tears as she rose from her kneeling position.

"Poor little boy!" she murmured. "How terribly he has suffered! And he did it for the sake of that English girl. He was trying to save her."

"Did Helen tell you anything?" Grey impulsively asked. "Did she explain what happened over at the landing?"

"There was very little chance for her to tell us, Monsieur, as she was so closely watched by those men who had captured her. But she whispered to Pierre, who understands some English, that she was hit on the head and showed him the lump there. Foulette said she had fallen and bruised her head, but I believe he was lying as he lied about young English."

Grey suddenly rose to his feet. His eyes were blazing with a fierce light, and his hands were clenched hard.

"Sit down, lad," Pete ordered. "I know how you feel. But keep calm now and get your letter written. We must be off to the hills, for I see there is much to be done this night."

"How can I keep quiet, Pete? Helen's in great danger and we must go to her aid. There is no telling what that brute Foulette might do to her. He caused the death of one girl, at least, and—"

"Quite true," Pete hastily interrupted, "so reserve your wrath and all the energy you possess for what lies ahead. Get on with your letter, and make it brief."

He then turned to Louis and his wife, and spoke to them in their own language.

"We must soon leave you, my good friends. There is much to be done, and we have no time to lose. That girl is in danger and needs help."

"Stay with us until the morning," Louis urged. "You must be very weary after your long journey. You need rest."

"There will be no rest for Grey and me this night. While that girl is held captive by Villebon we shall sleep but little. The League of the Crimson Sign has a great task on hand that will test it to the uttermost, and prove its mettle. So, please do not urge me to remain here any longer. And, besides, it might not be safe for you. Should Villebon hear of our visit to the Jemseg, it is hard to tell what he might do. He suspects you already, so I do not wish to make your lot any more difficult."

"He is making it almost unbearable now," Louis bitterly replied. "He is doing everything in his power to annoy us. And that is strange, for we supply him with much of the food he needs for his garrison. He has been robbing us ever since he came to the Nashwaak. We are compelled to supply him with provisions to feed his lazy impudent soldiers, and we get very little in return."

"Be careful, Louis," his wife warned, glancing nervously around. "Someone may be listening. Villebon has his spies abroad, remember. It is never safe to speak too plainly."

"You are right, Marguerite. Yes, you are quite right. I forgot myself in my anger. If Villebon heard what I have just said, he might destroy our buildings, burn our crops, and carry us prisoners to Quebec. In his rage he would forget how valuable we are to him."

Pete King had risen to his feet. His eyes were full of sympathy for his distressed friends.

"I do not think Villebon will go that far. He cannot get along without your supplies. In that lies your present safety. Keep up courage, for a change may soon take place which will free us from this tyrant."

"You think so, my friend?" Louis eagerly asked. "How?"

"I cannot explain now. But watch yonder hill across the river this night, and what you see there will be a sign of what I mean. Come, Grey, we must be off. Good night, my friends, and remember the sign."

Louis and his wife did not forget. They watched and waited, and about midnight they saw a streak of light lift from a hill on the opposite side of the river. It rose up suddenly as from a tall tree, blazed brightly for a while, and then vanished. Well now did the eager watchers know its meaning. It was a signal to the men of the Crimson Sign. That light which gleamed from yonder hill would soon be flashed from other beacon hills along the Washademoak, and far inland, even to the Saganic and to regions beyond. At once the rangers would respond to its call, wherever their camps might be, and gladly and eagerly they would answer the summons of their leader. This Louis and Marguerite knew, and it brought much comfort to their burdened hearts.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CHALLENGE OF LOVE

"How can Villebon be so cruel!"

"It is his nature, Judith. He can be very smooth and courteous outwardly, and when one does his bidding without any question he can be most agreeable. But cross him, or offend him in any way, and, Mon Dieu, he can be hard! He has great ambitions, and he is willing to sacrifice his best friends to attain his end. The soldiers under him, as well as the Indians, are but pawns in the game he is playing."

"I can understand that, Sebastien, but would he sacrifice that helpless, innocent girl to further his designs? Would he really force her to marry you? The mere thought of it is terrible."

"I know it is, Judith. But Villebon is quite ready to do that. His hatred to the English is very great, and it would give him much satisfaction to compel Colonel Garland's daughter to marry me. He is very bitter towards that English Colonel, and he would do anything for revenge. And to think that I am the victim!"

Judith la Valliere and Villieu were seated in a canoe on the opposite side of the Jemseg creek, across from the D'Armours' house. It was night, with not a breath of wind rippling the surface of the stream. A moon, nearly full, was riding low over the eastern hills and casting a bright silver path across the water. Tall trees lined the shore, and in their dark shadows the canoe was well hidden from any prowlers who might be passing up or down the river. Villieu was seated on the cross-board, his right arm placed lovingly about the girl, who was nestling at his feet. It was a great moment for both of them, charged with such vital importance. It was the second night after Judith's arrival at the Jemseg when Villieu had come to her. Pierre had given him the whispered message when he reached the Nashwaak, and the ardent lover had sped down river as fast as four men of the fort could drive the canoe. He had often made these hurried trips, so nothing was thought of his hasty departure by the garrison. Villebon alone wondered, for he had not sent him on any urgent mission. He distrusted Villieu and longed to send men to spy upon him. But he had other work on hand, so decided to question his officer when he returned.

Judith's joy in having her lover with her was offset by the startling news he imparted to her. At first she could not believe it possible that Villebon would do such a cruel thing. Then when she became convinced that it was true, a great fear filled her heart.

"I cannot lose you, Sebastien," she whispered. "I must not. You do not love that English girl, I am sure, so it would be a sin for you to marry her."

Villieu pressed her hot hand in his, bent his head and kissed her.

"I love only you, little one. But Villebon thinks nothing of love. I have heard him sneer at it as a malady of young fools, so what am I to do?"

"Do what your heart prompts you, Sebastien."

"Ah, that would be neither easy nor well at present, Judith. I might go with you to the Chignecto, and cut myself off entirely from Villebon. But that would be the act of a deserter. I am a soldier of France, and must remain at my post of duty, even though it means serving under an unjust commander. I set great value upon my honor."

"I know you do," and the girl sighed. "I wish that those over you did the same. What does Villebon think of honor? Nothing. What does Frontenac think of honor? Nothing. And what does the King himself think of honor? Nothing."

"Judith! Judith! You must not talk that way."

"But you know it is true, Sebastien. If Villebon had any honor in his soul he would not force you to marry that English girl. If Frontenac had any honor he would not deprive my father of his rights to this land. And if the King had any honor left he would not be ruled by women who are—"

"Hush, hush, little one," Villieu hastily interrupted. "You talk wild. If anyone should hear you say this, it would not be

well with us. You know what has happened to others who said far less. Even the wilderness has ears these days."

Judith laughed softly and nestled closer to her lover.

"I have no fear. Villebon cannot frighten me. I am even willing to go to the Nashwaak, face the tyrant and forbid him to marry you to that English captive. I am only a girl, but I think he would listen to me."

It was now Villieu's turn to laugh. The very idea of Judith going to the fort and confronting the commander was amusing. Soon, however, he became serious, for he knew something of the fearlessness and determination of this girl who had faced so many dangers in the great forests and on Bay, rivers and lakes. There was no telling what she might do. Her love for him filled her heart with a wild abandon.

"You must not think of such a thing, little one," he advised. "It would be too big a risk. Force of arms would be the only thing that could influence Villebon, and that you do not have."

"But I cannot lose you, Sebastien."

"And you never will, Judith. Although Villebon may force me to marry that girl, I shall never consider her as my wife. I shall return her to her father as soon as I can."

"But you cannot marry me even though you do that, remember. If Father Elizee marries you to that girl, the Church will not permit us to marry. Have you thought of that?"

"What do I care? If the Church will not permit us to marry, we can live without its blessing."

"No, no, that would be very wrong. I would never agree to such a thing. We must have the Church's blessing. There would be no happiness without it."

"But how could I live without you, little one? If the Church will not give us her blessing, we must then live apart all our lives. Would you be willing to do that?"

"Yes, rather than do what is unholy," was the low reply. "My mother when she was living always taught me to do what is right, and she said that then the Holy Mother and Jesu would be with me to help me. If I did wrong I would be punished and have no peace. And I know she was right."

"Very well, then, Judith, I see I cannot persuade you, and, I guess what you say is true. I do not wish to go against the Church, remember. But if Father Elizee obeys Villebon and marries me to that English girl against my will, do you think the Church will be doing right?"

"She may think so, as in that way she might save the girl's soul."

"Save her soul! Ah, I know what you mean. Father Elizee would baptize her and bring her into the Church before he married her to me. Yes, yes, that would make it all right with the Church, but not with me."

"You must not marry her, then."

"How can I help it?"

"Isn't there some way of escape? Suppose that girl should disappear?"

Villieu started, for he remembered that Madame Louise D'Armours had suggested the same thing. Surely the girl he loved so much was not like that woman at the Oromocto.

"How could she disappear, Judith?"

"Oh, there are many ways. What about the League of the Crimson Sign? I believe that Grey Martell is in love with that captive girl, and that he is determined to save her. Could we not help him? She might leave the fort, and Pete King and his men could be waiting for her. Have you thought of that?"

"I have, but I do not see how it could be arranged. Villebon will keep a close watch upon that captive. She is too valuable a prisoner to lose."

"I suppose so," and the girl sighed. "But I thought that perhaps love would make a way. If I were a man I think I could do something."

Before Villieu could reply, a slight sound arrested their attention. Looking quickly around, they saw the shadowy forms of several canoes moving swiftly upstream. Instinctively they crouched low lest they should be observed. Then as the canoes crossed the bright beam of moonlight, they recognized them. They were the vanguard of the League of the Crimson Sign. They counted them as they passed, six in all, loaded with men. Then they were gone, whither they could not tell.

Judith caught Villieu impulsively by the arm.

"They have come to rescue the English girl!" she whispered. "And they will do it, I am sure. Pete King called them the night we arrived here. Madame Marguerite told me that a beacon-light blazed from a hill on the western side of the river, and its meaning was quite clear to her and her husband. Yes, the men of the Crimson Sign will rescue that girl, so you will not have to marry her."

"Do not be too confident, little one. I do not wish to discourage you, but I know Villebon better than you do."

"Perhaps so, Sebastien. You may be right, but I have confidence in Pete King, and in you."

"In me!"

"Yes, in you. This is a chance to prove your love for me."

Villieu was surprised at the girl's cool and calm manner. She had released his hand from hers, and had thrown his arm from her body. This did not seem the Judith of a few minutes before. He knew not what to say.

"Take me back to the house," the girl ordered. "You have work to do, so I must not detain you any longer. You are a soldier of France, remember, and your honor is at stake. You know of the arrival of the men of the Crimson Sign, so it is your duty to report the matter to Villebon as soon as possible. That is your business at present."

"But, Judith, let me explain. I am willing to do whatever I can, but what you demand of me is impossible. How can I assist that girl to escape and at the same time serve Villebon?"

"That is for you to decide. Nothing is impossible to a true lover. I have always thought of you as the bravest of the brave, one who knew no fear, and who would risk anything in a great and noble cause. You were ever next to my father in courage and great daring. You know something about his life, how he adventured and suffered. People wonder at my daring, and say it is not right nor natural for a girl to travel so far in the wilderness with Indians as her only companions. But they do not know, they cannot understand that the spirit of my father is in my soul, and that he has ever inspired me. And this journey I have made to the Jemseg is a risky one. You know as well as I do that my father is the rightful owner of Acadia by royal decree. But Frontenac has cheated him out of his rights, and Villebon does his every bidding. He controls this land from the Nashwaak. He stirs up the Indians against the English and the French who oppose him. But he is really weak, for the natives are leaving him for the League of the Crimson Sign. Pete King and his men are gaining in strength, and my father is ready to join them. Then, Colonel Garland is sure to come to rescue his daughter. Against such a force Villebon will be powerless. Think what that will mean. My father will be ruler of this country, as he should be, and you will have a high position. I have, as I said, run a great risk in coming here, and a greater in telling this to Villebon's leading officer. But the hope that you might join us has given me courage."

She ceased, and Villieu did not at once reply. He was greatly disturbed by what the girl had so plainly told him.

"I must think this all over, Judith," he at length slowly replied. "You have placed me in a hard position. The temptation you have put before me is very great. As a soldier of France I should report what you have told me to Villebon. That is my duty. But as your lover I should remain silent."

"It is hard for you to decide, I see. I did not think it would be, especially after the way Villebon is planning to treat you. I shall urge you no more. Perhaps I have said too much already. It is not for a girl, and a la Valliere, at that, to plead in such a manner. I have never done it before, and shall never do so again. Come, let us go."

Picking up a paddle, she was about to drive the canoe from the bank, when Villieu placed a hand upon her arm.

"Quiet!" he whispered. "See. A canoe!"

As Judith turned and looked, she caught sight of a craft cutting its way swiftly up stream. As it crossed the moonlit path, it was quite easy to see the number of persons on board, two Indians paddling, with two others seated in the bottom of the canoe. Villieu recognized them at once.

"They are black robes!" His voice was so low that Judith only heard him with difficulty. "They are on their way to the fort, and they must be planning to spend the night with the D'Armours."

"It will not be necessary, then, for Villebon to await the arrival of Father Elizee," the girl replied. "He will compel those black robes to marry you to that English girl."

"True, true. This is awkward. What shall I do! Fate is against me."

"It is in your own hands," the girl calmly reminded. "Fate has opened two doors of escape. One is by the way of the Chignecto, which you reject. The other is to see that the English captive disappears from the Nashwaak. But you say that your honor as a soldier of France forbids you to do either. Perhaps you are right. But when a man is a slave under an unjust and cruel master, what will he not do for his freedom? Even a bird will fight for its rights, and to defend its brood. Come, let us go."

Villieu picked up his paddle, dipped it into the water and sent the canoe reeling backwards from the shore. He was annoyed, and in a most unpleasant frame of mind. The girl had stung him to the quick.

"And what do you intend to do?" he ere long asked.

"Keep out of sight of those black robes," was the quiet reply. "What I shall do after that is better for you not to know. You are a soldier of France, and an officer of Villebon. He is such a worthy man, so kind and thoughtful of your interests that I do not wish to keep you from him any longer."

The sarcasm of this girl was galling to Villieu. Her dauntless courage awed him. From no one else would he have submitted to such biting words of scorn and rebuke. But it was her spirit which appealed to him most of all. Had she wept and lamented over the prospect of losing her lover, she would have lowered herself in his estimation. But the challenge she had hurled stirred him with a desire to prove his valor in some deed of desperate daring.

CHAPTER XV

LOYALTY

The commander of the Nashwaak Fort was greatly puzzled. Seated at his table, he studied carefully a piece of soiled paper he was holding in his left hand. Foulette stood at attention before him, waiting his master's word of command. Presently Villebon lifted his head and looked keenly at the soldier.

"And you say that Pierre, the hunchback, gave you this?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did he tell you who sent it?"

"Louis D'Armours. He said it is the report you ordered from him of his grain and stock."

"But this is no report. It is nothing but a confusion of letters scrawled on this dirty paper. It's an insult, that's what it is, and I shall call that rascal sharply to account."

"Pierre may be able to explain, sir," Foulette suggested.

"Ah, you are right. Bring him here at once. Yes, he might know the meaning of this. Where is he?"

"At his sister's house. He always stays with Madame Bedard when at the Nashwaak."

"Is that English girl there, too?"

"She is, sir. You will wish to see her, I suppose? She is very beautiful."

"So I have heard. Yes, I expect to see her to-day. How is she bearing her captivity?"

"There is no change. She has the same haughty manner. Her spirit is remarkable."

"We'll soon take that out of her. I'd like to see her devil of a father just now. He must be like a raging tiger at the loss of his daughter."

"You may have a chance to see him, sir, and pretty soon, at that."

"Eh? You think he will come to rescue his daughter?"

"I am sure he will, sir."

"I agree with you, Foulette. But Villieu does not think so."

"Villieu is a fool," the soldier growled. "He doesn't understand that English Colonel as well as I do. I have heard about him from Indians."

"So have I. And if his daughter is anything like him, it will take stern measures to subdue her. But, there, hurry away and bring Pierre to me."

When Foulette had gone, the commander sat for a while in deep thought. He studied the letters on the paper, at the same time tapping the table with the fingers of his right hand. At length he aroused, crossed to the window and looked over at the Bedard house. But he saw more than the building, and a shrewd expression shone in his eyes. He had evidently thought of something which gave him considerable satisfaction. He was suspicious of everyone, and the most trivial word or incident was carefully noted. That piece of paper containing those letters had a meaning, he felt certain, and he was determined to find out what it really was. It was undoubtedly intended for someone else, and who would that be but the captive girl? Why it had been handed to Foulette, he did not know, so that was why he wished to see Pierre.

He remained at the window until he saw Foulette and the hunchback coming back across the square. When they presently entered the office, he was again seated at his desk, examining some papers he had received from Frontenac. He wished to catch Pierre off-guard, and not appear to be too curious about the mysterious letters.

Foulette approached the table and saluted. Pierre did likewise, although awkwardly. He was not accustomed to military ways. For a few seconds Villebon seemed to pay no attention to the men, but kept his eyes fixed intently upon the papers. He well knew how to act a part that might impress his inferiors. When he at length lifted his head, he looked coolly and sternly at Pierre. The latter, however, was by no means abashed. His confidence in himself was so great that he would have faced Frontenac unflinchingly, and even the great King Louis, for that matter. Villebon noticed this, and it annoyed him. He remained calm, however, and the sternness of his face relaxed a little.

"How are my friends at the Jemseg?" he inquired. "I hope that Madame D'Armours is well."

"All were well when I left this morning, sir. And Madame Marguerite was in the best of health."

"Did you see Madame Louise at the Oromocto on your way hither?"

"Oh, yes, I always call there to rest. Madame Louise is very kind to me, and feeds me well."

"And you give her news in return, I suppose?"

"There's not much to give these days, sir, especially at the Jemseg. There's nothing but hard work on the farm."

"Has Monsieur Louis finished haying yet?"

"Oh, no. There's a great deal to be cut. It will take us two or three weeks if the weather is fine, and much longer if it rains."

"You must have a large stock to feed during the winter. I asked your master to send me a report, but so far I have not received it. I wish to know the conditions along the river, as Count Frontenac is very particular about such things."

At these words Pierre's eyes expressed his surprise.

"I did bring a report from Monsieur Louis, sir," he explained. "I gave it to this man, Foulette, to deliver to you."

"Is this it?" Villebon asked, as he lifted the soiled piece of paper from the table and held it forth. "This is all I have received, and it is no report, nothing but a lot of meaningless letters."

As Pierre stared at the paper, all his self-confidence deserted him. His face paled and his body trembled. But no word did he utter. Villebon seeing his confusion, smiled and stroked his chin.

"You recognize this, I see. You have made some serious mistake, no doubt. This paper was not intended for me. You must have got this one and your master's report mixed. Am I not correct?"

But Pierre made no reply. He still stared at the paper as if he could not believe his eyes.

"Can you read?" the commander demanded.

"N-no, sir."

"That explains your mistake, then. Now, look here, my friend," and Villebon leaned forward a little, "there is something quite mysterious back of this." He tapped the paper as he spoke. "This was given to you by someone at the Jemseg, and it was intended for that English girl. But you sent it to me instead, while she received the report. Is not that correct?"

As Pierre made no reply, Villebon's face grew stern. An ugly light came into his eyes which caused Foulette to stiffen into greater attention. He knew that expression only too well, better by far than did Pierre.

"You have made a blunder," Villebon continued, "a mistake that will prove most costly to you unless you do what I request. You have committed a very serious offence in carrying this paper from the Jemseg for that captive girl. Fortunately it reached me instead. But I shall overlook what you have done if you will tell me truly who gave you this piece of paper, and the meaning of these letters."

Villebon paused and awaited a reply. As Pierre made no effort to speak, the commander's face reddened.

"No? You will not answer, eh? You know, but will not tell. Mon Dieu! I know how to make carrion like you open his lips. Foulette, take this thing to the guardroom. But, wait, I want you to bring that English girl here. Get two men to look

after this cur. String him up by the thumbs to the cross beam. Let them give him ten lashes on his bare back if he will not confess. Then ten more, and so on until his tongue is loosed. If that will not suffice, it will have to be the fire. That will bring him his senses. Go now and do as I have ordered. Then bring that girl here."

Foulette grinned as he led the terrified Pierre out of the building. This was work he enjoyed, and nothing suited him better than to have the hunchback placed on the rack. He had a grudge against him, and this would be sweet revenge.

When the men had gone, Villebon paced restlessly up and down the room. His imperious nature could not endure any delay. He was worried, too, over many things, especially his precarious position at the Nashwaak. The Indians had all gone back to their villages, and he was uncertain if they would return if he summoned them. Should the League of the Crimson Sign be joined by Colonel Garland with a strong force he would be helpless. And even without additional assistance, Pete King and his men could prove very annoying. He knew that they were a most formidable body, not so much in size as in quality, loyal to the death to the League of the blood-red sign, and well acquainted with the country and forest fighting. It was hardly likely that they would attack the fort, but they could cut off his supplies, shoot down his men and make good their escape. His only hope was in the Indians up river. At all cost he must keep them in good humor by means of presents and promises.

As Helen Garland entered the room, with Foulette by her side, Villebon was standing near the table. This was the first time he had seen the girl, and his heart quickened as he looked at her. Taking a step forward, he made her a graceful bow, and motioned her to a chair. But Helen made no move to obey. She remained standing, very erect, her head proudly poised, and her defiant eyes fixed full upon the commander's face. The latter was somewhat disconcerted. He knew how to speak to men when they refused his bidding, but he was at a loss what to say to a rebellious girl, especially when she was a captive, and the daughter of Colonel Garland, as well.

"So Mademoiselle will not be seated? No? Ah, I see you are surprised dat I spik English. Not very well, mebbe. But I have pleasure in meeting Colonel Garland's daughter."

Helen's face brightened a little at hearing her own tongue spoken. And the commander impressed her by his bearing and courteous manner. She felt that no harm could come to her from such a man. Perhaps the reports she had heard about him had been wrong. She was well aware how enemies were in the habit of saying evil things about one another. This man might be different from what she had been led to believe, so with tact she might touch his heart, and thus gain her freedom.

Suiting action to thought, she made him a slight curtsy, and smiled. Villebon would have been more than human had he not been impressed by her graceful movement. Her beauty appealed to him, and a spirit of nobleness awoke within his soul. He thought of other days, and of fair maidens he had known in far-off sunny France. The charm of this girl brought back memories and stirred within him something he had imagined had long since died. She almost made him hate his rough life of subtlety and intrigue. All this passed through his mind as he stood silently looking at the girl.

He was aroused by a wild shriek from the direction of the guardroom. It was repeated, and then all was silent. Helen started, and looked towards the window.

"Do not be afraid, Mademoiselle," Villebon hastened to assure her. "De men are having a leetle fun. Dey are making merry, dat is all."

"But that cry was like someone in great distress," the girl replied. "It was terrible."

"I am sorry it annoy you, Mademoiselle. It shall not happen any more."

He turned to Foulette and spoke a few sharp words in French. The soldier saluted, and without a word left the building.

"We can come to beezness now, Mademoiselle," Villebon continued, as he picked up the piece of paper lying upon the table. "Dis reach me from de Jemseg. It come by Pierre. He geeve it to Foulette, and Foulette bring it to me. But it is all very funny. I understand not what it mean, so I send for you. Mebbe you know."

He handed the paper to the girl, and as she took it he watched her most keenly. As Helen looked at the letters she gave a slight start of surprise, although she made a great effort to control herself. It did not take her long to read the message, for she knew the secret code by heart. Grey Martell was at the Jemseg, and he was coming to rescue her! It seemed almost too good to be true. But he must not come. It would not be safe. He would be captured and put to death. He must stay

away. And the commander should never know from her the meaning of those words. What was she to do?

Villebon seeing the struggle she was making to control her feelings, smiled. He was quite certain that she understood the purport of that letter.

"So Mademoiselle understand, eh?" he queried. "Good. Mebbe she explain de meaning now."

Helen's eyes met his in a steady gaze. She knew there had been a mistake somewhere. She then remembered the piece of paper Pierre had given to Madam Bedard. He must have got them mixed. This one was intended for her, and the other for the commander.'

"Why do you think I understand the meaning of these letters?" she at length asked.

Villebon shrugged a shoulder, and took the paper from her hand. He did not like the way she looked at him. Her eyes hurt him. He became visibly annoyed. He was the commander once more, stern and self-possessed. His smooth, courteous manner vanished. He tapped the table with the forefinger of his right hand.

"Mademoiselle understand dese letters. She know de meaning. She must tell."

"Never!" The word leaped from her lips like a sword drawn from its scabbard. It pricked the commander to the quick, and hotly he returned the thrust.

"Ah, so! Mademoiselle talk very brave. But she know not what she say. Does she not know that Villebon is commander here, that she is in his hand, at his mercy? One word from heem, and she is like Pierre, de fool, de hunchback, who would not talk. Mademoiselle hear noise, a beeg cry, eh? She know not den what it mean. She know now, mebbe."

Helen stared wildly at the commander as the meaning of his words flashed upon her mind. Pierre would not tell who had given him that piece of paper, so he was being tortured! They were his shrieks she had heard. And would the same be done to her? Was Villebon base enough for that? As she looked at his eyes, now contracted to mere slits, she noticed the cruel expression upon his face. She realised that he was capable of almost any deed of infamy in order to accomplish his purpose.

"Ah, so Mademoiselle see now, eh? She know what to expect? She understand what happen to Pierre."

"I am prepared to expect anything from an enemy," was the calm reply. "As the daughter of an English officer I will die rather than betray my own people. I am ready, so go ahead and do your worst."

With hands clasped, the girl stood mutely before the commander, awaiting his next move. She had now resigned herself to her fate, no matter what that might be. But she would never divulge the meaning of those letters. Grey Martell said that he would come to her rescue, and that was her only hope now.

Seeing that fear of severe punishment had no effect upon the girl. Villebon shot his next bolt.

"So Mademoiselle will not talk? Very well. She is not afraid. She will not cry like Pierre. No! She is very brave. She is English! But mebbe she not be English for long. When she become Frenchman's wife, when her babies are all good French Catholics, what will she do and say den? Will she call herself English?"

At these words Helen's body became tense, and notwithstanding her desperate efforts to control her feelings, her heart beat fast with a new fear. What did the commander mean? What diabolical scheme of torture had he in store for her? Suffering of a bodily nature she could endure without flinching, but how could she stand personal dishonor and shame? Villebon was watching her closely.

"Ah, so Mademoiselle is begin to understand, eh? She not be so brave now, mebbe."

"Surely you do not mean to marry me to a Frenchman!" Helen exclaimed. "Would you cause an innocent girl such suffering?"

"Mademoiselle need not suffer. If she just explain de meaning of de letters on dis paper, and also tell de number of men her father has at his fort, as well as answer some more question, she shall go free."

"Why, oh why do you torture me?" Helen cried. "I have done no harm to you. I am only a girl, while you are a great

commander."

"But you are Colonel Garland's daughter, Mademoiselle. Your father is my very great enemy. I geeve heem pain when I make you suffer."

"Coward!" The girl's eyes flashed with anger, and her hands clenched hard together. "Do you call yourself a man? I thought Frenchmen had some honor."

Before Villebon could reply, Foulette and another soldier entered, supporting, and half dragging the limp body of Pierre, the hunchback.

CHAPTER XVI

STARTLING NEWS

Pierre presented a most woeful appearance as he sagged between the two soldiers. His face was distorted with pain, and he was foaming at the mouth. He was moaning and uttering words which none could understand. So terrible was the sight that even Villebon shrank back a little in awe.

"Is he crazy?" he asked Foulette.

"He seems to be, sir. He has been acting queer, and saying things which sent chills through my body. But I can't make out what he is jabbering."

"Did he confess anything?"

"No, sir. But he said that the English are coming with a great force to destroy us, and that the Indians will join the enemy. At every lash he cursed us, but when he became unconscious, we took him down, and have brought him here. We did not know what to do with him."

"You were fools to do that. I don't want to see the thing. You should have thrown him into the river. That's the best place for such a cur."

Helen stood aghast at the pitiable object before her. She knew that Pierre had been tortured, and his shrieks of pain were ringing in her ears. She had never imagined that men could be so cruel, especially to such a deformed person as Pierre. Her heart ached for him, and she turned to the commander.

"Oh, do something for him!" she pleaded. "See how he is suffering."

"Serves him right," Villebon growled. "He wouldn't confess. But I did not think he would go out of his mind. It's quite evident we can't get any information from him."

He ceased and looked sternly at the wretched man. Helen hoped to see some sign of pity in his eyes. But she looked in vain. Villebon was not a man to be moved by such a scene. The temporary feeling of awe had passed, and he was in full command of himself. He was angry at being balked of his purpose.

"Take the thing out of this," he ordered. "Hand him over to his sister, Madame Bedard. She will know what to do. He deserves to die, the snake! But I will show mercy to him this time. I am not altogether heartless."

It was not really mercy, but fear that restrained him. He thought of the Indians, and knew that Pierre was a special favorite of theirs. He was always kind to them, they liked his music, and he was never tired of playing for their entertainment when he was with them. No, it would not do to kill such a man. And should the natives hear how he had been treated, it might mean trouble. Villebon was in a quandary. He knew that he could not force Pierre to divulge the meaning of those letters, so his only hope lay in the English girl. But he was worried over what the hunchback had said about a strong force coming to attack him. Had the fellow a knowledge of the movements of the English, and in an unguarded moment had given away the secret? This was serious news, and it became greatly magnified in Villebon's excited and overwrought mind.

Helen was alone with him now, as the others had departed. She was awaiting orders from Villebon. What his next move would be she had no idea. She watched him curiously as he stood before her, thoughtfully stroking his pointed beard. Ere long his eyes met hers. They softened a little.

"I am at my wit's end, Mademoiselle," he began. "I am surrounded by enemies on all sides, and know not what to do. You tink I am cruel and unjust, but, Mon Dieu!" He paused and threw out his right arm as if to strike an unseen foe.

"When I try to learn de meaning of dat piece of paper, I do it only for protection. If you tell me, you go free. But if not, you must pay de price."

"And what is that?" Helen asked.

"You will become de wife of a Frenchman. I have heem ready. Oh, yes, Monsieur Villieu will make you a good husband."

He is sometime a fiery devil, but he will do what I say. Oh yes, he will obey me, a'right. He wants to marry de daughter of Valliere, dat rascal at Chignecto. But I don't want him to do so. No, no, Valliere is my enemy and he would like to be governor of Acadia."

"And would you marry me against my will?" Helen asked in astonishment.

"I shall have to do so, Mademoiselle, unless you do what I say, and tell me de meaning of de letters on dis paper, as well as answer some other questions I wish to ask."

"You shall have to force me to marry, then, for I shall never do so of my own consent."

"Very well, den, Mademoiselle. I shall geeve you one day, two, mebbe, to tink dis over. If you will not obey me, you shall marry Villieu as soon as Father Elizee come from de Beeg Lake. He should be here soon, for he has been away for some time. You may go now and tink over what I have told you."

Helen made a slight bow and left the room. Villebon stepped to the window and watched her as she walked slowly away from the building. His heart was strangely stirred, for it had been a long time since he had met such a girl. He liked her proud and defiant manner, as well as her courage. And her beauty of face and form appealed to him. It was a pity that he would have to marry her to Villieu. She was too good for him, so he believed. That she would be unhappy with such an overbearing man he was quite certain. If she were not Colonel Garland's daughter he would not permit such a marriage. In fact, he might win her himself, old though he was. But war was war, and in the midst of national conflict sentiment had to be pushed sternly and ruthlessly aside. He sighed as he thought of his life and how much he had missed. In barracks for years, and then at various posts on lonely frontiers. And he was no longer young. The fire of youth did not burn so brightly now, although his ambition for rule was as strong as ever. To be governor of the whole of Acadia was his great aim. Then he would settle down to the comfort of a serene old age, marry, perhaps, and have a family about him.

He sighed again as he thought of all this, and watched the girl until she disappeared into Madame Bedard's house. The sight of her had stirred his heart with a sense of what he had missed in life.

Scarcely had Helen Garland vanished from view, than he beheld a man coming towards him from the men's quarters. He recognized him in an instant. It was Father Elizee! This was surprising, as he had not been informed of the missionary's arrival. But it was timely, for he would be here to perform the marriage ceremony between Villieu and the English captive. A faint semblance of a smile appeared upon his face as he thought of the priest's astonishment when he learned what was expected of him. That he would obey, Villebon had no doubt. There would be nothing else for him to do. It would be useless for him to object to the commander's wish.

As the missionary entered, Villebon was again seated at the table, apparently busy with his letters. But he at once arose, and extending his hand, bade the priest welcome back. He then noticed the visitor's woe-begone appearance, and that he was on the verge of collapse. Startled, he assisted him to the chair he had just vacated, and going to a small cupboard, returned with a glass partly filled with wine. This he pressed to the exhausted man's lips and urged him to drink, which he feebly did. In a few minutes he had somewhat revived, and Villebon standing near watched him with considerable anxiety. It was more than personal interest which prompted this attention, for he was convinced that something out of the ordinary had happened to the missionary which alone could account for his pitiable condition. He noticed that his long black robe was almost in tatters, his face covered with a thick beard, and his hands scratched and bleeding. At first he feared that the man was dying, for he slumped down into the chair, and with closed eyes showed little sign of life.

"Pardon me, sir," he at length began. "I was very weary and must have fallen asleep. But no wonder after what I have come through. I have been in Purgatory for over a week, with no rest of mind or body. The voyage here, too, was very hard, and I barely escaped the enemy."

"The enemy, you say?" Villebon demanded. "What enemy? And where?"

"The men of the Crimson Sign. They nearly caught me as I came from the Big Lake. But by taking to the woods, my Indians and I eluded them."

These words produced a startling effect upon the commander, and for a while he forgot the missionary's condition.

"Which way were they travelling?" he inquired.

"Across the Big Lake from the Jemseg. They seemed to be headed for the Portobello."

"Ah, this is serious news you have brought, Father. But it is very timely, as it warns me of the presence of those desperate rascals. It must be the English girl they are after."

Father Elizee lifted his head and looked searchingly at the commander.

"So it is true, then, what I heard on my way hither? I thought the Indians were lying."

"It is true. We have here as prisoner the daughter of Colonel Garland. She is a great prize, and through her I shall have revenge upon my deadly enemy."

"Revenge is not a Christian virtue, Monseigneur. It ill becomes the commander of Fort St. Joseph to punish a girl for what her father has done."

A shade of annoyance passed over Villebon's face. He was not in the mood to be rebuked, even by his father confessor. He controlled his feelings, however, as he did not wish to antagonize this man whom he wished to bend to his will.

"You are right, no doubt. We can talk about this later when you have had something to eat and a good sleep."

"I need both, Monseigneur. But the condition of those Indians on the Chimenpy River weighs heavily on my mind. I cannot rest for thinking of them, so I have come to you for help."

"What is wrong with them, Father? Are the lazy rascals starving? It serves them right for dealing with the English."

"They are dying, Monseigneur, dying like rats. A plague has struck them, and they are desperate."

"A plague, you say?" Villebon questioned, greatly astonished. "This is the first I have heard of it."

"Quite true. There has been no time for the news to reach you before now. The Indians who are able to travel have fled from the plague-stricken place to the headwaters of the Chimenpy and its tributaries. I was left alone with the sick and dying, except for a few old women who stood nobly by to help. They may be all dead now."

"This is very bad news, indeed, Father. I am much disturbed. What was the cause of the plague, and what is its nature?"

"I cannot tell you how it came. It is not like any sickness I have ever witnessed, and the natives have no knowledge of anything like it before. An Indian, apparently in the best of health, suddenly begins to bleed at the nose, then blue spots appear all over his body, and in two or three hours he is dead. I do not know how many of them I have buried. But I had the satisfaction of baptizing most of them before they died. They were most anxious for the Sacrament. They had great faith in it."

"But it did not arrest the plague, Father."

"Ah, no. It did not save their bodies, although I hope it saved their souls. I did not understand why the Sacrament did not cure them, but I know now."

"You do?"

"Yes, Monseigneur. The Indians I met at Big Lake enlightened me. They said it was due to the English captive girl you have here, and I believe they are right."

Villebon was visibly annoyed at these words. His eyes gleamed with anger.

"Surely you do not believe such superstitious nonsense, Father. I am surprised. Prisoners of war are often taken, and nothing is thought of it."

"Perhaps not. But the Indians think that her presence here is the cause of the plague. They believe it is a punishment, and I agree with them. From what they told me, she has the appearance of some unearthly being, so beautiful is she. Perhaps she is the Holy Mother herself, or some angel in the likeness of human form. You must be very careful and do nothing to harm her."

Villebon looked keenly at the missionary, and the shadow of anger passed from his eyes. He realised now that this man

was not in his normal senses. He had suffered so much that his mind was temporarily unbalanced, and he was the victim of an hallucination. Food and rest would restore him.

"Look here, Father, we shall not continue this talk now. You are worn out. When you have had a sleep you can come to me again. I have something of great importance to tell you."

Father Elizee rose wearily to his feet. He staggered and placed his hand upon the table for support.

"You are right, Monseigneur. I shall go to Madame Bedard's. But you will let me have something for those suffering Indians, rum, or anything that will help them?"

"Yes, yes, I shall do what I can. Do not worry, you can depend upon me."

CHAPTER XVII

AN ARROW FALLS

Villebon was in a most troubled state of mind as he sat at the table after the missionary had gone. Things were not going as he had expected. His hope of capturing Boston, and thus becoming the ruler of a great territory, had vanished. Instead of defeating his English enemies in a short time by swift and sudden attacks, they were really on the offensive against him. The news that the men of the League of the Crimson Sign had been seen on Big Lake filled his mind with alarm. He was well aware that Pete King's spies were constantly roving the forests and frequenting the rivers and lakes, but so far they had not menaced the fort. They had never been seen in a large body, but only as shadowy phantoms upon which he could never lay his hands. But Father Elizee had informed him that he had been pursued by several large canoes loaded with men. This was most unusual, and even now they might be close to the Nashwaak, ready to attack.

And if they did surround him with a strong force, his position would be most serious. They would cut off his sources of supply, and shoot down his men if they ventured forth upon the river. With but fifty soldiers at his command he did not dare to attack them in the forest, for he did not know the League's strength. Several reports had reached him of the number of the band. Some said there were but sixty, and others that there were several hundred, all tested, desperate men, sworn by the letting of blood to destroy all French authority in the country and institute a rule of their own making, free from kings and arbitrary governors. Villebon realised that this was no vain vision. The League was growing in strength, and soon it might have with it the additional force of Colonel Garland. If so, then the doom of the Nashwaak Fort was sealed. Neither could he depend much upon the Indians now. The plague, most likely, would keep them as far away as possible, and his appeal to them for assistance might be in vain. He was quite well aware that the natives were dissatisfied and wished to trade with the English who held out better inducements in the prices of furs. Villebon could not help this, for he was hampered by the greedy traders at Quebec who forced him to pay the Indians as little as possible. This was hard to endure, yet he could see no way out of the difficulty. To compete with the English would mean giving more than he would receive for the furs, and thus he would soon impoverish himself. The men of the Crimson Sign were making great inroads upon his trading rights, and he could do nothing to check them. And they had back of them the large Boston firm of John Martell, with direct access to the markets of England and other places overseas. Such an outlet was barred to him, as he had only Quebec where he was being robbed by close-fisted traders who had him at their mercy.

The more he thought about these things, the more real did the menace of the League of the Crimson Sign appear to him. And now it seemed as if they had come against him with a strong force, and were, perhaps, surrounding him. But Father Elizee might have been mistaken. His mind may have been affected by his experience among the stricken Indians. This did seem reasonable, especially when he recalled what the priest had said about the plague. It was nonsense to think that a captive girl was the cause of the trouble. It was nothing but gross superstition. He tried to feel superior to such weakness, but the influence of early years, and the tales he had heard, made it almost impossible to shake off the subtle sense of awe. Father Elizee believed that the natives were right, and, perhaps, he knew. The Church was in touch with unseen things, so he had been always told, and he had never doubted it. But why the capture of that English girl should be the cause of the plague was more than he could understand. It had never happened before when he had taken prisoners. The plague was a natural cause which no one could explain. He knew of terrible epidemics which had afflicted certain parts of New France years ago, one of which was the dreaded small-pox which had affected whites and Indians alike, and carried death everywhere. So this superstitious idea was all nonsense. It was worse than childish. It was harmful to his cause, and such a rumor must be checked at once.

Villebon turned, pulled a cord on the wall, and immediately a bell sounded outside. Presently Foulette stood before him, saluted and awaited his master's orders.

"Where is Villieu?" the commander asked.

"Down river, sir. He left with two men soon after Pierre's arrival."

"Ah, yes, I remember ordering him to keep a strict watch upon those rascals at the Jemseg. I asked him to learn all he can about their possessions so I can check upon their report. Where is it?"

"I have it, sir. I found it a short time ago at Madame Bedard's where Pierre left it. He made a serious mistake, sir."

"He certainly did," Villebon replied as he took the paper. "It was a serious mistake for him, but fortunate for me when he got the papers mixed. The men of the Crimson Sign are very near to us, Foulette, and they sent a message to that English girl by the hunchback. Father Elizee was chased by them on Big Lake. We must have help from the Indians, so I want you to go to Meductic and induce them to come at once. Make any promise you like so long as you get them, two or three hundred, if possible. And they must come right away, for we are in great danger. Use every inducement you can. That will do. You may go."

Foulette turned and was about to leave the room, when Villebon detained him.

"Just a minute. You saw the hunchback at Madame Bedard's?"

"I did, sir."

"How is he feeling after his ordeal?"

"He was asleep, and Madame Bedard was attending to Father Elizee. He is almost a complete wreck."

"I know he is. But food and rest will soon restore him. And, Foulette."

"Yes, sir."

"Have you heard about the plague among the Indians on the Chimenpy River?"

"I have, sir, and it must be very bad from what the priest says."

"I am afraid so. But, remember, do not say a word to the Indians at Meductic about it."

"You can trust me as to that, sir. I shall not mention it. But they may have heard already. They have ways of receiving news which are mysterious to us. However, I shall do the best I can."

Foulette was about to depart, when a soldier entered, advanced towards the commander and saluted. In his hand he held an arrow which he laid upon the table.

"This came from the air, sir," he explained. "It stuck into the ground in the middle of the Square. See, the feathers are red, and a paper is folded around the shaft."

Villebon lifted the arrow and examined it closely. He knew its meaning, as well as the source from which it had come. He needed no words to tell him that.

"The Crimson Sign!" he mused, as if to himself. "This is the token. It did not come far. The enemy is very near, at our gate. I expected it."

Unfastening the paper attached to the arrow, he unfolded it and read the message written in French with a red material.

"Release the English girl. Take her one league down river to-night."

This was signed only with a feather, scrawled in a color resembling blood. As Villebon stared at the words, it seemed as if his face had caught the reflection of the blood-red letters and sign. He looked at the arrow, and the hand holding it gripped hard. The feathers seemed to fascinate him. He studied them closely, lost in thought. He then turned to the soldier.

"From which quarter did this come, Doucette?"

"I do not know, sir. I only saw it when it struck the ground, and it was straight on end."

"Ah! A strong arm and practised eye must have sent that arrow. An Indian's, most likely. This is serious."

"But Pete King can draw a strong bow, sir," Foulette reminded. "I have heard that he is well skilled in archery, and can outshoot any Indian."

"I have heard the same, Foulette. But I think it is exaggerated. He is a cunning rascal, nevertheless, does a big business with the natives, and has drawn many renegade Frenchmen into his band. And now that his devils are aroused over the

capture of that English girl, there is no telling to what extremes they will go in their efforts to rescue her. I cannot believe that they are merely bluffing in demanding her release. They have the power to starve us out unless we have help from the Indians at Meductic. They are our only hope, so you must go to them at once."

He paused and looked intently at the arrow he was still holding in his hand. He felt its point and ran his fingers over the feathers.

"Sharp at one end and smooth at the other," he mused. "Ah!"

He turned abruptly to Foulette and handed him the arrow.

"Take this with you to Meductic. Show it to the Indians and tell them what it means. And let it remind you how you must deal with those wily rascals—smooth in tongue as these feathers, and keen in wit as this sharp point. Promise them anything if they will come to our assistance against the League of the Crimson Sign. We are in a desperate situation, remember, and if Colonel Garland should arrive, we are lost. Tell them to hasten, and bring a large body of warriors. Go now and lose no time."

Foulette and Doucette were about to leave the room, when again Villebon motioned them to wait.

"Just a minute. Do the soldiers know about this arrow?"

"No, sir," Doucette replied. "I was alone when it fell, and brought it at once to you."

"That was right. So you think the men are unaware of our immediate danger?"

"They have not mentioned it, sir. Pellat went up the Nashwaak to-day to look for some good hardwood. You told him to set men chopping for the winter supply."

"Did he go alone?"

"Yes, sir. He always does when looking for wood."

"Has he returned?"

"He came back once, but did not stay long."

"When was that?"

"Several hours ago. He should have been back before this. He never remained away so long before."

"Pellat's a fool for going off alone. He should know better. Warn the garrison to be on strict guard, and extra alert. See that everything is in readiness in case of an attack. And, by the way, Doucette, if Pellat does not return soon, send a number of well-armed men up the Nashwaak to look for him. That is all now."

When Villebon was once more alone, he paced restlessly up and down the room. He was annoyed and worried, as well he might be. His fond hopes had been dashed to the ground. When he had erected his fort at the mouth of the Nashwaak, he had expected to bring the entire country under his subjection in a short time. But now he was caught like a rat in a trap. Instead of sweeping all before him, he was menaced by his enemies who were steadily closing in upon him. How many they were he did not know. But of their craft and prowess he had no doubt, especially with Pete King at their head. And what could his small garrison do against those skilled forest rangers? They could beat them off if it came to an open assault upon the fort, for the walls were strong, and the bastion guns commanded the large cleared spaces of several hundred yards in width. And in addition, there was the palisade of stout sticks, as well as the deep ditch surrounding the entire fortification. The men who composed the garrison could thus maintain a strong defence, but they could not go beyond the walls, and this to the commander was most galling. He could be penned in, and all means of supply cut off. There would be nothing then but starvation. If the Indians would not come to his assistance, the situation was hopeless. He could give up the English girl, but that would be a sure sign of his weakness. It would be a clear acknowledgment of defeat. Rather than be humiliated in such a manner, Villebon was determined to hold out to the last. He would die fighting, rather than surrender to a band of renegades.

CHAPTER XVIII

AN ENEMY VISITS THE FORT

There was considerable anxiety as the afternoon waned and Pellat did not return. Several armed men went some distance up the Nashwaak in a canoe, but found no trace of the missing man. Neither did they see any sign of the enemy. It was accordingly surmised that Pellat had gone back from the river and would appear in due time. He was a skilled woodsman, so it was hardly likely that he had lost his bearings.

Although somewhat anxious about the soldier's absence, Villebon was much relieved that nothing had been seen of the men of the Crimson Sign. If they were prowling around the fort they would undoubtedly have fired upon the search party. It would have been too good an opportunity for them to miss. But perhaps they were biding their time and awaiting an answer to the message which the arrow had brought. This thought caused him some concern. But it also strengthened his determination not to accede to the request. He would never give up the English girl, at least, not until he had her securely married to Villieu. As soon as the latter returned from the Jemseg he would have Father Elizee perform the ceremony. He would not care then what happened to the girl. It might add to the revenge to send her back to her father as the wife of a Frenchman. This new idea pleased him. Yes, he would get the marriage over as soon as possible, and after a while he would deliver up the girl. This would appease Pete King, cause him to draw off his men, and so the fort in the wilderness would be saved from a blockade. The Indians might not be needed, after all.

Villebon was highly elated with his new scheme, and he felt greatly relieved. But when night shut down and Pellat did not return, he became intensely anxious. The man was surely lost, so it would be necessary to send out search-parties the next day. It would be a risky thing to do, but he could not afford to lose such a valuable woodsman without an effort to find him.

This move, however, proved unnecessary, for at the dawn of a new day Pellat returned. He was weary and greatly excited. He had been captured by several men of the Crimson Sign, so he at once reported to his commanding officer. They had leaped upon him, overpowered him, and had stripped him of his clothes. They guarded him closely all night, and in the morning had sent him away.

"How far off was that?" Villebon demanded.

"Some distance up the Nashwaak, sir, a hundred yards or more back from the river."

"Did you see many men?"

"I did, sir. There is a big camp of them, and they kept coming and going all the time I was with them."

"Was Pete King there?"

"He was, sir, and he asked me many questions about the fort."

"Did you answer them?"

"Oh, yes, sir, I answered them, all right," Pellat chuckled. "I told him that the fort is very strong, and that you have a large garrison, and that the Indians are friendly and ready to help us whenever we need them. He believed everything I told him."

"How do you know that?"

"From what the men said and did. They were very much excited, and I heard some of them talking to themselves. They thought I couldn't hear, ha, ha! But I heard, all right. They decided the best thing to do was to get away while there was time. If the fort was so strong, and the Indians so friendly to us they couldn't do much, they believed. And Pete King was of the same opinion. It took his men some time, though, to make him understand. He seemed terribly disappointed, for he was sure at first that he could capture the fort or starve us out."

"Were they ready to leave when they freed you?" Villebon eagerly inquired.

"Nearly all of them had gone, sir. Some went off in the night. I don't believe there is one of them near by now. They

seemed almost scared out of their senses."

"That is strange," Villebon mused. "It is not like Pete King to be frightened of anything."

"I know that, sir. But he is well scared now."

"Did he ask after the English girl?"

"He did, sir, and he wanted to know where she is."

"You told him, of course?"

"Oh, yes. I said that Madame Bedard is looking after her. Then that young man, Martell they call him, asked about her, and appeared mighty interested in the girl. I told him she is having a fine time, with plenty to eat, and dancing with the soldiers at the barracks every night. I believe she's his sweetheart, for he looked terrible when he heard that. He said something to Pete King in English which I could not understand. Anyway, they stripped me of my clothes, although I put up a stiff fight. Then that young fellow put them on and left the camp."

Villebon gave a slight start, and looked keenly at the soldier. An anxious expression appeared in his eyes.

"How long was he away, Pellat?"

"Some time, sir, two hours, maybe."

"And he returned your clothes?"

"Yes, sir, with thanks and apology for taking them from me. He said they fitted him perfectly. He would make a good Frenchman, that boy. He looked just like one of our men. I wonder what he wanted the clothes for?"

"I know if you don't," Villebon bitterly replied. He then smiled grimly at the soldier's surprise. "Yes, I know. Tell me, now, Pellat, did you come back once to the fort after you left yesterday morning?"

"Come back, sir! Why no."

"But Foulette said you did. He told me that you visited Madame Bedard's house, but did not stay long."

"Mon Dieu!" Pellat exclaimed, as light dawned upon his mind. "It must have been that young Englishman dressed in my clothes."

Villebon rose from his chair, walked over to the window and looked out. He felt the insecurity of his position more than ever. Even his own men could not be trusted. An enemy had been admitted into the fort! He must have walked right by the sentinel at the gate in broad daylight! What was the meaning of that? Was there treachery among his men? Or had the sentinel been careless and believed it was Pellat? He would make a strict inquiry. And the young Englishman had gone to Madame Bedard's house! Ah! that woman might know something. He had never trusted her anyway. He suspected her of being in league with the rebels. She was a sister of Pierre, the hunchback, and in communication with the D'Armours at the Jemseg. Pierre always stayed with her when at the fort, and he was a rascal he could not trust. And now after the treatment he had received, it was hard to tell what plot might be afoot.

"Pellat," he called without turning his head. "Come here."

The soldier took a couple of steps forward, surprised at the strange tone in his commander's voice.

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to go and send Madame Bedard to me."

"Yes, sir."

"Then find out if Villieu has returned. I wish to see him, too, but later, after Madame Bedard has gone. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"And, Pellat. You say there are many men of the Crimson Sign up the Nashwaak?"

"There were, sir. The woods seemed full of them. They were coming and going all night."

"And you think they have all left?"

"I believe so, sir, from what I overheard. They were frightened at what I told them."

"That will do, Pellat. You may go."

Villebon watched the soldier as he walked across the square.

"He thinks he scared Pete King and his gang away by what he told them! The fool! I know better. Those rebels have not run away. That was merely a ruse on their part. They are as near as ever, lying low and awaiting my next move. But the devils will wait until I have my will. Then they can have the English girl. She shall be married this very day."

He returned to his chair and sat heavily down. He was weary and annoyed. Things were not turning out to his satisfaction. He longed to punish someone to relieve his feelings. But he had to be careful not to antagonize his garrison. He was at the mercy of his men, and he did not fully trust them. They gave him outward obedience, but he believed their hearts were disloyal. They were more than tired of their life in the wilderness and longed for the gaiety of Quebec. He had ruled them with an iron hand, but he could not tell how long he could control them. Already he had lost several who had deserted and joined Pete King to live the free careless life of the forest rangers. What if the rest should do the same!

He was thinking of these things when Madame Bedard arrived. He rose to meet her, accepted her curtsy, and motioned her to a bench near the table. The woman did as she was ordered, but kept her eyes fixed upon the commander. It had been a long time since she had been summoned before him, and she realised that it must be a matter of considerable importance now. She was well past middle age, of medium height, and slight in form. She walked with a limp, caused by an injury to her left knee years before. Her face, once beautiful, was seamed with wrinkles, the result of toil and care. But time had not dimmed the lustre of her eyes. They were kindly eyes, expressing the soul within. She was virtually a mother to every soldier of the garrison. When any man was sick, it was Madame Bedard who ministered to him, and cured him with her wonderful concoctions of herbs and roots which she was constantly gathering around the fort. In many ways she helped the men, and did all in her power for their comfort. They would have fought for her, and even given their lives, if necessary, on her behalf.

Villebon was well aware of the value of such a woman in their midst. She had a restraining influence upon the soldiers, and her presence made their lonely lot more endurable. Her house was ever open to them, and there with the armourer and his wife the pleasant evenings proved a great relief to the monotony of life in the barracks. But the commander feared and suspected Madame Bedard. Although kind to the soldiers, he had his doubts about her loyalty to him. And since the punishment of her brother, it was difficult to tell what she might do. It was even possible that she might incite the garrison to rebel. The presence of the men of the Crimson Sign would be an inducement for them to desert. It was, therefore, necessary for him to deal tactfully with her. It was most galling for a man in his position to be in a measure dependent upon a woman. Yet he knew that he was much more fortunate here in the wilderness than elsewhere, for even in the court of France women held unlimited sway over those in high authority.

"And how is Father Elizee to-day, Madame?" he inquired. "He was almost exhausted when he arrived."

"He has had a good rest, sir, and is preparing to return at once to those afflicted Indians. I am supplying him with some medicines in which I have much confidence."

"Surely Father Elizee will not go back so soon. He is not strong enough yet. He must wait awhile."

"So I told him, sir, but to no purpose. His mind is firmly made up, and you know what kind of a man he is. He never thinks of himself when others need his help."

"But he must not go to-day," Villebon emphatically declared. "Tell him I order him to remain, as I wish him here for a special reason."

The woman shrugged her shoulder, as she looked keenly at the commander.

"You will have to tell him that yourself, sir. He would not listen to me. But he wants my medicines for those Indians. I

have some ready, but I need more roots, so it will take me most of to-day and to-morrow to gather and steep them. I was about to go after them when you summoned me here."

"Ah, so you think you can keep him until your medicines are ready?"

A peculiar expression came into the woman's eyes, and she smiled.

"The medicines will not be ready, sir, until you give me orders. I could supply Father Elizee this very minute with all he needs. But he must wait and rest before he goes back to his Indians. It may not be right for me to deceive that good man, but it is the only way I can make him wait. So if you do not need me any longer, sir, I will go now and see how he is getting along."

"Just a minute, Madame. How is the English girl?"

"Very well, sir. She is a great comfort to me, just like a daughter."

"Does she fret much?"

"Not so much as one might expect. Anyway, she doesn't show it, but is brave and cheerful. She is certain that you will treat her right, and restore her to her father at the first opportunity."

"The soldiers are courteous to her, I suppose? They often go to your house, I understand."

"Oh, they always act like gentlemen, sir, when at my place. I wouldn't let them come if they didn't behave themselves."

"It must be lonely for the girl not being able to speak French. How do you talk to her?"

"I did it at first by signs. But now she is learning to speak French and already she knows quite a number of words. My brother Pierre is able to speak her language which he learned from young English down river."

"So your brother and the girl have been talking together? It must be pleasant for her."

"Pierre has not spoken to her since she has been here, sir. He is suffering too much to say anything. You know the reason."

There was a note of reproach in the woman's voice, which Villebon understood. He felt almost like a child now, and it annoyed him.

"These are serious days, Madame, and it is necessary to take harsh measures at times. We are surrounded by enemies, and they are now very near. You have heard Pellat's story, I suppose?"

"I only know, sir, that he was captured by Pete King's men."

"That was after he returned to the fort and visited your house."

Villebon was watching the woman closely as he spoke. He expected to see her start or show some sign of embarrassment. But her face merely expressed surprise as she looked steadily at the officer.

"Pellat has not been at my place for several days, sir, that is, not to my knowledge."

"Foulette lied, then, Madame. He said that after Pellat went up the Nashwaak, he returned and visited your house."

"Did Foulette say that, sir?"

"He did."

"There must be some mistake, sir. Pellat has not been at my house of late."

"Have you been home all the time?"

"Oh, no. I often go after roots and herbs during the afternoon, as you are well aware."

"You may have been away when Pellat called."

"That may be true, sir. But I know nothing about his visit."

"That will do, Madame. You may go. But there is something strange about all this. And, by the way, have you seen Villieu since his return from the Jemseg?"

"Villieu doesn't come to my house much, sir. He is an officer, so it would not do for him to mingle with the common soldiers who would meet him there. He keeps very much to himself these days."

"I suppose so. That will do, Madame. You have work to do, and so have I. But keep Father Elizee to-day, at least. I do not wish to force him to remain, so if you can detain him, it will prevent an embarrassing situation."

CHAPTER XIX

READY FOR THE BRIDE

Madame Bedard had been gone but a short time when Villieu stood before his commanding officer. Villebon was in no proper mood to receive his subordinate, although he had sent for him. He was tired and perplexed. He was not at all satisfied with his interview with Madame Bedard. He believed that she knew more than she would admit as to what was going on at the fort, as well as the visit of that man to her house disguised in Pellat's clothes. It seemed to him that she was in league with others who were trying to undermine his authority. Pierre, the hunchback, was her brother, and he worked for the D'Armours at the Jemseg. That in itself was enough to make him suspicious of the woman. And her calm and unperturbed manner had irritated him, although he had not shown his annoyance. It was his policy to conceal his feelings as much as he could when dealing with a difficult situation. In this manner he believed he could throw the suspected off their guard and gain valuable information which otherwise he could not acquire. With Madame Bedard, however, nothing had been accomplished, and it was this that nettled him.

And now Villieu was before him. As he looked at the strong and upstanding officer, his eyes narrowed a little. He returned the salute in a perfunctory manner, and shifted uneasily in his chair.

"You are late in coming to see me," he chided. "You arrived early this morning, so I have been informed."

"Quite true, sir. But I was travelling much of the night, so it was necessary to make myself presentable ere appearing before you. Food, sleep, and a change of clothes have renewed me, and I am now at your service."

"You multiply unnecessary words, Villieu," Villebon reprovingly replied. "I accept your excuse, but at such a critical time as this I can hardly think of the body and its needs. What have you to say about affairs at the Jemseg? Have you learned anything of importance?"

"I have, sir. Last night I observed six canoes loaded with men of the League of the Crimson Sign passing up stream to Big Lake."

"Ah! That agrees with what Father Elizee told me. He was chased by those rebels."

"They could not have been the same ones, sir. Father Elizee has been here for a day."

"You are right, Villieu. Yes, you are quite right. And you saw the rascals at the Jemseg?"

"Yes, sir. Six canoes went by in the night."

"Did they stop at Louis D'Armours'?"

"No, sir. The two black-robos who followed shortly after, went there."

"Two black-robos! They were coming up river? Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir. I watched them go by from where I was concealed."

"And you saw them at Louis D'Armours'?"

"My men did, sir. They followed them to the house. The priests are on their way from Port Royal, no doubt."

"Most likely. But they should have been here before this. I am anxious to see them and to hear the latest news. In this God-forsaken hole we are completely shut off from the outside world. Nothing of any importance ever comes this way."

"It may come sooner than you expect, sir."

"What do you mean?"

"When the League of the Crimson Sign is on the move, sir, something is bound to happen."

"Yes, yes, that is true. They must be after the English girl. They sent me a message by an arrow. They demand that I give

up the girl."

"Will you do so, sir?" Villieu asked as unconcernedly as possible.

"Why should I? It would be a sign of weakness of my position."

"Pete King knows that already, sir. He can starve us out in a short time. He can cut off all our means of supply, for you have not enough men to face him. He is not unaware of that."

"I know that only too well. It all depends upon the help I receive from the Indians. I sent Foulette to the Meductic to induce them to come at once."

"And if they don't come, sir?"

Villebon shrugged a shoulder, and threw out his hands in a gesture of despair.

"I shall be forced to give up the girl, although I intend to do that anyway."

Observing the eager expression in Villieu's eyes, his lip curled in a sarcastic smile.

"Oh, you need not think that you are to be outside of my plan. You are to marry that girl, and then when you are tired of her, you can send her away. It will be a sweet revenge upon Colonel Garland."

With the greatest difficulty Villieu controlled himself. He was naturally impulsive, so the thought of an innocent girl being made to suffer for the deeds of others aroused in his soul an intense fury. He recalled her courage and defiant manner when she had been brought a captive to Acadia. She had not whined, and no tears had she shed, but had endured all her hardships with a spirit that had won his unbounded admiration. But for his love of Judith la Valliere and their betrothal, nothing would please him better than to take Helen Garland as his wife. But without her love and willing consent, he realised how fatal such a union would be. He knew that his commander was a stern hard man, but he had never imagined that he would stoop to such an abominable deed as this. Even now he hoped that he was not really in earnest.

"Is not such a revenge most unusual, sir?" he queried.

"It may be, Villieu. But just think what I might do to that girl. I could have her disfigured, or put to death, or—" He paused and smiled grimly. "Or I could force her to marry Foulette. But, no, I shall wed her to Monsieur Villieu, my worthy lieutenant."

"And saddle me, sir, with a woman who does not love me, who can't speak a word of French, and whose manner of life is altogether different from mine. The punishment will be as much upon me as upon the girl. And, besides, she is not of my faith. As I said before, sir, when you mentioned this to me, what will Father Elizee say?"

"It does not matter to me what he says. He shall obey my orders, for I am ruler here. And the sooner the ceremony is performed the better it will be. I shall have it off my mind, and can attend to more important matters."

Villebon reached out his right hand and pulled the rope on the wall. A bell sounded outside, and in another minute a soldier entered.

"Bring Father Elizee here," the commander ordered.

As the soldier left the building, the faint semblance of a smile appeared upon Villieu's face as he stood silently before the table. His powerful body was drawn to its full height as he remained rigidly at attention. Outwardly he was the very embodiment of loyalty to his superior officer. He did not seem like a man about to be forced into a marriage very much against his will. Why could he, then, smile and appear so unconcerned? Villieu alone knew, and only with difficulty concealed his amusement as he watched his commander awaiting the priest's arrival. The ruler at the Nashwaak felt certain that he was about to wreak a suitable revenge upon his bitter enemy, Colonel Garland. He had his daughter in his grasp, and through her he was about to strike a heart-rending blow at her father. Yes, that was what he was planning as he sat there, lost in thought. And before him stood Villieu, watching, and waiting the outcome which he knew could not be long delayed.

Father Elizee, who soon entered the room, was clothed in a long black robe, which was old and worn. It was torn in several places, and the bottom was frayed and ragged, showing hard usage. A slight beard covered his thin, tired face. His forehead was high and narrow. But his eyes were what at once arrested attention. They shone with the light of holy enthusiasm, expressing the soul within. They told of his devotion to his great cause, eyes that would face hardship, danger, and even death without flinching. Villebon never liked those eyes. They were too piercing, and seemed to read the very secrets of his heart. He did not care to have Father Elizee at the fort. He preferred a different kind of a priest, one who was more worldly-minded, who enjoyed the good things of life, and who would not trouble himself so much about the souls of the savages. But in such matters he was helpless, so was forced to put up with the one who had been sent to him.

Villebon rose as Father Elizee entered, and held out his hand. This man represented the Church, and no matter what he thought personally, he was forced to show outward respect. He motioned him to a seat.

"I prefer to stand," the missionary quietly said. "This is not time for ease of body. You sent for me, Monseigneur?"

"I did, Father. I wish to know the state of your health. You are rested, I hope."

"I am never rested. How can I rest when those poor Indians are suffering? If I were only sure that they are saved, I should not mind so much. But they are in the darkness of heathenism, and seem willing to remain in that terrible condition."

"So you have not had much success among them, then?"

"Very little, Monseigneur. But I trust that this trouble which has come upon them will change their hearts. If I can do something for their bodies I may be able to win them."

"And you intend to return to them?"

"Yes, as soon as Madame Bedard has her medicines ready. And you will provide me with some rum? I shall use it with caution."

"You shall have all you need, Father, although I have my doubts about its effectiveness. This plague, which you believe is sent as a punishment, will not be easily checked."

"Ah, but when earthly means are used in faith, with the addition of prayer, much will be accomplished. I have no doubt about that. You have sinned in allowing that English girl to remain here a captive, and so this plague has come upon the Indians. And it may even reach this fort and carry off your garrison. I must stand between it and you. I believe the Lord will take my little and perform wonders, as He took the loaves and fishes of the boy and fed a multitude. The Holy Mother will intercede, and a miracle will be wrought that will mean the conversion of the savages."

"I admire your faith, Father, and wish you every success. But I do not like to see you expose yourself so much."

"The Lord's servant never thinks of himself, Monseigneur. I have a work to do, and until that is accomplished I must not cease."

"And I have something for you to do here, Father, before you go. You have met the English girl at Madame Bedard's, I suppose?"

"I have seen her, but have had no conversation with her, as I do not speak English."

"She is Colonel Garland's daughter, Father. She is very beautiful, and has won the heart of Monsieur Villieu here, and he desires to make her his wife. I wish you, therefore, to unite them in holy wedlock before you leave. It will not take you long."

The priest was surprised at these words. He glanced at Villebon, and then turned to Villieu.

"Is this your desire, Monsieur?" he asked.

"I am a soldier of France, Father, and my commander's wish must be my wish."

"But is it the wish of your heart, Monsieur?"

"When the head commands, the heart must obey. Every soldier knows that."

"Ah, I see your replies are evasive, Monsieur. I must know the truth. And, besides, is not the girl a heretic? How could I unite such a person to one of our Holy Faith? It would be contrary to the teaching of our Church."

"That can be easily remedied, Father," Villebon replied. "You can baptise her, and thus save a soul from everlasting perdition. She will prove a better convert than all the savages you can bring into the fold. Just think of the effect it will have at Quebec, and even in France, when it is learned that Colonel Garland's daughter was baptized and received into the Holy Church at Fort St. Joseph, on the Nashwaak, in the wilderness of Acadia. The news will be astounding, and it will do much to strengthen our cause. This English girl will be considered the first fruit of the heretics in this land, and even His Holiness, the Pope, will give you his blessing."

The priest's eyes glowed with the light of enthusiasm. He did not notice the cynical expression which lurked about the corners of Villieu's mouth. Neither did he doubt the sincerity of Villebon's words. He was thinking only of the captive girl, and how wonderful it would be to save her soul. He was a good man, was Father Elizee, entirely consecrated to his great cause. But he was sadly lacking in worldly wisdom. His disposition and training had made him so. Quiet and reserved by nature, his burning zeal for the heathen had driven him forth from an obscure position in France to mingle with the rough and conflicting elements of Acadia. So taken up was he with his holy mission that he was almost blind to the intrigues, plots and strife that everywhere existed. He lived most of the time in a trance, where in vision he saw and heard things which lifted him beyond the sordid matters of daily life. To mingle with the Indians, to share their rough, roving life, and to partake of their dirty, unsavoury food meant nothing to him. It was all taken as a matter of course, and he gloried in the hardships. Such a man, therefore, was no match in worldly affairs against Villebon and others of his kind.

The commander realised that his words had influenced the missionary, and he smiled. He could always afford to smile when things went his way, and all did his bidding.

"I shall send for the girl at once, Father," he declared. "We shall hold the service in the little chapel. There you can baptise the girl, and perform the marriage. Are you ready, Villieu?"

"At your command, sir," was the reply, accompanied by a salute.

"Very good. We can now get the matter settled without further delay."

Again he pulled the rope, and a soldier appeared.

"Bring the English girl here at once. She is at Madame Bedard's."

He then rose to his feet.

"We shall go into the chapel and await the bride's arrival."

Father Elizee, however, hesitated.

"How can I speak to the girl, Monseigneur?" he questioned. "I do not know her tongue."

"Oh, I shall interpret," Villebon proudly replied. "I understand English enough for the purpose. I shall explain everything to her. You will only have to do your part."

Leaving the office, they passed through a door which led into the orderly room, which was seldom used. Beyond this was the chapel, a small place. Here Villebon stopped and bowed to the priest.

"You enter, Father, and make ready for the wedding. The happy bridegroom will wait here with me for the bride."

Without a word the priest entered the chapel, and closed the door. He was glad to be alone for a few minutes in this sacred place which was to witness a great triumph of the Cross in the wilderness, a heretic saved from perdition and received into the fold. That would atone for all his hardships and discouragements, and win the unstinted commendation of his superiors.

Villebon and Villieu did not have to wait long in the orderly room ere the messenger returned. He appeared at the door

alone.

"Where is the girl?" Villebon demanded.

"She has disappeared, sir. She is not in the fort, and no one knows what has become of her."

CHAPTER XX.

ASK VILLIEU

The men of the League of the Crimson Sign roamed the woods around the Nashwaak fort like sleuth hounds. They were in their element, for the prospect of a fight thrilled their souls. For months they had been on the defensive in their hidden retreat on the Saganic, keeping watch and ward lest an attack should be made upon them by Villebon's men, assisted by the Indians and soldiers from Quebec. Now, however, they were unleashed, to wander at will, and to close steadily in upon their enemy. Well trained in woodland lore, thoroughly acquainted with every hill, valley, river and lake, they glided from place to place as stealthily as Indians upon the warpath. Every movement around the fort was noticed by their keen eyes, and when Foulette left for the Meductic the purpose of his mission was correctly surmised. They knew the number of men composing the garrison, and how precarious was their situation. But if the natives came in a large band to support Villebon, then the men of the League would be forced to become extremely wary. In fact, they might be compelled to retreat to their stronghold on the Saganic.

This Pete King well knew. He had taken up his position a short distance up the Nashwaak, and here he was in touch with his men who brought reports of all that was happening around the fort. And with him was Grey Martell, eager and impatient for action. While Helen Garland was a prisoner he could not rest, and it was with considerable difficulty that Pete King restrained his impetuous spirit.

The morning sun was stealing down into the valley as they ate their frugal breakfast by the side of the river. They were alone, as they had been through the night. At any moment they expected couriers to arrive with news of importance. But this morning they were long in coming, and Grey chafed at the delay. He had told his leader about his visit to the fort disguised as a Frenchman. But he had said little about his meeting with Helen Garland, and Pete was considerate enough not to question him too closely. He merely inquired about the girl, and how she was bearing the strain of her captivity. But as to the condition of the fort, and how he had managed to pass the sentinel at the gate he wished to know every detail.

"I had no trouble with the sentinel," Grey informed him. "He glanced at me once and then gave me no further attention. He thought, most likely, that I was Pellat."

Pete had meditated upon this statement, and referred to it this morning as they ate their breakfast.

"That sentinel must have been thoroughly deceived," he chuckled. "You certainly did look like Pellat. Villebon must have been in a great rage when that woodsman returned and reported what had happened to him."

"And I am afraid he will vent his wrath upon Helen," Grey replied. "He is cruel and vindictive enough to do anything to an innocent girl."

"I know he is, my boy. And it's too bad you could not have brought her back with you. I am glad, though, that you didn't try. It was too risky, and I should not have let you go to the fort."

"It was not my fault, Pete, that I did not bring Helen with me. I was willing to fight the whole garrison, if necessary, to save her. But she would not let me. She knew that it would mean death to me, and she was right. I was almost crazy, I guess, to see her there a captive when I could do nothing to rescue her. And she would not let me stay long, but begged me to hurry away. But I saw her, and that meant a great deal to me."

He paused and gazed straight before him out over the narrow stream. He saw again the girl he loved, standing so calmly before him, as he held her hands in his and begged her to leave with him, no matter what the risk might be. And then that last fond embrace when their lips had met ere he had hurried away. He told Pete nothing about this, and it was unnecessary, for his worthy leader knew quite well what that brief meeting must have meant to both of them.

"Did the girl say anything about Villebon's plan to marry her to Villieu?" Pete asked. "Did she seem anxious?"

"She did not believe that Villebon would do such a cowardly thing. When I told her that he was revengeful enough to do anything, she said he was only trying to frighten her, to make her tell who had sent that strange message to her, and the strength of Fort Reliance. When I reminded her of how cruel he had been to prisoners who had been captured, she said

they had been men and not women. She could not believe that he would punish a girl for what her father had done. She was sure that Villebon would release her in time, and I could not change her mind. She does not realize her danger, Pete. But we do, and that is what makes me so anxious to rescue her at once. And we are doing nothing. We are just prowling around and making no definite move for her release."

Pete King smiled at the young man's impatience. He filled his pipe and lighted it with a glowing ember of the dying fire. Then a serious expression came into his eyes.

"I am anxious, too, lad, to be up and doing. But rash haste now will prove our undoing. We cannot take the fort, that is certain. And even if we had heavy guns, it would be a difficult task. You know how Major Church tried and failed. Our only way is to cut off the fort supplies, and thus force the garrison to vacate or surrender. With the men he has Villebon cannot fight us in the open. We could beat him in a short time, and he knows it."

"But suppose the Indians come to his assistance?"

"We shall have to retreat and fall back, most likely, upon our stronghold on the Saganic."

"And in the meantime what will happen to Helen?" Grey demanded. "Do you suppose Colonel Garland will come to rescue her? If he does, he will bring big guns with him."

"I am not depending upon him, lad. He may come, but it will take some time for him to reach the Nashwaak."

Impatiently Grey kicked a burning ember. He was greatly disturbed. His only thought was of the girl he loved, and what might happen to her.

"This delay is almost more than I can stand," he declared. "If I had a force of the King's soldiers I would attack Villebon to-night. Under cover of darkness we could easily scale the walls. There are only fifty men at the fort, and we could capture it before the Indians arrive. What a victory that would be, and what a sensation it would make in England when the news reached there. How proud all would be of us."

Pete smiled grimly at his companion's enthusiasm.

"That might be so, my boy, yes, that might be so. But what I know about the people in England, I have my doubts. They are too much taken up with their own affairs to think anything about this country and what happens here. Those in authority are too much interested in their mistresses to bother about such a land as this. And it takes all the money that can be raised by robbing hard-working people to provide for a gang of useless parasites who hover around the King. They have no means to send ships and soldiers to aid men who are fighting for England in Acadia. But mark my word, lad, the time will come when men and money will be poured out like water to win this country. Nations will then fight, not for its furs only, but for its other values, such as trees, minerals, and the rich lands which are now lying unused. The old countries across the ocean will need outlets for their growing populations, so they will turn to this wilderness. All they care for now is fighting for the skins of wild animals. But thousands will come here some day, the fertile lands along the great river and its tributaries will be cultivated, and there will be homes, villages and towns everywhere. I shall not live to see that day, for it will only come when the nations stop their cursed wars and turn to matters of peace."

Grey was not altogether surprised at these words, for he had heard Pete King utter the same things before. But he was not interested in what would happen in the future. The present alone concerned him now. He turned impatiently towards his leader.

"All that may come to pass, Pete, but it won't help us while Helen is a prisoner, and we are doing nothing to rescue her. And we shall never do anything if you scatter your men over the country. Why not call them together and raid the fort? They are ready for a fight, and if our sign of the red feather means anything, let them show it. We have been boasting about the League of the Crimson Sign, and singing our song of defiance, but what do they amount to? Let us be up and doing. We could mount the walls and surprise the garrison before they had time to use their heavy guns. We know far better how to attack such a fort than did Major Church. He could not get his men near enough to make an assault. We are in a different position."

A serious expression came into Pete King's eyes, mingled with anger. He rose to his feet and laid a heavy hand upon Grey's shoulder. For a minute he did not speak, and a slight tremor shook his body.

"I admire your spirit, lad, but not your judgment. You are young, so I excuse you this time. But never let me hear such words from your lips again while you belong to the League of the Crimson Sign. If any of my men had spoken as you have he would have been degraded, the feather ripped from his cap, and he would have met the fate that overtook one last year who tried to take matters into his own hands. This wilderness life either makes or breaks a man. It has no mercy to the weak and whining. But the ones who stand up to the strain and endure the hardships will win out. I brought you here to make a man out of you, and I promised your parents to look after you. But your father told me there was to be no coddling, and I have obeyed him. You have taken the rough and tumble with the men of the Crimson Sign, and so far you have stood the test well, but, for God's sake, don't show the white feather now. Remember the sign of our Order. Red is the feather you wear, so don't disgrace it by useless whining and complaints."

"I don't intend to, Pete," Grey proudly retorted. "I am not showing the white feather, and hope I never shall. If I complain at our slowness in rescuing Helen, is that a sign of weakness? When I am so anxious to attack the fort, does that show I am a coward? Didn't I enter the gate of the fort alone, and remain there for a while with enemies all around me? You know I did what no other man of the League has ever done. Your words of reproach are strange."

"Perhaps they are, my boy. But I have been trying to teach you the important lesson of wisdom, of self-control, of patience. You have courage, I admit. But courage alone will not do. And even a knowledge of the ways of the woods will not suffice. You must learn how to use your knowledge, and that means wisdom. And wisdom will teach you self-control and patience, without which you will act like a fool, rush headlong into danger, lose everything, and your life, most likely. No, that won't do. I am much older than you are, so while you fret and chafe at our delay, remember that I have done all that is possible so far. I know better than you how to play this game. My men have perfect confidence in my judgment, and are satisfied. They understand that we are not able to attack the fort with any hope of success. A wearing-down process is the only way, and by cutting off the fort's supplies is the only means to that end. I believe Villebon knows it, too, and for that reason he has sent for the Indians."

"And if they come, Pete?"

"Our time of waiting will be over, and that should suit you. We shall have a great advantage over them, for we can watch their movements, while they will not know where we are. Wherever they go, by river, lake, or portage, my men will see them. They have received instructions, so will know what to do. The only way we can fight is in the open, and there I have no fear of the outcome."

"And in the meantime what will become of Helen?" Grey demanded. "If Villebon is checked or defeated, he may take revenge upon her. He hates Colonel Garland, and he will strike at him through his daughter. I do not trust him. He would do anything when enraged, as he certainly will be if we cut off his supplies."

Before Pete King could make any further reply, the sound of heavy guns fell upon their ears. It came from the direction of the fort. They listened with strained attention, while a serious expression came into Pete's eyes.

"The Indians have arrived!" he exclaimed. "That is the fort salvo of welcome. Our time of waiting is now ended, lad, and we must be on the move."

"Which way, Pete?"

"Follow me and you shall know. Gather up our belongings here, and make ready."

He then stooped and made a few marks upon the ground near where the fire had been. He also placed several sticks in a certain position, the meaning of which Grey well understood. They were signs to direct the men of the League. It was their secret code in which they had been thoroughly instructed. Pete King used beacon fires by night when necessary, but he depended most of all upon the marks and the sticks. The fires could be seen and partly understood by their enemies, while the others, if noticed, would be only intelligible to the men of the League.

In a few minutes they were speeding among the trees along the Nashwaak, down towards the main river. No sound did they make as they peered keenly forward, ready for any emergency. The fort guns had ceased, and all was still. Grey's heart thrilled with anticipation, and his leader's steps were all too slow for his eager spirit. He longed for eagle's wings to sweep him onward to her who was a captive at the fort. No risk was too great for him to undertake on her behalf.

At length Pete King's pace slackened, and several times he stopped to listen. But nothing could they see or hear until they

came close to the clearing surrounding the fort. Here they dropped upon their knees and crept cautiously forward. Presently the strong palisade appeared to view at the point of land where the Nashwaak joins the main river. In front were many canoes, filled with dusky warriors, moving too and fro, while before the open gate soldiers were drawn up at attention. It was easy for the concealed watchers to see all that was taking place, for the distance was not far. The Indians seemed to be giving an exhibition for the benefit of the soldiers as they manoeuvred their canoes with remarkable skill, circling through the water, sweeping up to the landing-place, and then suddenly swerving away, their strong bodies bending and swaying rhythmically to their paddle strokes. As Pete and Grey watched them, their hearts thrilled with admiration. What warriors! The young man gave a deep sigh.

"I wish we had those fellows with us," he whispered. "We would soon finish Villebon."

"Maybe we'll get them yet, my boy. All that display doesn't amount to much. Villebon has a hard time to hold those rascals. They are very slippery."

Ere long the Indians ceased their manoeuvring and moved in a body towards the shore. When they had drawn their canoes up on the bank, the governor came forth from the fort. He was resplendent in his official uniform, and attended by a strong bodyguard. He advanced and addressed the natives. What he said the watchers among the trees could not tell, although they surmised he was bidding them welcome. When this ceremony was ended, he turned, re-entered the fort, followed by all, both Indians and whites.

"Well, that's over, and what are we to do now?" Grey asked. "Villebon commands the situation, it seems to me, and we can do nothing."

Pete apparently did not hear these words of discouragement, for he was looking intently to the right. He then raised himself a little from the ground for a better view. What he saw seemed to satisfy him, and silently he pointed to an object moving cautiously among the stumps and brush piles. Grey looked, and his eyes opened wide with interest and surprise.

"Why, it's Madame Bedard! Didn't she go down river with her brother yesterday?"

"That's what Tony and Nick reported," Pete replied. "They saw her limp out of the fort with Pierre, the hunchback, get into his canoe and go away with him. She must have returned later. Perhaps she only went a short distance to get some roots and herbs."

At first the woman seemed intent only upon picking wild flowers and occasionally digging up a root. But as she moved closer to the edge of the forest, she now and then gave a swift glance towards the great dark trees on her left. Pete surmised that she was looking for someone, and at once gave a low whistle. The woman, however, did not appear to notice this, neither did it startle her. But she moved nearer to the direction of the sound, and at length left the open and came to where the men were crouching. Seeing them, her face brightened, and she held up a finger of warning. She also glanced back over the clearing to make sure that no one was there.

"I knew I should find someone here," she began in a low voice in French. "You are in great danger, Messieurs."

"And so are you, Madame," Pete replied.

"I do not mind at all. I am only an old woman, so my life doesn't count. But I wanted to tell you about that English girl. She is as dear to me as my own child, and you must save her from those brutes at the fort."

"How can we do that?" Grey impetuously asked.

"Sh-h," the woman warned, glancing again towards the clearing. "We must be very careful, and I cannot stay long. But that girl is not at the fort. She has escaped. Villebon will pursue her, and if you do not help her she will be captured again."

Grey rose swiftly to his feet. His eyes were ablaze and his whole body was quivering with excitement.

"How did she escape? Where is she? Tell me, quick."

A smile of sympathy overspread the woman's worn and wrinkled face.

"Ah, you wish to know, Monsieur, how she escaped? Never mind that now. It is better for me not to tell. But go and find

her. There, I must leave you and get back to the fort. Villebon is suspicious of me."

"But why have you come to give us this information?" Pete demanded. "Are you not doing what is wrong?"

"Bah! what do I care for that? Isn't Villebon acting like the devil? Didn't he order my dear brother to be strung up by his thumbs, and his feet burned with hot coals to make him explain about that paper?"

"What paper?" Pete inquired.

"The one my brother brought from the Jemseg. He had two, one for the English girl and the other for the commander. But he got them mixed. Pierre can't read, so he made a bad mistake, yes, a very bad mistake."

"And Villebon got the letter I sent to Helen!" Grey exclaimed. "And he tried to force Pierre to tell who sent it?"

"He did, and when Pierre wouldn't tell him, he handed him over to that brute Foulette, who strung him up by the thumbs and burnt his feet with hot coals, as I told you."

"And did Pierre confess?"

"Oh, no. Pierre went off his head, and was very bad for a time. He wasn't able to explain anything, but raved like a madman. The commander sent him to me and I put him to bed. Poor fellow! I just sat down by his side and cried. I could not help it. To think that Villebon would do that to my brother who never harmed anyone in his life. Pierre will never be the same man again. He is terribly broken up over his suffering, and his legs and arms pain him all the time. I can't do anything to relieve him."

There were tears in the woman's eyes, which she hastily brushed away with her sleeve. The men were deeply moved by her story. In fact, Grey could hardly restrain himself, so angry was he.

"We shall punish those devils," he cried. "We shall pay them back for treating your brother in such a cruel manner. And if they have done that to Pierre, they may do the same to Helen."

He then turned to the woman.

"Steady, lad," Pete warned. "Remember what I told you."

"Where is Pierre now?"

Madame Bedard cast a furtive glance out over the clearing.

"He is with the English girl," she whispered. "They both left the fort together. But, Mon Dieu! What if Villebon should ever know I told you this!"

"He will never know, Madame. You can trust us to keep the secret. But where did Pierre and the girl go?"

"To the Saganic, by way of the Portobello, the Big Lake, and the Washademoak. But, oh, oh, it is a long way, and I fear something will happen to them before they get there. Pierre is not strong, and his body was full of pains when he left."

"When did they leave the fort?"

"Yesterday morning. But that is all I dare tell you. I must go home, as the commander may need me."

"Wait a minute," Pete ordered. "How did that girl escape without my men seeing her go? They have been watching the fort very closely."

A shrewd expression came into Madame Bedard's eyes, as she looked at the ranger.

"Didn't they see them leave, Monsieur?"

"They reported that you and your brother left and went down river."

"Ah! And suppose it was not Pierre's sister who was with him? Maybe it was someone else who was dressed like her."

"What! Do you tell me it was Helen!" Grey exclaimed. "Was she dressed in your clothes and limped like you?"

"I have told you enough, too much, in fact, I must go now."

"But how did the girl escape the sharp eyes of the guard?" Pete demanded.

"Ask Villieu when you next see him. He may be able to tell you."

With that Madame Bedard left them, sauntered out into the clearing, and began to gather flowers and roots as she made her way slowly towards the fort.

CHAPTER XXI.

IN PERIL OF WATER

Helen Garland had endured much since her capture at Fort Reliance, and she had borne all with a courageous spirit. But the sense of despair came upon her when she found herself in the wilderness with a helpless man by her side. Pierre, the hunchback, who had risked so much for her, was lying upon the ground beneath the shelter of some thick bushes, writhing in agony. The tortures he had undergone at the Nashwaak were telling severely upon him, and his body had given way under the strain.

After their escape from the Fort, Helen was well aware of the effort Pierre was making on her behalf. As he paddled down the river she knew that he was suffering, although he did not complain. Then on that hard overland march to the headwaters of the Portobello he had stopped several times and leaned against a tree for support.

"You are tired, Pierre," she had said.

"Me no good, Mam'selle," he replied. "Me a'right bimeby."

But he was not all right, for his suffering increased as they made their way down that little inland stream in the small canoe Pierre had always kept hidden for any sudden emergency. Here Helen did her part, for she was skilful in the use of the paddle. And this was fortunate, as Pierre's suffering steadily increased, and at times he was unable to make a stroke. The ordeal through which he had passed was having its deadly effect, and the joints of his body which had been so cruelly racked caused him great agony. Although Helen could do nothing to give him relief, her heart was filled with sympathy for her brave rescuer. But she kept the canoe in motion, and aided by a gentle tide made fair progress during the afternoon.

It was almost dark when they at length came to a lake, and here she ran the canoe ashore. The night was spent among the trees a short distance from the water. Pierre had brought some food, and this they ate in the darkness, for they were afraid to light a fire, as they fully expected their pursuers to come that way. Wearily the hours dragged by, and whenever Helen did doze for a few minutes, she always aroused with a start thinking that she heard the sound of approaching canoes. She knew that Pierre was suffering a great deal, although he never complained. He did not lie down, but sat huddled upon the ground with a blanket wrapped about him. The night was cool, and Helen was thankful for the other blanket which covered her own body. A fitful wind rustled the leaves of the trees, and through their delicate tracery she could see the stars twinkling and shining overhead. How far away they seemed to the lonely girl. They could not help her in her trouble. In fact, they appeared to be mocking her. And yet she had been taught that God made them and guided them in their course. And if He cared for the stars, why did He not care for her? Since childhood she had been told that God's love surrounded each one, and she remembered the words she had heard that He would give His angels charge over his people. But she could not see any sign of His love now. He had allowed her to be captured and carried away from her home, and He permitted evil men to continue their cruel work. And they prospered while innocent ones suffered. She recalled poor little David, and his terrible treatment at the hand of that brute Foulette. Why had not God taken care of him? It was unusual for Helen to doubt. But a heavy cloud of despair had settled upon her. God had failed to keep His promise. She had never questioned His love before. But in her present condition she felt that she could not turn to Him for help.

There was only one to whom she believed she could look for aid, and her heart quickened as she thought of him. He must know by now that she was somewhere in the wilderness, and he would lead the men of the Crimson Sign to her assistance. He might appear at any minute, and it was this hope that buoyed her up and kept her strong. How surprised she had been when Grey Martell had stood before her in the Bedard house, disguised as a French soldier, and urged her to leave with him. She recalled his noble appearance that day, and the expression of love in his eyes. She knew the risk he had run, and she had been most thankful when he had left the fort undetected and unharmed. He had failed in his mission then, but his presence had inspired her, and the remembrance of his strong arms about her and the pressure of his lips to hers brought a glow to her heart and cheeks. Yes, he would save her, so he had said, and it was that promise which sustained her during the long weary night.

It was early the next morning when Helen launched the small craft and helped Pierre on board. His sufferings had not lessened. In fact, they were worse. Every movement caused him great agony. He tried to use the paddle, but with a groan

of despair was forced to desist. Helen realized that if they were to reach the Jemseg, she alone would have to perform the task. Pierre watched her with admiration.

"Mam'selle tres brave," he said. "Me no good. Me all sam' babby."

"Don't talk that way, Pierre," the girl replied. "I can manage all right, and when we get to the Jemseg, Madame Marguerite will make you well again."

"Ah, mebbe so, Mam'selle. Mebbe so."

With that he lapsed into silence as the canoe moved on its way out across the first lake to the second one beyond. He sat in the bottom of the canoe facing the girl. He admired her now more than ever, and to watch her graceful movements as she steadily paddled was most pleasant to his eyes.

And in truth Helen Garland was the very embodiment of confidence and beauty. She was proving her mettle in no small degree. She was typical of those pioneer women who faced hardships and dangers in a wild country with a courage that nothing could daunt.

At noon they landed on the edge of the Big Lake, and ate sparingly of the small supply of food that was left. Helen was hot and tired after her morning's work. But she was thankful that so far no pursuers were in sight. If she could but cross the wide space of water before her and reach the Jemseg she felt she would be safe. The noble D'Armours would shelter and defend her against the enemy. She did not reason how it would be possible for a handful of people to hold out against ten times their number, composed for the most part of strong Indian warriors. Anyway, she believed that she would be safe, and that, perhaps, the men of the Crimson Sign would be there to assist. Grey had told her that he would rescue her, and in his word she had perfect confidence. It was well that she did not know the difficulties her lover would have to face in order to keep his promise. Had she known, it might have weakened her spirit of determination as she resolutely continued on her way across the Big Lake.

The morning had been fine, but after midday the sky darkened, and a breeze drifted in from the south on the flooding tide. The surface of the lake which had been like a vast mirror, rippled into roughness as the wind increased. This at first did not impede the canoe's progress, and only an occasional wisp of spray dashed on board. In a short time, however, the situation changed, and so rough became the water that the light craft was plunging and lifting in a most dangerous manner. It was with considerable difficulty that Helen kept it headed to the wind, and she was fearful lest it should swerve broadside into the rough troughs of the waves where nothing could prevent it from overturning.

Realizing their danger, Pierre turned carefully around, lifted his paddle and tried to help. But at the first feeble stroke, he emitted a cry of pain, the paddle slipped from his nerveless grasp and floated away beyond reach.

"Me no good!" he gasped. "Me lak' babby."

"Never mind," the girl replied. "I can manage all right. The shore is not far away, and I think I can reach that point ahead."

That, however, was easier said than done. Helen was becoming weary and her strokes weakened. The distance was not far now, only a few hundred yards. The whitecaps were rolling towards her, and the waves were incessantly leaping over the bow. But neither wind nor wave daunted her in the least. If only her strength held she believed she could make the point beyond.

Pierre longed to do something to help in this desperate struggle. As he glanced around at the girl, and noticed her brave efforts, he forgot for a time his suffering. What could he do? His paddle was gone. Why had he let it slip from his hands? With it he might make a few strokes and thus give the toiling girl a little respite.

Presently an idea flashed into his mind. Ah, why had he forgotten? There was something he could do. Thrusting his hand into an inside pocket of his jacket he brought forth his little wooden fife. Could he play anything? Would his aching fingers allow him to hold it to his mouth and manage the stops? He would try, anyway. He wriggled carefully around and faced the girl. The latter did not notice what he was doing until several notes of music fell upon her ears, which soon developed into a stirring lively air. A smile overspread Helen's face, for she at once understood Pierre's meaning. She knew that he was playing to assist her, and she admired his courage. As the canoe swayed and plunged she glanced at his moving fingers. They thrilled her soul and inspired her as much as the music. They fascinated her, those magic fingers,

causing her to forget her weariness as she drove her paddle into the water with renewed energy. She was well aware what it meant for Pierre to do what he could to help.

"You are very brave," she told him, as he paused in his playing. "We are almost at the point now."

"Ah, me verra glad," Pierre replied, as he glanced up at the girl. "Me help leetle, eh?"

"Yes, much indeed. See! we are out of the rough water now, and are safe!"

"Dat good, Mam'selle. We safe, mebbe."

"Yes, safe from the water, Pierre, but not safe from cruel men. Is that what you mean?"

"Ah, ah, Mam'selle verra wise."

A few minutes later the canoe touched land, and with a sigh of thankfulness Helen laid aside her paddle and stepped ashore. The wind tore through the trees on the bank above, but here in this sheltered spot all was calm. Looking out over the lake she wondered how she had ever come through that rough water in such a craft. So far she and Pierre had been preserved from harm. But the strain had been great, and as she stood there a sudden weakness came upon her, causing her to sink down upon the sand and gravel at her feet. Pierre seeing this, was afraid that she had fainted. He struggled to his knees and scrambled painfully out of the canoe. He crawled to where the girl was huddled, and touched her arm.

"Mam'selle seek, eh?" he anxiously queried.

"Not sick, Pierre, only tired," Helen explained as she lifted her head. "But I am all right now. I didn't reach the point, though. It looks nice up there, and I think I could make it after I have rested a little. Shall we go?"

Pierre shook his head as he looked towards the point several hundred yards away.

"We stay here, Mam'selle. Dis good place."

"But it is very rough, Pierre, and the bushes are so thick and close to the shore."

"Dat true, Mam'selle. But nice place to hide. If bad men come, dey no stop here. Too rough. Bah! Dey go to dat point. See?"

"Yes, I understand. But why should we stay here, anyway? We want to reach the Jemseg, so we might as well go in a few minutes when I have rested. The tide is running down, and as the wind is from the south, the water is quite calm close to the shore."

"No, no, Mam'selle. We hide here now. We wait. Bimeby bad men come dis way. See? Dey go down Jemseg, mebbe. Dey go up lak', mebbe. Dey no see us here. Dis place too rough. No land here."

"Perhaps you are right, Pierre," Helen replied as she looked thoughtfully out over the water. "But if the men of the Crimson Sign should come, they will not know where we are."

"Dey know now, Mam'selle. Dey know everyt'ing. Dey watch all tam. Pete King heem great man."

Helen smiled to herself at Pierre's unbounded confidence in the League of the Crimson Sign. If he were right, and Grey Martell knew where she was, why did he not come to her assistance? What was delaying him?

"Yaas, we stay here now," Pierre declared. "Bimeby, t'night, mebbe, me feel better. Me help paddle."

"But we have only a little food left, remember. We shall starve if we remain here long."

Pierre shook his head as he looked at the girl. There was a strange expression in his eyes such as she had never seen before.

"Le Bon Dieu Heem tak' care of us, Mam'selle. De Black Robe say so. Heem know much. You believe dat, eh?"

"I try to, Pierre. But sometimes I wonder if God cares. Why does he let wicked men do such cruel things?"

"Dat's Hees bizness, Mam'selle. We find out bimeby, mebbe."

"I hope so," and Helen sighed. "But I might as well begin housekeeping if we are to stay here. The canoe must be hidden, and a place made for ourselves among the bushes where the enemy cannot see us."

"Mam'selle right," Pierre agreed. "Me help some, mebbe."

"No, I can manage quite well. You are not able to do—"

She ceased abruptly, while an expression of fear came into her eyes. She laid her trembling right hand upon her companion's shoulder and pointed down along the shore.

"Look! A canoe! It is coming this way."

Forgetting his pains, Pierre scrambled to his knees, and looked in the direction of the girl's pointing finger.

"Hide! Queek!" he whispered in a hoarse voice. "Dey no see us, mebbe."

But Helen did not move. Her eyes were fastened upon one form in the approaching canoe. It was a woman, and no matter who she might be, whether white or Indian, she was one of her own sex, anyway, and that was all the assurance she needed.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE ENEMY IS NEAR

Very anxiously the fugitives watched the on-coming canoe. Only three persons could they distinguish, and one was a woman. As it drew nearer, Pierre touched Helen's arm.

"Dat Mam'selle la Valliere!" he exclaimed. "She help us."

Helen made no reply. Her heart was beating fast with excitement. Was she at last to see the girl who was betrothed to Villieu? Her fame had reached even Fort Reliance, and she had heard the soldiers there tell about her daring deeds of adventure. She had often wondered what she was like, and now she was about to know.

Presently the Indians in the canoe ceased paddling, and it was quite evident that they had caught sight of the two upon the shore. Then they moved out into the lake where the waves were running high. Helen's eyes glowed with admiration as she watched the natives managing the frail craft. As it dipped and plunged, the water leaped in flying spray, and at times it seemed as if it would be swamped in the rolling billows. But it always rose as buoyant as ever, and after making a large circle headed at length towards the shore. Helen could not comprehend the meaning of this. But Pierre knew.

"Injun 'fraid," he explained. "Heem t'ink many men here. See, heem stop now. Heem look."

Helen was looking and saw that the Indians were merely keeping the canoe to the wind, and peering keenly ahead. It was then that Helen rose to her feet and waved her hand.

"Help," she called as loudly as she could. "We are only two."

For a few minutes there was no response to her appeal. The canoe did not advance, and she could tell that the Indians were talking with the girl. Ere long their paddles struck the water with strong strokes and the craft leaped forward like a thing of life, throwing up white wisps of spray as it cut through the rollers. As it approached, Helen walked down to the water's edge. When the canoe at length grounded upon the sand and gravel, Judith la Valliere rose to her feet, stepped lightly ashore, and the two girls met for the first time. And instantly each recognized in the other a nobility of birth and manner which outward conditions could not conceal. A smile overspread Judith's face as she held out her hand.

"I am glad we have met, Mademoiselle," she began in English. "We shall be good friends, I hope."

Helen was surprised and delighted to hear this girl speak her own language, and as their hands met, her eyes became moist with thankfulness.

"You are very good," she replied. "And I am so thankful that you speak English. I shall have someone to talk to now."

"I have always known your language, Mademoiselle. My father speaks it, and he taught me. It is a great help to know the language of the English. They are wonderful people."

"You are not our enemy, then? You do not hate us?"

Judith's rippling laughter was pleasant to hear. But she suddenly checked herself, and her face became grave.

"No, no, I am not your enemy. I do not hate you. But many of my people do. You are in great danger, Mademoiselle, and so am I."

"Why are you here, then? Your home is far away, so Pierre told me."

"Because I like this life. I cannot stay long at home where it is so quiet. I must be off and away on the noble streams with my two faithful Indians. How beautiful are these rivers. They are like my nature, I guess, now calm, and then wild like this lake. When I go home I shall be contented for a time, and then after a few weeks I must be away again. I like danger, and adventure gives me pleasure.

"So that is why you have come here?" Helen asked in surprise. "You like danger? I cannot understand that."

"I suppose not. Let us sit down while we talk. But, no, not just now. I shall explain what I mean later. What is the matter

with Pierre?"

"He is not well. He was tortured at the fort and suffers a great deal."

"And you brought the canoe over the lake! You did it alone?"

"Pierre helped me with his music."

"I see," and Judith looked with admiration upon the English girl. "I see. I understand. You have escaped from Villebon? Is that it?"

"I have, and I know his men are after me. They may be here soon, but they must not catch me. I shall die first."

"Where are you going, Mademoiselle?"

"I do not know. But I hope that the men of the Crimson Sign will come to my assistance. We must hide here and wait, although we have little food."

"You cannot stay here, Mademoiselle. I shall take you to my good friends at the Jemseg. Not just now, but to-night when it is dark."

"Oh, will you? That will be good. But there are only a few people at the Jemseg, and they cannot save me if Villebon's men come."

"I know that. But maybe the men of the Crimson Sign will come first. And how would you like to go with me to the Chignecto? You would be safe there until we get a ship to take you to your own home."

Helen stepped quickly forward and impulsively threw her arms around Judith la Valliere.

"You are kind, so very kind. How can I ever repay you?"

"I want no pay, Mademoiselle. I am paid already by your love. There are no girls in this country like you, and I am glad we have met. We must always be friends. And your friend is my friend. I have met him, and like him."

"What! have you met Grey Martell?" Helen asked in astonishment. "Where?"

Judith smiled as she looked at her companion's animated face.

"On the Saganic, several days ago. Pete King could hardly keep him from going to the fort at once to try to rescue you."

"Ah, I knew Grey would be anxious to do all he could to help me. And you like him?"

"I do. Very much. But, there, we must not talk about him now. Poor Pierre must be looked after, and a place made among the bushes where we can hide."

She looked out over the lake, away towards the opposite shore. As she did so, her keen eyes detected something that caused her to start and speak rapidly to the Indians in French. They had been resting upon the ground, but at once leaped to their feet and turned in the direction Judith was pointing.

"Canoes!" one of them exclaimed. "They are coming this way."

"Then, we must hide," the girl declared. "Quick."

The Indians at once sprang forward, dragged the canoe out of the water, carried it swiftly from the shore and hid it among the trees. They did the same with the other, and then searched for a suitable place of concealment among the bushes.

Assisting Pierre, Helen and Judith followed, and from a sheltered spot the natives had found, they peered anxiously out over the lake. The distant canoes could be seen more plainly now as they breasted the waves and the wind.

"Perhaps they will stop here," Helen remarked as she knelt by Judith's side. "Or they may go down the Jemseg."

"We shall soon know, Mademoiselle," was the quiet reply. "But if they are going up the lake they will come this way and

land, most likely, at that point just above us. They will hardly come where we are, as this is not a good camping place for many men."

"Oh, I am so glad now that I could not make that point," Helen declared. "It was all for the best, I see. Perhaps God was guiding me, after all."

"You believe in le Bon Dieu, Mademoiselle? You think He guides you?"

"I like to think so. But sometimes I have my doubts when I see how He lets bad men do such cruel things."

"Ah, they can go just so far, remember. Le Bon Dieu is watching, and He always brings them down. And I believe He will do it with those men who are coming here. Maybe they will drown out there. See what a hard time they are having."

Helen was watching, and her eyes never left those reeling and plunging canoes as they drew nearer and nearer. At any other time she would have enjoyed the scene. As it was, her heart thrilled when she saw how skilfully the crafts were handled. Pointed straight to the wind, they rose and fell, while the waves leaped incessantly over the bows. The water was much rougher now than when she had crossed the lake, for the wind had increased in violence.

Anxiously they watched as the canoes swept towards them. They were six in all, and ere long they could distinguish the Indians who were wielding the paddles. The natives knew their business, and the rough water did not seem to trouble them in the least.

"They are coming straight towards us," Helen whispered, as she grasped Judith's arm.

"It seems so."

Pierre, however thought differently.

"Dey no come here, me t'ink. Shore too bad. Dey go up dere," and he motioned to the point above.

And in this he was right, for in a few minutes the canoes swerved slightly to the left, and circled towards the point. Helen breathed a sigh of relief.

"Oh, I am so thankful they have gone there. What shall we do now?"

"Wait until night, Mademoiselle," Judith replied. "We must stay in this place until then. In a few hours it will be dark. We shall escape them yet."

The circling canoes swept by, plunging and reeling through the turbulent water. The soldiers of the fort were not paddling, but sitting in the bottoms of the crafts. They were not far away now, so it was easy to count their number, fifteen white men, and as many Indians, thirty in all.

"Ah, dat ol' rascal Villebon sen' too many of hees men," Pierre whispered. "Me hope Pete King attack de fort now. Villebon mus' be crazee to sen' so many sodgers 'way. I hope t'get my hands on heem some day, an' when me do, me pay heem for what heem do to me. An' Foulette, also, heem bad man. Heem one beeg devil."

"I think they will both be punished," Judith replied. "And I believe the time is very near. My father is the rightful owner of this land, for it was granted to him by the King. Villebon must be driven out, and I am doing all I can to help."

"Is that why you have come here?" Helen asked.

Judith did not reply to this question, but turning to her Indians, spoke a few words of command. At once they glided away among the trees, and when they returned several minutes later they bore in their arms blankets, and a basket of food which they laid at the girl's feet.

"We might as well be warm while we wait here," Judith declared. "Pierre will feel the good of some extra covering, and I know you will, too, Mademoiselle."

"It is kind of you to think of us," Helen replied, as she wrapped a blanket about her body. "The air is quite chilly. I hope it will not rain."

"Rain soon, me t'ink," Pierre remarked as he looked up through the thick branches overhead. "Bad, ugh, if rain come now."

Seated upon the ground with muskets in their hands, the Indians kept careful watch. The girls felt more comfortable, and Judith served out the food, giving liberal shares to Pierre and the natives.

"Madame Marguerite gave me this," she explained. "She packed this basket with her own hands, and this excellent bread she made herself. She is good, and so is her husband."

"It is a pity they are so oppressed by Villebon," Helen replied. "How happy they would be if left alone."

"That will never be, Mademoiselle, until Villebon is driven out and my father rules here. You asked me if that is why I came to the Saint John. It was one reason, for I wished to find out things for myself. I had been longing to come for some time, but had always delayed. Then when I learned that the daughter of Colonel Garland had been carried captive to the Nashwaak, I decided to act. It was necessary that the League of the Crimson Sign should know, so I brought the news."

"And so it was you who told Grey Martell about me!" Helen exclaimed, although her voice was low. "You came to help me?"

"Yes, and to further my father's worthy cause. I came also," she added, after a slight pause, "to see a certain person. You have met Monsieur Villieu, I suppose."

"I have. It was he who made my escape possible."

"Ah! So it was Sebastien? I am glad."

"Yes, but Villebon must not know of it."

"He never shall hear of it from me. But how did Sebastien do it?"

"He had influence over the guard at the gate, and I came forth wearing Madame Bedard's clothes. See, I have some of them on now."

Thus the two girls talked while Pierre slept nearby. Noel and Tatsu, the Indians, were ever on the alert, one keeping watch while the other spied upon the enemy at the point. They took turns, and reported everything to their mistress. Foulette and his men were camped there for the night, so they told her. The Indian warriors were angry at the way Foulette was treating them. He was rough, and ordered them about as if they were dogs. The white men, also, were surly, and complained a great deal. They were cold, too, for Foulette would permit no fires to be lighted lest their whereabouts should be discovered by the men of the Crimson Sign.

Judith was quite satisfied at this information, and hoped that Foulette's troubles would increase.

"He deserves to be tied to a tree and left there," she declared. "He did it to that poor little English boy, David. He is a brute."

"Oh, I know all about that," Helen replied. "It was terrible! Surely such a man will not escape just punishment."

"He will not, Mademoiselle. I know that Monsieur Martell will catch him some day, and when he does it will not be well for the villain. The look in Monsieur Martell's eyes frightened me when he learned what Foulette had done to you and little David."

Slowly the day closed, and when it was sufficiently dark, a canoe moved silently from the shore with a smaller one in tow. The wind still roared through the trees and lashed the lake into fury. But along the shore it was quite calm. With strong steady strokes the Indians drove their canoe onward towards the Jemseg, and away from the unsuspecting Foulette and his wrangling followers.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE NIGHT ALARM

It was in no pleasant frame of mind that Foulette started forth from the Nashwaak with his soldiers and the uncertain Indian warriors. He did not like the undertaking in the least. He preferred the comforts of the fort rather than the hardships of the wilderness. And, besides, he was afraid of the League of the Crimson Sign, although he had often declared that they were beneath his contempt. But such boasting merely concealed his fear. He knew quite well that Pete King and his men had learned what had happened to young David on the bank of the Washademoak, and how their hearts would be filled with the spirit of revenge. Try as he might, he could not get the thought of that young boy out of his mind. It haunted him night and day. Over and over again he pictured the scene, the lad bound to the tree, crying for help in the darkness, and then slowly dying there alone. Evil though Foulette was, he was really a coward, filled with superstitious fears. He believed in ghosts and terrible unseen powers, which even the cross hung about his bull neck and hidden beneath his shirt, could not banish. When the spirit of the English boy appeared to him at night, he would frantically clutch the symbol of redemption for comfort which would not come.

And Foulette hated Indians. To him they were miserable savages, not deserving the name of human beings. That the French had to depend upon them in their war against the English was most galling. But notwithstanding his contempt, he knew that he could not treat them like the soldiers under his command, and order them about with loud curses. They were too independent for that, so he had to be cautious lest they should desert him. So during the journey to the Big Lake he controlled his temper as much as possible. But when they at length landed upon the point, wet from the leaping spray, cold, and unable to light a fire to dry their clothes, he was in a most ugly mood. Sternly he ordered the Indians about, and cursed them when they did not at once obey. The natives endured this for a while, too surprised at first to raise any objection. But when their spirit of pride and independence asserted itself, they rebelled. They drew apart, consulted with one another, and then approaching Foulette, their spokesman delivered their ultimatum. It was brief and to the point. They had come to the aid of their white brothers, so he said in effect, and they would not be treated like dogs. They were warriors of a brave and great people, not accustomed to being ordered about by men of a different race and color. If Foulette was not satisfied, they would leave him and go back to the Meductic. They were not anxious to fight against the English, but had only come at the urgent request of the commander at the Nashwaak, who was their friend and treated them right. That was all he had to say, and he was speaking for the rest of the warriors.

Foulette was in a quandary. He knew that these natives meant what their spokesman had said. If they left him now it would be a most serious matter. The few white men he had would then be at mercy of the League of the Crimson Sign, and he knew how slight would be their chance against such a man as Pete King and his dare-devil followers. And should they manage to get back to the fort, what would Villebon say and do? Foulette well knew that he would be disgraced forever in the eyes of all, and he would never be able to hold up his head again. Word would reach Quebec, and even as far off as France, of this affair. It would pass from mouth to mouth, forming a choice topic of conversation. Oh, yes, he knew how it would sound. Foulette had gone out against a band of rebels, but he had treated his Indians so badly that they had deserted him. He had been forced to beat an ignominious retreat, with Pete King and his men pursuing him, like dogs after rabbits. That would be the story, embellished to make it sound as ridiculous as possible.

There was nothing left, therefore, but for Foulette to pacify the indignant natives. He concealed his annoyance as much as he could, expressed surprise that they had been offended, and promised that if they would overlook anything he had said and stood by him, he would see that they were well rewarded upon their return to the fort.

When Foulette had finished, the Indians again consulted with one another and finally decided to remain with their white brothers. It was quite evident to all the soldiers, however, that this was but a temporary peace, and that another mistake on Foulette's part would be fatal to the expedition.

Slowly night shut down. The wind howled through the trees, and the soldiers shivered as they huddled among the bushes at the edge of the forest with their blankets wrapped about them. The Indians sat apart, sullen and talking among themselves. Foulette did not like their manner, and he feared that they might be planning mischief. But he was helpless to do anything. He cursed his luck in having to make such an expedition as this, dependent upon a band of undisciplined savages. He envied Villieu who had gone by the main river. At Oromocto he would have the pleasure of Louise D'Armours' hospitality, and would not be compelled to stay in the open on such a rough night. And at the Jemseg there

would be Louis D'Armours and his wife to entertain him. His heart became hot with anger as he thought of these things, and the partiality that had been shown to his rival Villieu by Villebon. And all this trouble was over the capture of an English girl. He hated his commander now more than ever, and was glad that the girl had escaped his grasp. But he had to make a pretence of searching for her, at any rate, and he knew how angry Villebon would be if she were not found.

Thinking thus, he dozed. The soldiers and the Indians alike slept, tired out with the exertions of the day. The wind still kept up its hoarse roar overhead, and night, black as ebony, shut out all things from view. Foulette had not placed anyone on guard. In such a desolate place as this there was no danger, so he believed. The wild lake in front, and the interminable forest behind, made their position as secure as any palisaded fortress. He could not have chosen a better place for camping, so he thought. If the idea of an attack by the League of the Crimson Sign had entered his mind, it had been banished as utterly improbable.

As he dozed, he dreamed that he had overtaken the English girl, had seized her in his arms, and held her fast. How beautiful she appeared! She was his at last and no power on earth could take her from him. He would defy Villebon, and flee with his treasure into the great forest and enjoy the girl to his heart's content.

From this enchanting bliss he was suddenly awakened, and as he opened his eyes a shot rang out among the trees, followed by another, and then another. Loud cries of distress were heard, sounding weirdly through the howling of the storm. Leaping to his feet, he groped for his musket and called to his men. They were also awake and alert, listening and waiting with fast-beating hearts for whatever might happen next. They had advanced to the very edge of the forest, while the Indians had glided noiselessly among the great trees in an effort to learn the cause of the shots and the cries.

Foulette did not know what to do, and when he spoke to his men they could give no assistance to his perplexity. To enter the forest on such a dark night would be useless, so they decided to wait until the Indians returned. They would learn something then, perhaps, that would solve the mystery.

Some time elapsed, however, before the natives came back, greatly puzzled. They had found out nothing, so they reported, but in the morning they would make a more thorough search. In the meantime all must remain together, so they advised, lest an enemy should be lurking near ready to attack. To this Foulette would not agree.

"We must leave this place," he declared. "It is haunted. Those cries came not from human beings, but from evil spirits seeking to destroy us. We shall take to the canoes, go farther up the lake and keep off from the shore until morning. I do not feel safe here."

The soldiers readily agreed, as they were thoroughly frightened. And the Indians did not object, for it mattered little to them where they went. And, besides, they realized the wisdom of Foulette's advice. Yes, it would be safer out on the water than huddled in the darkness on shore where at any minute an enemy might spring upon them from the depth of the forest.

Having arrived at this decision, they groped around for their blankets, and clutching these, and with muskets in their hands, they hurried to the water. Here they searched for their canoes they had left drawn up on the shore. But they searched in vain. Not one could they find. All had gone.

Consternation now smote the hearts of all, and try as he might, Foulette could not allay the fear of both whites and Indians alike. That they were surrounded by evil spirits who were seeking their destruction, was most apparent. The mysterious disappearance of the canoes was not the work of human beings but of creatures of the darkness, and the cries they had heard were evidence of their presence. The soldiers crossed themselves to ward off the evil influence, while the natives declared that the Great Spirit was angry with them for pursuing the white girl.

Foulette was the only one who had regained his senses. Although naturally superstitious himself, his feeling of awe soon passed, and he felt sure that the evil spirits had nothing to do with the loss of the canoes. They were evil, all right, to his way of thinking, but they were in human form, and they were around them ready to attack at any moment.

"You are all fools," he told them. "Stop your nonsense. I know what has happened to our canoes. It is the League of the Crimson Sign that has done this deed. Evil spirits do not fire guns. That was done to draw us away from the shore. Pete King and his gang are the only spirits that have stolen the canoes. They are devils, and have outwitted us. The darkness, the wind off shore, and the roaring in the trees have all helped them in their hellish work. We are tricked. But, Mon Dieu! they shall be paid for this, and double payment, at that."

The soldiers made no reply to their leader's wild outburst of fury. They knew only too well how powerless he was against that wily unseen enemy that had thus struck at them in such an unexpected manner. And what was now awaiting them? Was this but the beginning of Pete King's plan of destruction? They believed so, and the thought filled them with dismay. The Indians could give no comfort, for they, too, were helpless. For once those hardy warriors of the wilderness were at their wits' end. How the men of the Crimson Sign, for they thought only of them, had found them out in this desolate place was more than they could explain, and the more they thought about it, the more puzzled they became. And to add to their trouble, most of their ammunition had gone in the canoes. They had powder in their horns, but only a few rounds of bullets, which would not last long in a fight with their enemy. And their provisions had gone, as well. They were certainly in a desperate situation. The natives thus became restless. They longed to be away from the point, back to the Meductic. The white men were fools, so they believed.

Slowly the night wore away, as the men shivered and watched, waiting with strained attention for the attack which from moment to moment they felt would not be long delayed. Towards morning the wind abated, and when the sun rose, there was peace in the forest, and the waves of the lake gradually smoothed into calmness. The clouds were rolling away, so the blue sky and the brightness of the day revived the dispirited hearts of the weary watchers. At the first faint gleam of dawn, they had eagerly scanned the shore and the water for their canoes, but no sign of them could they behold. They had vanished as if by magic.

"Curse Pete King and his rebels," Foulette cried, as he looked out over the lake. "They are rats and must be routed out of this land. Wait till I get some more canoes and then we shall follow them to their hole on the Saganic."

The Indians were not at all impressed by their leader's words. They still believed that evil spirits of the night had done the deed. To their minds it was utterly out of the question that human beings could steal their canoes during the short time they were in the woods. But evil spirits could do anything, and it was that which made their hearts tremble with superstitious fear.

Some action, however, was necessary, and the only thing to do, so it was at length decided, was to make for the Jemseg, miles away. There they could obtain food from the D'Armours, as well as canoes and boats to take them back to the Nashwaak. It would be a most humiliating retreat, all knew, especially Foulette, who dreaded the wrath of his commander. But there was nothing else to do. One ray of hope remained. They might meet Villieu and his men, and if enough canoes could be found at the Jemseg, they could join them and continue the search. This would be most galling to Foulette, as his hated rival and his men would be sure to taunt them most scathingly.

The sun had now risen above the tops of the tallest trees, and the lake was like a great mirror. The day promised to be hot, so the thought of plunging into the forest to make their way to the Jemseg was not at all pleasant, especially to the soldiers. And Pete King and his men might be on hand to waylay them and shoot them down. They could not put up any lengthy fight, and, besides, they could not tell at what spot the enemy might fall upon them. There was nothing left, however, but to make the attempt. They could not remain where they were and starve. Their case was desperate, so they had to retreat by the only way that was open.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN ARROW STRIKES

As the men were about to plunge into the forest, an Indian uttered an exclamation and pointed up the lake. At once all eyes were turned in that direction, when far in the distance a moving speck was discerned. That it was a canoe, and coming towards them, they were well aware. Was it an enemy? Other canoes, perhaps, were following. Was Pete King with his gang sweeping down upon them? It seemed so to Foulette, and his fear was mingled with a furious rage. He had been caught like a rat in a trap from which he could see no way of escape. What little ammunition his men had would not last long. A few rounds and they were done. The enemy would have them at their mercy, and he well knew what that would mean.

As he stood watching, there flashed into his mind the scene on the shore of the Washademoak that night he had bound the little English lad to the tree and left him to his fate. He cursed himself now for his folly. The men of the Crimson Sign would spare his followers, most likely, but not the one who had so cruelly treated an innocent boy. The thought made him desperate. But what could he do? There could be no escape in the forest, for they would be more helpless than on the shore. No, it would be better to remain where they were, so he decided. They could put up some kind of a fight here for a while, and keep the enemy at bay. Pete King might not know of their scanty supply of ammunition, and would, therefore, hesitate in coming too close or making a direct attack.

More distinctly now could the on-coming canoe be seen. But no others were to be observed, and this gave them considerable relief. It was alone, and that was some comfort. It approached rapidly, and as it drew nearer, the sun shining upon it bathed it with what seemed to the watching men a super-natural light. The bow and the dipping paddles were all aglow. Four men they ere long recognized, two of them only paddling. Who were they? the men asked one another, although no one could give a satisfactory answer. Whether they were friends or foes they could not tell. But they had no fear now, for they felt more than a match for four men whoever they might be.

Down the lake came the canoe, still bathed in the shimmering glory of the morning sun. The mystic beauty of its appearance made a deep impression upon the staring men. It seemed almost unnatural, as if it bore messengers from another world, riding out of the dawn upon some special mission.

This brief sense of awe was dispelled, however, when they recognized the strong swaying forms as Indians, and the two passengers as black-robed priests. They were the ones who had arrived at the Jemseg, so Foulette believed, and had gone up the lake for some definite purpose. Now they were returning, and eagerly he waited for them to make for the shore.

But in this he was disappointed, for instead of heading for the waiting men, the canoe kept at a considerable distance. When opposite the point it slowed down, as the Indians ceased paddling. The occupants keenly scrutinized the band upon the shore, uncertain who they were. Was it for fear that they kept so far away? Foulette wondered. He wanted to speak to them, to explain their situation.

"Come ashore," he shouted. "We are friends and will not harm you."

At these words the Indians brought the canoe somewhat nearer, and again stopped.

"Come closer," Foulette ordered. "Do not be afraid."

"We are not afraid of you, my friends," one of the priests replied. "But we have no time to lose, so if we can do nothing for you we must hasten on our way to the Nashwaak. We bear ill tidings, and death, perhaps. We have been far up the lake, nay, even to the river beyond. There we found men, women and children dying from a plague that has stricken them. Their condition is terrible. We were helpless to do anything for them, so we are on our way to the fort for medicines. We must not delay."

The effect of these words caused consternation among Foulette's Indians. They spoke to the natives in the canoe, asking them numerous questions which the white men could not understand. But from their sharp words Foulette knew that they were greatly excited, and he tried to allay their fear.

"There is no danger to us," he told them. "The plague is too far away to harm us."

He then explained to the priests what had happened to them, and the serious predicament in which they were placed.

"Have you seen anything of Pete King and his men?" he asked in conclusion. "I am certain that they are the ones responsible for our trouble."

"We have not seen them, my friend," one of the priests answered. "Neither have we seen the canoes. There was no sign of them anywhere. But what has happened should be a warning to you and all the Indians. No human beings have stolen your canoes. It is a visitation of divine wrath for the evil things you have been doing. You are waging war against your neighbors, bringing ruin and death to many, and carrying away an innocent girl. Your hearts are bad. Satan has you in his possession, and you are turning this land which God made so good into a hell. And what is the result? A plague has come to visit the natives, to punish them for their wrong doings. And the loss of your canoes is a warning to you, and if you do not give up the pursuit of that English girl you will all perish. I do not speak lightly, my friends, but as one commissioned by le Bon Dieu Himself to warn sinners of the errors of their ways."

These words, spoken so calmly, although they awed Foulette, annoyed him, as well. He felt that the priest was right, yet he did not like to hear the truth uttered so plainly.

"Will you tell that to the commander at the Nashwaak?" he asked. "Will you dare say to him what you have just told us?"

"To the King himself would I say it were he here," was the quiet reply. "We are not subject to earthly rulers, remember. Our command comes from One supreme over all. Monseigneur Villebon shall hear from our own lips what you have just heard."

"And what good will that do?" Foulette retorted. "You will have to tell the same to Count Frontenac, and do you imagine you can influence him to cease his war with the English?"

"Our business is to speak the truth, my friend, no matter what happens. Our mission here is not child's play. Do you think we have left our comfortable home in Old France to venture into a wilderness such as this for God and His Church and the salvation of souls to be turned aside from our divine purpose through fear of frowns of kings and commanders? Nay, we are willing to suffer, to die, if necessary, for our great cause. And so we warn you now not to proceed any further with your undertaking. Disaster will come upon you all if you do."

"It has overtaken us already, and we are stranded here, without food, and but little ammunition. And even while we wait, the enemy may be lurking in the woods ready to spring upon us. And if they do, we shall all be slain. Have you any food to give us? We have none."

"No, my friend. We have hardly enough for another meal. But why not send your Indians into the woods to obtain game?"

"And let them be shot down by Pete King and his devils? No, we must keep together and make our way to the Jemseg. Inform our commander when you reach the fort of our desperate situation. He may be able to send us assistance."

"We shall do that, my friend, and we shall also advise him to cease this strife which is bringing such misery and ruin upon this fair land. The wrath of God will fall heavier still if it continues. But we must now proceed, as we have a long way to go."

As the natives dipped their paddles into the water, and the canoe sped forward, the men upon the shore silently watched them for a few minutes. The words of the black-robos had impressed them deeply, and reverently they crossed themselves to ward off impending evil. Even Foulette was somewhat awed, and stood for a while uncertain what to say or do. But ere long he roused himself, and with an oath ordered his men to make ready for the march to the Jemseg.

"I do not believe what the priest told us," he declared. "The evil spirits that stole our canoes were Pete King and his curs. And they are not far away, mark my word. They are skulking in the woods, ready to fall upon us at the first opportunity. We must walk close together, keep a strict watch and reserve our ammunition. Let the Indians lead, for they know the way."

The natives had listened to all that the priest had said, and understood the meaning of his words. They stood apart from the white men, sullen and defiant. The plague which was carrying off their people inland brought fear into their hearts.

They had been deceived by Villebon, so they believed, and this thought angered them. They wanted to go back to the Meductic, and be free from Foulette, the bully. The insults they had endured on this expedition were galling to their proud haughty natures. They would return to their own camps and report the indignity they had received.

Although Foulette knew that the Indians were sullen and rebellious, he did not know how deep was the anger which dwelt in their hearts at his rude and imperious manner. He believed that they would soon forget, and be as loyal to the French as ever. But he might have known, had he not been such an ignorant boor, how fickle the natives really were, and willing to side with the ones from whom they could receive the greatest favors. English and French were practically the same to them, and whichever could make the greater show of power held their temporary allegiance.

At this moment, when the relation between the whites and the Indians was tense, all were startled by the appearance of a little wasted figure, who suddenly emerged from the forest and stood beside them. Foulette recognized him at once, and with a cry of terror shrank back as from a blow. It was young David, the English lad, and so weird did he appear, that to the staring men he was nothing less than a spirit from the unseen world of mysteries. So he seemed to Foulette, more than to the others. This boy he had tied to a tree and left him to die on the bank of the Washademoak, and now he was before him! His body trembled, and his teeth chattered as if he had the ague. That this was a human being he could not believe, for to such a man superstition is very strong. He was speechless, and stood with bulging eyes gazing upon the apparition before him.

Young David did not seem to notice the man. He stood very still with far-seeing eyes staring out over the lake, as if seeking for something there. He was a pitiable object of distress. His clothes were in tatters, and his flesh, where exposed to view, was scratched and bleeding. His long tangled hair fell over his forehead, cheeks and neck like matted sea-weed.

Presently his eyes turned from the lake and rested full upon Foulette. They grew large and round, as with a peculiar gurgle he moved forward with hands outstretched in eagerness.

"Helen! Helen!" he cried. "Where are you? I must find you."

With face ghastly pale, Foulette recoiled before the advancing lad. Then suddenly he grasped his musket, raised it to his shoulder and pointed it straight at the boy. But before he could pull the trigger, an arrow sped from among the trees, struck his right hand a glancing blow, the sharp point tearing open the flesh, ere it buried itself in the ground at his feet. With a shriek of pain, Foulette dropped his gun and clutched his bleeding hand. Forgotten now was young David in the face of this new menace which confronted him. He stared at the arrow sticking upright in the earth, and the small blood-red feather he saw attached to it told its own tale. His companions saw it, too, and while several sprang forward to assist their wounded leader, the others, including the Indians, seized their muskets and faced the forest lying silent and mysterious in the background. Pete King and his men were there ready to attack, they were sure, and all felt the helplessness of their position. No way of escape could they see. With their canoes gone, and the enemy prowling around ready to shoot them down, they did not know what to do. They could not fight unseen men, and to rush among the trees to meet their foe would be the height of folly. The Indians were enraged at the way they had been trapped, and blamed Foulette for their serious predicament. They had trusted to his leadership, and he had proven himself to be worse than a fool.

For some time they waited, but as nothing happened, they lowered their muskets, but remained as alert as ever. Foulette bound up his injured hand with a piece of cloth torn from the lining of his jacket. He cursed his luck. Then he thought of young David. But he was nowhere to be seen. In the excitement the lad had vanished as mysteriously as he had appeared.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN END TO WAITING

Seated upon a log beneath the shade of a big spruce tree, Pete King listened attentively to Grey Martell's latest report. The young man's face was flushed and his eyes glowed with the fire of excitement. A white man and an Indian were standing by his side, while a score of rangers were seated or standing nearby. All were greatly interested in what Grey was saying.

"Foulette and his men are in a bad fix and do not know which way to turn. We have been watching them all the morning, and they are afraid to enter the woods. They think we are waiting to shoot them down. We have them in a trap, and they know it."

"Yes, we have them at our mercy, lad," Pete replied, "and we could easily destroy them. But that is not our way, for the League of the Crimson Sign has never yet attacked helpless men, whether Indians or whites. And if they are wise they will not try to fight us. So Foulette was frightened when young David appeared, was he?"

"He was nearly crazy, and would have shot the boy if Scoudy here had not disabled his trigger hand."

Pete turned his eyes upon the Indian who was standing near with an expression of satisfaction upon his face.

"You did well, Scoudy," he commended. "I shall remember this."

"He was like a streak of lightning," Grey explained. "I didn't believe any human being could do what he did. And you should have heard Foulette yelp when that arrow struck his hand. He knew where it came from, all right, and he was certain that we were about to attack."

"Foulette is meeting with more surprises than he expected, my boy. He has lost his canoes, and now he is at his wit's end. But where is young David? He must be looked after or he will die of starvation and fatigue."

"I sent Big Lake Jim and Indian Squatty to bring him here. I wonder how he managed to reach this place alone, and why the D'Armours allowed him to leave the Jemseg. Do you suppose anything has happened to the people there? They may have been forced to flee to the woods to escape Villieu and his men. We have had no report yet from the Jemseg, remember, as our scouts have not returned. And where is Helen? We are no nearer to finding her now than when we were when we left the Nashwaak. She may be a prisoner again, for all we know. We are certain she came by the way of the Portobello, but what has become of her and Pierre? Foulette has not found her."

"We are doing all we can, lad. And we have done much already, although there lies heavy work ahead. We have trapped Foulette and his men, and if they stay here much longer they will be starved into submission. They have had nothing to eat since last night, and there is no prospect of their getting anything. We have them surrounded, and I am just waiting to receive their words of surrender. When they lay down their guns, I shall dictate terms, and not before."

"But we are losing valuable time," Grey protested. "Helen may be in great danger, starving, perhaps. Why not leave Foulette and his gang here and get on our way. They are helpless and can do no mischief, so let us abandon them. That will be punishment enough."

"I am not so sure of that, my lad. I am very anxious to find Colonel Garland's daughter. But we cannot let Foulette go free. Why, he would lead his men to the Jemseg and meet with Villieu there. That must not be. Those two forces must be kept apart. They are separated now, and I intend that they shall remain so. Be patient, as it cannot be long now before Foulette surrenders."

Pete King had scarcely ceased speaking when two rangers came suddenly and stealthily from among the trees. They were weary, and their clothes were torn. They advanced to where the men were grouped and dropped upon the ground at their leader's feet. Seeing that they were greatly exhausted, Pete ordered food and drink to be brought. As the scouts ate the meat and bread and drained the mugs of rum, their spirits revived.

"Mon Dieu!" Tony LaParrie exclaimed, as he drew the sleeve of his jacket across his mouth, "I thought we would never get here. Isn't that so, Jean?"

"It is true, Tony. We haven't slept a wink for two nights, as we didn't dare let Villieu's men out of our sight. We've been following and watching them every minute."

"Come to the point, men," Pete demanded, rising to his feet. "Let me know at once what you have seen and heard. This is no time for delay."

"It would take a long time to tell everything," Tony replied. "We were hiding among the bushes and saw Villieu arrive at the Jemseg. He had a large band of soldiers and Indians with him, and—"

"Well, what happened? What did Villieu do to the D'Armours?"

"Oh, they escaped before Villieu arrived, and are on their way to the Saganic. We told them to go there."

"By canoe?"

"No. They have gone overland. There was no chance for them to get away by water."

"Is Villieu following them?"

"He had not started when we left. But he is after them now, most likely. His men were feasting at the Jemseg upon the good things Madame Marguerite had stored in her house."

"And Villieu did not stop them?"

"Not at all. He seemed to pay no attention to what they were doing."

"Did you see anything of Judith la Valliere?"

"Indeed we did, and I wish you could have seen her, too. It was this morning when we were lying among the bushes near the river, cold and hungry, when she came down the Jemseg from the Big Lake with her two Indians."

"Was Helen Garland with her?" Grey anxiously asked.

"She had only her Indians when we saw her. She was seated astern, with her paddle in her hand, peering cautiously ahead. When they came in sight of Louis' place they ran the canoe ashore, where one of the Indians landed and went into the woods to spy upon the soldiers, so we surmised. He was gone quite a while, and when he returned he talked for some time with the girl, telling her, most likely, what he had seen. We crept as close as we could until we were able to see her face quite clearly. It was wonderful, and I never saw anything like it before."

"Never mind about her now," Pete ordered. "Tell me what happened."

"Well, she went, as I thought she would. And she didn't go through the woods, either, but sent her canoe down stream like an arrow and landed in front of the house where the soldiers were gathered just after breakfast. Villieu was talking to them, giving orders for the pursuit of Louis and his people. We got as near as we could and heard something of what he said, for he spoke in a loud voice."

"And what was that? Go on," Pete urged, as Tony paused.

"He ordered some of his men to go overland after Louis, and the rest to go by water up the Washademoak, and all were to meet at the landing at the end of the portage. From there they would go up to the Saganic where they would be joined by Foulette and his men. There they would surround our stronghold, capture it, and take you and as many of us as they could catch back to the Nashwaak."

"So that is Villieu's plan, eh? He thinks he'll be joined by Foulette and his men. But he'll learn, yes, he'll learn a great deal before he's much older. So he's divided up his force, has he? Well, that suits me. We'll settle with each in turn. But first of all, we've got to attend to these beauties we have here, and get them out of the game. They can't hold out much longer, unless they head for the Jemseg, which I don't think they will attempt now."

Grey Martell turned impulsively towards his leader.

"And we don't know yet where Helen is. Jean and Tony have heard nothing of her. But she must be somewhere near the

Jemseg. Pierre would naturally make for there after leaving the Nashwaak. They must be in hiding along the river. I am going to find her."

"She may be with the D'Armours, my lad, on the overland way to the Washademoak."

"Then, the sooner we go, the better. We must head off Villieu's men who are in pursuit. We can go across country as the crow flies, and meet them in that deep valley. Give me a dozen men and I shall leave at once. You can follow later."

Pete King looked keenly at the young man for a while in silence. He then gazed off into space, lost in thought.

"Well, I suppose I must agree to your request," he at length replied. "I don't like to let you undertake such a perilous venture with so few men, but nothing else will satisfy you, I see. Your father would not like it, I am sure. But you are determined to have your own way, so you will have to bear the responsibility."

"I shall do that, Pete," Grey excitedly replied. "Who will go with me?" he asked, turning to the men surrounding him.

At once all sprang forward, eager for the undertaking. Grey could not repress a smile of satisfaction at their readiness to follow him. His smile vanished in an instant, however, as he glanced at Pete King and noticed the expression upon his face. Surprise as well as disappointment was depicted there. Grey understood what was passing through his leader's mind.

"I can't do it, Pete," he impulsively declared.

"Can't do what?"

"Leave you, of course. You don't want me to go, and I guess you know best. I shall wait, anyway, until Foulette and his gang are attended to, as you may need us all if they decide to fight. It can't be long now before something happens one way or another."

Pete King at once stepped forward, laid a heavy hand upon the young man's shoulder, and looked straight into his eyes.

"Lad, you have lifted a heavy weight from my heart by the words you have just uttered. You didn't know that I was testing you. But I was, and took this critical time to do it. I know how anxious you are to be away to find Colonel Garland's daughter. That is only natural. But there are times, remember, when delay will gain more than action, and this is one of them. We have not the strength to fight Villebon's men and the Indians who are with them. We can only win out through cunning strategy. We could not have fought Foulette and his men successfully, but we have outwitted them by taking their canoes, ammunition and provisions without loss of life. Isn't that a far better way than shedding blood? You have trusted my leadership so far, and all has been well. But the time has come, I see, when you must act for yourself, and I believe I can trust you to the full. Take what men you need, and go."

Before Grey could reply, a sound from the direction of Foulette's position arrested their attention. It was the low hoot of an owl repeated three times, and all knew its meaning. It was an imperative call from one of the men on guard at the point. Seizing their muskets, all moved swiftly, though cautiously, forward, certain now that something of an important nature was about to take place, but just what it was no one could tell.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A STARTLING ORDER

They had advanced but a short distance when they were met by one of the rangers who had been on guard. His face wore an expression of satisfaction, showing how pleased he was with the news he had to impart.

"Foulette has surrendered," he announced. "He has put up a white piece of cloth."

"I expected it," Pete replied. "But we cannot trust that rascal. It may be only a ruse to get us out into the open. Has he seen any of you?"

"No. We have kept well hidden."

"Good. Keep out of sight a while longer, and order him to lay down his arms. Tell him to pile them near the water, and then line his men upon the bank half way between the woods and the lake. And you might also advise him that I will come before long. I don't want him to think I am in a hurry," he added with a chuckle. "Let him imagine I am not much concerned about his surrender. It will keep him in awe of us and increase his suspense."

When the ranger had departed, Pete and his men moved slowly forward, and when near the point dropped upon their hands and knees and crept silently among the trees. At length they drew apart until Pete and Grey were alone. In a short time the men huddled upon the bank could be plainly seen. Then the order to lay down their arms sounded forth, causing the cornered soldiers and Indians to start and look keenly in the direction from which the order had come. As they hesitated, the command was repeated more sternly than before. Pete smiled at the effect of these words. Foulette's rage was intense, and he gave vent to his feelings in wild curses. But he knew that he was helpless, and so did his followers. Still they delayed.

"Lay down your arms near the water," again came the order. "This is the last time, and if you do not obey at once we shall shoot. Be quick about it, too."

From the tone of the hidden speaker Foulette realized that to refuse would be fatal, so reluctantly he motioned to his men, who at once moved slowly to the lake and laid their weapons in a heap a few feet from the water.

"Now, line your men upon the bank," came the command, "and face this way. The leader of the Crimson Sign will meet you ere long. He has more important things to attend to at present, so he is delayed."

The captives obeyed, the Indians keeping apart by themselves. All wondered what was about to happen. Fear tugged at the hearts of the soldiers, for they had heard much about Pete King and his gang, not at all to their credit. That they were wild dare-devils they were certain from the stories that had been brought to the fort. And their bloodthirsty nature was evidenced by the red sign they wore upon their caps. With considerable uneasiness they, therefore, awaited the next move of these lawless rovers of the forest.

Pete King kept them waiting for some time. He knew that the longer they were held in suspense the greater would be their fear. And besides, he was enjoying this victory over Villebon's men. He had outwitted them, and it was a great satisfaction to watch them huddled there but a short distance away. And he knew how Foulette was seething with rage at his ignominious defeat. Should he ever get back to the fort, how could he explain his capture to his angry commander? He would be the laughing-stock for the rest of his life. No matter where he went, he would be known as the rat who had been caught in a trap without putting up a fight. Oh, yes, Pete knew how it would be, and the thought of this brutal boaster's humiliation gave him much satisfaction.

For about fifteen minutes Pete waited, and then with only Grey Martell following, he suddenly emerged from the forest. A deathlike silence was the only reception he received, as the soldiers stared with curiosity at this leader of whom they had heard so much. And in fact, his appearance bore out well the reports, for he seemed to them a veritable giant, capable of performing mighty deeds of daring. And the young man with him impressed them as well, for he, too, measured up to the stories which had been related of him.

As Pete King stood there, he leaned slightly upon his grounded musket and eyed Foulette silently and sternly for a whole minute.

"Well, what is the meaning of all this?" he demanded. "What are you doing here?"

Foulette was surprised at these words. Why did the ranger ask such questions? Surely he knew why they were there. He made no reply, but his little swinish eyes glared with hatred.

"So you do not care to answer me," Pete continued. "And it is not at all necessary. I know why you are here. But for us you would be far away from this point carrying out your commander's orders. How would you like to be in my place at this moment?"

With an oath, Foulette stepped forward and confronted Pete King.

"What is the meaning of such words?" he roared. "This is no time for silly questions. We are desperate men, starving and at your mercy. Nothing have we eaten since last night, and yet you play with us. Tell me at once what you are going to do."

"Playing with you, are we?" Pete's eyes narrowed as he looked keenly at the angry man before him. "Well, we have nothing else to do just now, so we might as well have some fun. It isn't often we have such a noble band of men rounded up as we have at present. There, keep back," he sternly ordered. "Don't you take another step forward. And I ask you to keep a civil tongue in your head. You are at my mercy, remember. What I shall do with you remains to be seen. In the meantime I shall give your men some food. We have not a large supply, but we shall share what we have."

Placing his fingers to his lips, he gave a sharp whistle. In another minute a man glided from the forest and stood before him. Pete looked at Foulette.

"See how this man responds to my call. If I had given a different whistle you would be astonished at the number it would have summoned. It is well you surrendered when you did."

He then ordered the ranger to take several men and bring a supply of food from their camping place.

"Leave some for ourselves, and make haste. Time is passing and we have much to do."

He then told Foulette to arrange the soldiers before him. When this had been done, he moved nearer, and a smile of amusement overspread his face at the staring men.

"It is not my purpose to ask any more silly questions," he began. "But while you are waiting for the food, I shall spend the time in speaking a few plain words. I know why you are here. You came to capture the English girl, and at the same time to wage war upon the League of the Crimson Sign. You have been outwitted, and for your good, perhaps. You will not find the girl, and had you attacked us, everyone of you would have been slain. You do not know how strong we are, and how well we understand the woods and every hill and valley for many miles around."

He paused for a brief space and looked out over the lake. When he continued his voice was less stern, almost fatherly in its tone.

"I know you came forth to destroy us, and you would have done so had it been in your power. Are you not, therefore, surprised that we have treated you with such leniency? When you landed here we could have shot you down. Instead, we adopted another course by taking away your canoes, ammunition and provisions. That left you practically at our mercy, and we could have destroyed you all. But that is not the way of our League. We do not kill defenceless men. It is not blood we want, but peace. We desire to be left alone. Count Frontenac considers us lawless rebels, and he has given orders to Villebon to have us exterminated. And why? Because we trade with the Indians. Surely this is a land large enough for a few men to carry on the fur trading business without war. Frontenac could not possibly cover this vast country, so there is more than plenty for him and us. And why should the English and the French be fighting in this land? For their kings, you believe. But what do our kings care about us? You can speak for your own, if you wish, for you know about him, while I know about mine. My king is more interested in his mistresses than he is with a country such as this. What does he care about a few soldiers fighting for him in Acadia? Bah! they are nothing but dirt, not worth thinking about. We who belong to the League of the Crimson Sign wish to be free, to live apart from the old world's artificial life. This is a grand country, with unlimited possibilities, capable of maintaining a great population. It is rich, its rivers and lakes teem with fish, and there is plenty of room for all who come. The French and English who are here could live side by side in peace, cultivate their lands, bring up their children, and where their men would never be carried off to be killed like dogs in senseless wars at the wish of selfish and vice-besotted rulers. Instead of that, we fly at one another

and make this land a hell for the sake of kings far away. And we bring the Indians into our disputes. They do not know what it is all about, any more than we do, so they join with the ones who make the biggest show and promise them most. All such childish nonsense should stop. We do not want to fight you, and you do not want to fight us. But you are forced to do as you are told, as slaves, and you are to be pitied. We hold no ill will against you, and to prove what I say, I am going to send you back to the Nashwaak as soon as you have had something to eat. The food is now before you, and while you are helping yourselves, your canoes will be brought here."

Hungry though they were, the soldiers and Indians stared at Pete King ere touching the food which had been brought. Such clemency was something they had not expected. In fact, it was almost beyond their comprehension. Never for a moment had they imagined they would be given their freedom. But the leader of the League of the Crimson Sign had said so, and he seemed to them now like a man whose word could be trusted.

As they stared, Pete King gave a hearty laugh.

"What is the matter with you men? Why don't you eat? I hope you don't think the food is poisoned. Oh, no, we never do anything like that. We leave it for polite people, such as rulers in civilized lands. You can eat what is before you without any fear. It is rough, I admit, but wholesome, and you will feel better after you have eaten."

He motioned to the captives, and soon all were enjoying the cold meat, coarse bread, and corn cakes which had been provided. Pete watched them with twinkling eyes. He could afford to be satisfied. He had cornered this band who had come out against him, and were about to return to the fort like whipped curs. The thought of their crestfallen arrival at the Nashwaak amused him, and he smiled. Foulette saw the smile, although he did not know what caused it, and he ground his teeth in wrath.

"You seem to think this is all a joke," he growled.

"It is to me, my friend, a great joke, and I am enjoying it immensely. It is not every day I have the pleasure of entertaining the grand warriors of the noble and haughty commander at the Nashwaak."

"Come with us to the fort and we shall repay your entertainment. Villebon himself will be there to perform the honors. That would please him very much."

"Ah, no doubt it would. But it might not please me. His entertainment might be similar to that he gave to Pierre, the hunchback. Oh, no, I am quite satisfied to entertain without any such payment. But, there, we must end this pleasant conversation and get your men away. The canoes, I see, are coming. My men have speedily fulfilled my orders."

The soldiers and Indians looked up the lake where they saw their lost crafts bearing slowly towards them, propelled by members of the Crimson Sign.

"I thought you had set them all adrift," Foulette muttered.

"Not at all. We took good care of them, as you can see for yourself. Your men shall have the canoes and provisions, but not the ammunition. We can make good use of that, as well as your muskets and swords."

The soldiers and Indians made haste with their meal, and then rose to their feet, anxious to be away. But Pete King lifted his hand and ordered them to wait. There was a peculiar gleam in his eyes which all noticed.

"Just a minute," he began, looking at the Frenchman. "I am sorry to detain you, but it is for your good. The day is very hot, and out upon the lake you will be most uncomfortable with your heavy clothes. I do not like to see men suffer, so I request that you strip yourselves of your coats, trousers, hats and boots. You can leave them with me, and I shall see that special care is taken of them. The Indians I except, as they are thinly clad."

At these words the soldiers stared in wide-eyed amazement. Even Foulette was dumbfounded at such an order. It was the most idiotic thing he had ever heard. Only a madman would give such a command.

"Is this another of your jokes?" he furiously roared. "You speak like a crazy fool. I never heard anyone give such a senseless order."

"I suppose not," Pete suavely replied. "But you have much yet to learn about the unusual quirks which come upon me at times. They seize me most unexpectedly, as one did last night which caused me to borrow your canoes."

"Borrow!" Foulette shouted with an oath. "Steal, you mean."

"We shall not argue or quarrel over words at present. If you prefer 'steal' have it so, as it makes no difference to me. It was merely a quirk then as now. But this is no joke. I mean what I say. Your men must strip, and at once."

"My men can do so if they wish," Foulette angrily replied. "As for me, you will have to tear the clothes from me by force. I am an officer of the King of France, and do you imagine I would lower myself to such a deed? We have laid down our arms, and surely that is sufficient."

"I shall not ask you to remove your clothes, my friend. You will need them for the rough journey which lies ahead."

"What do you mean?" Foulette anxiously asked. "What rough journey?"

"Through the woods, of course, with us. We could not think of permitting you to return to the Nashwaak to face an enraged commander. Not even your injured hand would be able to appease his wrath. You would receive not the least sympathy from him. And, besides, there is something that must be attended to over at the landing-place on the Washademoak, so your presence will be necessary there."

Foulette understood only too well the meaning of these words, and his eyes were filled with fear as he glanced towards his men, as if expecting help from them.

"Do you really intend to take me with you?" he asked in a voice which was now like a cringing coward. "For God's sake, let me go back to the fort."

"No, you go with us, and I warn you not to make any effort to escape. Your men shall go, but not you."

He ceased and with a majestic wave of his hand ordered the soldiers to obey his command. And, in fact, they were already doing so. Some had stripped in great haste, and were speeding to the lake, clad only in their shirts. The rest soon followed, and all scrambled helter skelter into the canoes. It was an amusing sight to see these warriors who had come forth so confidently against the League of the Crimson Sign now scurrying almost naked from their place of defeat. Pete King gave a loud laugh, and placing his fingers to his lips gave two sharp whistles. At once more than a dozen armed men leaped from among the trees, and lifted up strong triumphant voices in their martial song.

Swift as the feathers in an eagle's wing,
Yo-ho! Yo-ho! Yo-ho!
We are the League of the Crimson Sign,
We are the men of the Outer Line,
Yo-ho! Yo-ho! Yo-ho!

When they had finished the entire song, they repeated the closing line with all the power of their voices. At that long-drawn out "Yo-ho! Yo-ho! Yo-h-o-o!" the sound reverberated through the forest, and ringing out over the water filled with awe the hearts of the Frenchmen, now speeding from the shore as fast as their dipping paddles could drive them.

The Indians, who had been silently watching all that had been taking place, made no motion, and their impassive faces revealed nothing of what was passing through their minds. But Pete King understood them better than they imagined. All they wanted was to get away, back to the Meductic. They had been deceived by Foulette. Instead of being a strong leader, he had been weak and foolish enough to allow himself and his men to be trapped like rats. Yes, Pete truly surmised the thoughts of these natives, and he was pleased. Villebon would not find it again easy to induce the Indians to ally themselves with him against the English after this. And in a short time all the natives would know of this defeat, and would be of the same mind.

He also knew why the Indians had made no move to leave. They were unwilling to accompany the almost naked soldiers. They wished to go away by themselves, and have nothing more to do with the Frenchmen. He looked towards the shore at the remaining canoes, and then at the Indians.

"You are free, my brothers," he told them. "Go your way back to your camps. The League of the Crimson Sign has spared you. Let us be friends after this."

At once an Indian stepped forward and simply thanked Pete King. He told how he and his companions had been

deceived by the Commander at the Nashwaak who had given them a leader who was a bully, and was foolish enough to allow his men to be trapped. They would never come out again against the rangers, who henceforth would be their brothers.

Having said this, he motioned to the other Indians, and in another minute all were moving slowly to the lake. They boarded their canoes, lifted their paddles in a parting salute, then dipped them into the water, and sped rapidly away.

Foulette had watched everything with terror-stricken eyes. Once he had started to follow his soldiers, but had been sternly ordered by Pete King to remain where he was. Then three rangers came to his side, ready to seize and bind him if he attempted to escape. He watched his men far out upon the lake, and despair filled his heart. He knew why he had been detained, and what it would mean to him when he reached the Washademoak. He cursed himself for his brutality to the English boy, but it was too late.

When the soldiers and the Indians had departed, Pete King ordered his men to collect the cast-off clothes.

"We might as well take them with us," he said. "I have another quirk, and if it works out as well as the last one, I shall be satisfied."

He then turned to Foulette.

"You know, perhaps, why I have kept you here," he began. "But you have yourself to blame. You have escaped so far the result of your devilish deed to a little innocent lad on the bank of the Washademoak. You know what it was, and when you saw young David you thought it was his ghost. Oh, no, it was no ghost, but the boy himself, demented through your brutal treatment. You bound him to a tree and left him there to die, and to be food for the crows. Fortunately we arrived in time to save him, but not before his mind became affected through terror. Were you altogether devoid of human feeling when you did such a deed as that? Evidently so. And such a brute as you is not fit to walk this earth. The sooner the world is rid of such a contemptible creature, the better it will be. What you did to that poor lad, you deserve to have done to you."

Foulette's eyes bulged with terror, and he looked to the right and the left for some way of escape. Seeing that he was surrounded by the rangers, he dropped upon his knees and begged Pete King to spare him.

"Let me go," he pleaded, "and I'll never do such a thing again."

"It is too late now, Foulette. And, besides, I could not trust such a coward as you. You should have thought of this before. I suppose the little boy pleaded not to be left as food for the crows, and you and your men laughed at him. It was great sport for you then, no doubt, but it is a different thing now. I hand you over to my men, and they will take charge of you."

At that instant there came a long-drawn cry from the forest in the direction of the Jemseg. Pete King straightened quickly up, and when the sound was repeated, an anxious expression appeared in his eyes. He then lifted up his voice and answered the call. This he did twice, and when a response came back, he knew that he had been heard.

"There is serious trouble afoot," he said, "so we must be on the move. I shall make for the Washademoak, and Grey you take your men and head for the Jemseg. But be very careful, my boy, for much is now at stake. Your rangers will stand by you, but don't act the fool and get caught in a trap. Remember you belong to the League of the Crimson Sign. So do nothing to disgrace it."

CHAPTER XXVII.

SERIOUS NEWS

An hour later Grey Martell with his little band was making his way rapidly through the forest towards the Jemseg. He was leading, and his men travelled in an arrow-like formation. Grey was the point with six on either side, each separated about forty yards from the one nearest to him. In this manner they spread out for a considerable distance, yet all within relay hailing call from their leader. This route was familiar to them, and they knew every hill and valley for miles around, although some of them had never travelled it before. This was due to the fact that Pete King had been most exacting in impressing the topography of the country upon the minds of his followers. He had rude maps drawn of the entire regions of the Saint John River, Big Lake, the Washademoak, the Belleisle, and the Kennebecasis, with their tributaries, from the harbor on the south to the Grand Falls on the North and the Petitcodiac on the east. By canoes along the streams, and on foot through the forests the rangers had travelled. They had noted with special care whatever they saw, and from their reports maps had been made which were studied during the long winter evenings in their stronghold on the Saganic. So although Grey had not traversed all of these regions, they were firmly fixed in his mind. He was quite proud of his knowledge, and had always been able to hold his own in the contests which had taken place.

There were also signal hills, specially marked with red. Some of these were for beacon fires at night, the light of which could be seen a long distance. There were smaller ones, nearer together, used for calling purposes. Men stationed on these could relay messages from one to another by pre-arranged calls, and well understood by all the members of the League. It was towards one of these that Grey now made his way in response to the call which had reached them by the shore of the lake.

Silently and stealthily they advanced through the thick woods, as swift as panthers in search of prey. Grey set the pace, for his blood was hot within him at the thought of the adventure he was certain lay ahead. That he had been entrusted by Pete King with this undertaking thrilled his soul with joy. He was at last free to assume the responsibility of leadership in the struggle against their enemies. His strong, lithe body bespoke his eagerness as he glided forward with musket in hand, alert and ready for any emergency.

It was not adventure alone which lent speed to his feet, and gave him such an impulse to be up and doing. It was his overwhelming desire to find Helen Garland. Through the long tiresome days of waiting she had never been out of his mind, and he had chafed at every delay which kept him from seeking her. Now he was at liberty to go in search of her. But what had happened to her since her escape from the fort? That was the thought which gave him so much concern. What hardships and dangers had been hers? Perhaps she had been captured and taken back to the Nashwaak. His companions knew the reason of his great speed and were determined to do all in their power to help him. And that power was by no means small. Although they were few, yet they were men in the prime of life, strong, resourceful, stern tough fighters when necessary, and capable of enduring almost unimaginable hardships. They were loyal to the core, ready to do and to die for the League to which they were bound by their oath and the blood-red sign.

Ere long Grey swung sharply to the left towards a hill beyond. As he ascended his steps slackened, and he moved more cautiously, peering keenly forward, alert and ready for whatever might happen. The law of the forest demanded that nothing should be taken for granted. The ones who pitted their strength and intelligence against a great wilderness were forced to learn its ways, follow its example, and make use of every subtle device hidden within its timeless bosom. And although the wilderness always won in the end, no matter how skilful and daring the adventurers might be, yet it was that uncertainty, mystery and danger which had ever lured great hearts into its depths, and thrilled them with an unquenchable passion.

Presently Grey paused and gave three whistles, one long and two short. This was at once answered, and in another minute a ranger stood before him.

"You were long in coming," he greeted. "Where are your men?"

"A short way behind. But tell me, Nick, what's the news? Any word of Helen?"

"No, I have had no word of the girl, but Mademoiselle la Valliere is waiting for you. I think she knows something."

"Where is she?"

"On the shore of the Jemseg, at that marshy cove."

"I must go to her at once. Any word of Villebon's men?"

"They were at the Jemseg, but have left, headed for the Saganic. Some went overland and others by canoes. They have been scouring the country for miles around to find the escaped girl. We must be very careful."

"And where are the D'Armours?"

"They left before Villieu and his men arrived. They are somewhere in the woods north of the portage. But where is Pete King?"

"He has gone to the Washademoak."

"That is good. And he will need all of us, for Villebon has sent more men to assist Villieu. A number of soldiers arrived unexpectedly from Quebec, and they hurried at once to the Jemseg. So you see we will have to contend with more than we expected. If they join forces with Foulette we shall have a hard time."

Grey smiled, and as briefly as possible related what had taken place at the point on Big Lake. Nick was greatly impressed, and his eyes glowed with excitement.

"I wish I had been there to have seen the fun," he exclaimed. "That was a fine victory. It was a master stroke, and I long to give three cheers for Pete King. He is a grand leader."

"And we must win another over Villebon's men," Grey replied. "We can trust Pete King to outwit our enemies. In the meantime, I must see Mademoiselle le Valliere. Let us get on our way and we can talk as we travel. There is no time to lose."

Although they travelled rapidly, they were extremely cautious, and their voices were low.

"Where did you meet that girl, Nick?" Grey asked.

"On the shore of the Jemseg, as she and her Indians were going by. I whistled, and she looked startled. But when she saw that we belonged to the League, she brought her canoe close to the bank."

"Did she tell you anything about Helen?"

"Nothing. But she asked for you, and said she would be waiting at the cove, and for you to come as fast as you could."

"When was that?"

"This morning."

"What kept you so long? And where is Jerry?"

"He is following Villieu's men who have gone overland. I stayed until they left. On my way here I came across the D'Armours and their people." "Where were they going?"

"To the Washademoak, so Louis told me. He was keeping north of the regular portage lest he should be captured by the soldiers who are scouring the country."

"That will be a hard journey for Madame Marguerite and her children."

"It certainly will. But Madame is very brave."

"What does Louis expect to do when he reaches the Washademoak?"

"He hopes to come across some of our men there who will take them all to the Saganic."

"Why did Louis leave the Jemseg? Was he afraid of Villieu?"

"Not altogether that. But he was not willing to fight for Villebon, and he knew that if he remained he would be forced to take part against us. We are the only friends he has here, and he would rather depend upon our League than upon

Villebon, who has treated him so badly. He is a most determined man when he makes up his mind, and he is thoroughly loyal to his friends."

"We must do all we can to help him, then," Grey emphatically declared. "But we must not talk any more now as we are close to the Jemseg, and enemies may be lurking near."

They slackened their pace, and crouching low, glided among the trees. In a few minutes the gleam of water appeared ahead.

"This way," Nick whispered. "Over there by that big tree and clump of bushes. It is there she said she would be waiting for you."

Pushing their way forward, they at length dropped upon their hands and knees and slowly advanced. They could not afford to take any risk lest they should fall into a trap which might have been prepared for them. Grey wished to believe the Valliere girl could be trusted. Yet a doubt lingered in his mind. She was betrothed to Villieu, and her loyalty to him might outweigh everything else. So this place of meeting might be surrounded by foes ready to spring upon the men of the League who had been lured here.

Nothing happened, however, and soon they caught sight of the canoe lying close to the shore with Judith la Valliere and her two Indians waiting. Grey gave a low whistle at which the girl looked quickly and expectantly towards the forest. She then placed a warning finger to her lips. She smiled as Grey stepped from among the trees and stood upon the shore, while his companions halted and remained out of sight.

"You were long in coming, Monsieur," Judith began in a low voice.

"I am sorry, Mademoiselle. But I came as fast as possible. Have you been waiting long?"

"Too long, and precious time has been wasted."

"What do you mean? Have you something to tell me about Helen?"

"I have, but not what I expected when I sent you word to meet me here. I hoped then to give you good news about Mademoiselle Garland. But now—"

"What has happened to her?" Grey demanded, as he stepped a little nearer to the water in his excitement. "Where is she? Tell me, quick."

"I do not know. I left her last night with Pierre up this stream, and went down to the D'Armours to learn if it would be safe to take her there. On my return this morning to where I had left her, she and Pierre had disappeared. We searched the woods for a while and saw tracks of several people, but we did not dare to go too far. I am afraid the girl has been captured."

Grey stood like a statue while Judith was speaking. His body drawn to its full height, was tense and motionless. His hands were clenched, and his eyes glowed with a light which almost frightened her. She admired him now more than ever, and almost envied Helen Garland for having such a lover. Presently his body relaxed and he gave a deep sigh as he placed his right hand to his forehead.

"This is bad news, Mademoiselle. And to think that she was so near us on Big Lake and I did not know it. We followed Foulette and his men from the Nashwaak, so that was why we missed seeing her crossing the lake. Where did you find her?"

Briefly Judith told him, and how they had escaped by night from below the point where Foulette and his men were camped.

"She is a brave girl, Monsieur, and so kind to Pierre. I am afraid he is very ill. He was so badly treated at the fort that his body is racked with pains. He was not strong, anyway, and his suffering has weakened him so much that he is helpless."

"And Helen was well when you left her?"

"She was, and enduring her troubles nobly."

"I knew she would. But how much more can she stand? If she has fallen again into the hands of those devils there is no telling what they will do to her. We must go up stream and follow those tracks. Your Indians will help us, Mademoiselle?"

"Certainly, Monsieur. They are at your command. And I shall go, too."

"Very good. You go in your canoe. I shall take my men by land, keep out of sight, and meet you where you stop. We must hurry, for there is no time to lose. We must rescue Helen."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH

It was a dreary vigil that Helen Garland spent with Pierre on the bank of the Jemseg after Judith la Valliere had departed. But she knew it was necessary. If she went any farther she might meet with Villebon's men and be taken back to the Nashwaak. The D'Armours would do all in their power to assist her, she was certain, but they would be helpless if the soldiers from the fort were there. So it was best for Judith to go with her Indians and find out first what was taking place.

"I shall come back very soon," Judith had told her. "You will be safe here. Le Bon Dieu will take care of you and Pierre."

And Helen tried to think that she was safe, and that the Bon Dieu would guard her. But as she sat by Pierre's side, with the deep darkness around her, she did not feel so secure. A slight breeze stirred the great trees, and often she imagined that terrible creatures were peering forth at her from those grim black depths. At every sound of some moving animal or the creaking of a tree her heart would beat fast, and she pressed a little closer to her companion. It was some comfort to have him with her, even though he was practically helpless.

But while Pierre's body was useless, his mind was active. He thought little of his own suffering, but of the girl nearby. That he could do nothing to assist her was what gave him such worry.

"Me no good, Mam'selle," he whispered. "Me all 'sam babby. Me no man. No!"

"Yes, you are, Pierre," Helen told him. "You are very brave and never complain about yourself. You proved so true and loyal at the fort, and were willing to suffer rather than betray your friends."

"Ah, dat was not'ing, Mam'selle. No good. Everyt'ing turn out bad."

Thus through the long night they kept watch. No sleep came to their eyes, and eagerly they looked forward to the dawn when they hoped that Judith la Valliere would return with good news. That was their only comfort in their loneliness. Helen thought much of Grey, and knew that he would come if he knew where she was. But he might be far away now, searching for her, or fighting, perhaps, Villebon's men. But could the League of the Crimson Sign overcome trained soldiers? And suppose Grey should be killed or seriously wounded? Even now he might be lying somewhere in the great forest with no one to aid him. Such thoughts were hard for her to endure. She tried to be brave and hope for the best, but weakened as she was, the task was almost beyond her power of endurance.

It was really Pierre's courage which inspired her now. She knew that he was suffering, and yet he never complained. The cold ground was a poor bed for his pain-racked body, and the blankets could not fully protect him from the chill air of night. It was just before dawn, that darkest and most depressing time, when Pierre reached almost the acme of heroism. Helen, huddled by his side, was then experiencing the most poignant feeling of despair. As she stared dry-eyed before her, a terrible sense of hopelessness overwhelmed her. No ray of light pierced the blackness of her soul, and she felt that she was doomed to perish there in the wilderness. This was the first time since her captivity that she had sunk so low in spirit. In a mighty forest, surrounded by unknown dangers, pursued by pitiless enemies, cold and weary, with a helpless man as her sole companion, it was little wonder that the flame of hope flickered down almost to the vanishing point.

At this critical time Pierre, as if he intuitively surmised her mood, drew his fife from his pocket and began to play an old familiar tune. The hands that held the little instrument were racked with pain, and the notes were accordingly shaky and faltering, but they aroused and inspired Helen. She knew why he was making this exertion, the same as he did out upon the lake. It was for her sake, so she at once threw off the blackness which enshrouded her and resolved to respond to the sacrifice he was making. Piece after piece he played, and after his stiff and benumbed fingers had become limbered up, the music poured forth with scarcely a false note. And as he played, a sense of peace and strength came into Helen's heart. Her eyes had been closed as she listened, but when Pierre ceased she opened them, and to her surprise it was not so dark around her. The dawn of a new day had come, and its light was touching the great trees and stealing down through their outstretched branches. It seemed to her that the music had chased away the darkness. Though she knew that this was only a fancy, yet it was really true to her, for the music had dispelled the blackness of her soul.

"Morning is coming, Pierre," she announced. "Your music has brought it. You are a wonderful musician."

"Me verra glad, Mam'selle," was the low reply. "Dis fife do great work. It spik lak somet'ing a'mos 'live."

"It helped me, anyway, Pierre, and I thank you. You have cheered me up and given me new courage. How do you feel now?"

"Me not too bad. But pain here," and he placed a hand to his heart. "Wen dat go 'way, me fee' a'right."

"When did the pain come?" Helen anxiously inquired, rising to her feet and bending over him.

"A leetle tam ago. It fee' queer at firs' an' den it go 'way. Bimeby it come back an' stay 'while. Now it stay all tam."

Scarcely had Pierre uttered these words when a slight sound arrested their attention. It grew louder, and presently they detected cautious footsteps approaching. Facing the sound, Helen peered through the dim light of the morning. She was standing erect, every nerve in her body tense with anxiety. Was it friend or foe?

And as she waited and listened, three men appeared from among the trees, and to her unspeakable joy she recognized Louis D'Armours and two of his men. They came swiftly forward now and stood before the girl. Impulsively she reached out, caught Louis by the hand, and would have fallen to the ground had he not upheld her in his arms. At this unexpected deliverance Helen was so overcome that a great weakness had swept upon her. This soon passed, however, and with an effort she regained control of herself. How good and noble these men looked, and she tried to express her thanks. But she could not speak French, so the men did not understand what she was saying. Seeing this, she turned to Pierre,

"You speak for me. Tell these good men how thankful I am to them for coming here, and ask them how they found us."

Pierre did so, and conversed with Louis for a few minutes. He then interpreted the words to the waiting girl.

"Louis, Tony an' Noel watch for Villebon men. Dey go dis way, dey go dat way, an' no see 'em. Bimeby dey hear museek. Dey know my fife. Den dey come here an' fin' us. Me verra, verra—"

He suddenly ceased, his body swayed, and with a gasp he fell over on his side. Springing forward, Helen knelt by the prostrate man and looked anxiously upon his face. His eyes were closed, and although he was still breathing, she knew that he was dying.

"Pierre! Pierre!" she called. "Don't you know me? It is Helen. Speak to me. We are saved."

These words of appeal caused the stricken man to open his eyes. He looked at the girl, and a faint smile overspread his face. Then his right hand moved a little, as if seeking for something. Helen knew, and taking it in her own, held it firm in a loving pressure. Again Pierre smiled, gave a sigh of contentment and became very still. The hunchback was at rest from all his trials.

As Helen watched his face, so white and drawn, she could hardly believe that this true friend had left her. He had been so good to her, and with his feeble dying strength he had played his fife to give her comfort and inspiration. And his music had done more than he ever imagined. Its notes had gone forth and brought friends to their side.

And as she knelt there, Louis D'Armours touched her bowed shoulder. She looked up, and he at once pointed to the right. She understood his meaning, and rose at once to her feet. She then stooped and attempted to lift Pierre from the ground. Louis knew what she meant, and speaking to his men, they stepped forward, lifted the dead man in their arms and started with him through the forest. He was not a heavy load, for his body had become wasted through his recent suffering. Helen and Louis followed. The girl now gave herself up unreservedly to this worthy man's guidance, feeling certain that he knew best what to do, and would protect her from her enemies. She thought, too, of Judith la Valliere. If the girl should return how greatly worried she would be at finding no one there. But perhaps, she and her Indians would follow through the woods and overtake them. That was her only hope, for she could not remain any longer there with Pierre dead. Now was the time she needed help, and these three men were with her, and Judith might never return. Something might have detained her down river. Perhaps she had fallen into the hands of Villebon's men and was held captive by them.

To Helen it seemed a long way they travelled, and she wondered where they were going. There was no trail, and the ground was rough where the stones and snags bruised her feet, for her shoes were in shreds from the hard usage they had

received. At times she stumbled and would have fallen had she not been supported by Louis who walked close to her side. At length so weak did she become that she was forced to lean upon him almost entirely. And just ahead moved Tony and Noel bearing the body of Pierre. No word was spoken, and no sound came from the forest surrounding them save the occasional scolding of a squirrel or the chirping of birds in the branches overhead. It was a region shut out from the busy world of human life. Could any place be more solitary? Helen wondered. And yet she knew that even here they were not safe, for at any moment the enemy might come upon them, and what could three men do against Villebon's soldiers? Grey Martell seemed farther from her now than ever, for what chance would there be of his finding her in the heart of this lonely forest?

After a journey which appeared as never ending, they reached the brow of a hill and began to descend into a valley below. Down and down they moved until they came at length to a little brook that gurgled on its way through the dense underbrush and trees. Crossing this, they entered a thick grove, and there in the midst, nestling close to the opposite bank was a log building. So suddenly and unexpectedly did they come upon it that Helen gave a slight cry of surprise. Louis smiled, pointed to the house, and then touched his breast. Helen understood his meaning. She had heard how pioneers often had such places of retreat where they could flee from their enemies. And this must be one of them, although no one had ever mentioned it to her, not even Pierre. But she was not surprised at this, for she knew it was a great secret known only, perhaps, to the ones whose lives depended upon it as a place of refuge.

She had little time, however, to think about such things, for as she drew near the cabin a great weakness overcame her. Then in a confused way she knew that sympathetic faces were bending over her, and she heard Madame Marguerite's voice. She felt herself being carried in doors, laid upon blankets, her face bathed with water, and food pressed to her lips. A sense of wonderful comfort and relief came upon her. She was safe from the enemy, and with friends who would protect her. That was the thought which passed through her weary mind as sleep, from which she had been so long deprived, enfolded her in a gentle and loving embrace.

How long she slept she did not know, but she was awakened by loud cries of fear and wild confusion. She opened her eyes and looked around, somewhat bewildered. Madame Marguerite was standing by her side, her arms enfolding her children, while the other women were wailing and lamenting nearby. Angry voices of men were heard outside, some protesting and others threatening. She sat up and clutched Madame's arms, and looked up inquiringly into her face.

At that instant the door was burst open and a number of soldiers rushed into the room. With a cry, Helen shrank back in an effort to hide herself. But all in vain. She was the one they were looking for, and at once they laid rude hands upon her, dragged her to her feet as they gloated over their captive. That they were delighted was quite evident, but what they said the girl could not understand. But Madame Marguerite knew, and with the courage of despair she sprang between Helen and her captors, and faced them with unflinching eyes.

"Cowards! Brutes!" she cried. "Have you no mercy on a helpless girl? Get out of this place at once. Where is my husband?"

Although the soldiers drew back a little in awe before this aroused woman, they were not to be deprived of their captive. They laughed, and ordered the angry woman to be quiet as that would be better for her and all the rest. If she wished to see her husband she would find him outside with his men. They wanted the English girl, and would take her with them. The others could go to the devil, for all they cared.

At these words Madame Marguerite stepped to the door and looked out. The yard seemed full of men, but she hardly noticed them, for she caught sight of her husband, Tony and Noel being bound to trees. Forgetting Helen and the children, she rushed frantically from the house to go to the aid of the bound men. But in this she was stopped by strong hands laid upon her. In vain she struggled to free herself from their grasp. Wildly she looked around for help, but only the unfriendly faces of the soldiers could she see. And as she stood there, Helen was led forth from the cabin, her hands bound with thongs and closely guarded by several men.

CHAPTER XXIX

TEMPTED

Villieu was entertained at the Oromocto by Madame Louise D'Armours. His men were billeted at the few houses in the settlement, while the Indians camped in a sheltered place at the edge of the forest. The night was rough, with a strong wind roaring in from the south. Villieu was more fortunate than Foulette who shivered with his men on the shore of Big Lake. The room was cosy, and Madame Louise was in her most charming mood. She had brought a bottle of her choicest wine, which she kept for special occasions. She was pleased to have this noted officer as her guest, and she hoped to hear news from the fort, chiefly about the English girl.

"Ah, this is excellent wine, Madame," Villieu exclaimed, as he filled his glass the second time. "I have not tasted any like it since the last time I was here."

"I remember, Monsieur. We drank to the health of your commander, and to the fair Judith. I hope they are both well."

"I have not seen Judith of late, Madame. But my commander was in good health when I left the Nashwaak to-day."

"And the English girl is there yet, I suppose. Was the marriage a success? It must have been hard for you to leave your bride so soon."

"There was no marriage. The girl escaped."

Madame Louise's eyes opened wide in surprise at this information. She leaned eagerly forward, half way across the table at which they were seated.

"She has escaped, you say, Monsieur? How did it happen?"

Villieu shrugged his right shoulder, and lifted the glass to his lips.

"She left the fort with Pierre, disguised as his sister, Madame Bedard."

"Ah, so! But where was the guard? How did she escape him?"

"He was deceived, so he said, and did not know it was the English girl."

"But who planned her escape, Monsieur? She could not have managed it alone. Did Madame Bedard help her?"

"No. She was out gathering roots and herbs at the time, so knows nothing about it. Villebon is sorely puzzled."

"And in a rage, too, no doubt."

"He is, frantic, in fact, at losing such a valuable prisoner. It will be hard on the one who effected the girl's escape if he is found out."

"Death, most likely, Monsieur. Villebon will not pardon anyone for doing such a deed."

"Quite true. Villebon is a hard man."

The woman was watching her guest's face very closely, and a slight smile appeared about the corners of her mouth. She was reading him better than he imagined.

"You cannot go back to the fort, then, Monsieur."

"What do you mean, Madame?" Villieu demanded, glancing nervously around. "Why cannot I go back to the fort? What have I done?"

"Oh, nothing, Monsieur," was the laughing reply. "Have another glass to steady your nerves."

Villieu, however, paid no attention to her invitation. He leaned towards her until his face was quite close to hers.

"You are a shrewd woman, Madame," he whispered. "You understand, I see. But I did not mean that you or anyone

should know."

"You don't know much about women, then, Monsieur, especially when it comes to matters of the heart. But I shall not embarrass you further on that point. No, you cannot go back to the fort, so what will you do?"

"Find the girl, of course."

"And what then? Hand her over to Villebon, I suppose, and permit yourself to be shot as a traitor. What a grand and glorious thing that will be. Just think of it, an officer of the King of France assists an English captive girl to escape from Fort St. Joseph, then goes in search of her, finds her, meekly returns her to the fort, and calmly allows himself to be shot as a traitor. What nobleness! What devotion to duty! I am amazed!"

Stung to the quick by these scathing words, Villieu leaped to his feet, his face ablaze with anger.

"Enough, Madame! If you were a man, you would answer to me with sword or pistol for what you have just said. But as you are a woman, and I an officer of France, there is nothing I can do but leave your house."

"Be seated, Monsieur," and Madame smilingly motioned to the chair he had just left. "Do not get so excited. I only spoke for your welfare."

"My welfare?"

"Certainly. I did it to arouse you, Monsieur, to induce you to take the only course left for your escape."

"Your words are strange," Villieu replied as he resumed his seat. "Please explain."

"I am surprised, Monsieur, that you do not understand. You cannot go back to the fort, for Villebon will have no mercy. It will mean death to you. The secret cannot be kept. It will leak out sooner or later."

"Yes, just as soon as you can get word to my commander," Villieu bitterly retorted.

The woman's face flushed, and only with an effort was she able to control herself.

"You misjudge me, Monsieur. Villebon shall never hear from me. I am no friend of his, and it is not to my liking to please him with such news. Oh, no, I can keep a secret when I wish. And I shall keep yours, if—" She paused and looked keenly at her guest.

"If what?" Villieu questioned.

"If you capture that English girl, send her back to her father, and join forces with the League of the Crimson Sign against Villebon."

"Never! I should be a traitor to my King and country."

"You are one already, Monsieur, so another step should not trouble you in the least."

"But that was in self defence, Madame, for the sake of the girl I love. That was different. Villebon had no right to command me to do such a thing. Even the King himself would be horrified at such a contemptible act, and would uphold me if he knew. And Frontenac, I believe, would do the same."

"Don't be too sure, Monsieur," and again the woman smiled. "But what I suggest is also in self defence. Your career will be ended if you go back to the fort, and your name will be handed down as a traitor. You cannot appeal to the King and Frontenac. And if you did, what you might say on your own behalf would not weigh the slightest grain against the words of your commander. And, besides, he would act first and explain afterwards. You cannot deny that, Monsieur. Why should you die when you have so much for which to live? With the fair Judith as your wife, and thus united to the family of the noble Sieur de la Valliere, there is nothing you cannot accomplish in this country. You will have the support of the League of the Crimson Sign, Villebon will be driven out, and you and your father-in-law will rule here. Frontenac cannot stay your progress. The King, in fact, will be forced to acknowledge your control. There is no other way open to you. Now is your opportunity, and to delay will be fatal."

Villieu did not at once reply, but sat lost in thought. It was a great temptation, hard for him to resist. Madame Louise

watched him intently. She surmised his struggle, and it pleased her to see him with bowed head and worried brow pondering her words. Her heart beat somewhat faster as she studied him, for he was a man handsome enough to quicken the blood of any woman, especially of the nature of Madame Louise.

"Why have you thus tempted me to be a traitor to my King?" Villieu at length asked, as he lifted his head and looked at his hostess. "What have you to gain?"

"Have I no interest in my friends, Monsieur?" was the sharp reply. "Is not their welfare mine? I am surprised at your question."

"No doubt you are, Madame. But it is somewhat unusual. Most people who are deeply concerned in other people's affairs have some personal motive."

"And so have I," Madame Louise acknowledged, as she lowered her voice and glanced around the room. "My interest in your commander is one of them. I fear that his wilderness life is not good for his health, and a change, I believe, would be most beneficial."

Villieu smiled a little. This woman was amusing.

"I understand, Madame, your concern for my commander. And you think it would be good for his health if he left the Nashwaak?"

"I do. And for others, too, especially my sister and her husband at the Jemseg. I love Marguerite, although we have drifted far apart. It was not her fault, but mine. I am considered a bad woman, and, perhaps, I am. Once we were always together, two innocent girls, free from care, knowing nothing of the cruel world of men. But now—"

She ceased abruptly and wiped away a tear. For the first time Villieu felt a little respect for this woman. There was a goodness in her which he had not suspected.

"You must not judge yourself too harshly, Madame. I can understand your concern about your sister and her husband. They are most worthy people."

"They are, Monsieur, and it is hard to see them oppressed by that monster at the Nashwaak."

"Hush! Hush, Madame! You must not say that. It is dangerous."

"I know it is. But we are always in danger here. And you are in great danger, too, Monsieur. Not until you become ruler of this land will there be any justice. I have appealed to Count Frontenac in vain for compensation for my husband's death. When Major Church attacked Fort St. Joseph, Mathieu fought like a brave man and true, and gave his life for the King. Our house and barns were burned by the English on their way down river, and we lost everything. Yet my claim for compensation has not been granted. And why? Because of Villebon. He denounces me to Frontenac as a bad woman and dangerous to his cause in Acadia. He writes lies about me, and has poisoned Frontenac's mind. You know what I say is true, Monsieur, and I shall never receive justice while that villain is in command at the Nashwaak. But when he is driven out and you and the noble la Valliere rule this country, then, and only then, will I obtain my rights."

Villieu rose to his feet when Madame Louise had finished speaking, and stood lost in thought. He then placed his right hand upon the hilt of his sword and turned to the watching woman.

"You have placed a great temptation before me, Madame," he began. "On the one hand there is loyalty due to my King and commander, and on the other, love and ambition. It is hard for me to decide between such strong forces."

"Why should it be so, Monsieur? Loyalty to your King and commander, you say. Bah! What do they care for you? Nothing. But the fair Judith loves you, and you love her. And, besides," she threw out her hands with an impressive gesture, "what will your loyalty amount to after this in the eyes of Villebon? The firing squad will be the answer to my question. And will you who are young, with such prospects before you, and love, as well, sacrifice all for the bauble of loyalty to a King, subject to a petticoat rule, and to a commander who is a minion of the devil in hatred, revenge and cruelty?"

Slowly Villieu drew his sword from its scabbard, and raised it above his head. He held it there and looked at the woman.

"Madame, I am greatly bewildered, and know not what to do. I wish to be loyal to my King and commander, no matter what they are like. And yet my love for Judith la Valliere and what you call ambition, stand in my way. I cannot decide, so by this sword upon which there is no dishonour, I appeal to heaven to assist me in my perplexity. I must leave your house at once, and I thank you for your hospitality. With the Indians I shall pass the night."

"What, out there in the open!"

"Ay, out in the open there where the wild wind will be a fitting accompaniment to the tumult raging in my heart and mind. And, besides, the Indians will not tempt me. Good night, Madame."

CHAPTER XXX.

TRAPPED

Villieu was in no enviable frame of mind as he led his men at dawn down river. He had passed a sleepless night, most of the time pacing to and fro near the camp fire the Indians kept burning. If the natives wondered at their leader's restlessness, their calm impassive faces gave no sign, and they seemed to pay no heed to the pacing man.

Villieu did not visit Madame Louise again. It was not his early departure which kept him from bidding her farewell, but his unwillingness to meet her. During the night he had made his decision. Whether his appeal to heaven had been of any avail, he did not know, and cared less. He had fought a hard, stern battle alone in the darkness with the wind whipping around him, and at the first streak of dawn his mind was made up. He would carry out his commander's order, find the escaped girl, if possible, and return her to the fort. He would also attack Pete King and destroy his stronghold on the Saganic. Any personal feeling of love and ambition he would overcome before the one and all important duty to his King and commander. He would drive his men as they had never been driven before. Neither would he spare himself until his object had been attained.

In thus reasoning with himself Villieu was, in fact, trying to crush down the real desire of his heart and mind. Ever there rose before him the vision of Judith la Valliere, and of himself and her father as rulers of Acadia. It was that which brought the moisture to his brow, which the chilly wind could not dry. It was that which caused him at times to stop and stand motionless with clenched hands, staring straight before him with unseeing eyes.

And as he sped down river he seemed like a man fleeing from some spectre which was ever near, no matter how hard he travelled. His men were surprised at his manner, and chafed under his stern imperious orders. This did not seem the same man of yesterday, who, although an officer, had always been considerate and courteous. They could not understand him, so greatly had he changed during the night.

Villieu, however, cared little for what his men thought so long as they obeyed him and hurled the canoes onward. He wished to get through with the task placed upon him as speedily as possible. There would be no weakening on his part, he was fully determined. He would not have his name handed down as a traitor to his King and commander, come what might. But in his headlong haste and firm resolve there was ever before him the vision of the fair maid of the Chignecto, and of the English girl who was wandering somewhere in the trackless forest. Love for one, and sympathetic admiration for the other gave him no peace. The thought beat against his heart and mind, demanding admittance. But the more insistent it became, the greater grew his resolve not to yield to the temptation. He was somewhat like the man on the Damascus road long before, who had seen a vision, but was determined to crush and overcome the real desire of his heart by greater efforts in his ruthless persecution.

And even the presence of Judith la Valliere at the Jemseg could not shake his resolve. But it was hard to withstand the expression in her eyes. Had she railed and wept, he would not have been so much affected as by the way she looked and what she said.

"You have quite a force with you, Sebastien," she quietly remarked. "You should easily overcome the League of the Crimson Sign and capture the escaped girl."

"I certainly should," Villieu replied. "And with the aid of Frontenac's men, who unexpectedly arrived at the river, I am sure of victory."

"You should be proud to lead such a company. You always delighted in daring adventures, so this one should make you happy."

"Do I look happy, Judith? Do I seem like a man free from care, and rejoicing in this expedition?"

"Well, no, I can't say that you do. You appear to me like a man who did not sleep last night. Why?"

"I cannot tell you, Judith."

"Ah, it is just as well, perhaps, I think I know."

"You do! What do you know?"

"It is not necessary for me to tell. But I must go now. You have much to do, so I shall not detain you any longer."

"Where are you going?"

"Back to the Chignecto."

"And then?"

"Darkness."

"Darkness! What do you mean?"

"Love alone can explain."

Villieu started as the light of understanding came to his mind. He reached out to take her in his arms, but she drew haughtily back.

"Judith!" he gasped. "What is the meaning of this? Why do you look at me that way?"

"How else could I look?" the girl coldly replied. "Go, join your curs. They are waiting for you. Send them forth to hound an innocent girl to her doom to gratify the devilish revenge of your commander. Then, when you have obediently and cravenly married her, forget that you ever knew and loved Judith la Valliere, of the Chignecto."

"Judith! Judith! Listen to me. You do not understand. You do not know."

"I know enough, Monsieur. You need not waste words."

Their eyes met for a few seconds, and without another word, the girl turned and moved slowly away towards the river and her Indians.

Villieu stood and watched her until the canoe had disappeared from view. He hoped that Judith would cast a backward glance upon him, but he waited in vain. Not once did she look in his direction. His brain was in a tumult. He had lost the one girl in all the world he loved. And what for? To carry out the orders of a cruel and revengeful commander! But it was too late now. The die was cast. Judith had rejected him with scorn. He need not hesitate any longer, but drive forward against the enemy.

And drive his men he did. Frontenac's soldiers he sent overland to the Washademoak, while he dispatched a number of his own men to scour the region north of the portage to search for the escaped inhabitants of the Jemseg.

"Find Louis D'Armours," he ordered. "Show no mercy to him and his men. And if you capture the English girl, you will be well rewarded. Make haste and lose no time. We shall all meet at the landing-place, and from there we shall proceed to the Saganic where we shall be joined by Foulette. We shall then wipe out that nest of rebels and capture Pete King."

With the rest of his men Villieu proceeded by canoe up the Washademoak. He had never been here before, but the Indians knew the way, so he trusted to their guidance. He had more canoes than were needed for his company, but they would be filled at the landing-place with the soldiers who would meet him there. He was confident of victory, for what could a wandering band of rangers do against trained men assisted by some of the finest Indian warriors from the Meductic? In the woods they might be at a disadvantage, but not in the open.

The afternoon was waning as they drew near the landing-place. They moved very cautiously now, keeping some distance from the shore lest the rangers should be prowling about. When opposite the end of the portage, the Indians ceased paddling and scanned the shore. What they saw seemed to satisfy them, and they pointed out to Villieu a number of soldiers, some standing and others seated upon the bank.

"They are our men!" Villieu exclaimed. "It is quite evident that Pete King and his rascals are nowhere near. They must have retreated to the Saganic. Let us land."

As the canoes moved towards the shore, the men upon the bank gave a cheer of welcome, and received a hearty response from the new arrivals. The latter were all in great spirits, and they now looked upon this expedition as a grand picnic.

The rangers had disappeared, frightened, so they imagined, by the force sent against them.

And even Villieu felt a deep thrill of pleasure. His orders had been well carried out, and he was confident of success. His canoe was leading, and when within speaking distance he asked the men among the trees if they had seen anything of the rebels.

"They are here," came the reply. "Pete King and his gang are our prisoners."

With a shout that reverberated through the forest, the soldiers urged the Indians to make haste. No sooner had the canoes touched the shore than all leaped out, forgetting their muskets in their excitement. They had no need for them now, and all were eager to behold the captive leader and his followers. They were like boys out of school in their wild abandonment of joy. And the Indians, too, joined their white brothers in their race up the hill.

Villieu was as eager as his men. It did not seem strange to him that the waiting soldiers had not come to the water's edge to bid them welcome, but had remained several hundred feet away. In his intense excitement he thought only of the pleasure of looking upon the captive rangers, especially their leader. How Villebon would rejoice when he returned with them to the Nashwaak. Surely such a victory would give him a high standing and cause his name to be honored not only throughout the whole of Acadia, but at Quebec and even as far away at France. In the flush of success everything else was forgotten, and not once did he remember Judith la Valliere and her biting words of scorn.

He had advanced about two-thirds of the way up the bank, when he received the great surprise and shock of his life. Where a minute or two before he had seen, as he thought, Frontenac's soldiers awaiting his coming, he was now faced by a band of men, some standing and others kneeling, with levelled muskets pointed straight at him and his followers. Then came the stern command to halt and surrender. Villieu stopped dead in his tracks, looked wildly at the menacing forms before him, and at once understood the meaning. He glanced around as if to retreat. As he did so, he saw men gliding from among the bushes with muskets in their hands, and lining up near the water between him and the canoes. And with them was Pete King, the man he had been told was a captive. The blood of intense passion surged to his face. He had been caught in a trap from which he could see no way of escape. He had been outwitted by the shrewd leader of the Crimson Sign. But why were those men before him wearing French uniforms? Where had they obtained them?

As he thought of this, reason forsook him. He saw his men cowering before those levelled muskets, their faces blanched with fear. With an oath, he drew his sword, and calling upon all to follow him, he wheeled and sped down the bank. One man alone started to follow, but a shot rang out, and he crumpled to the ground. Villieu was allowed to continue his headlong course. With sword held aloft, he rushed at Pete King. With a tantalizing smile, the latter whipped his pistol from his belt and stepped forward. As the infuriated Villieu lunged for his deadly stroke, there was a sharp ring of clashing steel as Pete stepped nimbly aside, parried the blow with his pistol, and with lightning rapidity drove the doubled fist of his left hand at his opponent's head. Villieu reeled, swayed, and the sword fell from his nerveless hand as he sank with a groan to the ground.

This scene was enacted in a few brief seconds. The interest of the rangers and soldiers was intense, and all stared in silent, wide-eyed amazement. But at the sudden and unexpected outcome, all lifted their voices in a ringing cheer for the victor. Even the Indians, surly and defiant at their ignominious capture, could not disguise their admiration, but expressed their feelings in deep guttural exclamations of a series of "ha-ha's!"

Pete King, however, remained unmoved by this acclaim as he stood watching the prostrate man. He then stooped, picked up the fallen sword and bent it until the point of the blade almost touched the hilt. Only a man of unusual strength could perform such a feat, but to him it seemed no greater an effort than the bending of a twig. Slowly he allowed the blade to straighten out, and a smile overspread his face as he held it out towards the staring soldiers.

"Great steel, that," he remarked. "What a pity it has not been used in a better cause."

He then glanced down upon Villieu, who was struggling to his feet, still somewhat dazed.

"Are you satisfied now, my friend?" he asked. "Or do you wish to try another round with me? If so, here is your sword. I know and admire a brave man when I meet him."

"Not with you, Pete King," was the unsteady reply. "I only fight with men, and not with the devil."

"Ho! ho! so you think I am the devil, eh?"

"Yes, the devil, or in league with him, for no man could do what you did without the devil's aid."

"Maybe you are right, my friend, for it takes a devil to match the devil. But you may call me what you like, as it makes no difference to me. But devil or just plain Pete King, I have overcome you to-day, and you and your men are my prisoners."

"I know that only too well," Villieu bitterly replied, as he looked around upon his dispirited followers. "But where did you get those uniforms in which your rangers are clad? I thought they were Frontenac's men."

"That was quite evident. But Frontenac's men are at the Jemseg now, most likely. They received a message from Villebon's lieutenant to hurry back to the river."

"I sent them no message!" Villieu exclaimed in astonishment.

"I sent it for you, Monsieur," and again Pete King smiled. "I did it for their good, so one of my men took it."

"Ah, I see, dressed in a French uniform!"

"Just so, and they believed the message was from you, so hurried back by the way they had come."

"And the uniforms?" Villieu gasped. "Where did you get them?"

"Foulette will explain. He is right near, so I shall bring him at once."

At this instant the rangers gave a shout of surprise, and pointed excitedly up the lake. As Pete King quickly turned, he saw a large number of canoes sweeping rapidly towards them.

"Colonel Garland and la Valliere, of Chignecto!" he exclaimed. "Greet them, my men! Greet them, quick! Give them a salute that will make the forest ring with an echoing welcome."

At once several muskets spoke, and ere the reverberations had died away, the rangers lifted up their voices in their triumphant martial song.

Swift as the feathers in an eagle's wing,
Yo-ho! Yo-ho! Yo-ho!
We are the League of the Crimson Sign,
We are the men of the Outer Line,
Yo-ho! Yo-ho! Yo-h-o-o!

The response to this welcome was volley after volley from the visitors, followed by wild cheers as the canoes swept swiftly towards the landing-place.

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN THE NICK OF TIME

When Grey Martell led his men to the appointed place of meeting on the eastern bank of the Jemseg, he found Judith la Valliere with her two Indians awaiting him. She was sitting under the shade of a big tree while the natives were stretched upon the sand a short distance away. She rose to her feet and smiled her welcome as Grey approached.

"You are late, Monsieur," she accosted. "I have been waiting here a long time."

"We have been delayed, Mademoiselle. Look what we found," and Grey pointed among the trees.

Judith turned, and as the rangers advanced, she saw two of them leading and supporting young David, the English lad. He was still staring straight before him, as if seeking for someone. His clothes were in shreds, his feet bare, his arms and legs bleeding. It did not seem possible that any blood could be left in his body, so worn and wasted was it from exposure and want of food.

Stepping swiftly forward, Judith went to the boy and looked into his face. Her heart was filled with a deep sympathy at his pitiable condition.

"You poor little boy!" she exclaimed. "And those devils of men made you like this! But they shall pay for it," she fiercely cried as she turned to Grey. "Find them, Monsieur, and do to them what they have done to this innocent lad. And they will do the same to us if they get the chance, for they are merciless. Villebon must be driven from the Nashwaak. He is a usurper, and has no claim to this land. My father is the rightful owner, for he received his commission from the King himself. Villebon is a brute. Think what he tried to do to Mademoiselle Garland. He planned to force her to marry Monsieur Villieu, who is betrothed to me. Only a devil would plan such a deed as that. You love that sweet girl, Monsieur. But villains are after her, and they will capture her unless you make haste. Leave this boy with me. I shall keep one of my Indians. You take the other as guide, and we shall follow."

"But you should not come, Mademoiselle," Grey replied. "It might not be safe. You remain here, and we shall return for you."

"No, no. One place is as safe as another in this country. You go and find Mademoiselle Garland, and we shall be with you after a while. She may need a woman's care."

Grey was more impressed than ever with this wonderful girl. As he watched her standing so erect before him, he was thrilled by her great beauty and reckless daring. And how noble she looked, with her face tanned by wind and sun, and the coils of her jet-black hair wound carelessly upon her well-poised head, and falling in straggling wisps over her shapely neck. Her very presence was enough to inspire a host of men. And what a leader she herself would make. Much had he heard of her beauty, and many were the stories of her adventures that had drifted to the Saganic. But he knew now that they were all true, for of her nothing seemed improbable.

The thought of her was with him as he and his men left the river and plunged again into the forest. How kind she had been to Helen, and she was now concerned on his behalf. If la Valliere was anything like his daughter what a worthy man he must be. He would make a noble ruler in such a land as this. To fight for him would be a pleasure. If he were in command all strife would cease, and the League of the Crimson Sign could carry on its work in perfect security.

They travelled as formerly in an arrow-like formation, although the men were closer together now. Grey was the point, and he had by his side Judith's Indian, who followed the trail of the D'Armours as unerringly as a bloodhound. His well trained eyes detected every mark upon the ground, and only an occasional grunt of satisfaction escaped his lips. Thus through the forest they sped, up hill and down, now threading their way among great trees, and again struggling through tangled alder bushes where the marks of those who had preceded them were more clearly observed.

At length they reached the top of a hill which commanded a valley below. Here the Indian suddenly stopped and sniffed the air.

"Smoke!" he exclaimed. "Fire!"

"Where?" Grey asked.

The native's only reply was to point down the valley. Then dropping his musket, he climbed far up into a tall spruce. When he at length descended, he reported that he had seen a big smoke at the foot of the hill across the valley, although he could not tell what it meant. At once he picked up his musket and moved forward.

Ere they reached the bottom of the hill, they could hear the crackling of the fire as it burned fiercely on the opposite side of the little brook. Advancing cautiously, and wondering what it meant, the men drew closer together. Nearer and nearer they approached, gliding from tree to tree which they used as screens. Presently they could feel the fire's hot breath, and in another minute they understood. It was a log cabin aflame. Grey and his followers were amazed, as they had never heard of such a place as this in the forest. But there it was on the hillside, now a seething mass, with the flames licking up the dry logs and scorching the trees encircling the building. The watching men knew that in a short time the fire would spread, and rage with unabated fury through the forest. That it had not already started forth on its wild rampage was due to the dampness of the ground here. But sparks and flying embers would ere long light upon dry tinder and the havoc would be continued far and wide. There was nothing they could do but watch and wonder. For once those rangers were puzzled, and even the Indian could offer no explanation.

And as they stood there, a cry of distress was heard. Again it came, and as they looked in the direction from which the sound came, the Indian darted forward, closely followed by all the rangers. The heat was almost unbearable now, but still they pressed forward, shielding their faces with their hands until they came suddenly upon Louis D'Armours bound to a tree, with Tony and Noel nearby. It took the Indian but an instant to draw his sharp hunting knife, cut the bonds and free the men from their perilous positions. Then before they touched the ground, they were caught in the rangers' strong arms and borne swiftly to a place of safety by the brook, where their hands and faces were bathed with refreshing water.

So overcome were Louis and his companions by their terrible ordeal that for a while they were unable to speak. Louis was the first to recover sufficient strength to explain what had happened. His words were broken and he was forced to stop at times for breath.

"Mon Dieu, it was terrible! We had just buried poor Pierre over there among the trees when those devils came upon us. They bound us to the trees, set my cabin on fire, and then left with the women and children. They laughed and jeered at us as they went away."

"Did you see anything of Helen Garland?" Grey asked.

"Yes, we found her this morning by the Jemseg and brought her to this place. It was that girl Villebon's men were after. I pleaded with them to spare her and let her escape, but they only laughed in scorn."

"Which way did they go?"

"Towards the Washademoak. They expect to meet Villieu and his men there, and then proceed to the Saganic to destroy your post, capture Pete King and all the men of the Crimson Sign. Foulette has gone up Big Lake to the river above and will join Villieu at the Saganic. I do not know what will happen to us. My wife and children are now in the hands of those devils. After my years of hard work I am ruined and bereaved of my loved ones. And those brutes left me to die a horrible death here with Tony and Noel. They do not know what mercy means, and when they have broken up the League of the Crimson Sign, there will be none to oppose them, and they will be worse than ever."

It was pitiful to witness the agony of this heart-broken man, and all the rangers were deeply moved by his distress. But his story added fuel to the anger in their hearts against the men who had committed such dastardly deeds, and they were impatient to be on their way to rescue the women and punish their captors. Grey advised Louis not to lose hope, and told him of what had happened to Foulette and his men on the shore of Big Lake. This was amazing news to the depressed man, and brought some comfort to his troubled heart and mind.

There was no time for more talk. Grey was anxious to be away. But it was quite evident that the rescued men would have to remain behind. They were in no condition for fast travel, and they would only impede the rangers. Louis insisted that he should accompany them. But when he tried to rise he fell back upon the ground. He then had to bow to the inevitable.

"You stay here," Grey told him. "Mademoiselle la Valliere should arrive before long with young David. Tell her not to follow us, but to remain here with you until we return. The fire will not harm you, as the wind is driving it north, so you

should be quite safe. We must be off at once."

So once more Grey and his men sped through the forest. They were nearing the end of their quest, and all knew that the critical moment was not far away. They were thrilled with eagerness, for they were about to meet their deadly foe who had been harassing them for so long. Hitherto, no opportunity of meeting Villebon's men had presented itself. They had been restrained by Pete King's wise counsel from attempting any foolish attack upon the Nashwaak Fort. The soldiers had not ventured inland, but had kept to the main river and the lower reaches of its tributaries. They might have picked off the few men who did leave the fort, but that would have been of little avail. Pete King did not desire useless slaughter, and so long as Villebon was willing to leave him and his rangers alone he was satisfied. He hoped that the war between the English and the French would soon be over, a treaty signed, and the strife in Acadia would cease. So he had held his restless men in check, and looked forward to the time of peace. But now that Villebon had sent forth his soldiers on a mission of destruction and death, it was different. The rangers were at last free from their leader's restraining hand. With the life of the English girl at stake, and with their blood at fever-heat, they formed a terrible avenging band as they swept like bloodhounds through the depths of that mighty forest.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE RANGERS STRIKE

Weak and bewildered Helen Garland could hardly realize at first what was happening outside the little cabin. There seemed to be soldiers everywhere, talking and laughing in high glee at the success of their raid. She saw Madame Marguerite a short distance away pleading earnestly with the leader and pointing to the men bound to the trees. But her words appeared to fall upon deaf ears, for the man merely grinned at her distress and called out an order to his men. Helen learned the meaning of that command when presently flames began to issue from the cabin. Then the horror of what they were doing became apparent. They were leaving Louis, Tony and Noel to be roasted alive. Could it be possible that human beings would commit such a brutal deed! She strained at the bonds which held her hands. She longed to be free to rush to their aid, and cut the thongs which held them. But she tugged in vain, and only weakened herself by her efforts. Her captors, seeing her struggles, laughed and uttered remarks, which fortunately she did not understand. In a few minutes she was seized roughly by the arms and ordered to move. Tearing herself free, she sprang towards the leader and pleaded earnestly for the bound men. Although the man did not understand her words, he knew their meaning and treated her as he had Madame Marguerite with a diabolical grin of amusement. Helen looked him full in the eyes as she made her request, and before those beseeching eyes his own dropped, and with an oath he ordered his men to depart at once.

In another minute they were threading their way among the trees, leaving behind them the burning cabin, and the men doomed to destruction. Helen was not permitted to walk with the other women, but was kept apart, and well guarded in the centre of the marching men. She was too valuable a prisoner to lose, so every care had to be taken. There were about twenty soldiers in all, and they advanced in a careless manner, feeling certain that here no caution was necessary. At the Washademoak they would meet Villieu, and as for the men of the League of the Crimson Sign they gave them hardly a thought. Pete King and his gang might be prowling around somewhere along the waterways, but in the heart of the great forest they would not venture, let alone attack a body of well-armed trained soldiers. To them this was turning out to be more of a picnic than a war. They had captured the English girl, and soon they would have the pleasure of routing out the nest of rebels on the Saganic. Then they could go back to the Nashwaak, celebrate their victory, and boast about it for years.

Helen found the walking very difficult, and painfully she limped along in an effort to keep up with her captors. Often she stumbled and would have fallen had she not been supported by the men guarding her. Twice she turned and saw Madame Marguerite helping her little ones. Once their eyes met, and the expression upon the noble woman's face filled her heart with an overwhelming sadness.

Thus on and on they moved. Helen becoming weaker all the time. The afternoon was waning, and she wondered where the soldiers were going. She had no idea of direction, and cared less. She only knew that she was tired to the point of exhaustion, and that her last ray of hope had fled. She longed to lie down and die, and be free from her trials. What was the use of keeping up any longer? Grey had not been able to rescue her, and, perhaps he was farther away from her than ever. She would never see him again, so she believed. She had fallen again into the hands of her enemies, and they would not let her escape a second time. And when she was taken back to the fort, Villebon would not spare her. But as she struggled on, she did not care very much. Perhaps she would not live to return to the Nashwaak. Better far to die there in the forest than be forced to marry one who belonged to a hated race.

These gloomy thoughts surged through her weary mind as she moved forward. They were travelling now along a very deep narrow valley where the trees were not so heavy. A thick grove of young firs closed them in on every side through which they had to force their way, and where those in front could not see the ones who were following. When about halfway through this tangle of trees and bushes, cries were suddenly heard from the men ahead, succeeded by fierce shouts, as the men of the Crimson Sign leaped upon the soldiers like a whirlwind, and with hatchets in their hands, began their deadly work. Taken by surprise the soldiers had no chance to use their muskets or draw their swords, but found themselves helpless, and fell like grain before the scythe. Yells of despair, curses, and shrieks of pain rent the air, as bushes crashed and men fought with one another.

Helen was completely bewildered by this terrible confusion, and stood looking with wide-staring eyes at the carnage before her. Then from the midst of the swaying and surging men Grey Martell leaped towards her, struck down the man

guarding her, lifted her from the ground and bore her swiftly away. Oh, how good it was to feel those strong arms about her, and to know that she was saved from her captors. She clung to Grey and pressed her face close to his. There was no time for words at this critical moment, so imprinting a kiss upon her lips, he released her and hurried back to assist his men. And there at a safe distance Helen listened to the combat. Gradually the clamor lessened, and at length all became still. Then from among the bushes Madame Marguerite appeared with her two little ones, followed by the other women. They came to the girl's side and sank upon the ground, pale and trembling. Helen flung her arms about the children and held them close. Tears were coursing down her cheeks, but they were tears of thankfulness. She knew that she was safe, and that the men of the Crimson Sign would stand by her to the last. That her captors were defeated, she had no doubt. Grey had found her, and he would never leave her again to the mercy of her enemies.

The victory of the rangers was complete. Half of the soldiers were either dead or badly wounded. Several had been captured, while two had escaped and fled away into the forest. The prisoners were securely bound and brought forth from the bushes. Among them was their leader. He was a different looking man now from the one who had ordered the destruction of the cabin and the doom of Louis D'Armours and his companions. He was bleeding from wounds he had received, and his whole appearance was expressive of his great dejection. He did not look at Madame Marguerite, but stood with downcast eyes between two of the rangers. One by one the other prisoners appeared, some hardly able to walk, and all bearing marks of severe treatment. They were lined up in a row, uncertain what their fate would be. As Grey Martell stepped forward to speak to them, Madame Marguerite advanced. She was greatly agitated as she held out appealing hands to the young man.

"Oh, Monsieur," she began, "send men back to free my husband, Tony and Noel. This wretch," and she motioned to the leader of the soldiers, "had them bound to trees, and then set fire to our cabin. It may be too late to save those men from a terrible death. But send help. Tell your men to go like the wind. For the love of le Bon Dieu, order them to hurry."

"Your husband and his companions are safe, Madame," Grey replied, much moved by the woman's distress. "We arrived just in time to save them, and they are now waiting for us by the little brook."

For a few seconds the woman stood and looked steadfastly into Grey's eyes, as if to make sure that he was not deceiving her. She uttered no word, but presently tears flowed down her cheeks. She clasped her hands and raised them above her head in an attitude of mute thankfulness. She then went back to her little ones, caught them in her arms and pressed them firmly to her breast.

"Your dear father is safe!" she cried. "We shall be with him soon. These good men will take us to him."

For a minute, perhaps, she held the children close with her face near to theirs. She was aroused by a light hand upon her shoulder. Looking up, she saw Helen standing by her side with a troubled expression in her eyes. She motioned towards the bushes where the fight had taken place. Madame Marguerite at once understood the girl's meaning when she caught a glimpse of a soldier being carried forth from among the trees. She rose to her feet, her heart stirred by the sight. She could never bear to see anyone suffer without doing something to help. So here now in the midst of the forest men were in need of her assistance. And she knew what to do, for a pioneer wife had to be somewhat skilled in simple remedies for the relief of those in distress, whether it was a child's cut finger or a more serious injury which sometimes came upon her workmen. And at the Jemseg she had always been the one to whom people turned when trouble came or an accident occurred. Madame's gentle loving touch acted like magic, so the people believed, and in this they were not far astray.

Forgetting for a time her own cares, this noble woman left her children, and followed by Helen, went at once to see what she could do. And there upon the moss at the foot of a fir tree she saw several soldiers lying and bleeding from the blows they had received. Although these men had bound her husband to the tree and had laughed her to scorn, she seemed to forget all this now as she set to work to do what she could for their comfort. With pieces of cloth torn from her tattered dress, she bound up the wounds on their heads in an effort to staunch the flow of blood. Helen lent her aid, and also offered shreds from her own torn dress. It was little, however, that the women could do, but the soldiers' eyes expressed their gratitude, and one even smiled a little at the touch of a woman's hand.

"You are very kind, Madame," he murmured. "I feel better now."

There were others beyond all human aid, so great had been the blows from the rangers' deadly hatchets. They were unconscious and dying. To Helen the scene was almost more than she could endure. She was weak, anyway. A sudden faintness came upon her, and she was about to lean against a tree for support, when she felt strong arms placed around

her. With a sigh of relief she gave herself up to Grey's keeping as he bore her away from the scene of suffering and death. She was too tired to think, so closing her eyes, she resigned herself to her strong lover who had found her and would protect her from all harm.

She was aroused by the sound of distant guns. Opening her eyes, she saw Grey looking off towards the Washademoak, and listening intently.

"We are not far from the lake," he remarked. "I wonder what those shots mean. Perhaps Pete King and Villieu have met at the landing and are fighting."

Soon the firing ceased, and all was still. A puzzled expression came into Grey's eyes, as he turned towards Helen.

"That cannot be a battle, for the shooting has ceased. Pete King would spend his last bullet before giving up, and so would Villieu. I must send a man at once to find out what it is all about."



CHAPTER XXXIII.

TILL DEATH

The blast of a horn sounded forth upon the still evening air, and echoed through the long reaches of the silent forest. It floated up the narrow Saganic, and reached at length Grey Martell and Helen Garland, seated side by side upon the mossy bank under a big pine tree. The young man's left arm was placed lovingly about the girl, while his right hand clasped hers lying in her lap. Their beaming eyes expressed the joy in their hearts, and their animated faces bore no signs of the hardships through which they had recently passed. At the sound of the horn, Grey raised his head, listened, and then smiled.

"Supper will soon be ready," he remarked. "That is the first blast, and when the second sounds we shall have to go. This is an important night for Pete King, and he wants all to be present."

"And it's an important night for us," Helen replied. "I wish we could spend it together here. This place is so quiet and restful. I am tired of noise and excitement. The soldiers stare at me, too, as if I were a curiosity."

"They cannot help it, Helen, for you are a heroine in their eyes. They have heard about your terrible experiences, and how brave you were through them all."

"I do not feel like a heroine," and the girl sighed as she looked pensively out upon the water. "I didn't do anything worth speaking about. But Pierre and poor little David were true heroes, and gave their lives for me. How I should like to go to that little brook and lay some flowers upon their graves. When the Indians carried David to us after that terrible fight in the woods, the boy knew me, for he took my hand in his. And just before he died, he smiled, and whispered my name. I shall never forget those two loyal friends. What a pity they had to suffer so much from cruel men. The very thought of Foulette makes me shudder."

"He was a bully and a coward, Helen. When he was dragged to that tree where he had bound little David, he cried and begged for mercy. And how Pete King did lash him with his tongue. He told him that shooting was too good a death for such a villain, and that he should be left there, as he had left an innocent, helpless boy, to be food for the crows. Foulette's eyes were fairly popping out of his head, and he was yelling and crying when the muskets spoke and he crumpled to the ground. And that leader who captured you was served the same way. But he was a man compared to Foulette, for he took his punishment without any fuss, and did not even ask for mercy."

"Please, please, don't say any more!" Helen pleaded. "Those men are gone, so we must not spoil our happiness by thinking about them. This is the last night we shall be together for some time, so let us talk about pleasant things. Father is leaving in the morning, remember."

"I know that only too well, Helen. But he will come back, so he says, with cannon and a larger force to attack Villebon. I shall have to stay here until then, I suppose, but when Villebon is driven out, and his fort destroyed, I am going home, and to you. Your father will not keep us apart any longer. He has been very nice to me, and apologized for the way he treated me in the past. And I feel quite sure from what he said that he and my father will be friendly after this."

"Oh, I hope so, Grey. I shall never regret what I have suffered if it is the means of bringing our families together. Suffering and sorrow do that sometimes, so I have heard."

"I shall miss you so much, Helen, and shall count the days and hours until we meet again."

"And I shall do the same, Grey. It will be very lonely without you. But the hope of seeing you soon will be a great comfort. And I shall miss that noble girl, Judith la Valliere. I feel so sorry for her. She loves Villieu as much as I love you, and her heart is almost broken because they are separated. We have had several long talks together of late, and there were tears in her eyes as she told me how much her lover meant to her. It will be hard for her to go back to her home with her fond hopes in ruins."

"She will have the D'Armours there, Helen, for la Valliere has induced them to leave the Jemseg and settle at the Chignecto. He has promised them land where they will be safe from Villebon, and where Madame Marguerite will not be so lonely."

"They are most worthy people, Grey, and were so kind to me. I shall never forget them and their dear little children."

At that instant the horn again sounded its imperative summons. Grey rose to his feet, and held out his hands to the girl.

"We must go, for Pete King will stand no delay to-night. It is a pity we have to leave this place, but it can't be helped. When supper is over, we may be able to get away by ourselves again."

As Helen stood up, she caught sight of a canoe coming rapidly down stream, driven by two men. Grey saw it, too, and recognized the occupants.

"They are the rangers Pete sent to the Nashwaak to spy upon Villebon!" he exclaimed. "They must have special news by the way they are travelling."

The canoemen saw the two upon the bank, lifted their paddles from the water, and allowed their craft to drift with the tide. Although they looked weary, their faces brightened when they beheld the girl, and at once saluted her by touching the fingers of their right hands to the red feathers in their caps.

"You are welcome back, my friends," Grey accosted. "What news do you bring from the Nashwaak?"

"Great news, but Pete King must hear it first," Jules LeMoine replied. "That is the law of our League, you know."

"You are right, Jules. But take us on board, as the horn has sounded twice for supper, and we were just leaving when you arrived. There will be much merry-making to-night."

"It's well we are in time, Grey. But, Mon Dieu! it will take a great deal of merriment to make us forget what we have seen up the Chimenny."

"Is the plague raging there yet?"

"It is. Some of the Indians have left, and the few who remain will soon be dead."

"Is Father Elizee there?"

"No. He did not return."

"Why?"

"I cannot tell you now. But come on board, and you shall know later. We must hasten, as the news we bear is important."

Pete King's eyes shone with pride and satisfaction as he sat at the head of the long table and looked upon the men and women gathered there. He was happy, and with good reason, for he had accomplished a great deal. His leadership had been tested, and had not been found lacking. He had outwitted Villebon's men at Big Lake and at the Washademoak without the loss of a single ranger. And he was proud, too, of Grey Martell and his men for what they had done to Frontenac's soldiers when Helen Garland and the others with her had been rescued. And he knew that these achievements would leave a lasting impression upon the Indians. Although they had been entrapped with the soldiers, he had given them their freedom, and had sent both bands back to the Meductic. The news of the prowess and mercy of the League would spread rapidly from place to place, from camp to camp, and it would be difficult for Villebon to induce the natives to join with him again against the rangers. And all this had been accomplished without any outside assistance. Colonel Garland and la Valliere had arrived only in time to celebrate the victory, and this pleased him.

This farewell supper to his guests had been arranged with great care. There was an abundance of good things, including venison, wild fowl, and choice speckled trout. The cooks had responded nobly to the task placed upon them, and as Pete King's eyes roamed over the table, he was quite satisfied at what they had done.

There had been much cooking, as well, for the soldiers and the prisoners. Although they camped in the open among the trees, they were served this evening with a special meal in honor of the occasion. That England and France were at war with each other was forgotten as all joined in the repast which had been provided. And the few Indians present were not overlooked. Squatted upon the ground they enjoyed the food served to them, wondering, perhaps, why the English and French, who had been such bitter enemies a few days before, were now eating together in peace and harmony.

The rangers were in a rollicking mood. This was a great occasion to them, and they were determined to make the most of

it. When they had eaten, they drank the health of their guests, sang songs, especially old chansons, cheered the leaders at the head of the table when they spoke, and smoked strong tobacco to their hearts' content.

Helen was greatly interested in all that took place, as she sat by Grey Martell, with Madame Marguerite at her side. She liked the rangers, of whom she had heard so much, even though she was somewhat embarrassed at the glances of admiration they cast upon her. They seemed so happy and free from care. How proud Pete King must be of such men. He seemed very wonderful to her. A man who could control such a band of reckless rovers, and do it without strict military rules, must be no ordinary leader.

It was Judith la Valliere, however, who claimed her chief attention. She was seated at her father's side, and although she appeared to be enjoying all that was taking place around her, Helen noticed that the food upon her plate remained almost untouched. At times she made a pretence of eating, but that was all. Helen believed she knew the reason, and her heart was full of sympathy for the noble girl who had done so much for her. With her lover a prisoner and his fate uncertain, what a trying ordeal this festive occasion must be to her proud sensitive nature.

During the supper Pete King glanced several times at Judith la Valliere. He also surmised the great effort she was making to be brave and cheerful. Once he detected a fleeting expression in her eyes and a seriousness upon her face which told their own tale. He smiled to himself as he thought of the news he had received that evening.

At length the moment arrived for which he had been waiting. He motioned to two rangers, who at once left the table. He then rose to his feet, and raised his right hand for silence. Talking at once ceased, and all turned expectantly towards the leader, wondering what he had to say, and the meaning of the sudden departure of the two rangers. Clouds of smoke were ascending from many pipes, and circling in fantastic wreaths about the flickering flames of the numerous candles. From where Helen and Grey sat, Pete King seemed like some weird, unnatural being, almost like a giant of other days as seen through the mist of wavering smoke.

An impressive silence followed Pete King's up-lifted hand, while all waited for him to speak.

"My friends," he at length began, "our festivity is almost ended, and I am sorry. It has been a wonderful night to me, and I do not expect to see its like again. But before we leave this room, there is something of considerable importance to be done. You wonder what I mean, and you shall soon know."

He ceased, looked towards the door, and waited. All eyes followed his, and several of the rangers stood up in eager curiosity. In another minute the two rangers entered, and between them walked Sebastien Villieu. Judith la Valliere gave a slight gasp, and leaned impulsively forward. Her hands were clenched hard together, and her staring eyes were fixed full upon the prisoner's face. She knew that a critical moment had arrived, but just what it would mean she had no idea. Her brain was in a tumult. Why had Villieu been brought here? Did Pete King intend to humiliate him in the presence of his rangers and his guests? He did not seem to her a man like that. But what other purpose could he have?

Villieu walked more like a victor than a prisoner. With head erect, proud-and defiant, he advanced to where Pete King was standing. Judith, keenly watching, felt a thrill of pride at his bearing. If he had cringed, trembled, or shown the least sign of embarrassment, she would have despised him. But now she breathed a sigh of relief. He was again her ideal of manhood, such as she had cherished in her heart before he had chosen loyalty to love.

As the two leaders stood face to face, a breathless silence reigned in the room. Pete King was the first to speak.

"Monsieur Villieu, I have asked you to come here, as I wish to speak to you in the presence of this company. You came out against the League of the Crimson Sign at the order of your commander. You did all you could. I know something of what it meant to you, and I admire you for your loyalty, even though love called you elsewhere. You are a man after my own heart, and it is with the greatest pleasure that I restore to you your freedom."

Reaching down, Pete King lifted a sword from the floor, and held it forth, hilt foremost.

"I return this to you, my friend, and may you use it in a better cause after this."

Villieu was about to accept the weapon, but at Pete's closing words, his extended hand dropped. His face flushed, and a gleam of anger flashed into his eyes.

"It has ever been used in a worthy cause, Monsieur," he sharply retorted. "And if I receive it from you, I shall continue to

use it at the order of my commander. You should think carefully before returning it to me. You may rue your action."

"What commander?" Pete questioned.

"Monseigneur de Villebon, of course."

"Man, I like your spirit. But you will be surprised to learn that Villebon has abandoned his fort on the Nashwaak, and has fled to Quebec. You have no commander now, so you are your own master."

For the first time Villieu's calm self-possession vanished. He glanced quickly around the table until his eyes rested upon Judith la Valliere. He then advanced another step towards Pete King.

"Do you speak the truth?" he demanded in a trembling voice. "Or are you only mocking me?"

"It is the truth, Monsieur. I have the information from two of my rangers, and you can depend upon their word. They were near and saw everything that took place. When Villebon learned of the defeat of his men, and that Colonel Garland and Sieur de la Valliere had arrived, he was seized with panic, and fled with what garrison he had left. Even Father Elizee was forced to go, too. The fort is deserted, and so is the entire river. There is not a white person left anywhere. When Madame Louise, at the Oromocto, heard of what had taken place, and that she and her few people would be alone in a vast wilderness, she hastily collected her household effects and departed for Port Royal, taking all her workers with her."

Villieu stood very still, as if dazed by such news. Then he slowly lifted his hand and grasped the sword which Pete King was holding out to him.

"Thank you, Monsieur," he quietly said. "What you tell me is serious news. I can hardly believe it, and yet it must be true. My commander has deserted me! He made no effort to rescue me! Ah, I might have known it!... And I sacrificed so much in loyalty to him! But it is too late now!"

His head drooped, his tense body relaxed, and his iron will weakened. What had he to live for now? His commander had deserted him, and the girl he loved had rejected him with scorn. Where could he go? What could he do?

He was aroused by a light touch upon his arm. Glancing around, he saw Judith la Valliere by his side, looking into his face.

"I am here, Sebastien," she said. "Hold up your sword." As he did so, her right hand clasped his at the hilt. "Till death!" she cried.

"Till death!" Villieu repeated in a voice full of deep emotion.

Then followed a scene such as that building had never before witnessed, as Helen, Grey and the others closed around the lovers, and offered their congratulations. Cheer upon cheer sounded forth from the rangers, and they lifted up their strong glad voices in one verse of their martial song.

Swift as the feathers in an eagle's wing,
Yo-ho! Yo-ho! Yo-ho!
We are the League of the Crimson Sign,
We are the men of the Outer Line,
Yo-ho! Yo-ho! Yo-h-o-o!

THE END.

[The end of *The Crimson Sign* by Hiram Alfred Cody]