

ATHABASCA BILL

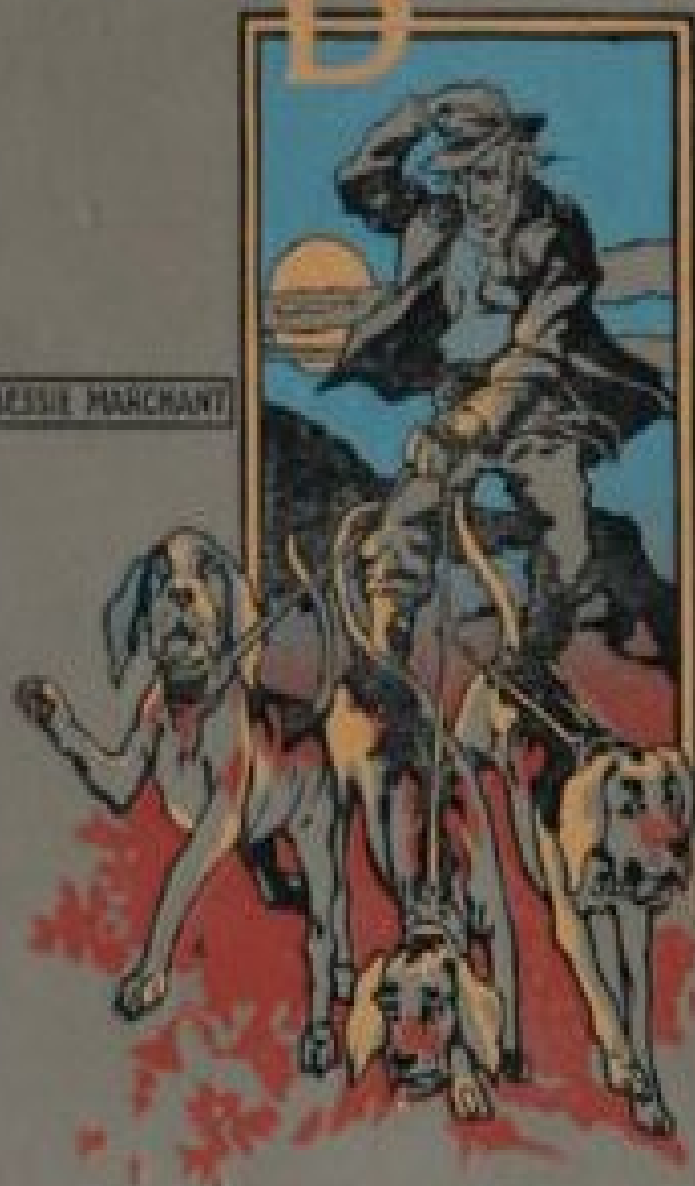
BY
BESSIE MARCHANT



SHELDON
PRESS

ATHABASCA BILL.

BESSIE MARCHANT



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ATHABASCA BILL WARMED UP SOME STEWED MEAT.

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ATHABASCA BILL

A Tale of the Far West

BY

BESSIE MARCHANT

(MRS. J. A. COMFORT)

AUTHOR OF "A BRAVE LITTLE COUSIN," "THE
MYSTERIOUS CITY," ETC.

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ATHABASCA BILL

CHAPTER I OLD MAN ARLO'S DOGS

The three Crawford boys, on their way home from school, paused as usual at Deerfoot Corner to listen to the deep-throated baying of old man Arlo's bloodhounds, and to peer through the narrow openings in the high staked-fence with the hope of seeing the bent, wizened old fellow out with the dogs, practising their trade of man-hunting.

It was always a mystery to the boys, that old man Arlo should devote so much time and trouble to the training of his two bloodhounds, since no one in the district ever needed their services in tracking down thieves, or finding runaways, for he lived in a miserable fashion, and was always pleading poverty, yet spent enough on his dogs to have maintained himself in decent comfort.

The baying was coming nearer—plainly the hounds were on the trail, so in order to avoid accidents, they swarmed up into the lower boughs of some roadside trees to see the fun. As a rule, especially if Ella were with them, they took to their heels, racing at top speed down the slope through Golden Grove, and across Joe Armstrong's lot, to their own holding at the far end of the valley.

But Ella was not at school to-day, and being unencumbered with a non-climber, they quickly made their way up to a safe roosting-place in the spreading boughs, then waited for the fun to begin.

"Why, there are three dogs to-day, and they are not hunting, but held in a leash!" exclaimed Fred, who by reason of his seniority and superior strength had climbed higher than the other two, and so caught sight of the dogs first.

"So he has," cried Sam, peering through the yellowing leaves. "Then it must be true what Ross Johnson said about old man Arlo having bought a dog, that has come

all the way from Montana, and can hunt a man through a crowded city street, yet never lose the trail. That is the one, that brown and white creature in the middle; easy to see which is the stranger, and, my word, but isn't it a beauty too!" and he gave vent to a long, low whistle of admiration, craning his neck so far out through the branches, that it was almost a miracle he did not overbalance himself and fall out of the tree, in front of the whimpering hounds that were straining so eagerly at the leash, as if anxious to be free and away across country tracking down something or some one from sheer love of hunting.

"Hullo, old man Arlo, where are you off to now?" piped out Johnny, the youngest of the three boys, in his shrill treble; he always wanted to know other people's business, and never scrupled to ask for information on the subject.

As a rule the old man was taciturn, and loth to gratify the curiosity of people, but to-day he was nearly as eager and excited as his dogs.

"I'm going to Millet—there has been a big robbery from the railway depôt, and the inspector has sent for me to bring my dogs to help 'em in tracking the thieves; so I'm reckoning that them wrong-doers are pretty nigh as good as convicted already," replied the old man, with a knowing wink, and a vicious pull at the leash, for the dogs were straining at it so hard that they nearly dragged him off his feet in their eagerness to go forward.

"When was the robbery?" called out Fred. "I was over at the depôt with our team yesterday, and I heard no talk of anything having been taken then, nor did there seem anything much to steal except a few empty freight cars, and nobody would want bloodhounds to track them with, I should think."

"Ah, it doesn't ever do to judge by appearances," retorted the old man, with a sly chuckle. "There was a little box standing in one corner of the office, that was worth double the value of every freight car on the depôt, and it is that box that was stolen last night, the thief getting clear away, and nobody none the wiser until this mornin'."

"What was in the box?" piped Johnny, whilst Sam whistled again, in wonder this time that anything so valuable should be left in the office, instead of being locked away in the safe.

"They say the box was chock full of dollars—five hundred of 'em, and they'd been labelled nails, so that no one should suspicion them for anything of more value. I reckon the thief that went for to steal that box o' nails made eyes as big as glass marbles when he saw what that box had in it really."

"Will your dogs be able to catch the thief?" called out Johnny, more shrilly than before, for the old man was moving on again, the straining of the hounds serving to

tow him along.

But he turned to nod in token of assent, at the same time grimacing so hideously that the boys shivered in spite of themselves, because his face was so full of malevolence, and his reputation matched his appearance.

They watched until a bend in the road hid him from sight, then, with a little start of recollection, Fred began to scramble down from his perch among the branches. "Come along, boys, we must run for it now, for we've wasted quite ten minutes, and I promised mother I'd be home early to do the milking, because Dolt Simpson has to go to the mill this afternoon."

Away raced the three boys like the wind, Johnny's short legs twinkling along in the rear of the other two, as he made plucky efforts to keep up.

It was fairly easy going as they pelted down Golden Grove, but part of the way across Joe Armstrong's lot was very rough and heavy, so that Sam and Johnny speedily dropped behind, though Fred raced on, taking the short way across the potato-patch when their own land was reached, jumping the rows in a series of quick bobbing leaps like a kangaroo.

The Crawford homestead was only a small square house, standing in an enclosure, around which were built other houses and sheds, all of the same rough unpainted wood. A belt of spruce firs and hardy larches on the north broke the worst violence of the wind from that quarter, sheltering the young apple and pear trees planted there. It was a bare dreary-looking spot, but the Crawfords loved it because it was home, and a pang shot through Fred's heart as he neared it, knowing as he did that in all probability this time next year would see the old place in the hands of strangers, whilst they would be settled further away in the wilds, where land could be had for next to nothing.

Just as he reached the fence, over which he was preparing to take a flying leap to save time, instead of going round to the gate, a rosy-faced girl came rushing out of the house, and flung her hands up in joyful gesticulation about something or other, whilst she shouted something Fred could not hear.

"What is it?" he panted, thinking at first his sister was reproaching him for coming home late.

"Father has come home from Athabasca," she shouted again, her voice plainly audible this time.

"Hurrah!" cried Fred in a rather broken-winded fashion, owing to his want of breath, then without staying to shout the good news to Sam, who was ever so far behind, whilst Johnny was not even in sight, he rushed on towards the house.

"When did father come, Ella, and where is he now?" he panted, tugging at the

strap of his bookbag, and nearly wrenching it asunder in his haste to get it off.

"He is out in the barn, I think; here, I will take your bag, and oh, Fred, he has found a place that he likes, so we shall have to go," she cried, catching her breath in a sharp little sob.

"Where?" he demanded quickly, pausing for her answer, whilst his heart gave a painful bound.

"He will tell you; I don't think the place has got a name yet, but it is somewhere by the Wabamun Lake, beyond Stony Plain and Spruce Grove," said Ella, in a tone which seemed to imply that the prospect was anything but inviting.

Fred whistled softly, but said nothing in answer, only rushed away to the barn to find his father, who had been away in the wilds prospecting for a fresh place of settlement ever since the close of harvest.

Maitland Crawford was a man with a passion for the wilderness pure and simple, and when a district became fairly settled, he felt crowded, and, longing for elbow room, yearned for a new location beyond the bounds of civilization.

It had not been an easy matter to take up new ground whilst the children were babies, but now that Fred was turned fifteen, and Johnny, the youngest, nearly nine, this obstacle seemed in a fair way of being removed, and so Mr. Crawford had set to work in good earnest on the task of finding a new home.

He was busy sharpening a saw when Fred entered the barn, but turned to greet his son with a bright smile, and a warm nod of greeting.

"I've got home again, you see, sonny; and, what is more, I've found what I have been looking for."

"Ella said you had dropped on a place you liked out by Wabamun Lake," Fred replied, with as much interest as he could muster on the spur of the moment, for he would not disappoint his father if he could help it, distasteful as he found the prospect of a change.

"Yes, that I have; it is rather rough at present, but when we've a house built, it will be a snug location, I can tell you; wood and water in plenty, and more game than you boys will manage to shoot in the next ten years. I saw a black bear the night I spent in a shack on the lake shore; but there, I mustn't begin talking of all I've seen and done, or I shall not be finished with this saw by supper-time," and Mr. Crawford turned back to his saw with a resolute air.

"I must stir round too, for I've got to milk, because Dolly has gone to the mill," Fred said, his face brighter now, and his voice eager, because of that mention of black bear.

There was over an hour of steady hard work got through before he had a

chance to talk with his father again; by that time it was dark, and they were all washing their hands for supper, at the little sink out on the back porch, when Johnny, who was polishing his face very hard with a rough towel, asked shrilly—

“May I have that little wooden box that is out in the barn, father?—I mean the one you brought home with you to-day?”

“I don’t know what box you mean, Johnny; but certainly I did not bring it home with me to-day,” replied Mr. Crawford, turning to enter the kitchen where supper was spread.

“Then I wonder how it came there,” went on Johnny, in a puzzled tone; “I asked Dolt Simpson if he had put it in the barn, but he did not know anything about it, and it wasn’t there last night when I went to look for the eggs.”

“What box are you speaking of, Johnny?” asked Celia, coming out just then from her bedroom, where she had been lying down most of the day with a bad headache. In age she came midway between Ella and Sam, but owing to her severe headaches and general weakness, was often compelled to stay away from school for weeks at the stretch.

“It is a nice little wooden box with a lid and a fastening, and it has ‘copper nails’ printed in big letters on the top; I found it hidden away behind the big board, where the two speckled hens mostly lay their eggs,” explained Johnny, at some length.

“I know, I saw it there when I rushed out to the barn, after father came home, to look for eggs for supper,” remarked Ella, who was hovering between the stove and the table busy with cooking. “I thought father had brought the box, because he went to the barn before he came indoors, but I forgot about it again until now.”

“We will step out to the barn and have a look at it after supper, for certainly a box could not walk into the barn, having no legs,” rejoined Mr. Crawford, with an easy laugh. “But supper is the first consideration.”

“Yes, indeed it is,” replied his wife; “for I expect you have not had very many comfortable meals during the last few weeks.”

“I think I could reckon them up on the fingers of one hand,” Mr. Crawford said, with a laugh, as he took his place at the table.

Then the children began to clamour for the story of his adventures, so that the supper-time seemed likely to be prolonged indefinitely. Dolt Simpson, the hired man, had gone home, and the father and mother were alone with their children, a reunited family once more; and no one was willing to break the spell of happiness by making a move to leave the table, until Mrs. Crawford said that it was high time Sam and Johnny went to bed. The latter began to clamour then for the little wooden box to be brought from the barn, and Mr. Crawford, reaching for his cap, said he would

go and fetch it, when there came the sounds of dogs baying in the distance.

“Why, I believe it must be old man Arlo’s bloodhounds on the trail!” exclaimed Fred, starting up in surprise.





CHAPTER II

A GREAT SHOCK

Old man Arlo's dogs?" echoed Mr. Crawford, in great bewilderment. "What would he be doing with them out at this time of night? It is so dark that you can hardly see your hand, if you hold it up in front of your face, and it would be but little lighter out in the open."

"I suppose they want to work the trail while it is fresh," answered Fred. "Old man Arlo told us there had been a robbery from the railway dépôt at Millet, and that he had been sent for to bring his dogs to track the thief. He would have had about time to go to Millet and come back again, if he stepped out briskly, that is, and the dogs were towing him along at a great pace when we saw him as we came home from school."

"I thought they only used bloodhounds when some big crime had been committed, like murder, for instance," said Ella, with a rather frightened face, coming to the door to peep out under her father's arm at the blackness of the night.

"I expect they are using the dogs now to save the expense of sending for a detective," said Mr. Crawford carelessly, putting his arm closer round her, and stooping to kiss her hair. "I came through Millet myself early this morning, but I heard nothing of the robbery. I ought to have been home a good bit sooner, but I was so dead tired, that when I sat down in that little wood bordering Pearson's lot, to eat my breakfast, I fell asleep, and didn't wake for nearly five hours."

"Poor, dear daddy! Didn't you go to bed at all last night?" asked Ella, in great concern, as she nestled closer in the arm that enfolded her.

"No, nor yet for a good many previous nights. It was cooler walking at night, and so I slept a bit in the day-time, when the sun saved the cost of blankets in keeping me warm; it will be a real treat to sleep in a bed to-night, and I don't mean to be late in getting there, but first we will go and get that box from the barn that Johnny is so excited about. Have you got the lantern, Fred?"

"Yes, father; here it is," answered the boy, coming forward with a lighted hurricane lantern, and the two went off together, Mr. Crawford coughing badly as he stepped out into the chill night air.

"Maitland, Maitland, put your comforter round your throat, or you will be getting bronchitis," called Mrs. Crawford, who had come to stand beside her daughter in the doorway.

"All right, mother," rang out the cheery response. "But I can't do it, by reason that I gave it away to a poor fellow who was sleeping rough last night, and I haven't screwed my courage up high enough to confess to my wrong-doing yet," he said to Fred, with a merry laugh, and little dreaming the misery that act of kindly charity was to bring to him and his.

"One of the girls can make you another, but you ought not to be out in the night air without something warm round your throat," Fred said, as he flashed the light of his lantern in at the doorway of the barn. His father had a delicate chest and throat, which made some little care necessary on winter or autumn nights.

Mr. Crawford did not reply at the moment; he was groping his way past a pile of hen-coops, to where the big board was leaning against the wall of the barn; then stooping down and feeling about with his hand, he presently drew forth the wooden box which had so excited Johnny's envy and admiration. It was well made and strong, but quite empty, and except the words "copper nails," had nothing about it to explain its use, or serve as a means of identification.

"Well, this is funny!" exclaimed Mr. Crawford, backing out from the neighbourhood of the coops, to where Fred stood with the lantern on the threshold of the barn. "I'm certain I never saw the box before—have you, sonny?"

"No, father," replied Fred with decision, and then there came flashing into his head what old man Arlo had said about the box of nails that was stolen from the railway dépôt, and which had contained something so much more valuable than mere nails. It was on his tongue to speak of it, and to express a wonder whether the thief had brought the box to hide it in their barn, with the intention of diverting suspicion from the proper quarter.

But the words were never spoken, for as they stood there just outside the barn door, both absorbed in the mystery of the box, there came the sound of a panting breath close at hand, then a lithe brown and white body with gleaming eyes sprang out of the darkness, and with a roar like an enraged lion, sought to fix its fangs in Mr. Crawford's throat.

Taken by surprise as he was, however, he was yet too quick for the creature; thrusting his arm forward in a wild instinctive effort at self-preservation, he caught the

animal's grip on the leather sleeve of his short jacket.

Before Fred, who seemed half paralyzed with fear, could spring forward to his father's rescue, two more dogs rushed out of the darkness to assist the first in dragging their quarry to the ground, but at the sound of Mr. Crawford's voice, as he shouted to his son, they suddenly commenced to fawn upon him with every appearance of love and affection, though the hound which had seized him first still clung to his arm with a fierce, unrelenting grip, growling horribly, as if daring the unfortunate victim to strike a blow in his own defence.

Mr. Crawford, however, stood quite still, talking in soothing, friendly fashion to the two dogs which crouched fawning at his feet, but not attempting to irritate the creature that had its fangs fixed in his sleeve.

"Father, what shall I do to help you?" cried Fred, in a voice quivering with horror, for this sudden attack out of the blackness of the night seemed to have robbed him of the resourceful courage which usually stood him in such good stead.

"Nothing. Stand quite still, and don't anger the beast, until its master comes up; I expect I happened to cross its trail, and so am the victim of an ugly mistake. Ah, here they come!" ejaculated Mr. Crawford, as the flickering lights of lanterns, and the sound of men's voices, came round the angle of the barn.

"Ah, the good dog has got him, sure enough!" cried an eager, rasping voice, then dim forms came plunging forward, and a man with a heavy hand gripped Maitland Crawford by the arm, saying gruffly—

"So the beast ran you, down, mister; well, it's no use crying over spilt milk, and seeing you've been found out, why, you'd best come along quietly; it will pay in the end, you know."

"No, I don't know; and I tell you plainly, officer, that I don't intend budging a foot from here until I know what it is I am accused of, and the nature of the evidence leading to this attempt at arrest; I am surely entitled to so much consideration in a free country like this. But I will thank you to call off this brute of a dog," said Maitland Crawford, in a steady tone.

"Why, surely it ain't never you, Mr. Crawford?" cried the thin, rasping voice of old man Arlo, in dismayed query, as he came up panting heavily, and holding his lantern high, in order that he might see clearly the face of the captive.

"It certainly is no one else. But are you going to call the dog off, or must I kill the beast in self-defence?" demanded Mr. Crawford impatiently.

"Down, Jenny; down, lass; good dog; leave it alone!" cried old man Arlo, seizing the hound by the collar, and slipping the leash through it, dragged the creature away by main force, though it whimpered and cried, struggling vainly to maintain the grip of

its prey; but there was a quivering horror in the old man's tone, and when the dog was securely fastened, he exclaimed in consternation, "It surely wasn't never you what took them things from the depôt?"

"I may be able to deny the charge with more force, when I know to what it is you are referring," replied Mr. Crawford; and then he turned again to the man who was holding him in custody, demanding the explanation that was so tardy in coming.

That individual began at once to tell, in a jumbled and half-incoherent fashion, of the robbery at the depôt on the previous night, when a third man, who had been silent hitherto, chanced to flash the light of his lantern on the box which Mr. Crawford had been to the barn to fetch, but which the onslaught of the dog had flung from his grasp on to the ground.

"Why, here's the very identical box what had the dollars in it!" he cried out excitedly. "Why, we've caught him red-handed and in the act, as you may say."

"So it is; now, who would have thought it?" and the burly inspector, who had Mr. Crawford in his grip, let go his hold in sheer amazement for a moment, whilst he peered at the wooden box Johnny had wanted so badly. Then he said in a serious tone, "I'm afraid I must lock you up to-night, Mr. Crawford; for taken altogether, the case against you seems uncommon clear. That box labelled 'copper nails,' but containing in reality five hundred dollars, was stolen from the railway depôt at Millet some time during last night."

"But father didn't know the box was here until the children told him, and they only found it in the barn by accident. Father has been away for weeks, and only came home this afternoon," burst out Fred, with impetuous haste.

"Of course, if Mr. Crawford can prove an alibi, will let him go to-morrow with an apology, but we can't do without the pleasure of his company to-night nohow," replied the burly inspector.

"I should like to know how it was suspicion fastened itself on me to begin with, apart from that box, I mean," Mr. Crawford said, with a nod of his head in the direction of the box, which the third man had appropriated, and was holding with as jealous care as if it still contained the five hundred dollars.

"We found a scarf, a sort of long woollen comforter, lying in the office, as if the thief had dropped it by accident; there was a cap, too, but that was so soaking wet we thought it wouldn't hold scent, so trusted to the scarf. Then we sent a message to old man Arlo to bring his dogs along, and giving the scarf to the brutes for scent, they brought us straight here and pulled you down," explained the officer.

"Only one dog tried it on; look at the other two," said Mr. Crawford, pointing to the two hounds that lay resting at his feet, one of them licking his boot in an

affectionate fashion.

“Ah, old Ruby would sooner pull me down, than stick a tooth in you, Mr. Crawford, and it’s about the same with Smiler; they’ve long memories, them bloodhounds, and they don’t forget in a hurry when a person has been good to them. But it is a mistake, Mr. Crawford; I am quite sure it was a mistake to arrest you,” said old man Arlo, in tremulous agitation.

“That is my own opinion also, only, unfortunately, I don’t seem able to prove it,” replied Mr. Crawford, with a sigh of impatience, for he was very tired, and it was distinctly worrying to be met by a charge like this on the first day of his return, more especially as from the nature of his wanderings, he might find some difficulty in establishing an alibi; then he asked abruptly, “Have you the scarf here? I should like to see it.”

“Here it is,” said the officer, pulling from his pocket a knitted muffler of grey wool.

“I thought so,” groaned Mr. Crawford, when he had inspected the scarf by the light of the lanterns; “that is, or was, my comforter, but I gave it away last night to a poor fellow that I thought was worse off than myself, and this is what has come of it.”

“I’m sorry to hear it, Mr. Crawford, ’pon my word I am; it makes things so much more awkward for you. There don’t seem no more to be said about it though, and so I suppose we’d better be moving. The moon will be up in less than another hour, so we shan’t find it quite so dark going back to Millet,” the officer said, with great concern in his tone, being honestly sorry for the farmer, who had borne such a good character before.

It was on Mr. Crawford’s tongue to say that he must go indoors and make some sort of an explanation to his wife before letting the law take its course, when there came the sound of Ella’s voice calling to him from the back porch, “Father, dear father, when are you coming indoors, or do you mean to stay out in the barn all night?”

He shivered then as if smitten with sudden ague, and said in a low, hurried tone to Fred, “I can’t face telling them; you’ll have to do it for me, sonny. The hardest bit of work you ever set your hand to, I guess, but you’ll do it for my sake. Tell them, if you like, that I’m called away on sudden, unexpected business to-night, and you can leave the details to the morning.”

“But, father, they will feel so bad about it, if you go without a word; and, besides, I’m coming too; they will lock us up together, then we can talk things over a bit,” said Fred, tumbling his words out in a great hurry.

“Go in quietly, then, and ask your mother to come out here, but don’t let the children come, for they would begin to cry, and I—I don’t think I could bear it,” Mr. Crawford replied, in a low, choked tone.





CHAPTER III

THE MYSTERY GROWS

Mrs. Crawford, although slight and frail in appearance, was endowed with more courage than most women; so when Fred called her out from the warm, lighted kitchen that night, into the chill darkness of the night, and told her of his father's arrest, she did not scream or faint, as a weaker woman might have done; but after a short gasp, as if the tidings of disaster had taken her breath away, said bravely—

"You must certainly go with your father to-night, Fred, and then if he is not released after examination to-morrow, you must come home to me, and we will see what is best to be done."

"Mother, you're a real brick!" cried Fred fervently, as he piloted her round the angle of the barn, to where the little group of men and boys awaited his coming.

She smiled faintly, and slipped a trembling hand through his arm to steady her steps.

"Most people have the capacity in them for rising to the occasion, whatever the occasion may be, and I would not add another straw to your father's burden of care just now," she whispered, just as they reached the group waiting for them in the shelter of the barn wall.

Mr. Crawford shook off the grip of the inspector's hand, and moving a step forward, took his wife in his arms.

"My poor Emily, if only I could have spared you this sorrow! But you don't believe I took those things, do you?" he asked, with a yearning pain in his voice.

"Of course I don't. What do you take me for, Maitland, if you think I would join the ranks of doubters at the first breath of suspicion?" she cried indignantly. "Why, I wouldn't believe you guilty though all the world declared you so, if only you told me yourself that you were innocent."

"As I am," he replied quickly; then went on in a slower, graver tone, "but it is easy to see that I shall have considerable trouble in proving it, for the evidence

against me looks overwhelming. The finding of the stolen box in my barn, the fact that my woollen comforter was found on the floor of the room from whence the box was stolen, and then the bloodhounds running me down in this fashion, will all tell against me at the examination.”

“Never mind,” she said, in brave, encouraging tones. “And don’t be depressed even if you are committed for trial, Maitland. Being innocent, it is next to impossible that you should be brought in guilty, since there is a God in Heaven to protect the weak and champion the cause of those who have no helper. The children and I can run the farm for a few weeks, as we have done since you have been away in Athabasca; and I will take care that Dolty Simpson has no chance to loaf round, wasting his time.”

“I think we had best be moving soon, Mr. Crawford; it is a goodish step back to Millet, and there is nothing to be gained by delay,” said the officer who had taken him into custody, feeling that it was really kinder to shorten the tribulation of the parting.

Mrs. Crawford let her husband go without another word; then bidding Fred hurry back in the morning, as soon as there was any tidings to bring her, she stood white-faced, but tearless, to watch the dreary little procession move off.

The man from the railway dépôt, who had identified the box, walked first, and after him, the burly inspector, the prisoner and Fred, whilst old man Arlo and his three dogs brought up the rear, Montana Jenny still whimpering and straining at the leash, as if anxious to spring again on the quarry that she had run down so successfully. But the other two walked along with hanging heads, as if entirely ashamed of the business in hand, as indeed they would have been, poor beasts, if the full importance of that night’s work could have been made clear to them.

Next to old man Arlo himself they loved Mr. Crawford, being sagacious enough to know that they owed their lives to his kindness; and as their master had said of them, they had long memories, and did not forget in a hurry.

One day in the previous winter there had been a fearful blizzard, and old man Arlo, who had gone to the town, was forced to stay there for three days, until it was possible for him to make his way back. But the dogs had been left at home, and must have been nearly starved, perhaps quite, had not Mr. Crawford chanced to hear them howling, and guessing from the sound that something was wrong, gone to discover what ailed the creatures. Finding them shut up without food or water, he had stayed to relieve their wants, even lighting a fire to cook them a good warm meal, and thaw the water for them to drink. Being almost as sagacious as human beings, and endowed with a lively sense of gratitude, the dogs understood who it

was had saved them from a lingering death of cold and hunger, and loved him accordingly. So that when the trail they had all three followed from Millet railway depôt ended in the man whose hand had fed them, the two lay down and licked his feet, leaving Montana Jenny to do her best, or worst, alone.

Although Mrs. Crawford had borne up so bravely under the terrible shock of her husband's arrest, she broke down completely when she had to go back to the house, and tell her other children what had happened.

Sam and Johnny were frolicking about like squirrels at nutting-time, whilst Ella and Celia, though pretending to clear the table, were in reality joining in the fun, when, white of face, and sick at heart, their mother entered the house, and told them of what had happened to their father.

They came about her then, the two boys crying noisily, the girls quiet but with quivering lips, and the sudden plunge from happy mirth to bitter sorrow broke her down utterly.

"Mother, don't cry so badly; why, you could not weep more if father were really guilty, instead of merely being accused of a thing," Ella said sharply, for to her such a demonstration of grief savoured of disloyalty to the father she loved so dearly.

"Hush, dear, it will make her feel better to cry," whispered Celia, who, although she was younger, had through suffering gained a keener insight into the hearts of others.

It was a night long to be remembered by the mother and her girls. Sam and Johnny went to bed and cried themselves to sleep in half-an-hour. But although Mrs. Crawford and her daughters put out the lamp, and lay down together on their bed, no sleep came to them, and they lay through the long hours waiting for the morning, longing for the cheerful light of the dawning, yet dreading with heavy, aching hearts what the day might bring.

The morning, however, did not end the sickening apprehension, and the hours lagged along more slowly than ever. Sam and Johnny were sent off to school, but Mrs. Crawford let the girls stay at home with her, knowing how impossible it would be for them to apply themselves to lessons, and glad to have the comfort of their presence in that silent house.

Dolty Simpson had taken holiday, and gone off to the inquiry before the magistrate, so that farm work was entirely at a standstill.

"It makes me think of Sunday somehow, though it is the most horrid Sunday I have ever known," said Ella, as she and Celia fed the poultry, then turned the horses and cows out to find their food in the pastures, where the pigs were already feeding.

"I think it is like that day two years ago, when mother was so ill, and father was

not at home; do you remember how anxious we were, and afraid she would die, because she was in such fearful pain?"

"Yes, I remember," said Ella. "But Fred was at home that day, and things never seem quite so bad when he is on hand to help keep us cheerful. I suppose that is why to-day seems sadder than that other day."

"God heard our prayers then, and made mother well again, so maybe He will hear us now, and send our father back to us, cleared from this dreadful charge," Celia replied softly, with a rapt look on her pale little face.

Ella brushed her hand hastily across her face, to flick away the tears that would come, then the two went back to their mother, and to the weary waiting, which seemed as if it would never end.

The shadows were lengthening, and it was almost time for the children to be coming home from school, before Fred returned from Millet.

His face was white and weary, and his whole bearing so expressive of acute depression, that the questions which sprang to their lips were not uttered, and they waited in silence for him to speak.

"Father is committed for trial on the charge of having robbed the railway company," Fred said, in a dry, formal tone, as if he were repeating a lesson.

Mrs. Crawford moved her pale lips as if in reply, but no sound came, and there was a strained hush through the room, until Ella asked, in a puzzled fashion—

"Why did they send him for trial? I thought if a person stole a thing, or was supposed to have stolen it, they received punishment straight away."

"So they do sometimes; that is, if a man steals a pig, or a cow, or a load of fence-rails, and it can be proved against him, the magistrate sentences him to as big a penalty as the law will allow. But they can't prove anything against father, though the evidence is so strong; that is why they are sending the case for trial. Tom Saunders told me he believed a clever lawyer could have got father off to-day, by showing that there was no case against him, even though suspicion would have clung to him still," Fred said moodily, dropping on to a chair which stood just inside the door, as if he were too weary to stand on his feet any longer.

"How no case?" asked Mrs. Crawford, lifting her bowed head with a jerk, whilst a momentary gleam of relief and hope shone in her sad eyes.

"Tom says that to begin with, it was a fraud against the railway people to send five hundred dollars packed up as copper nails, and that the people to be prosecuted should be the consignees of the box. Then the evidence against father had so many thin places in it, that it must have broken down altogether, but for the finding of the box in our barn, and father's declaration that the comforter found in the

station house belonged to him," Fred said vehemently, clenching his hands in sudden anger at the untowardness of things.

Mrs. Crawford sighed, shaking her head a little sadly, and remaining silent, for really things looked so black that for the moment she felt crushed.

Ella and Celia were also silent, but, after a moment's pause, Fred burst out passionately—

"There's more behind, only I get so choked with rage when I think about it that I don't know how to get the words out. You remember the cap, a fur cap it was, that was found just by the office window, only they couldn't use it as scent because it was so soaking wet?"

Mrs. Crawford nodded, and again the hopeful light came into her eyes, but she said nothing, for speech just then was impossible to her.

"Directly father saw the cap he knew it, and so did I, for it is pretty certain there can't be another cap in the Dominion like it."

"It was surely not that cap of Athabasca Bill's?" cried Ella with a jump.

"I am sure of it; you know what an extraordinary looking thing it was—the crown of silver fox skin, one lappet of squirrel, and one of white rabbit. Why, I should have known the thing if I had stumbled on it in Central Asia, or Peru," replied Fred stormily. "It is that which has put me in such a rage to-day, thinking what a wretch Athabasca Bill must be to try and throw the blame of his wickedness on father, by hiding the box in our barn!"

"Fred, I'm quite sure that Athabasca Bill would never do such a thing," interrupted Mrs. Crawford. "Think of the weeks we nursed and cared for him last winter, when he was so sick. Why, it isn't in human nature to be so ungrateful; there is some mistake somewhere, I am quite confident; he may even have given his cap away in charity, just in the same way that your father bestowed his comforter on the poor fellow with the cough."

"That is what father said, and he thinks if only Athabasca Bill could be found, we should most likely get some clue to who the thief really was," replied Fred.

"The trouble is where to find a wanderer like that," sighed his mother, pressing one hand to her throbbing brow.

"Father told me that he saw him only the day before yesterday; met him in the hilly country the other side of the railway," Fred answered excitedly.

"Then, my boy, you must go in search of him; if he is as near as that, it should not be a hard task to hunt him out. But, hard or easy, it must be done to save your father's good name," Mrs. Crawford exclaimed.

"I'll find him, mother, never fear," replied Fred blithely, little recking what the

search would involve, or where it would lead him.





CHAPTER IV

WHERE WAS ATHABASCA BILL?

Fred awoke with a start, sat up, rubbed his eyes and shivered, wondering for a moment where he was, and what had happened to him.

Then in a flash recollection came back—he was on tramp in search of Athabasca Bill; this was his third night away from home, but the first time that it had been necessary for him to sleep out.

On the very first day of his journey, he had pounced on the trail of the man he sought, and gained so much information on the subject, that he confidently expected to overhaul him in the course of the next two or three days.

Fred's first night had been spent at Green Forks Creamery, twelve miles the other side of the railway from his home, and after earning his supper by two hours' work at wood-chopping, had turned in upon a lump of fragrant hay in the stable-loft to get his night's rest.

He was not alone, however; a genial Irishman, known in those parts as Creamery Pat, being his companion, and from him Fred learned that Athabasca Bill had called at the creamery on the previous day, and had taken orders for furs that were waiting for him there, telling Pat when he left that he meant to make his way by Strawberry Creek, and Rocky Raps, to Chip Lake, and Lobstick River, where there was a good winter hunting ground.

An hour's wood-chopping next morning had earned Fred as much breakfast as he could eat, with something over for dinner; and then he was away hot-foot on the trail again, heading now for Strawberry Creek.

The second night he spent in a lumber camp, where also Athabasca Bill had been heard of, one of the lumbermen having seen and spoken with him on the previous day. So Fred set forward again on the next morning in hopeful spirits, but so footsore as to be very much slower in getting over the ground.

Civilization was growing sparse and scanty now, and he had to chiefly rely for guidance on the section stumps, standing up here and there in the knee-high willow

scrub, or the blazed and numbered tree-trunks in the heavy-timbered lands. A town boy must have been badly scared at the wide solitudes, but Fred's up-bringing had admirably fitted him for his task, and he was not nearly so frightened in the wilds as he would have been in a big city crowd.

A company of ragged Indians, journeying south-ward to the Ponoka Reservations, were the only human beings he had seen since mid-day, and when at dusk he came to a deserted lumber camp, he resolved to stay there until the next morning, through fear of going further and faring worse.

His supper that night was but a scanty one, whilst the prospect of breakfast was so remote as to be problematical; but being desperately tired with his long tramp, Fred ate what there was, then lay down to sleep, wisely leaving the question of the morrow's food to take care of itself until the next day should dawn.

But the day had come now, and something else with it, as he realized with a jump of amazement on opening his eyes and looking round. He had gone to sleep the previous night in the shelter of a half-ruined log hut, known in those parts as a shack, one side of which was open to the weather, whilst through the open spaces of the roof he could see plainly the opal-tinted morning sky. It was not the delicate tints of sunrise which so much surprised him, however, but the gambolling of some lively black animals in the open space before the shack.

At the first glance he had thought them to be goats, but a second look revealed them for what they were, the sprightly cubs of a huge black bear, which was quietly feeding a little distance away on some roots grubbed from behind a heap of fallen logs.

For a moment or two Fred lay quite still, watching the gambols of the sportive cubs, at the same time keeping a watchful, wary eye on Mrs. Bear, feeling uncommonly nervous all the while, black bears not being the kind of creature most desirable for companionship in the wilderness, to a person unprovided with the means of self-defence.

It would not have been so embarrassing if there had been a back door to the shack, since in that case he might have slipped out in an unobtrusive fashion, and so got clear off without disturbing the happy family. As it was, he had to think of some other way, and to make haste about it, for the cubs were rolling and tumbling nearer and nearer to where he lay, and who should say but what their mother might not take it in her head to stroll in that direction also?

The thought made him go cold all over; then summoning his courage up to one great effort, he sprang to his feet and rushed shouting and yelling from the shack, throwing up his arms, jumping and prancing as if he had gone suddenly crazy.

The effect of his noisy demonstration was magical; the two cubs went up trees like cats, jumping three or four feet up on to the trunks, whilst the portly dame, their mother, scuttled away into the willow scrub like a frightened rabbit.

It took Fred a minute to realize that the bears were quite as much afraid of him as he was of them, and then he burst into a loud laugh, which echoed and re-echoed through the lonely forest reaches.

When his mirth had subsided a little, he began to think of the scanty supper of last night, and to wonder where that morning's breakfast was to come from. He had some money in his pocket, it is true, but money was of little use in the wilderness, where there was nothing to buy; so drawing his belt a little tighter, he set forward again, steering his way as on the previous day, by means of the section posts.

It was terribly lonely work, however, and he was getting nervous and fidgety, as well as desperately hungry, when about two hours before noon, he stumbled on to a little encampment in the willow scrub on the banks of a tiny stream, where a young man and his sister were camping under a cart, until they had built themselves a hut to live in.

The latter, a brisk, bright girl of twenty or so, seized Fred by the shoulders, and gave him a kind of elder-sisterly shake.

"Have you run away from home, my lad?" she demanded, her comprehensive glance taking in Fred's carefully mended clothes, his good, stout boots, and his tired, hungry face.

"No; that I did not. My mother sent me, and I'm on the track of Athabasca Bill; but it is rather a long story, and if you, please, would sell me some breakfast, I would tell you more afterwards, for I am just dreadfully hungry," Fred said, with an eager sniff, for the odours coming from a pot simmering over a fire near by were quite tantalizingly savoury.

"Breakfast!" she exclaimed, with a merry laugh. "It is dinner you mean, I should think, Frederic John Crawford, unless, indeed, it is fashionable city hours that you keep."

"Oh, I got up early enough, the bears took care of that; they were as good as an alarum clock," Fred replied, with a laugh; then he sat down suddenly on a convenient log that lay near, feeling so sick and giddy that he could not think what was going to happen to him.

"Suppose we call it lunch, by way of splitting the difference," she said merrily, as, seizing an iron ladle and a tin basin, she proceeded to dip out a portion of the steaming, savoury stew, which she handed to Fred, giving him a wooden spoon to eat with. "I hope you don't object to tin basins and wooden spoons, Frederic John

Crawford; it is a little difficult to get silver, porcelain, and cut glass in the backwoods. If you had happened along twenty years later, when Tom and I had made our fortunes, things would have been a bit grander perhaps."

"Twenty years is rather long to wait for breakfast, and, my word, isn't this just good!" exclaimed Fred, drawing a long breath of satisfaction, and then getting nearly choked by a lump of pepper.

"You look as if you needed something that was good; your face had such a yearning, hungry look when you came into camp, that I began to feel nervous lest you should want to make a dinner off me," said the girl, who had told Fred that her name was Saidie Marsh.

"There is no telling what I might not have been tempted to do, if you had not given me something to eat so quickly," he replied, as with great carefulness he scraped every fragment of the stew from the sides of the tin basin, in order that none of it might be lost.

Saidie leaned back against a tree trunk and laughed as if this were the very best joke that she had heard for weeks, until her brother, who was splitting logs at a little distance, called out to know where the fun came in, and whether there was enough left to make it worth his while to come and laugh too.

Then Fred, taking advantage of a momentary lull in her mirth, ventured to inquire whether she would prefer to take payment in money or labour, adding modestly that he could split rails, or cut firewood, or anything else that she preferred.

"Well, then, I prefer that you shall just sit there and tell me why your mother sent you roaming about the woods alone looking for—what was the man's name?"

"Athabasca Bill. But I can talk and work too, and, please, I'd rather, as I am in a hurry, and it will save time, for I'm getting hot on his trail, and I'm more than anxious to overhaul him as soon as I can," Fred said urgently, adding, rather shyly, "unless, indeed, you would rather have money."

"No, no, boy, I don't want the money, nor the work either; sit still and rest yourself whilst you tell me your story, and then I'll give you a lump of bread and cheese to take with you, to save you from having to wait as long for your supper as you did for your breakfast," Saidie answered good-naturedly. Then she sat listening with keen interest, whilst he told her about his father's arrest on charge of a robbery that he had never committed, the finding of a cap that was unmistakably the one worn by Athabasca Bill, and his mother's belief that the wanderer would be able to throw some light on the mystery of the robbery at the depôt, or at least give them some clue to the perpetrator.

"But, boy, can't you see that most likely it was this man—Athabasca Bill, as you

call him—who stole the money, in which case it is not likely that he would be very anxious to assist in identifying the thief?” cried Saidie, in amazement at the innocent credulity which had sent Fred out alone on such a quest.

“Mother says she is quite sure he didn’t steal the money, and father says so too. Besides, it is next to impossible that he could have been in Millet at the time when the box disappeared, because father met him about noon in the hilly country this side of Millet, but quite thirty miles away; he was then going west, and even supposing he’d turned round and tracked father back to the town, he would still have been too late to steal that box, which was missed very early in the morning,” Fred replied, so earnestly that even Saidie was compelled to accept this view of the situation in part, though she still shook her head in a doubtful fashion.

“If this man, Athabasca Bill, could not possibly have committed the theft by reason of his distance from the dépôt, then the same holds good of your father surely?”

“It would do if he could prove his alibi, but that is just what he can’t do, for he did not see a single individual from the time he left Athabasca Bill, until the next morning, except a poor fellow tramping like himself, who had a terrible cough, and to whom father gave his comforter. We think that must have been the thief, because of the comforter being found afterwards in the dépôt.”

“Humph, I should think so too!” replied Saidie, with a dissatisfied frown wrinkling her face. “But what I fail to understand is what Athabasca Bill would be likely to know of this beggar, if he was so many miles away. Was the fellow wearing the cap when your father gave him the scarf?”

“It was dark, or nearly so, and father can’t remember what the man had on his head, but he said that he had been surprised to see Athabasca Bill without a cap at all; and when he asked him if he was going to turn Indian, or if his funds didn’t run to hats just then, Bill merely laughed, saying that he liked to be bareheaded.”

Saidie drew a long breath at this explanation, then said, with an air of decision—

“I think your mother was quite right, when she started you off to find Athabasca Bill.”





CHAPTER V

A STRANGE COINCIDENCE

Tom and Saidie Marsh were very good to Fred, trying hard to persuade him to stay until the next day, in order that he might get thoroughly rested.

But this Fred would not do, his burning anxiety to run down Athabasca Bill making him too restless to stay a minute longer on the way than necessity compelled him to do, so although he was footsore and tired, and the road to be traversed more lonely than ever, he was for setting forward again directly his hour of rest was at an end.

"Tom, how far is it across country to Errol's lumber camp?" demanded Saidie, with a puckering frown on her face, when she had exhausted all her eloquence in persuading Fred to stay longer, but to no purpose.

"A matter of fifteen miles, perhaps twenty; do you want to go over?" drawled Tom Marsh, in his slow, good-natured fashion, which was such a contrast to the brisk energy of Saidie's utterances.

"Yes, I do if you can spare me. I can sleep at Mrs. Errol's, and come back to-morrow. I shall take both horses, then the boy can ride one, and I can ride the other; you can manage single-handed for one day, then, when I come back to-morrow, I'll work double tides to make up for my little holiday," she said with a short laugh, and a little grimace which only Tom could see, and that was intended to inform him that she wished to go for the sake of helping their guest over a rough and tiresome piece of his road.

But Fred was quick to understand, and at once entered a protest.

"Oh, please don't trouble to come on my account; I can get through to Errol's by sundown, or if I don't I can sleep under a tree, a roof doesn't matter much anyway this weather."

"If that's your opinion it isn't mine, for I find the nights are getting uncommon cold, and that is why I'm in such a hurry to get on with my house-building, or I'd

maybe take a run over as far as Errol's myself, so Saidie must go, for I want some nails—copper nails, if they have got them, and there are one or two other things we want in the housekeeping line," Tom replied. He had mastered the meaning in his sister's grimace by this time, and was acting up to it in a manful fashion.

"It will only take me five minutes or so to get ready, for the horses are hobbled, and I've nothing else to do but get into my riding skirt, so we will be starting right away," Saidie said, with a merry laugh at Fred's discomfited face, and then, whilst Tom went down to the little natural clearing by the stream to bring the two horses up, she dived into the shelter under the cart, to emerge two minutes later hatted and habited for her ride.

"You've a pretty location here," Fred said, looking round with an air of eager interest, when he had scrambled on to the back of the grey horse, whilst Saidie mounted the brown animal; he was thinking of their own projected move into the wilderness, and wondering if the shores of Wabamun Lake afforded possibilities equal to this bit of the wilderness.

"It will be all right when we get a house," replied Saidie, as she jerked the bridle as an intimation to her steed that she was ready to go on, then nodded in farewell to her brother. "But it is anything but comfortable, when it rains as it did last week, three days at the stretch, and we without a roof to cover us. Oh, but we were in a pickle, I can tell you," she said, with a shiver of recollection; then changing her tone, asked abruptly, "What is this Athabasca Bill like, and how is it that you know him so well?"

"We didn't know him very well until last fall, although we had often seen him at harvest times, for he most often happened along and helped us when we were at our busiest. But last year he took sick, got a chill or something, and was bad at our house until nearly Christmas; we had a doctor to him once or twice, but he begged mother not to do it again, because he couldn't pay the bills; so mother nursed him and did her best for him, till he was able to get about again."

"Humph! I think your mother must be a mighty good woman to do so much for a tramp," jerked out Saidie Marsh, with a funny little snort.

"He wasn't really a tramp, only low down through misfortune. He had been well educated, and should have been in a good position, only he got under a cloud, his family turned him adrift, and he'd just been drifting ever since. Most winters he goes trapping on the Athabasca Lakes, then comes south in the summer, and works on the farms," Fred explained, a little indignant that she should call his friend a tramp.

"What is his name?" she demanded sharply.

"I never heard any one call him anything but Athabasca Bill, or Bill," answered

Fred, saving himself from a tumble almost by a miracle, as the grey horse put its foot in a hole, then lurched heavily to one side.

"Rough going, isn't it? but we shall find it easier later on," said his companion, as the brown horse also floundered and slipped on the uneven ground; then returning with a strange persistency to the subject of his quest, she asked, "What is this nameless man like—is he dark and fierce-looking, a sort of Texas cow-puncher who has wandered north and got lost?"

"Not a bit of it; he is one of the meekest, mildest looking men that I think I ever saw. His hair is lighter than mine, his eyes are blue, and he doesn't look as if he could knock over a squirrel in an ordinary sort of way; but I saw him get roused once, and then he got as fierce as a Cherokee on the war path."

"What was it about?" demanded Saidie, with no lack of interest, and though he was always more than willing to talk about his friend, Fred was considerably surprised at the eagerness this stranger girl displayed on the subject.

"There had been a fire in a lot of dry bunch grass, and every one had been hard at work putting it out, because it was near the schoolhouse, and they thought it would be fired too. Bill hadn't been among the workers, though he was in at the finish, when every one was ready to dance with delight because the danger was over, and Micky Shute, the bar-tender, began chaffing him about happening along in time to fling up his hat and shout hurrah with the rest, but keeping out of the way till the work was done. Bill glared at the fellow for a minute or so, just as if he would scorch him out of existence with a glance, then he jumped straight for him, and knocked him clean into a tub of water that had been used for wetting fire mops in."

"Hurrah! I like that. What happened next?" demanded Saidie eagerly, clapping her hands.

"There was nothing to happen, except the laughter at the figure cut by Micky Shute when he was hauled out of the tub, for Athabasca Bill had walked away, and wasn't seen again that day. But the police told us afterwards, that Bill had been one of the first to turn out when the fire-guardian raised the alarm, and he had been working like a horse in the water-hole all the time, because the wheel didn't turn the water up fast enough, and the creek was nearly dry."

No response from Saidie at this, though Fred had expected quite an outburst of hurrahs; but when he turned to look at her, surprised by her silence, he saw to his amazement that her head was low down on the brown horse's neck, and she was weeping bitterly.

"Why, whatever is the matter with you?" he exclaimed, in extreme consternation. Tears always got upon his nerves, and, so far as he could see, this outburst was

entirely uncalled for.

For a minute or so Saidie sobbed on, seemingly unable to explain the cause of her grief, whilst Fred grew hotter and hotter, feeling all the time as if he would very much like to kick his heels into the grey horse's sides, and make that worthy, though blundering animal carry him at the top of its speed from the sight of so much grief.

Presently recovering a little, she looked, with a wan smile.

"I am afraid you will think me rather silly," she said, in a choked tone, catching her breath in another sob.

"I couldn't think what I had said or done to make you take on like that," he replied reproachfully, looking as offended as he felt.

"It was stupid of me, and I know by experience how boys hate tears; besides, I almost never cry. But from what you have said, I can't help thinking that Athabasca Bill must be my eldest brother, who has been missing more years than I could count; indeed, ever since I was a little girl in short frocks."

"Oh!" Fred's eyes looked as if they would start out of his head with amazement, and he was plainly not capable of anything in the way of speech, saving the ejaculation which he fired off like a rocket.

"It must seem very funny to you, that I can be so sure of the identity of a man I have never seen; but that bit you told me about Bill knocking down Micky Shute convinced me that it must be the same," she said, gulping down a succession of sobs that threatened to choke her.

"But how—?" began Fred; then failing the ability to put what he wanted to say into words, stopped short in confusion.

"How did he come to be lost, do you mean? Ah, that is a long story, and a sad one," Saidie said, rubbing her eyes very hard with her handkerchief, which had the effect of making them even redder than before. "Bill, or Willie, as we used to call him, was the eldest of our family, and I am the youngest. There were ten of us altogether, but all are dead now but four; that is Willie, my eldest sister Mary, who is married and lives in Wyoming, Tom, and myself."

"Are your father and mother dead too?" inquired Fred, hastily scenting another breakdown, and anxious to divert her mind, even though his question had no cheerful tendency.

"All dead," she answered, with a sad little shake of her head. "Willie, as I said, was the eldest, then Mary, and then came Arthur, whom my father and mother always appeared to love better than any of their children. He and Willie had situations in the same store, and were very much attached to each other, seeming to care for no other companionship. But one day word came to my father that the boys

had been gambling, and had taken money that did not belong to them; both stoutly denied it, but suspicion pointed to Willie, and in a fit of bitter anger my father cast him forth, declaring that he would never again look in the face of the son who had so dishonoured his name. Oh, they were sad years that followed; my mother drooped and drooped, my father grew into a morose, taciturn man, of whom his children were afraid, and a string of disasters followed on the heels of each other, until we seemed to be living over again the experience of the patriarch Job; and no sooner was the news of one tragedy told, than a messenger arrived in hot haste to inform us of another. Two of my brothers were drowned boating; then my sister Lucy, who had gone to stay with some friends at a distance, took fever and died; after which Arthur was run over in the street, and brought home mortally wounded."

"Look here, don't tell me any more if it hurts you so," interrupted Fred, seeing how white his companion had grown.

"It won't hurt me more to tell of it than it does to think of it all," she said, with a shiver. "When Arthur knew he was dying, he confessed that it was he and not Willie who had gambled, and then stolen money to make good his losses; when suspicion fell on Willie, he was too cowardly to own up to the truth, and so the good elder brother was cast out in anger to sink or swim as he could, whilst the guilty one stayed on in the comfort and love of the home. My father and mother never recovered the shock of Arthur's dying confession, and died within two years; they had advertised far and wide for news of Willie, but no word had come to them out of the silence. Tom, Mary and I lived on together until my sister married, then he and I decided to come north and try our fortunes in the wilderness. It was just about that time we chanced to hear from some one, who years before had come across Willie in Canada, and since then I have always felt that, sooner or later, we should come upon his trail."

"There is Errol's place, I believe," broke in Fred, pointing to some smoke rising from the valley below.

"Yes; that is it," replied Saidie, adding breathlessly, "and oh, suppose we find your Athabasca Bill there!"





CHAPTER VI

OLD MAN ARLO'S MONEY BAGS

The day after Mr. Crawford's committal for trial, old man Arlo rose early, and prepared for a journey.

As it was to be a journey by rail, his beloved dogs were, of necessity, left behind, carefully locked up with a good supply of food and water.

The old man lived alone in a little brown house, that stood back from the road in a weedy patch of clearing. Very few people ever came near the place, because of the unenviable reputation enjoyed by the dogs, so that he had little cause to fear that any of his neighbours would come prying about his premises during his absence.

A poor old object of pity he looked, as he set forth on his jaunt, his well-worn garments hanging in loose, flapping folds about his shrunken form; a battered old hat pressed down over his straggling grey hair, and a soiled, faded scarf tied in an untidy wisp about his throat.

He had a sideway motion in walking, that reminded one of a crab; and although he looked such a weak, frail old fellow, it was quite wonderful the pace he made, and the ease with which he seemed to get over the ground. When he reached the railway depôt, he boarded the cars on a trip to the town, haggling so fiercely with the official over some question of price, declaring that he had been charged a quarter of a dollar too much, that eventually a good-natured fellow-passenger paid the money for him, under the impression that the disputed coin formed a part of his bottom dollar.

Old man Arlo thanked the kindly stranger almost with tears in his eyes, and then subsided on to his seat, his wrinkled face screwed into a pucker of intense satisfaction, which never left it until the town was reached.

He made his way along the busy street from the depôt to the court-house, looking such a shaky, pitiable old man, that more than one passer-by turned to look at him, hoping that no harm would come to him in the bustling throng, where it was

every one for himself and no man for his neighbour.

When he appeared before the officials in the court-house, asking if he might be allowed to bail out Maitland Crawford, his request was looked upon as a sort of mild form of lunacy, and he was responded to in the half-bantering fashion supposed to best fit his case.

"All right; what is the figure?" demanded old man Arlo, with a rather dangerous gleam in the eyes, that were hidden away under their bushy, beetling brows.

"Five hundred dollars, money down," was the laconic reply, given in a brusque tone, for the official deemed he had wasted enough of his valuable time on this wandering lunatic, and was desirous of getting rid of him as soon as possible.

"Will you take it in notes or gold?" demanded old man Arlo, producing a bulky pocket-book, from which he proceeded to extract some very greasy notes. "Because, if you want it in gold, I'm afraid I'll have to trouble you to step along to the bank with me, or to send one of your young men to fetch it, for I'm not very good at carrying things now, and five hundred dollars would be something of a weight, eh?"

The energy with which the old fellow fired off the ejaculation made the official jump, whilst his amazement at finding the old tramp possessed of so much money was a sight to see.

"Notes will do, Mr. Arlo," he replied gravely, so soon as he had found his tongue again after the momentary shock. "But do you think you are wise to take such a risk? Think of the temptation to a man in Mr. Crawford's position to slope, when he finds himself free again; then where would you be?"

"Oh, I ain't afraid; Maitland Crawford is honester than most, and he wouldn't slope, to let a poor man in, as had tried to stand his friend," replied old man Arlo, in a quavering tone, shaking his head with an air of such pathetic helplessness, that the other was instantly more sorry for him than ever.

"Well, of course you know your own business best," he said tersely, then proceeded to sign the necessary documents that would ensure the prisoner's release.

"Rather hard lines on a man to be sent to prison on such flimsy evidence as was offered yesterday," commented old man Arlo, as he sorted over his bank notes.

"You think so? It seemed to me fairly circumstantial; and, really, we have so many of these robberies from railway depôts lately, that it was high time to make an example of some one, so there was nothing like commencing with the first offender caught red-handed."

Old man Arlo snorted in a fashion which savoured of disgust, then inquired in that feeble, cracked voice of his, if it was urgently necessary that his name should be

made public in the matter of Mr. Crawford's bail.

"Not if you prefer to remain unknown," was the reply.

"Very well; you put it down as 'a friend,' same as they do on subscription lists, and I'll turn up all right to claim my five hundred dollars, when the time comes, don't you fret," and he laughed in a wheezy, cackling fashion, suggestive of machinery badly in want of oil. Then when the necessary forms had all been gone through, shuffled away as he had come, only for the present, at least, five hundred dollars the poorer, and looking as if he did not possess another dollar in the world.

When it was intimated to Mr. Crawford that he was a free man, until the date fixed for his trial, he was at first incredulous, for it had not seemed possible to him that any one would come forward to bail him out. Then he asked to be told the name of his benefactor, but was informed that his surety wished to remain unknown, and was in consequence more puzzled than ever.

But he was free, and that in itself was a joy unspeakable. Without a moment's unnecessary delay, he hurried to the depôt, and because there was no passenger train for some hours, he boarded a train of freight cars, and travelled homeward on the rear platform of a horse car, dropping off when the cars stopped at Millet, and walking past the office he was supposed to have robbed, set out on the five-mile trudge to his home.

He was thinking how pleased they would be to see him—how the children would shout, and how his wife's face would shine with quiet joy; then came the thought of when he would have to leave them again, to be tried for a crime he had not committed, perhaps sentenced to a term of imprisonment, from whence he must return with a shamed and tarnished reputation, that nothing could restore to honour and uprightness.

"Oh, it was hard, cruelly hard to be made the victim of so foul a plot!" he muttered to himself, stopping short in the middle of the road, clenching his hands until the nails pressed into his horny palms, and his whole frame grew rigid with the intensity of his emotion, so that for a moment he was like a person in a cataleptic seizure.

It was growing dusk with the soft, enveloping gloom that marks the early autumn night, when suddenly a bird, perched among the yellowing leaves on a steeply wooded bank, burst into a sleepy trill of song, and then was silent again.

But it had done its work; the tension of the sorely tried man's limbs relaxed, the terrible rigour passed away, and he went forward with a free, springing step, because the tiny burst of bird-music had reminded him of the words in Holy Writ, that not one sparrow could fall to the ground without the Creator's knowledge, and

so he was comforted, remembering that he was of more value than many sparrows.

His fancy had not over-painted the joy wrought by his unexpected return. Mrs. Crawford was sitting in a despondent attitude by the kitchen stove, and the children were getting their supper in melancholy silence, when he opened the door and walked in.

"Father!" cried Ella, with such a jubilant shout that her mother sprang up, knocking over a chair and a tin saucepan with a great noise and clatter.

"Maitland, is it really you?" she cried, with unbelieving joy, tumbling into his outstretched arms, whilst all the children crowded round, as uproarious now as they had been solemnly silent before.

"Really it is myself," he replied, laughing, yet with an odd quavering sound in his voice that betrayed the feeling lying behind; then with a quick change of tone he asked, "Where is Fred?"

"Gone in quest of Athabasca Bill; he set out at dawn this morning. I could not rest without doing something, and that seemed the only thing to be done. If Athabasca Bill can throw no other light on the mystery, he can at least help to prove an alibi for you," Mrs. Crawford said eagerly. She was still clinging to her husband, as if scarcely able to assure herself even now that he was not an apparition.

"I had thought of that myself—about the alibi, I mean, but not of sending Fred; he is such a boy to set out on a big journey like that," he answered.

"But he has a wise head on his shoulders, and I have no doubt of his doing his best. I gave him nearly all the money I had, and told him to earn his food where he could, so that he should not spend more than he could help."

"It was a good plan, and I hope the boy will find him; but Athabasca Bill would be precious hard to track down, I fancy, for he goes to such outlandish places for his winter trapping," Mr. Crawford said, as he sat down in his armchair by the stove, and began to realize how very tired he was.

"Ella, dear, hurry to get your father some supper, he must be so hungry; you might scramble some eggs, Celia will help you." Mrs. Crawford spoke to her daughter in an urgent whisper, then turned again to her husband with a question. "Maitland, you said some one had bailed you out; who was it, dear?"

"I haven't the ghost of a notion; when I asked, I was told that it was a friend, and that this unknown individual, whoever he or she may be, had considerably left enough money to pay my car fare home."

"It was very, very kind!" she murmured.

"Indeed it was. Amazingly kind! I did not know that I possessed such an influential friend anywhere."

“Father, I’m dreadfully sorry I asked to have that box; only it was such a nice, cunning little box, and I wanted it so very badly,” Johnny said later on, when there was a lull in the talk, and he found a chance to say something on his own account.

“What box?” asked Mr. Crawford, in an abstracted fashion.

“The box that made the trouble. Dolty Simpson says that if you hadn’t been found with the box in your arms, you would not have been taken to prison; and if I had not wanted it so badly, you would not have gone to the barn to fetch it just then.”

“There is reason in that, certainly,” said Mr. Crawford, with a look across at his wife; “though, I declare, I had not thought of it before. But don’t worry yourself, Johnny, my lad; whoever put the box there meant it to be found on my premises, and it was not your wanting it merely that brought the trouble, though I don’t say but what it may have hastened the catastrophe a little.”

Johnny sniffed in a dolorous and uncomforted fashion; many and bitter were the tears he had shed since his father’s arrest, because of his own innocent share in the business, and even now he could not feel himself free from blame.

But Mr. Crawford had more serious things to discuss that evening than even the sorrows of his youngest son, and sending him off to bed with a kindly word, began to talk to his wife concerning his plans for the future.

“I shall sell the farm and the stock at once, Emily, if I can get a customer for it, then matters will be easier for you if I am convicted and sent to prison for a term. Whilst if I should succeed in getting off, it will only hasten our going to the Wabamun country by a few months, and I shall be just as happy to be quit of this part of the world, after having to stand my trial for theft.”

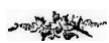
Mrs. Crawford nodded sympathetically, for she felt herself that the sooner they left the neighbourhood the better, after such a blow to their honour and respectability.

“But you couldn’t go to the Wabamun country in the winter, and with no house built on your claim,” she objected.

“You and the young ones could not. But Fred and I could manage very well with a shack under a sheltered hillock, well banked with snow. Then we could get a house built before the spring came and the land wanted us, don’t you see; and meanwhile, you and the children could have lodgings in the town, till the weather got fit for you to join us in the new home.

“It sounds promising, if only we knew how the trial would go!” sighed Mrs. Crawford.

“Ah, if only we did!” he said, with an answering sigh.





CHAPTER VII

OLD MAN ARLO SHOWS A WAY OUT

For the next week Mr. Crawford worked as hard as it was possible for one pair of hands and feet to do. His long absence searching for a new location had left farm work very much in arrears. Dolty Simpson, though honest and faithful, not being endowed with an energetic temperament, was apt to run work to slow music, unless there was a leading spirit in command to push things forward.

But now that the boss was back again, Dolty was having to hustle in true Yankee fashion, very much to his own discomfort, but vastly to the good of the farm.

Mr. Crawford was coming home from the ten-acre lot with his team one afternoon, after a long day of ploughing, when he met old man Arlo and the three bloodhounds, which as usual were straining and tugging at the leash. Montana Jenny growled in a menacing fashion, recognizing the quarry she had so successfully run to earth nine or ten days before; but Smiler and Ruby were straining and whining in vain endeavours to lick their preserver's hands or feet, or indeed any part of himself or his clothes.

Mr. Crawford left his team a minute, to go and renew his acquaintance with the two friendly hounds, for he had that strong inborn love of a good dog, which is like an instinct in some people, but he kept a watchful eye on Montana Jenny, having no desire to find her leaping at his throat.

"So you're out of prison," said old man Arlo, in a disagreeable, croaking voice. "Who's your bail?"

"Ah, that is just what I should very much like to know myself," replied Mr. Crawford warmly, "just to say to him, 'Sir, I thank you warmly for your confidence in my honour, and I'll take care to do my utmost to show myself worthy of it.'"

"Which only shows that you are more of a lunatic than I had given you credit for being," growled the old man harshly, drawing his brows together in a frown of portentous blackness.

"What do you mean?" demanded Mr. Crawford in astonishment, going to his team, which were beginning to show signs of restlessness.

"What I say; that if you've got a grain of sense or sanity left, you'll slope, whilst you've got the chance," snapped the old man, with a vicious tug at the cord which held his dogs.

"So that the man who stood my friend, when there was no one else to help me, shall have to lose his five hundred dollars, I suppose? Well, you must think me a low down sort of scoundrel, to return a kindness in that fashion," Mr. Crawford retorted scornfully.

"No need to let your dander riz in that fashion, as I knows of," retorted old man Arlo, with another tweak at the cord which restrained the impatient dogs. "The fellow, whoever he was, knew the risks he was taking in standing bail; maybe did it on purpose to give you a chance to get away."

"Innocent folks shouldn't have to run away in dishonour," Mr. Crawford said, frowning almost as heavily as the old man who stood glowering opposite.

"Bah, that is all stuff and talk! Lawyers and police have got to live, same as other people; and if there ain't enough real thieves and villains to go round, why, they have to convict a few honest, respectable folk once in a way, just to keep their reputation going, so to speak. It ain't no business of mine, of course; but you've been a good neighbour. I don't forget that you saved my dogs for me, and if I could advise you for your good, why, it stands to reason I'd be glad to do it."

Old man Arlo's tone was so strangely earnest now, that the other looked at him in surprise, answering more gently than he would have done, but for the beseeching look in the eyes gleaming from under the bushy, beetling brows.

"It is very kind of you, old friend, to be so concerned on my account, and I'm just as grateful as if I could follow your advice. But I've more confidence in the laws of my country, than to think I shall be convicted, being innocent; or if such a thing should be that I am sent to prison, I shall still have the knowledge of my innocence to support me."

"Mighty poor comfort that, I should say!" scoffed old man Arlo, with a sudden change of manner. "Well, as I said before, it ain't no particklar business of mine; still, if I was in your place, I'd slope, and be quick about it."

"There wouldn't be much use in my running away, I'm afraid, seeing that those terrible hounds of yours would be safe to stick to my trail, even if I made tracks for Labrador," Mr. Crawford answered, with a laugh, reaching out his hand to fondle Smiler's ears.

"Now, you look here, neighbour," said old man Arlo, with an air of solemn

earnestness, coming nearer and laying his wrinkled, dirty hand on the other's jacket sleeve; "if so be you've a mind to dodge the finger of the law, so to speak, I'll take good care that no beast of mine runs you down a second time. I'd sooner have choked the whole three of them, than that such a thing should have happened before. But there ain't no sense in crying over spilt milk, so I ain't going to waste time in whining about that; only once bitten, twice shy, and you give me a hint that you're thinking of sloping, I'll take jolly good care that there ain't no danger of the dogs following you up."

"You are very good; but it won't do, neighbour, for I've made up my mind to stay and face the music," rejoined Mr. Crawford, a little stiffly, for he was beginning to resent the old man's pertinacity.

"Well, well, do as you please; only perhaps you'll remember, if the worst comes to the worst, and you are convicted, that it is all your own fault," said old man Arlo, turning away in a huff, and dragging the unwilling dogs after him.

Mr. Crawford went his homeward way in a very brown study indeed. The way of escape pointed out by old man Arlo had been rankling in his own mind for days past, and it was only the exceeding ingratitude of leaving the man who had bailed him out to suffer, that had kept him from seriously meditating such a flight from the difficulties looming ahead.

He knew that, innocent though he was, nothing could save him from a conviction except the presence of Athabasca Bill, to swear to an alibi which even then might not hold good, or the detection of the real thief, a very unlikely prospect indeed, since the police would not stir further, or trouble themselves in looking for another victim, when they had one all ready and waiting close at hand.

If he chose to make a bid for safety in flight, the chances were greatly in favour of his getting off scot free; the country was so wide and so sparsely settled, that the mounted police would not be likely to trouble themselves over much in riding in pursuit of a fugitive, when there was so little to be gained by catching him.

But not to save himself from prison, or to save his wife and children from the poverty that must come upon them if he were convicted, would Mr. Crawford be false to his own idea of honour and uprightness. This unknown benefactor had believed in him, and trusted him to the extent of five hundred dollars, and he could not be the mean-souled ingrate to betray such a trust.

Strangely enough, his wife had been brooding over the same subject all the afternoon, and when supper was done, the two little boys gone to bed, and the two girls washing up the dishes on the back porch, she spoke of the trouble that had been so heavy on her mind.

"You will be ready to answer to your bail, Maitland?" she asked, half fearfully.

"Yes, I hope so," he answered, with a quick look at her, wondering if old man Arlo had paid her a visit before coming on to him.

"I am so thankful!" she exclaimed, with a deep breath of relief. "All day I have been haunted by the dread lest you should be tempted to keep your freedom, now you have it, by getting away before the trial comes on."

"Haven't you got a better opinion of me than that?" he asked, half banteringly, yet with an underlying reproach in his tone.

"I know how you love the children and me, and I feared lest your care for us should blind you to the duty you owe to yourself," she said softly.

He nodded, but did not speak for a minute; then he said, in a half query—

"So you are not very hopeful about the result of the trial?"

"How can I be, in the face of such circumstantial evidence? I am inclined to think it was a deeply laid plot to compass your ruin; yet even then it is amazing that it should have been planned with such consummate cleverness, since no one knew for certain that you were coming home that day, or that it would be so hard for you to prove your alibi; and then, again, no one could have known that you would take off that comforter of yours to give to that miserable tramp."

"Ah, but for that misguided act of charity, I should never have been in this plight," he answered bitterly.

"What do you mean?" she asked, in surprise.

"Why, but for that miserable comforter, they would have had no possible chance of fixing the guilt on to me; even the hiding of the box in my barn would have only served to throw suspicion on Dolty Simpson, or some one else, equally with myself. But the miscreant, whoever he was, to whom I gave the comforter, must have brought the box here, dragging the scarf after him, then have gone all the way back to the depôt, and stuffed the thing in at the office window."

"If only that tramp could be found!" sighed Mrs. Crawford, as she stooped a little lower over the garment she was mending, and hoped that her husband would not see the tears which blinded her eyes, and which she was furtively trying to wipe away.

"Aye, if only we could!" he echoed, staring moodily at the fire, yet seeing nothing in the blazing, crackling wood, but the bowed, suffering figure of the man to whom he had given his comforter, and whom he believed to be the enemy who had done him such cruel wrong. "But that, I am afraid, is by no means likely to come to pass, and the next best thing would be to get hold of Athabasca Bill."

"I wonder where Fred is to-night, and when we shall hear of him," said Mrs.

Crawford, with motherly anxiety for the welfare of her first-born, whom she had sent out to the wilderness on his father's behalf.

"When we see him, I guess, and not before. Post-offices don't stand very thick on the ground in the districts where Athabasca Bill spends his winters," replied Mr. Crawford; then Ella and Celia, having finished with the dishes, came back to the fireside, and the talk veered round to other subjects.

The next day it rained and blew with tremendous force. Ploughing, or indeed any sort of out-door work, was out of the question. Dolty Simpson hitched a horse to the wagon to drive the children to school, covering them over with a bit of tarpaulin, as if they had been bags of meal from the mill. Then when that errand was done, he went to the barn to help Mr. Crawford, who was busy repairing farming implements, and other work, always left for such kind of weather.

Ella and Celia had both gone to school that day, and when the active part of her day's work was over, Mrs. Crawford sat down to her big work-basket, which was overflowing with garments in need of repair.

There was no bread to be baked that day, no washing, ironing, or churning, and the brooding hush of the house was almost like the quiet that comes with Sunday, whilst the storm raging without made all the pleasanter the peace and comfort of the tidy kitchen, with its cheerful, crackling fire, which glowed and sputtered through the half-open door of the stove.

A vague uneasiness had taken possession of Mrs. Crawford, despite the restful quiet of her surroundings. Every few minutes she rose and went to the window, peering anxiously through the murk of the falling rain drops, as if she expected something or some one.

"I can't think what is the matter with me, but I feel just as if something were going to happen. I suppose the anxiety and trouble of the last week or two has rather upset me," she said, as, laying down the garment she was repairing, she rose once more and, going to the window, peered out at the driving rain.

Some one was coming. A brown horse, with a huddled dripping figure on its back was approaching the house, and with her hospitable instincts fully on the alert, Mrs. Crawford hastened to fling wide the house door, to give her visitor a welcome.

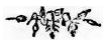
"Are you Mrs. Crawford?" asked a brisk, girlish voice, as the dripping rider slid slowly from her horse to the ground.

"Yes, yes; do you bring me news of my boy?" she panted anxiously.

The girl put out both hands to grip Mrs. Crawford's, saying in a tremulous tone

"I am Saidie Marsh, and I've ridden over fifty miles to bring you bad news; such

bad news that I am afraid to tell it.”





CHAPTER VIII

THROUGH DENAREE'S LEAP

Errol's lumber camp was also a store, and a recognized centre round which the units of civilization in that part of the world circled.

The man who gave the place its name, and was the mainspring of all its activities, was a stalwart backwoodsman, who had emigrated to the North West Territories from Ontario fifteen years before, winning himself a home and a living from the wilderness, becoming at length a highly prosperous individual, after a rough and ready fashion.

Mrs. Errol was a merry little woman, with a great longing for companionship, who found life at her husband's lumber camp so intolerably solitary, that it was only rendered endurable to her by entertaining and fussing over every wandering stranger, whose business or pleasure led him or her within reach of her eagerly proffered hospitality.

She welcomed Saidie Marsh with enthusiastic fervour, declaring that she would keep her a week, though she had seen her only once before.

"You are very kind, Mrs. Errol, and I shall be very thankful for one night's shelter, though I can't stay longer," Saidie replied gratefully; then drawing Fred forward, she said, "this is my friend, Frederic John Crawford, and the pair of us are out man-hunting."

"Dear, dear, only to think of it!" cried Mrs. Errol, with a gush of laughter. "I had no idea that the Dominion Government enrolled women in the mounted police corps; but we are always behind the times in the backwoods. Who is it you are hunting, pray—some terrible murderer?"

"No, indeed; our quarry has done nothing to be ashamed of, but he is badly wanted all the same. Is Athabasca Bill here, Mrs. Errol?" Saidie demanded eagerly.

"No; that he isn't. He went down to Denaree's Leap yesterday morning, on his way to the trapping grounds near Rocky Raps," replied Mrs. Errol.

"I am too late, then," groaned Saidie, blank disappointment settling down over

her face.

"But I must go on after him," broke in Fred, finding his tongue now, though he had hung shyly in the background previously, feeling a little over-awed by vivacious Mrs. Errol.

"You!" cried Mrs. Errol, with a sharp glance at him. "Why, you are much too young to go wandering about the world alone, man-hunting, and there are no hotels, or railway cars, where Athabasca Bill has gone."

"No, ma'am, I didn't suppose there were; but I have got to go after him, for all that, and to find him too," Fred replied, with a smile; he was finding Mrs. Errol easier to talk to now that he had once begun.

"Why is it you are wanting to find him so badly? Will you tell me, or is it a secret?" she asked kindly.

Fred told her at once, making his story as brief as was consistent with coherence. But he said nothing concerning the revelation made to him by Saidie Marsh, since that was her business, not his, and he had no right to make common property of it.

Saidie, meanwhile, had wandered indoors to renew her acquaintance with Mrs. Errol's three babies, who were pretending to help their old Indian nurse sort berries for pies, but were in reality rolling and tumbling over each other in a merry frolic, shouting and laughing in an abandonment of childish glee.

Sore as her heart was with the disappointment of finding Athabasca Bill had gone beyond her reach for the present, Saidie could not resist the temptation of joining the sport of the little ones, and in a few moments the shouting and laughing was redoubled, as she tossed them up in her arms, kissed the berry-stained faces, and rolled them over and over on the floor.

Fred coming upon the scene with Mrs. Errol a little later, was amazed at her mirth and high spirits; he was inclined to be a little resentful, too, because she seemed so happy and light-hearted, when she should have been, in his opinion, sad and melancholy at missing Athabasca Bill, whom she was so anxious to see and identify a short time ago.

But in reality he had more cause for gratitude than complaint, as he was speedily to find, for Saidie intervened so successfully on his behalf, with Mr. and Mrs. Errol, that he not merely did not have his supper, bed and breakfast to pay for, but his host offered to send him five miles down river in a canoe, to where Black Pine portage marked the limit of navigation in that direction.

"Will the canoe cost much?" Fred ventured to ask, for anxious as he was to overtake Athabasca Bill before that worthy plunged into the almost trackless

wilderness beyond Rocky Raps, he feared to make inroads on his scanty stock of cash, knowing the stern necessity there would be for the money later on, when there would be two to provide with food instead of one, for he could not expect the man he sought to journey all the distance back to Millet at his own expense.

"Not a cent, my boy; I've got to send a man with some stores in a canoe down to Black Pine portage, and you may as well go too; it should give you a pull on Athabasca Bill, since he tramped the distance, and it is pretty rough going between here and Black Pine," George Errol replied.

"I'm very much obliged to you," Saidie broke in, before Fred had time to utter a thank you. "I have my own special reasons for wanting Athabasca Bill captured and brought back with as little delay as possible. Indeed, I was in two minds about pushing on myself with Fred, until we overtook him; only Tom will be so put to it to manage without me, especially as I have got the horses, and we were almost out of sugar and tea."

"It is just as well you can't go on, for I've no opinion of girls wandering about in such a fashion, especially one as pretty as yourself," George Errol replied, with a laugh and a bow, which was intended to emphasize the compliment, but only served to make Saidie cross.

"I am perfectly well able to take care of myself, thank you, Mr. Errol; but you need not trouble about me, as I intend setting out for our camp at dawn to-morrow morning," she said, with a toss of her head and a pout.

"No, indeed you will not. You promised to stay until to-morrow afternoon, and I just mean to make you keep your word," broke in Mrs. Errol, who was getting her own supper in the intervals of feeding her children.

"What is the river like beyond Black Pine portage?" asked Fred presently, when a discussion about hat trimmings between the two women gave him a chance of getting the ear of his host for a minute or so.

"Just as bad as it can be; twenty miles of whirlpools and rapids, with rocks sticking up in the middle; the Indians have a name for it, which means the Valley of Death, but it is mostly called Denaree's Leap," George Errol answered, pushing a great dish of corn-cakes and maple syrup nearer to Fred, and bidding him help himself.

"Why Denaree's Leap?" asked the boy, who was keenly anxious to know all there was to be known of the country through which he had to make his way.

"There was a French Canadian exploring this bit of country, a few years back, when the Indians were inclined to be troublesome; his guides deserted him, and he was in a fair way of being murdered in his tent on the cliff above the river bank,

when just as he was hard-pressed and making a brave stand in his own defence, he espied a canoe that had somehow got adrift come bobbing and bowing down stream, and trusting to his luck, he turned and sprang right out into the current, by a wonderful chance grabbed the empty canoe, and scrambled in."

"What a plucky thing to do! Did he get safely away?" asked Fred eagerly.

"From the Indians, yes; from the Valley of Death, no. A few bits of the canoe were picked up a few days later, twenty miles further down river, but nothing was ever again seen of Jean Denaree, the ill-fated French Canadian explorer," George Errol replied, with a shake of his head.

"What a melancholy tale! And is it really true, Mr. Errol?" demanded Saidie, who had turned from the millinery discussion, to listen to the story her host was telling.

"I believe so. It was told to me by one of the Indians who saw Denaree jump," said George Errol. "My own opinion is that if he had only been a little braver, and shown a firmer front to the Indians, he need not have leaped to his death in that fashion; but you can never tell what a man will do when panic seizes him."

"All the Indians that I have come across have been the most arrant cowards; but perhaps they have become degenerate since the brave days of old," laughed Saidie, as she turned back to the question of millinery once more, with a shrug of relief in dismissing a topic so weird.

Fred could not get rid of it so easily, however, and in his dreams that night was taking Denaree's leap, and fighting for his life in the raging waters of the Valley of Death. So real was the vision, that he awoke himself struggling and choking, to find his head all entangled in his blanket, whilst the half-breed, named Potiphar, who was to take the stores down river, was tugging and shaking at his arm in order to rouse him for the start.

"Is it morning already?" asked Fred, sitting up with a shiver, for the air coming in at the open door of the hut was keen with the chill of coming winter.

"Boss do say, get away early down river wid dem stores, Potiphar, cos the boy he want to get along fast on the trail," said the half-breed, who rarely made a statement on his own account, but repeated the words of other people, as involving him in less responsibility.



SADIE STOOD ON THE BANK, WAVING HER HANDKERCHIEF IN FAREWELL

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“All right, I’m glad to be off early; but I declare I thought it was the middle of the night,” Fred answered, with a yawn, promptly stuffing his head into a bucket of cold water, in order to banish his sleepiness.

But the fear and horror of his dream was on him still, and he shivered again, as he swallowed down half-a-pint of scalding hot coffee, and munched away at a great chunk of bread and bacon, by way of breakfast. He had no special concern about that day's dinner or supper, for the wallet strapped across his shoulders contained a supply of food that was more than sufficient for one day's needs, and beyond that there was no use in planning for, since at any time now he might find Athabasca Bill, and turn to retrace his journey homewards.

Saidie was up to look after his breakfast, to speed him onwards with her brisk, cheerful words of counsel, and to lay a special injunction upon him.

"Don't tell your Athabasca Bill anything of that little story I confided to you yesterday; only bring him to see Tom and me, as soon as your business will allow of the visit, and if he is the man I think he is, I shall just love to tell it to him myself. Meanwhile, it is a secret between you and me, Frederic John Crawford."

"I'll be careful to remember, and as a reward for my good behaviour, perhaps you will consent to call me Fred, instead of all that mouthful you seem so fond of, Miss Marsh," he said, with a laugh, as he took his place in the canoe, among the kegs of biscuits, flour, and sugar, the parcels of bacon, tea, and other stores with which the canoe was heavily laden.

Then Potiphar took his place in the bow as steersman, telling Fred to do the best he could with the stern paddle, and the little craft pushed slowly out to mid-stream, whilst Saidie stood on the bank in the dull grey light of the dawning, shouting farewells and waving her handkerchief, until they were out of sight round a bend in the river.

How the current raced along! Fred found little work in paddling, whilst Potiphar grunted and snorted in satisfaction at their progress, but spoke no articulate word until they were nearing a part of the river where a wall of black, funereal-looking pines loomed up to the sky line.

"Boss say stop at Black Pine portage; no through passengers for Denaree's Leap," he said, with a grating chuckle of laughter at his own small joke, which, however, in his peculiar fashion, he imputed to his master.

But the laughter proved his undoing, for in paddling inshore he failed to notice the low-hanging branches of a birch tree, which swept him from the canoe into the swiftly rushing current. Then before Fred could realize what had happened, or bend his strength towards paddling inshore, the canoe shot forward at a tremendous pace into the swirling waters of Denaree's Leap.





CHAPTER IX

THE TIDINGS FROM BLACK PINE PORTAGE

Saidie Marsh thoroughly enjoyed her morning with Mrs. Errol, whilst it was a satisfaction to be in a house for a few hours, after her experience of living for weeks in and under a cart. It is true the house was a very primitive one, being merely a log-cabin of rather larger dimensions than usual, well chinked, and fairly comfortable, but nothing more.

"Still, a roof is a roof, and you never know the comfort of having one over your head, until you have had to go without for a while," Saidie said, when Mrs. Errol reproved her in a laughing fashion for her enthusiastic praises of the backwoods abode.

"Yes, I know what the sensation is, for I have been through it myself, or something nearly akin to it; but you will be all right when you get your house built."

"I hope so; and now I must really see about getting those stores packed on to the grey horse's back. I shall miss my companion on the ride back to our camp; he is such a nice boy, that Frederic John Crawford! I declare I got quite fond of him," Saidie remarked, with a regretful sigh to think she had all the weary miles to ride, with no companionship saving that of the horses.

"Poor laddie! I wonder if he will succeed in overhauling Athabasca Bill; it is a big order for such a boy to undertake. And I wonder if his father is really innocent?" Mrs. Errol said, in a musing tone, as she led the way into the rough lean-to built at the side of the house, where the kegs of sugar and flour were kept, and which was called the store.

"Of course he is innocent; you can't imagine the father of a nice boy like Fred being a common low-down creature, capable of stealing a box of copper nails from a railway depôt," retorted Saidie, with some heat.

"I thought it was five hundred dollars?" objected Mrs. Errol, as she began to shovel sugar on to the scale in a businesslike fashion.

"It makes no difference; the box was labelled nails, even if it was stuffed with

dollars,” Saidie answered, indignant still that even a suspicion of possible guilt should cling to the reputation of Mr. Crawford in Mrs. Errol’s mind.

“He might even have inherited his good qualities from his mother; it is often the case,” Mrs. Errol went on, in an argumentative fashion, as she tipped a little more sugar on to the scale to make it go down nicely.

“This one did not—at least, not entirely,” Saidie retorted, in a confident tone; then struck by a clamour of voices outside, moved hastily towards the door of the store, saying as she went, “I wonder what all the noise is about; it sounds as if something had happened.”

Mrs. Errol followed her to the door, then cried out in surprise and alarm, for a canoe was being drawn up on the bank by two Indians, whilst out of it Potiphar was scrambling, dripping wet, his head bandaged with a dirty piece of cotton cloth, and one arm thrust into the bosom of his red flannel shirt, as if it had also been injured.

“What is the matter, Potiphar? You look as if you had been in the wars!” Mrs. Errol cried, with an involuntary smile, for the half-breed looked a ludicrous spectacle, with his dripping garments and dirty head-bandage.

“No, ma’am, but me have been in the water, which is a wusser,” replied Potiphar, shaking himself as if he were a dog that had been for a swim.

“Have you had an upset with the canoe?” asked George Errol, who at this moment appeared on the scene, coming down from a lumber camp high up on the pine ridge.

Potiphar flung up his hand with a tragic gesture, rolling his eyes until only the whites were visible.

“There have bin a most disparate bad accident, an’ the canoe, an’ the passenger, an’ the stores have all gone through Denaree’s Leap together.”

“Not that poor boy!” gasped Saidie, going white to her lips, and looking as she were about to faint.

“Whatever were you about to let such a thing happen?” cried George Errol stormily.

“Me?” ejaculated Potiphar, with another wave of his uninjured arm. “It wasn’t me, Boss, for I was being drowneded all the time.”

“Yah!” broke in one of the Indians, who had paddled the half-breed back from Black Pine portage. “It have bin touch-an’-go with Potiphar, Boss.”

“Touch-and-go,” wailed that worthy; “Boss always say something bad sure to happen some day at Black Pine, cos de current am so strong dere, an’ Boss always say true. Touch-an’-go, an’ me so near drowneded, that me ain’t come to life again yet,” he said, plunging into the story of how he was swept from the canoe, but telling

it in such an incoherent fashion, that no one unused to his peculiar style could ever have made out his meaning.

He had been rescued himself by one of the lumbermen flinging a rope, and lassoing him as he was being swept down by the current past the landing place, in the wake of the canoe containing Fred and the stores.

"Still, the boy may not be drowned; there's just the chance of his getting through the rapids alive. I remember hearing of two men who did the journey in a birchbark, and living to tell the tale," said George Errol; not that there was much hope in his own mind, that Fred had survived the terrible journey through the rapids, but because he must say something that would soften the shock of the tidings to the two women, standing with shocked, white faces to hear the story of the accident.

"Yah!" snorted the Indian, who had spoken before. "Two men did get through once long time ago, but they had always bin up river, an' down river in a birchbark, an' knew all about it. Dis young boy, he sit an' stare while the canoe am sucked down by the whirlpool at Denaree's Leap, an' when the canoe come up again, it am empty an' floating like a bottle cork."

"Will they find his body, do you think?" asked Saidie in an awed voice, after a pause, during which no one had spoken.

But George Errol shook his head. He had seen too much of the river's vagaries, in the passage of the Valley of Death, to have any hope or expectation of Fred's remains being rescued from the long succession of whirlpools, in order that they might have Christian burial.

"Poor laddie, poor laddie, what a terrible fate!" murmured Mrs. Errol, standing with clasped hands, whilst the tears poured down her cheeks.

Saidie's face was white and pinched, but her eyes were tearless, as she held out her hand, saying, "I must be off as quick as I can, dear Mrs. Errol, for when I have delivered the stores at our camp, I must go over to Millet to break the news of this terrible affair to Fred's father and mother. Poor souls, how they will grieve!" and her voice choked and broke, as she turned her head hastily, to hide her working features from the gaze of the others.

"You had better write them a letter, and I will send Potiphar over to Knappsville with it to-morrow," suggested George Errol, feeling that for himself there was nothing he would not rather do than have to be the teller of such news.

"Oh, I could not treat them like that, poor things. I must go to them, if it were all the way to Newfoundland," exclaimed Saidie, with a quick, gasping breath.

"But the father is in prison, isn't he?" queried Mrs. Errol, whose tears were still falling.

"All the more reason why I should go to the poor mother. Why, a letter containing such news might kill her, coming like a knock-down blow in her loneliness. But if I am there to hold her in my arms and break it gently, she may not feel quite so bad," Saidie replied, with a thrill of deep feeling; then she hurried her preparations for departure with so much purpose, that in less than half-an-hour she was riding away up the long slope from Errol's, down which she had cantered in such buoyant eagerness and expectation on the previous evening.

But when once she was safely out of sight and sound of human companionship, and her horses were going forward at the steady pace which showed they knew themselves on their homeward way, her head drooped forward, and she commenced sobbing in a dreary, hopeless fashion, that lasted without stop or stay until she reached the little encampment by the river, where her brother Tom was triumphantly nailing the shingles on to the roof of his house.

"Hullo, Saidie! We shall sleep under a roof to-night, my girl; for Dan Shorter and his hired man came along just after you started yesterday, and put in a few hours' work on the roof. He wouldn't take money for it, either; but said he'd be glad of my help at a day's ploughing later on, when I was comfortably housed. Downright good of him, I thought it, especially as he knows a deal more about house-building than I do, and can get a power of work done in a very little while. But, I say, what is the matter with you, sis? You look as if you had been crying for so long, that you had forgotten to leave off."

"I believe that is just about the truth of the matter," replied Saidie, with a forlorn attempt at a smile, and then with quivering lips she told her brother of the tragic happening at Denaree's Leap.

"Why, whatever could that doddering old numskull, Potiphar, have been about, to get swept out of the canoe in such a fashion? He must have wanted to be upset," exclaimed Tom in surprise, for it seemed scarcely credible, that a man who knew the river so well as Potiphar did, should have been bowled over by such a blunder.

"It is just one of those bits of carelessness that do happen sometimes, I expect," Saidie replied, shaking her head in despairing fashion; "and through it that poor boy Fred has come to a terrible death."

"Pity Potiphar can't be sent the same journey, only the worst of it is that it wouldn't bring the poor boy to life again," Tom answered, picking up his hammer, and preparing to return to his work again, for time was precious in these shortening autumn days.

"Tom, I believe we are on Willie's trail at last," she said, with a catch in her voice, lowering her tone somewhat, although it is probable there were no listeners

within five miles of that little backwoods camp.

"You don't say so!" he exclaimed, with a start, turning sharply round, his work forgotten in the absorbing interest of her words.

"Do you remember that poor boy, Fred, said he was trying to overhaul a trapper, whom he called Athabasca Bill?"

"Rather; to remember the boy was to remember his errand, he was so dead set on running his man to earth," Tom answered, with a nod.

"Well, unless I'm much mistaken, that man, Athabasca Bill, is our long lost brother Willie," Saidie said in a tone of conviction.

"Whew, what next, I wonder! Why, I've heard of this trapper myself, come to think about it; I may even have seen him, for aught I know, and yet it never entered my head that he might be Willie."

"Of course not, nor mine either, until Fred told me about the little affair with Micky Shute, and then I seemed to see Willie all at once; for if you remember, it was just the kind of thing he would be most likely to do," she said, smiling at the recollection despite her trouble.

"I suppose it is," and he nodded again, his face wearing a thoughtful look as his memory went back to the long ago, before Willie had been driven out of the home, because of the unconfessed sin of Arthur. Then he asked abruptly, "Do you want me to drop things as they are, and start out on the trail of this Athabasca Bill?"

"No, I don't," she cried hastily. "In any case, Athabasca Bill will return in the springtime with his skins, and we can look for him then. But if you were to follow him now, I should know no peace day or night, through fear lest harm should come to you, such as befell poor Fred. Besides, I must go off myself at dawn to-morrow, and I can't be back much under the week, by which time it would not be of much use to try and follow his trail, I guess."

"Where are you going?" he inquired, thinking only of her taking another jaunt over to Errol's to see if any further tidings had been received from Denaree's Leap.

"Over to Millet, of course, to tell that poor boy's mother; you won't mind being left, Tom dear; I'll work double tides when I come back to make up for going off like this. But it is a case, you know, of doing as you would be done by," she said wistfully.

"Oh, I'll get along, never fear," he replied good-naturedly. "And see here, Saidie, you might stay a day or two to help her out a bit if she's much driven, poor soul; it is hard on a woman to have a trouble like that, and her husband in prison, too. I guess you'll be worth your keep, anyhow."

"I guess I will; one must be lazy indeed not to be worth that—at least, with an

ordinary sort of appetite,” she rejoined, with a quavering laugh.





CHAPTER X

OUT OF THE WHIRLPOOLS

When the canoe shot forward into the hissing, seething waters of Denaree's Leap, Fred gave himself up for lost, sending one swift, agonized look around at earth and sky, whilst an awful regret chilled his heart, because he had been unable to find Athabasca Bill before death overtook him.

Then with a bump the canoe struck against something, knocking the paddle out of his hand, and almost upsetting him into the water. An instinct of self-preservation made him slide down to the bottom of the canoe, which righted itself as buoyantly as a cork, shooting forward again with the velocity of a railway train, whilst the roaring, angry waters foamed along by its side.

Stretched full length in the bottom of the canoe, clinging for dear life to the thwarts, Fred saw nothing of where he was going, heard nothing save the roaring of the rapids, and was conscious of nothing, saving a strained, painful waiting for the end.

Would it never end? He was just feeling that he could bear no more, and would prefer death to this terrible waiting for it to come, when suddenly the motion of the canoe changed, and instead of shooting forward as heretofore, the little craft commenced whirling round and round so swiftly, that he was giddy and sick with the motion.

Then he must have become unconscious, from the wriggling, squirming motion of the little craft, though his grip on the thwart did not relax, even when a rush of water levelled the seething maelstrom for a moment, sending the flimsy craft on its way again down the narrow channel, where rocks and fallen tree trunks bristled like death traps on either side, threatening a swift destruction had the canoe been driven against them; but it rushed scathless on to where the tall cliffs of the ravine receded, the channel grew wider, and the current more leisurely; and then, ceasing to dash along with the speed of a mail train, the canoe, with its living but unconscious freight,

floated gently down river, until at length it attracted the attention of a solitary traveller, who was taking a noonday rest on the river bank.

Thinking that the canoe must have broken adrift from the last portage, but never dreaming that it had passed safely through the stormy turmoil of the Valley of Death, the traveller crawled out on the half-submerged trunk of a tree as far as he dared safely venture, then flinging a cord with a hook at its end, succeeded in catching the little craft and dragging it to the bank.

"Some one in it, asleep or dead!" he exclaimed, in surprise, talking to himself, after the manner of lonely people; then, with great care and tenderness, he proceeded to drag the stiff, drenched figure from the three or four inches of water which the canoe had shipped in its progress through the rapids.

"Now, where have I seen the laddie before?" he asked, in hoarse, yet kindly tones.

At that moment, with a long, sobbing breath, Fred opened his eyes and looked up.

For one moment he lay staring at the figure bending over him, as if unable to collect his scattered and bewildered senses. Then recollection returned with a rush, as he took in the details of the odd-looking headgear worn by his rescuer.

A cap of silver fox fur it was, of no particular shape, but distinguished by two big lappets, one of squirrel, and the other of white rabbit, which were tied down over the man's ears, giving him a peculiar sinister appearance, greatly belied by his kindly, gentle expression and humorous blue eyes.

"Why, you are Athabasca Bill!—but where did you get that cap from?" gasped Fred, his astonishment helping him to gain a temporary victory over his weakness.

"It ain't surely you, Fred Crawford?" exclaimed the man, in tremendous surprise, putting up a hand to rumple his shaggy hair into yet wilder disorder, but only knocking his outrageous cap further over one eye, until he looked the most comical object imaginable, and a veritable scarecrow as well.

"Yes, I'm Fred Crawford right enough, or at least I was before I came down river through Denaree's Leap," he said, trying to struggle to a sitting posture, but forced from sheer weakness to cling to the other for support.

"It isn't possible that you came down through the Valley of Death, and are alive to talk about it?" queried Athabasca Bill, in a tone of positive awe.

"I thought it was death I was going to, especially when the rotary current caught me, sending the canoe spinning round and round worse than a runaway whirligig at a fair. I don't remember anything since," Fred replied weakly, the reaction from the strain of his terrible voyage being almost more than he could bear, without breaking

down and crying like a girl.

"For sure, it was a marvellous deliverance!" exclaimed Athabasca Bill, still with wondering awe in his tones; then his solicitude for the shivering boy awoke, and he said urgently, "But let me help you over yonder, laddie, where I've got a bit of fire; you'll catch your death, for certain, if you sit shivering here."

"I want to know where you got that cap from; did you lose it and find it again, or have you had it all the time?" persisted Fred, his gaze still fixed on the other's striking headgear, as if fascinated by its peculiarity.

"Why, I've had it ever since I've known you, and I've never lost or mislaid it that I can remember," Bill answered, with a laugh, as he half-led, half-carried Fred through the bushes to where he had a little fire burning in the lee of a great rock. "It isn't often I stop to camp at this time of the day, but I was walking from dawn to dark yesterday, and from dawn this morning, so when I got here I thought I'd take a little rest, on the off-chance of finding a canoe coming along to put me over on the other side of the river," he went on, half in apology, as if he felt rather ashamed of being caught taking his ease in broad daylight.

But Fred felt he must clear up the mystery of the cap—that strange and unmistakable headgear which his father had identified in the railway dépôt at Millet, as being the property of Athabasca Bill, but which he was at this moment staring at on the head of its lawful owner.

"I must know about that cap," he said, almost irritably, for the thing was getting on his nerves. "It isn't possible that you've made yourself a new one, and given the old one away?"

"No, no, it's the same old tile I've always had; a most useful article for keeping the cold out, though not perhaps strikingly beautiful. I've never seen but one like it, though, and that——"

"One like it?" shouted Fred. "Oh, I say, where did you see it, and when?"

"Steady there, laddie, and take it easy a bit if you can; you must need a little rest after what you've come through, and it is quite a story about that other cap. You let me knock up a better fire, and get you in a fair way towards being a bit drier, then I'll tell you about it," Athabasca Bill answered, in a kindly but decided tone, against which Fred felt there was no appeal, and so was fain to submit with the best grace he could to a more or less patient waiting.

Making the best and biggest fire he could, Bill next proceeded to strip off as much of his own clothing as he could conveniently spare, which he then wrapped about Fred's shivering body, whose garments were then hung out on forked sticks about the fire to dry.

This done, and the steaming garments in a fair way to get fit for speedy wear again, Athabasca Bill next warmed up some stewed meat in an old tin pan over the fire, and standing over Fred, forced him to eat every bit of it, although the boy declared that even a mouthful would choke him.

“You must eat, laddie, or you’ll be down with fever to-morrow, and this ain’t no place for sick beds, I can tell you,” Bill persisted, with so much decision in his manner, that Fred did his best to obey.

He fell asleep soon after his meal, being strangely drowsy and worn out from the strain of his terrible voyage, and when he awoke again it was dark, with the stars shining out of a frosty sky.

At first he wondered where he was, and what had happened to make him feel so weak and sore; then catching sight of the queer cap of Athabasca Bill, as that worthy sat bending forward over the fire, which was now a mass of glowing embers, he suddenly recalled the events of the day, and the unexplained mystery of the cap.

“Awake, are you, laddie?” said Athabasca Bill, turning his head as Fred roused from his long sleep.

“Yes; have I slept long?”

“A matter of four or five hours; long enough to take off the keenest edge of your scare, I guess. Stiff, are you?”

“Not very,” replied Fred, as he rose slowly from his improvised couch, and crept nearer to the cheerful warmth of the fire.

“You will be to-morrow, if that’s any consolation; but get into your clothes, boy; they are all dry, and you will be none the worse for as many garments as you can lay hands on to-night, for I can tell you it will be nippy by-and-by. Then I want you to tell me what brings you careering about this back country like a strayed yearling, and why you were so desperately anxious to know all about my old cap and its double.”

“I’ll tell you,” said Fred, getting into his own clothes as quickly as he could, for, as Bill had said, the wind was nippy, and the frosty chill in the air made his teeth chatter; then he crouched down over the fire, telling over again the story of his father’s arrest on suspicion of having stolen the five hundred dollars from the box, labelled copper nails, in the Millet railway dépôt.

“Why, its monstrous, perfectly monstrous! to even think of suspecting your father; but there, it isn’t the first time, by a good long way, that the innocent have had to suffer for the guilty,” said Athabasca Bill, with great bitterness.

“I know that, but it mostly gets put right in the long run,” retorted Fred, with the air of a philosopher. “But what I can’t understand is that cap mystery; until I opened my eyes when you dragged me out of the boat, and I saw it on your head, I could

have vowed and declared that your old cap was in the hands of the police at Millet. Father identified it as being yours, and the marvel to me is that the mounted police haven't ridden you down before this, to charge you with being concerned in the robbery; only perhaps they thought as they had got one prisoner, they need not trouble about hunting for another."

"I guess you've hit the right nail on the head there, boy, and it's not wonderful either, when you come to think what a big country it is to ride through on the off-chance of catching a thief. Still, I can but wish they had taken it in their heads to run me down, since then I could have put them on to the track of the real thief, and that pretty quickly too, or else I'm much mistaken," rejoined Athabasca Bill, in great excitement.

"What do you mean?" cried Fred eagerly.

"Why, I saw the fellow that owns, or did own that cap, so like my own that your father identified it as belonging to me; saw him only the day before yesterday, too, and asked him what he had done with his beautiful headgear, and he told me with a laugh, that he had left it in the hands of a bigger rogue than himself. I wish I'd known then what you've been telling me now; I guess we should not have parted so easily, that young chap and me," replied Athabasca Bill, with a suggestive reaching out of his thin, muscular arms, and a snap of his jaws which was like the click of handcuffs.

"But how—?" began Fred, then stopped, as the other held up a warning finger, as if impatient to proceed.

"It was like this, boy; the day I met your father, but an hour or two earlier, I fell in with a young man with a terrible cough, who was in a fine state of mind, declaring he'd lost not only all his money, which he declared had been filched from him at cards, or some other kind of gambling wickedness, but he had also lost his credentials and some other important papers, which he was tracking back to find. To my amazement, he was wearing a cap so like this old fur tile of mine, that I clapped my hand to my head to make sure I'd got it on, and in doing so gave a tug at the string, which broke it clean off. Not wanting to stop to mend it then, I stuffed the cap in my sack, and went bareheaded for the rest of the day; that is how it chanced that I'd nothing on my head when I met your father."

"I thought you said you had seen the young man since," said Fred.

"So I did, and I'm coming to that in a minute, if you'll only be a bit patient," rejoined the other.





CHAPTER XI

STARTING IN PURSUIT

Oh, I'll be patient enough, if only you'll get on as fast as you can," Fred said, with a restless, excited wriggle of his body, which certainly did not look very patient.

"When I left your father," went on Athabasca Bill, after a pause spent in re-lighting his pipe at a brand taken from the fire, "I had to spend a deal of time tacking to and fro, doing bits of business as I went. There were orders waiting for me at the Creamery, and one or two other places, that kept me from getting on, and then the day before yesterday—that is, the day when I reached Errol's place at sundown—who should overhaul me, riding on a good horse, but my young bankrupt gambler of a few days before, whose headgear had been so like my own. He'd changed the fur cap for a felt wide-awake, but I knew him for all that, and asked him if he'd found his credentials again, and if the horse was one of 'em."

"Funny sort of credentials a horse would be; why, I thought they were letters, or something, to say you were honest and respectable," interposed Fred.

"There is more than one sort of credentials," replied Athabasca Bill, with an oracular air. "But this wandering tenderfoot, with his dissipated air, and desperate bad cough, declared that he'd found all he'd lost, and something more beside; when I asked him what it was, he said that was his own business, so I made up my mind he must have stolen the horse he was riding. However, I'd no evidence to prove it, so I parted from him as civilly as if he'd been proved honest by judge and jury. Then he asked me if Strawberry Creek didn't flow into the Saskatchewan River, and I told him yes; so he said he was glad to hear it, as he was going right away to Smoky Lake and Beaver River, and if he could get down the river, he'd travel so much faster than overland."

"Beaver River—but isn't that in Athabasca?" queried Fred, with a doleful lengthening of his face.

"Partly, and partly in Saskatchewan. Smoky Lake is just this side the boundary,

and in Alberta; I know that country pretty well, for I used to go up there trapping regularly every winter—a regular no-man’s-land it is, too; I’ve been for months and never set eyes on any human beings save Indians,” Bill answered.

“Whatever would this fellow be going there for at this time of the year—was he a trapper?” Fred asked, in great surprise.

“I should say not. From the looks of him, I took him to be one of those Hudson Bay Company’s people, who go from post to post taking orders, collecting accounts, and arranging the trade with the Indians; his talk about credentials made me the more certain about it, for, you see, he’d be sure to need something of the sort on such an errand,” replied Athabasca Bill, tossing another armful of brushwood on the glowing embers, which smouldered for a few minutes, then burst into a roaring, crackling blaze.

“A pretty kind of creature to be put in a place of authority!” cried Fred, with a wrathful intonation, thinking of the trouble which had befallen his own home, in consequence of that mysterious robbery from the dépôt.

“I’ve got a plan in my mind,” the other said, after a long pause, filled only by the crackling of the brushwood on the fire.

“What is that?” demanded Fred eagerly.

“That chap—let me see, what did he say his name was? Oh, I remember; Guy Herrick—has got a clear days’ start of us, to say nothing of his hitting the river at a point a good many miles lower down than this; but he hasn’t had the experience, perhaps, with Indians at the portage that I have, and so we may overhaul him without much trouble.”

“But you’ve got to come back with me to swear to father’s alibi,” broke in Fred, in quick protest.

“Now, boy, look here,” said Athabasca Bill, in a judicial tone; “if I turn round to-morrow morning, and track back to Millet as fast as I can go, all that I can do when I get there, is to sit down and wait till the trial comes on, and then up and say that I met your father in a certain place on a certain day. But when I’ve said it, I shall know, and so will every one else, that if your father had wanted to break into the dépôt that night, he would have had plenty of time to do so.”

“Then it was no good my coming all this way to find you?” cried Fred, in a bitterly disappointed tone, thinking of the weary miles he had tramped, and all that he had undergone in the passage of Denaree’s Leap.

“Don’t you make any mistake about that, and don’t be downhearted, either,” replied the other kindly. “If you hadn’t come to tell me your father wanted help, I should not have known it until it was too late, maybe. Now, the very best I can do

shall be done, for I don't forget what I owe your folks, and I'm going to pay as much of the debt as I can. If you and I go along after this Guy Herrick, and overhaul him, we can just take the law in our own hands, until we find a lawful person to help us, and take him back with us to the town in time to clear your father at his trial. If he should, after all, prove to be an innocent person, he will be able, at least, to identify his own cap, and free me from the suspicion of having been mixed up in the muddle."

"I see!" exclaimed Fred, with returning cheerfulness. "But how shall we manage the river, seeing that you haven't a canoe?"

"That's easy enough," began Bill, when Fred burst out excitedly—

"Why, of course there is that canoe I came in, with the stores; or was it too much damaged?"

Athabasca Bill shook his head.

"Now, if we took that without a word of explanation, we should deserve, and perhaps get the mounted police after us, for running away with George Errol's canoe, and appropriating his stores. No, boy, we must just get two of the Indians—and there should be plenty of them hereabouts—to carry the canoe and the stores back over the fifteen mile portage to Black Pine, with a letter or message to let the people know that you came safe through the racket of Denaree's Leap, then we'll get a birchbark of our own; I think I know where I can put my hand on one, and set off down river as fast as we can go."

"I've got a piece of paper and a pencil, so I can write a letter to Mr. Errol; then, perhaps, he will get a chance of letting our folks know that I am all right," Fred said, with a yawn, for though he had been so lately asleep, he was weary still, and badly in need of a good long rest.

"Tired, are you?" Bill asked, as he vigorously stoked the fire again. "Well, so am I; and the best thing we can do is to turn in and get what sleep we can, before it gets too cold for comfort. That blanket of yours was so sopping wet that I haven't got it dry yet, but it will do to hang up as a shelter to keep the wind away, and we can both lie down under mine."

Fred acquiesced cheerfully enough in this arrangement, and helped his friend hang up the wet blanket, as a sort of roofless tent to keep the wind away, though he was so stiff and sore that he could only move his limbs with difficulty.

Then the two lay down together as close to the fire as it was safe to get, and were quickly asleep. If danger menaced them in the long, dark hours, they knew it not, but slept on peacefully enough until the bitter cold awoke them, by which time it was nearly morning.

The fire had died down to a heap of dusty white ashes, and the blanket which

covered them was stiff with frost, whilst the ground appeared covered with snow.

"Whew, it is like mid-winter!" exclaimed Fred, sitting up and trying to rub a little warmth into one half-frozen arm, whilst his teeth chattered with the cold.

"You wouldn't say so if you had ever slept in the open in mid-winter," remarked Athabasca Bill, who was busy restoring the fire.

"I wonder you don't freeze to death, in the long nights you have, with no comforts, no proper roof over your head even," Fred said, watching the other's handy way with the fire, and wondering what he should have done had he been left to his own resources.

"Don't you make a mistake; I mostly have a roof over my head, though it is usually made of snow. Capital stuff to keep the cold out, snow is. Whenever I've built myself a hut for trapping, I've always covered it in three or four feet deep with snow, and slept as warm and comfortable under it as if I'd had a Mansard roof, and the canopy of a four-post bed over my head," Bill replied, leaning over his fire with great satisfaction, as the cheerful flames leapt upward again.

"I think I should like to be a trapper; will you take me for an apprentice?" Fred asked, with a laugh; he had slept a good deal of his stiffness off, and was feeling fresh and fit again, except for the cold.

"Not if I can help it," answered Athabasca Bill, with sudden fervour. "Now, don't mistake me, and think it isn't that I wouldn't like your company; but, to my way of thinking, no one that has got a home, and people in it that love him, should ever take to a lonely life like a trapper's. If you've got any one to love and trust you, then, I say, stop at home and enjoy it; time enough to take to trapping, when the home has slipped out of your grasp."

Athabasca Bill spoke with a stormy vehemence that would have surprised and startled Fred, had he not already been in possession of Saidie's story. As it was, he was strongly tempted to disobey her injunction, and drop a hint to the lonely, friendless man of the brother and sister who yearned so eagerly for his presence, and of the dispersion of the black cloud of suspicion and distrust which had hung over him so long.

But having given his word, Fred was in honour bound to respect Saidie's confidence, and was for turning the talk into other channels, in order to get as far as possible from temptation, when his companion started up, declaring that he heard some one coming.

"Which way?" asked Fred, whose untrained ears had caught no sound of approach.

"Over there, where your birchbark is lying. I think I'll step over that way and

have a look round, or maybe some wandering red man may reckon the thing is his own because he found it, and then where would George Errol be?" So saying, Athabasca Bill strode away across the grass, that was crisp with frost, to where the canoe was lying which had made the perilous voyage of the Valley of Death with such little damage to itself or its contents.

He was away for some considerable time, during which Fred worked at the fire with such good effect, that he succeeded in getting some warmth into his chilled body, and was just beginning to wonder what Athabasca Bill had found to keep him away so long, when he caught the sound of voices and footsteps coming nearer at a quick rate.

"So Bill did hear some one over yonder," he muttered to himself, giving the fire a deft stir with a stick, which sent a shower of sparks flitting upward on the frosty air, followed by a crackling burst of flame, which illumined the darkness, and enabled him to see his companion returning, accompanied by two forms wrapped in blankets—Indians, he guessed them to be, although they both wore hats of the cowboy type, and wore store-shoes of a down-at-heel, squelchy description, which proclaimed them in the last stage of decrepitude to observant ears.

"Get your letter written with the first gleam of daylight, boy, for the chance of sending the canoe back to its rightful owner has come quicker than I expected," said Athabasca Bill, with quite a new ring of energy in his tone; and as day was already beginning to break, Fred was speedily able to comply with the injunction.

A brief scrawl it was, just explaining to Mr. Errol how he had come scathless through the seething whirlpools of Denaree's Leap, and was returning the birchbark and the stores to Black Pine portage, asking also that Mr. Errol would write to his mother, telling her that he had found Athabasca Bill, and was on the point of starting with him for the Beaver River country in pursuit of the real thief, whose tracks he had by good luck happened upon.

This communication being given to the two Indians, they prepared to carry the stores and the canoe over the fifteen miles rough ground to Black Pine portage. Being, however, overtaken by a fit of curiosity on the way, they stopped to examine into the nature of their load, and finding a package of tobacco among the stores, promptly annexed it for their own smoking. After that first yielding to temptation, the remaining fall was easy enough. Fred's letter was stuffed into the next supper fire, and the two trailed off into the wilderness with the stolen goods.





CHAPTER XII

ROUGH TRAVELLING

The Indians to whom Athabasca Bill entrusted the stores and canoe for Black Pine portage, possessed a birchbark of their own, which, to save time, he purchased of them, for the conveyance of himself and Fred down the North Saskatchewan River.

Perhaps if he had been a little less eager and absorbed by his project of thief-catching, he would have examined a little more closely into the condition of the canoe which he had purchased of the wily red men. As it was, when they had started on their journey, and he with Fred prepared to set out on their hastily arranged trip to the Beaver River country, he found to his dismay that the wretched little craft leaked at every pore.

"A pretty business, truly! The next time I buy a birchbark without seeing it in the water, I shall deserve to get sucked in and drowned off-hand!" exclaimed Athabasca Bill, rubbing his extraordinary cap to and fro on his head, as if he intended rubbing every bit of hair from the top of his head.

"They must have come up river in the thing. I wonder how they kept afloat; did they bale, do you expect?" Fred asked, as he stood staring at the frail thing, with the water pouring in at the cracks and seams, thinking that they must have baled with extraordinary vigour to keep the thing from becoming water-logged and swamped.

"They didn't come up river in it, the varmints! that canoe hasn't floated for a month or six weeks past," rejoined Bill, in a tone of exasperation, as he turned the thing over, then rubbed his head more violently than before.

"What will you do?" asked Fred.

"There's only one thing to do, and that is, caulk it," said Bill, in the short, sharp manner usual with him, when things were more contrary than usual. It was on the tip of Fred's tongue to ask how the caulking was to be done, seeing that no materials for stopping leaks lay handy, but second thoughts decided him to wait and see what

his companion intended doing, instead of bothering him with questions.

"You make a better fire, as quick as you can; not a roaring, tearing blaze, but a quiet, glowing heat," commanded Bill, and Fred hastened to obey, though he rather wondered how the steady, glowing heat was to be arrived at in that region of brushwood and dried grass, where all the fuel flamed up, blazed furiously for five minutes or so, and then went out, leaving only a heap of hot dust and ashes.

However, where there's a will there's a way, most often, and having plied Bill's small hatchet to good purpose on the thickest of the brushwood, Fred laid the fuel in a conical heap on the fire, surrounding the whole with big stones and boulders dragged from the overhanging cliff where they had their camp. Half-an-hour of steady burning left a clear bed of red coals, the surrounding stones being also red hot.

Then Bill brought out his one cooking pot, which was neither more nor less than an old meat tin, with two bent skewers for a handle, and balancing it carefully on the hot stones, put into it some gum and balsam which had been stowed away in his pack, adding to it a little oil, and a cake of beeswax which he had made himself from a take of wild honey found on the previous day. When this precious mixture was boiling, he carefully daubed the outside of the canoe with it from stem to stern, going over and over the cracks and seams until they were well filled.

Fred watched the proceedings with great interest, lending a hand where he could, but carefully refraining from asking any questions, until the cooking-pot was empty, and Bill was cleaning it, by the simple, but effectual, method of rubbing it with handfuls of dirt.

"How soon will it be ready to use?" he asked then, with a nod of his head in the direction of the birchbark.

"To-morrow morning; so we will stay where we are for to-day, cook what food we've got, and be ready to be off bright and early at dawn," answered the other, then started off to look at the traps he had set whilst Fred was asleep on the previous day, in the hope that they might yield something towards the replenishment of his larder.

Fred being left to look after the fire, set to work chopping brushwood into convenient piles, and heaping it near the camping-place; with the remembrance of last night's bitter cold fresh in his mind, he worked zealously towards gathering together a good supply of fuel for the ensuing night. He was making active play with the small but useful hatchet belonging to his companion, when he heard a shout, and looking round, saw Bill making his way through the scrub to the camp, laden down with game as the result of his forage.

Seizing the bundle of wood he had ready chopped, Fred hurried back to the fire with it, arriving in time to congratulate Bill on the good fortune which had attended his trapping.

"Now, don't you make any mistake about the traps, which were all empty except one, that had this hare in it," replied the trapper, holding up the only furred game he carried, though he was hung all over with birds which looked something like grouse.

"Then how did you catch them?" demanded Fred, in astonishment, for the shot gun, the trapper's only weapon, was lying in its place beside the pack.

Athabasca Bill laughed as he slung the birds from his back on to the ground.

"That was easy enough. They are what we call fool-birds, and the name fits 'em uncommon well, too, for they are about the most foolish creatures I ever came across. I happened upon a covey of six of them as I was coming back with my hare, and they flew into some branches about nine feet from the ground; so I got a long stick, tied a string with a running noose at the end of it, and bobbing it over the necks of the creatures one by one, brought down five of them, and only just missed the sixth, which flew away with a scream and a flutter, after sitting still to see me wring the necks of the other five."

"Well, I should think you are about right in saying their name suited them," remarked Fred, as he seized upon one of the birds and commenced stripping off its feathers, though he only succeeded in getting one bird done to the other's two.

Everything was put in readiness that night for an early start in the morning, and then, when darkness fell, the two curled down in the lee of the little hill to get as much sleep as the chill of the night would permit them to snatch.

They had two blankets instead of one now, whilst the cold was not so intense as on the previous night, or else their fire was bigger, for they slept in comfort, until the slow, reluctant dawn began to creep down the sides of the pine-clothed hills on the other side of the river.

"A night's rest that a millionaire swaddled in fine linen and eiderdown might have envied," commented Athabasca Bill, as he warmed some tea in a tin can over the embers of the fire, which they drank without sugar or milk. He carried tea in preference to coffee, as being lighter of portage, and sugar was a luxury entirely out of question, on account of its weight.

They were afloat before it was actually daylight, and to their joy and satisfaction discovered that the caulking was successful, for the present, at any rate, though how it would stand in rougher waters they had yet to discover.

Athabasca Bill appeared as much at home in a canoe as if he had been born an

Indian, whilst Fred, by dint of keeping his eyes open and his wits about him, soon learned what to do, and what to leave undone in the matter of paddling. The journey was easy enough, and pleasant too, so far as the water part of it was concerned, but the numerous and difficult portages were exceedingly wearisome; for then, instead of paddling down the current in the light and buoyant birchbark, they had to tramp over rough trails, up steep hills and down precipitous descents, carrying the canoe and its contents on their shoulders.

It took four days of this sort of travel to get round to that part of the river into which Strawberry Creek flowed, and where they might hope to light upon traces of the man of whom they were in pursuit.

"There's an Indian village about five or six miles further down, and there we ought to get the news we want," Athabasca Bill said, as their light craft careered along on the swift current, caused by the confluence of the turbulent waters of Strawberry Creek with the steadier flow of the river.

"Is this reservation land?" asked Fred, glancing at the willow swamps on either side of the river.

"No; but the village is pretty permanent, for all that, and will be, I expect, until the land about here gets taken up and settled."

"Which won't be this year, or next, I should say," remarked Fred, looking at the willow-thickets on either side.

"Hullo, what's that?" exclaimed the trapper, becoming suddenly alert, ceasing to paddle, and leaning forward in an attitude of strained listening.

For a moment no sound broke on the dreary forest silence, saving the shiver of the crisping willow leaves, as the wind passed through them. Then followed a sound which almost made Fred's heart stand still—the deep-toned baying of a bloodhound.

"It is a tracker-dog," he whispered hoarsely. "Sounds just like one of old man Arlo's dogs, that he ran father down with," and he shivered again, thinking of the night when he had stood with his father in the darkness by the house door, listening to the baying of the hounds coming nearer and nearer, yet never dreaming of the disaster which loomed so close at hand.

Athabasca Bill thought he was nervous at the thought of a possible encounter with the creature, and spoke with intent to reassure him.

"No need to turn pale, laddie; by the sound there is only one beast singing to himself, and if he should chance our way, why he'll have to swim to reach us, don't you see?"

"Oh, I'm not afraid of the dog; 't isn't likely the creature would pull us down

unless it was tracking us. I was only thinking that, unless all bloodhounds bay alike, that must certainly be an animal belonging to old man Arlo," Fred said, bending to his paddle with renewed vigour, as if anxious to reach the place from whence the baying came, and assure himself of the identity of the dog.

But though both were keeping a sharp look-out, neither he nor Athabasca Bill happened to notice the submerged trunk of a tree lying right in their track, but owing to the heavy shadow on the water at that point, invisible until they crashed into it, the sharp, scraggy branches ripping open one side of the canoe.

In a moment they were both floundering in the water, Athabasca Bill making frantic, but futile, grabs at their various bundles, which had so unexpectedly set out voyaging on their own account; whilst Fred's whole attention was absorbed in the task of keeping himself afloat by clinging to the birchbark, which, after upsetting them so treacherously, had righted itself, and was floating like a cork, the rent in the side being now about an inch above the water line.

Fortunately they were very close to the bank, and in a minute or so succeeded in scrambling on land by the aid of the overhanging willows. The ground was very soft and boggy, but in the first moment of deliverance they forbore to grumble at this, as they shook the worst of the water from their dripping garments, and took stock of the damage they had sustained.

Bill's shot gun was, as usual, slung in a waterproof case under his arm, and, in view of the constantly recurring portages, both had blankets and packs slung on their backs, but two other bundles of traps and stores had already made a rapid journey to the bottom of the river, whilst the damaged birchbark and the paddles were already floating down the current, voyaging on their own account.

"Well, folks say it's mostly the unexpected that happens, and I'm inclined to believe that there is a deal of truth in the statement!" exclaimed Athabasca Bill, with an air of gloomy philosophy, as, besmeared with mud and dripping from his ducking, he drew himself up among the willows for a moment's breathing time.

"There's a trail here," exclaimed Fred, who had worked himself further into the thicket. "And I can see boot-marks, as well as moccasins, so there is civilization somewhere not far away."

"Of a sort, perhaps," responded the other, with a doubtful shake of his head, as he dragged himself to his feet, and proceeded along the rough, but well-defined path in the direction from which the baying of the dog sounded nearer and nearer, whilst Fred pressed closely in the rear.

Ten minutes or so of walking, and they emerged on a little clearing with a log cabin, and a hound tied to a fence.

“It’s Montana Jenny!” cried Fred breathlessly; “I’d know the creature anywhere.”





CHAPTER XIII

A BID FOR THE FARM

The tidings brought by Saidie Marsh from Errol's place of the tragic fate which overtaken Fred, plunged his family into the deepest grief.

The children crept about with sad faces and red eyes, whilst Mr. Crawford looked as if he would never smile again; but it was on Mrs. Crawford that the heaviest weight of the trouble fell, because of the knowledge that it was she who had sent her son on the journey, which had ended in such black disaster.

"Better that you, though innocent, should have been convicted, and had to serve a term of years in prison, than that this should have come," she said, looking up at her husband with quivering lips, as they sat side by side in the darkest hour of their trouble.

"I may have to go still; and it will be all the harder to be compelled to leave you so unprotected," he rejoined, checking the complaint against this last bitter blow of fate that rose to his lips, as he remembered some words from the Book of Job, running after this wise: "In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly."

"You must not worry about us, dear, whatever happens; for I shall not be alone, you know, and Ella is very capable, whilst Celia has the brains and management of a woman," Mrs. Crawford answered bravely, rising above her own sorrow, from an unselfish desire to lessen her husband's heavy burden of care.

"Still, good as they are, they are only bits of girls, and so don't count much so far as earning a living goes. If only I can sell this farm, it may make matters easier for you. I will go over to Millet to-morrow, and see about having it advertised," Mr. Crawford said, rising from his chair, and beginning to pace up and down the narrow limits of the room.

Saidie, worn out with her long journey, had gone to bed at the same time as Ella and Celia, whilst the little boys had crept off before that even, to cry themselves to

sleep over the loss of the big brother they loved so much. This left husband and wife alone, and they were looking forward into the black, dreary future, and planning to meet its emergencies as prudent people should.

But though they talked far into the night, then went to bed to toss there in wakeful restlessness until the morning came, they could see no light at all in the thick cloud of trouble overshadowing them.

Dawn found poor Mrs. Crawford too unwell to leave her bed, whereupon Saidie Marsh begged permission to stay until the next day, declaring that her horse would be quite worn out, if it could not have a little time in which to recover itself.

“Why, yes, of course we’ll be only too glad for you to stay, for we are grateful indeed to you for all the trouble you have taken, in coming such a long way to break the sad news to us yourself, instead of leaving us to hear it haphazard,” Mrs. Crawford said, in a low, faltering tone, when Saidie crept to her bedside with the request.

Mr. Crawford warmly seconded all this, and went off to Millet to take active steps in getting rid of his farm, feeling all the more comfortable about his wife, because he had left her in the vigorous, capable care of Saidie.

His errand did not appear very prosperous, however, for no one seemed in the least anxious to purchase a farm, or to know of any one else who chanced to be buying land. It was the wrong time of the year, and he knew if a purchaser were to be found, it would doubtless make a hundred dollars difference on the wrong side, whether he sold his land now, or waited until the turn of the year.

But when fate holds the whip hand, a man must do the best he can, and not grumble; so having put matters in train for the speedy disposal of his property, Mr. Crawford turned his horse’s head in the direction of home.

He was passing the last block of houses on the road out of Millet, when a man came striding towards him at a great pace, holding up his hand in token that he wished him to stop.

“Mornin’, neighbour; I hope it isn’t all true what I have been hearin’ in the town?” he said, reaching up a hard, work-worn hand, and shaking Mr. Crawford’s as if he meant to wrench it off.

“That chiefly depends on what you’ve heard; though, I fear, there isn’t much chance of exaggeration in that direction just now,” Mr. Crawford answered gloomily.

“I’m sorry, I really am, neighbour; I was downright cut up when I heard. You see, I hadn’t bin this way for nigh a month, and it takes a goodish time for news of any sort to filter through to our place,” the kindly stranger said, still working away at the other’s hand as if it were a pump handle.

"Thank you, Sam Beresford; a friendly word goes a long way in these times, I can tell you; for there is more than one man in Millet to-day that forgets he used to know me before I saw the inside of a prison. It cuts in pretty deep, when they go by without turning their heads," Mr. Crawford said bitterly; he had been treated thus several times lately, yet might never have said a word about it, but for this touch of genuine good-heartedness from Sam Beresford.

"Let 'em be; they'll hang their heads and chaw the dust bime-by, when you're proved innocent, and come home with flags flying and a brass band blowing itself into fits for a hescort," said Mr. Beresford, with a deep, rumbling laugh, which seemed to begin somewhere in the region of his boots. Then checking this untimely mirth, so suddenly that it stuck in his throat and nearly choked him, he asked, in a lower tone, "I hope it ain't true what they're sayin' about your boy havin' come to grief over Black Pine way?"

"I'm afraid there is no room to doubt it," Mr. Crawford said, controlling his voice by a great effort. "Miss Marsh rode over to our place yesterday to bring us the news. She was at Errol's place when the—the accident happened, and was told of it by a man who saw the canoe tip over with the poor boy in it."

"Ah, now that is trouble, if you like; and, neighbour, my heart aches for you, that it do," said honest Sam, gulping down a sob, for his heart was as tender as a child's, and he thought it no shame to put up a hand and openly wipe his tears away.

"It is a terrible blow, especially to his mother; she sent him off on Athabasca Bill's trail, you see, in the hope of being able to establish an alibi for me. I was in prison then, but some one bailed me out next day," Mr. Crawford talked on, fearing he should break down if he stopped a moment, for the sympathizing face of his friend was strangely disconcerting.

Presently he made a move to resume his journey, and then the other suddenly bethought himself of something he wanted done.

"Going home, are you, neighbour?"

"Yes; is there anything I can do for you out our side?" Mr. Crawford asked, for Sam Beresford lived ten miles away on the other side of the railway, and the roads of the district were very much in their infancy.

"Just what I was going to speak about," ejaculated Sam, commencing to fumble at the breast pocket of his coat; "I owe a little bill to a man out your way—ten dollars it is, neither more nor less, but it's bin standin' a goodish while now—an' I'm blest if the old skin-a-flint hasn't sent me a letter sayin' he'd have the law on me if I didn't pay up sharp. So as I happened to have some cash drop in yesterday, I thought I couldn't do better than hurry up with the money. Old man Arlo is the party

as it is owing to, and if you'd just look in and settle it for me as you go home, I'd be desperate obliged to you."

"I will do it with pleasure; shall I take the receipt and send to you, or ask him to forward it himself?" Mr. Crawford said, reaching down his hand for the money.

"Oh, there ain't no need to worrit about a receipt; I shan't pay the money over again, don't you be afraid; he can cross it off if he's got it writ down in black an' white against me, an' if he ain't, why there's no need to trouble. Good mornin', neighbour, and I hope you'll soon get righted, an' in smoother waters again." So saying, and with another hearty handshake, Sam Beresford went his way.

There was a smile on Mr. Crawford's face, as he told his horse he was ready to move on; and if it did not linger long, it at least served to show a temporary lifting of the clouds on his mental horizon.

The divergence of a mile on his homeward way brought him to old man Arlo's place, where a savage baying of dogs greeted him, until he shouted, as an intimation that he would have speech with the master of the house, when the angry barking changed instantly to an eager whining, the hounds having recognized their whilom rescuer by his voice, although they could not see his face, the outer door of their kennel being shut.

Thrice Mr. Crawford shouted, but receiving no answer, swung himself from his horse, and prepared to try the door. He had seen a thin, blue curl of smoke rising from the chimney as he approached the house, so imagined the owner could not be far away.

Nor was he. For just as his visitor's knuckles made active play on the door, old man Arlo came shuffling round the corner, as if he had but just become aware of some one seeking admittance.

"That door is barred to keep the draught out; you had best come in round this way," he croaked, in a hoarse voice, then began to cough as if he would choke.

"I don't need to come in. I met Sam Beresford in Millet this morning, and he asked me to look round this way, and pay you that ten dollars he has been owing you this good while back. Perhaps you will just let me have it in writing that I paid you," said Mr. Crawford, who meant to have a receipt himself, even though the man who paid the money was indifferent on the subject.

"Ha, ha, ha! are you afraid I shall go and say that you ha'n't paid me, eh?" queried the old man, then he was seized with another fit of coughing, which made him turn purple in the face.

"No, I'm not. But I'd rather have a receipt, for one never knows what is going to happen," replied the other.

"Then you will have to come indoors for it," old man Arlo said, gasping a little, and swaying in a weak, unsteady fashion, as he turned back round the corner of the house.

Throwing his horse's bridle over the hitching-post, Mr. Crawford followed him round to the back of the house, where the barn and piggeries were, and where also was the high-paled fence about the yard where the hounds took their exercise.

"Where is your other dog, the one that does not love me?" he asked, walking up to the palings and putting his fingers through for the dogs to lick.

"Montana Jenny? Oh, I got rid of the beast. I don't say she wasn't a good trailer, but she'd no discretion whatever, and was as obstinate as a pig," growled the old man, leading the way into the one miserable, squalid room, which served him as kitchen, parlour, and counting-house combined.

"The creature certainly did not love me. I hope you got a good price for her," Mr. Crawford said, glancing round the dirty, comfortless room, and wondering if old man Arlo was as poor as he looked.

"Oh, I did well enough. Glad enough to have her gone," he answered, coughing again; then with an abrupt change of tone he asked, "Well, are you thinking of taking my advice, and going off on the quiet one of these fine days soon?"

"No, I am not," the other replied. "But I've been to Millet this morning to have the farm advertised for immediate sale, for I must if possible get rid of that before the trial."

"It ain't the right time o' year to offer land; you'll only make a poor price."

"I know; but there is no help for it, as matters stand. I might have waited on the chance of getting off at the trial, but for my poor boy's death." Mr. Crawford stopped abruptly, and old man Arlo flung up his hands with an exclamation of horror and dismay.

"It's true, then, what Joe Armstrong was saying this morning, that your Fred had been killed, out yonder in Black Pine country?"

"Too true," said the bereaved father, in a dry, choked tone. "So I must get rid of the land somehow before the trial."

"How much are you asking for it?" queried the other.

"A thousand dollars as it stands, straw and hay included."

"Too much," rejoined the old man; "I know a man—leastways, he has sort o' commissioned me to buy him a farm in this district, and I don't mind bidding you nine hundred dollars on his account, cash down."

"It's a bargain, then," said Mr. Crawford.





CHAPTER XIV

OLD ACQUAINTANCES

At sight of the two dripping figures emerging from the willow thickets, the hound dashed forward as if to tear them down, at the same time raising such an uproar of barking, that the door of the hut speedily opened, and a man's rough, shaggy head was thrust forth, in order to discover what all the noise was about.

But he was a white man, and after a long, steady stare, Athabasca Bill claimed him as an old acquaintance.

"Why, if it ain't you, Blue Pete! And who'd have thought of coming across you in these parts? I heard you'd made your fortune a good while back, and gone to settle down at Calgary, or Toronto, I don't quite remember which."

"There ain't no call for you to go straining your recollection about it either, seeing that unfortunately it ain't true," rejoined the unkempt one, in an easy tone. "But come in, Bill, and make yourself at home, and the boy too; been having a bath in the river, have you, and with your clothes on? You look a bit damper than is ordinary on a fine day."

"And feel so, too," replied Athabasca Bill, with a shiver, as he followed his host into the log cabin, where a big fire was burning, and some kind of cooking in progress, whilst the place was strewn from end to end with garments, stores, and weapons, as if the owner had just come home from a journey, and had not yet had time to put things straight.

Blue Pete was hospitable, though shaggy; and if his cooking was primitive, and his methods of housekeeping somewhat lacking in the matter of cleanliness and tidiness, the warmth of his welcome left nothing to be desired.

He insisted upon clothing his guests in garments of his own, whilst their dripping raiment was dried at the fire; then dishing up a savoury mess of bacon, poultry and vegetables, all stewed together until they were indistinguishable one from the other, and the bones of the fowls stood out white and clean, he bade them fall to and feed.

With so much talk between the two men of past days, and the doings of long ago, there was no opportunity for some time for Fred to ask the question trembling on the tip of his tongue, as to the identity of the hound that was tied to the fence rails, and which every now and then voiced her complaints in a fresh burst of baying.

Presently Blue Pete, who, having finished eating, was smoking a short black pipe, and throwing out vast clouds of smoke, whilst he indulged in long-winded reminiscences of the days when he and Athabasca Bill had toiled in the same gang on the irrigation works at Lethbridge, stopped suddenly short in his talk, and asked Fred to take the remains of the stew to the clamorous dog outside.

"The beast is hungry, but she isn't likely to let any ventilation into you, boy, if you approach her down wind, so that she gets a whiff of something to eat first," he said, with a lazy stretch of his long limbs, as he threw another log on the fire.

Fred rose with alacrity; he had faced a savage dog before to-day, and armed with such a persuader as the remains of that dish of stew, he had no apprehension whatever as to the nature of his reception by the animal tied to the fence.

"I'll take it, and risk the ventilation. But I should like to know how long you have had that dog, and where it came from?" he said, pausing with the dish in his hand.

"That's easy answered; I've been away for a fortnight, sort of combining business and pleasure, down at Wetaskiwin, and having spent most of my available cash more or less wisely, I made out to tramp it most of the way back, specially as I had got some business to see to in Millet as I came through. But when I got to the town I found the man I wanted, Joe Armstrong by name, lived five or six miles east of Millet, so I had to tramp so far out of my way, and didn't feel very pleasant about it either. I did a stroke of business with him, though, that put me in a good temper again, and was tracking back to the railway, feeling that I could afford to ride after all, when I came across a poor, miserable old chap, a regular bag of bones; he was tied round with some old rags to keep him from collapsing, and he was leading that same animal as is chained to the fence outside."

"Old man Arlo, that was, I know," burst out Fred; then was suddenly silenced by a look from Athabasca Bill, warning him to be careful as to what admissions he made concerning himself.

"Well, the old chap wanted me to buy the brute; seemed reg'lar set on it, too; wouldn't take no for an answer, and all that sort o' thing, till at last I owned up I'd take it for a dollar and a quarter, not a long price as times go, but all I could afford, and he grabbed at the offer so eagerly, that I began to be sorry I hadn't said a dollar, without the quarter."

"Why, that dog cost I don't know how much money, and is a real trained

tracker, that came all the way from Montana, and could hunt a man through a crowded city street without ever losing the trail; Montana Jenny, old man Arlo used to call her, and he set no end of store by her, because she was so clever," Fred burst out, in profound amazement that the dog should have been sold at such a price.

"Ah, I remember he said something about the creature being good at tracking; that's what made me think of buying her, for those thieving rascals of Indians come stealing my willows after I've got them peeled and ready for plaiting; but I guess they will be glad to keep away, when they find out what kind of an active partner I've taken into the concern," Blue Pete replied, laughing, and with a nod of his head, Fred took up the dish and went out.

At sight of him, Montana Jenny made a vicious spring, as if she would settle things up and make a meal of him in next to no time at all. Fred thought of the last time he had seen her, and how she had sprung straight for his father's throat, whilst he stood by, powerless to help or hinder. But the remembrance, instead of making a coward of him, put a startling new idea into his head, opening out a series of daring suggestions which fairly made him reel.

Picking out the skeleton of a fowl from the dish he was carrying, he approached the vicious Jenny with a word of good-fellowship, and making as if to tear a mouthful of flesh from the fowl, offered the bony fragments to the dog, as if sharing his meal with her.

Instantly the creature lost her ferocious aspect, and began greedily devouring the bones, whilst Fred, coming nearer, and bringing his dish, sat down, prepared to share the remains of the stew together.

His plan succeeded to perfection, and by the time the dish was empty and well licked out, the dog and the boy were the best of friends. Then slipping the chain from the post to which it was fastened, Fred first took Jenny to the water for a drink, then went back to the cabin with the dog trailing behind him.

The two men were still smoking and talking, while the reek from the drying clothes, and the fumes from the two pipes, made an atmosphere almost too thick to see through. But their conversation now was of the more immediate past of three or four days ago.

"If he'd just been satisfied to shelter for a night or even two, and taken just what food was necessary, I would not have been mean enough to grudge it him; but to make off with a couple of pounds of tea, after breaking the lock of the cupboard to get at it, and eating up most everything there was in the place, makes me feel I'd enjoy giving him a ducking in one of my peeling-pools," said Blue Pete, with a smoulder of indignation under his good-natured indolence.

"Serve him right, too; I wouldn't have minded lending a hand myself, if I had been here. Do you know who the fellow was, or what he was like at all?" asked Athabasca Bill, with an anxious inflection, which suddenly aroused the keenest interest in the breast of Fred.

"I didn't see him, and all I know of him is what Snaky-Shoes, one of my Indian willow-cutters, tells me; he found the rascal here sitting tight on my stuff, as if it belonged to him. Snaky-Shoes said he was a sickly, white-faced one, with a desperate bad cough."

"Bill, it's the man we want. I'm sure of it!" panted Fred, with so much haste and urgency in his tone, that Blue Peter turned to look at him in surprise, then saw, to his further wonderment, Montana Jenny curling herself down at the boy's feet, as if she had belonged to him for the last six months.

"Hallo, younker, are you out on the police lay? And oh, I say, you'd best keep a safe distance from that brute, for she may feel hungry again, and you'd feel sorry if she had a piece out of your leg."

"She'll not hurt me; we've eaten out of the same dish, and tracker dogs have long memories for friend or foe," Fred said, slipping an arm round Jenny's neck, and giving her an affectionate hug, an endearment she acknowledged by stuffing a cold, wet nose into his hand, and wagging her tail. Even as he spoke he had a vivid picture of her lithe brown and white body hurtling through the darkness to seize his father by the throat, but his sense of justice made him remember that the poor animal was only following its instincts and doing her duty; besides, with care and kindness she might be useful in tracking down the real transgressor, and so, conquering the momentary repulsion, he responded to the overture of the cold nose by patting her on the head.

"We are both on the police lay, for the matter o' that," said Athabasca Bill, in a slow, thoughtful tone, as he came to the conclusion that they could not do better than take Blue Pete into their confidence in the matter of their quest; then forthwith plunged into the story of the misfortune which had overtaken Fred's father, and their pursuit of the man, whom they believed to be the real culprit.

"Humph! A rather slender clue—a cap, a comforter and a bad cough; still, a man has been hanged on less than that before to-day," Blue Pete said, blowing out such a cloud of smoke that even Athabasca Bill had to cough, whilst Fred was nearly choked.

"I should like to see that red chap—what-do-you-call-him—Snaky Shoes," Athabasca Bill said, when he had recovered from all the tobacco smoke which he had swallowed.

"He's about," Blue Pete answered, with a vague wag of his head towards the

back of the chimney, which seemed to imply that the Indian in question was being smoke-dried in the reek above the fire, but which really meant that Snaky-Shoes, ignoring the traditions of his ancestors, was working for wages in the osier beds behind the little hut.

Athabasca Bill rose slowly and stiffly to his feet, then taking a tobacco pouch from the pocket of his half-dried jacket, turned to leave the house.

Blue Pete also got up from his comfortable corner by the fire, as if the remembrance of neglected out-door work had just come into his mind.

"Holidays are desperately dissipating things; seems to me as if it was Sunday all the time now, and I'm always making mistakes and taking it easy now," he said, with a mighty stretch of his long, loose limbs.

"Can't I strike in somewhere and help?" demanded Fred, getting up, briskly alert. For although Canadian hospitality is so spontaneous and free, native etiquette demands a lively gratitude on the part of the benefited one, and he had been brought up to believe in paying his debts as he incurred them.

"Well, if you want something to amuse you, there's this place would be all the better for a little tidying up," Blue Pete answered, waving his hand in a deprecating fashion towards the litter encumbering floor, bed, table, and the big bench by the window. "I don't generally spend much time on that sort of thing myself, but that fellow who took lodgings here, free, gratis and for nothing, as they say down east, turned the place upside down, like pigs in a hay-meadow. I suppose he wanted to see if my things fitted him better than his own, for I found my best biled shirt gone, and a pair o' store shoes that didn't fit me quite enough were missing too."

"Oh, I'll clear up fine; it will be so tidy when you come back that you won't know it for the same," said Fred, setting to work with great zeal and energy, whilst Montana Jenny followed him round, sniffing suspiciously, as if she smelled a felon in every garment, and Blue Pete lounged away, well content to have some one else do his domestic tidying up for him.

Presently, in folding up a jacket which evidently came under the denomination of store clothes, though it was very old and ragged, he dropped a book from an inner pocket; stooping to pick it up, he caught sight of the name on the fly-leaf, "Guy Herrick, from a friend."





CHAPTER XV

MONTANA JENNY TAKES THE TRAIL

A thrill went through Fred as he read the name on the title page of the worn little book, which was a pocket edition of quotations from Shakespeare, very much be-thumbed, and a whirling sense of confusion and giddiness seized him, as he realized what a valuable clue had been put into his hands.

“Have a sniff, old lady,” he said, holding out book and jacket to Jenny.

The dog came at his bidding, and smelled jacket and book in a distrustful fashion, wagged her tail, then whining in a plaintive manner, dropped her nose on the ground and commenced to hunt round the room.

“You’ll do, good dog; maybe I shall live to be proud of you yet, only you mustn’t make mistakes and run down the wrong quarry this time,” he exclaimed, fussing over the dog in wild delight, then dancing round the room as if he had suddenly gone crazy, which encouragement so excited Jenny that she dashed round like a crazy creature, knocking down pots and pans, and upsetting furniture in her desire to find and pull down the owner of the ragged old jacket, that Fred was forced to tie her up to the leg of the bedstead, whilst he finished his task of clearing up the muddle in the place.

Then he went outside to see what he could find to do there, and espying a hatchet and a great pile of wood needing to be chopped, set to work upon it, only staying to bring out the dog, which he tied to the fence, where she could bask in the afternoon sun whilst he chopped.

But the tracker instinct had been awakened in Jenny by that invitation to smell the jacket and the book, and after restlessly pacing the length of her chain, with her nose on the ground, whining and crying, she flung up her great head in a melancholy and far-reaching howl.

Fred’s heart beat faster as he listened. Suppose he had made a mistake, and that ragged old jacket belonged to Blue Pete, instead of the stranger who had taken such

liberties with that worthy's house and wardrobe! The bare thought made him shiver, for he knew enough of the habits of tracker dogs to understand that it would not be wise to let Blue Pete come within reach of Jenny unwarned.

So he chopped on in feverish haste, keeping eyes and ears on the alert for some sign of his host's approach; then by-and-by, when he heard a cheerful whistle, and a rich, rolling tenor voice breaking out into a song, he dropped the hatchet in all haste and hurried to intercept Blue Pete, who was evidently coming up from the osier swamps at the back of the little clearing.

"Stay where you are, please; I want to talk to you," called out Fred, darting forward in the direction of the approaching forest, whilst Montana Jenny nearly choked herself with her chain in her efforts to get free and go also; then recovering a little from the strangulation, started howling worse than ever.

"What's up?" demanded Blue Pete, in mild astonishment, as Fred rushed towards him in a desperate hurry.

"I only want to be sure that I haven't made a mistake," panted the boy. "I found an old jacket, ragged and torn, amongst the muddle on the floor, and a book of poetry fell out of the pocket, with the name, Guy Herrick, on the fly-leaf; I thought it must have belonged to that man we are wanting, and I let Jenny smell it, telling her to go and find; then she got so eager she was ready to knock the house down, to get out and away, and I had to tie her up. But I am afraid lest I may have made a mistake, and given her one of your coats to smell, in which case it won't be safe for you to go too near her, until matters have been made plain to her again."

"Well, you are a pretty sort of a young varmint, to go setting my dollar-and-a-quarter dog against me in such a fashion!" exclaimed Blue Pete, throwing back his head in a guffaw of amusement. "But perhaps it wasn't my jacket after all, though 'ragged and torn' describes most of my clothes pretty accurately; but suppose we go and identify the thing, or will the dog tear me down *en route*, do you expect?" and again the great laugh burst out, as if the joke were too good to be dropped for some time to come.

"You'll be all right if you don't get near enough for her to get a smell at you," cried Fred, who was trembling in every limb, having taken the most serious view possible of the matter, because of his share in it; and then he hustled Blue Pete towards the door of the log-house, taking good care to keep himself between his host and the dog, which was still sniffing the ground, and making frantic dashes for freedom.

Once inside he shut the door, then brought forward the jacket from the corner, where he had laid it away for safety, then held it up for Blue Pete's inspection.

"It's a beauty, certainly; but it ain't mine, and, what is more, I couldn't get into it if I tried," said that worthy, taking the garment, and turning it round and round; then his eye was caught by something lying among a pile of personalities in the corner from where Fred had brought the jacket, and picking it up, he shook it triumphantly. "My best biled shirt, as I'm alive! So the fellow wasn't so much of a rogue as I thought him, though if he wore the shirt he might have washed and starched it—got it up, as the laundresses say—before he went away. Well, I'll forgive him the shoes he took, seeing that I never could wear them with any sort of comfort; but I did feel real mad about that biled shirt, for I've only got two, and this was out and out the best one."

Fred could not help laughing at the affectionate manner in which Blue Pete smoothed down the soiled cotton garment, which appeared so precious to him; then he picked up the ragged jacket with a relieved air.

"I'm very glad I didn't make a mistake, for I should have felt bad if Jenny had gone for you," he said.

"And so you'd oughter," responded Blue Pete, with another guffaw, as he rolled his much-prized shirt up into a tight ball, and stowed it upon a high shelf next to the coffee-pot, doubtless to await a good opportunity for washing and starching, he being something of a dandy with regard to his personal appearance, though rather lacking in the virtue of domestic tidiness.

But Fred was pulling and tugging at that part of his clothing in which his carefully hoarded money was hidden; he had not drawn upon the little store since leaving home, but now he felt the time had come to spend and not to spare, so he was prepared to do the thing handsomely, even though the doing left him all but penniless, with a journey of unknown length before him.

"What will you take for Montana Jenny? I want to buy her very badly, and I should like to have the jacket too, if you don't mind." His voice was fairly trembling with eagerness, and his breath came in short pants from the greatness of his excitement.

"What do you want a dog for?" demanded Blue Pete.

"I've got to follow up that man that was staying here; you heard what Athabasca Bill said about the fur cap that was like his own—so like that my father identified it as belonging to Bill. But in this wilderness we may overrun his trail no end of times if we don't have help; so I want Jenny and this jacket, and then I believe I can make her track him down."

"Not a bad idea that!" exclaimed Blue Pete. "How much money have you got, anyhow?"

"Five dollars. Mother gave me all she'd got in the house; but I haven't spent any

yet, because I've mostly worked out my board, except since I've been with Bill, and he won't let me pay him for my keep, because of having been at our house so long last fall."

"I should think not. Good as a hospital, your house must have been for him. I only wish your folks lived out this way, so as I could drop in on 'em to be taken care of when I felt queer; only then, perhaps, the temptation to have a sickly fit would come so often, that I should develop into a confirmed invalid before I'd made my pile, which would be desperate inconvenient for everybody. But stow your money away, boy, and you shall have Jenny. Much good may she do you, too; though I don't mind owning that I am more than half afraid of the brute."

"It is very kind—" began Fred, with a flush and a stammer, being rather sensitive on the score of patronage, and feeling that he would have preferred to pay for the dog—at least, the dollar and a quarter which was the price his host had given old man Arlo.

"Not a bit of it, boy; you can take the dog as the first instalment of Bill's debt to your mother, and if you want to know why I'm taking his financial responsibilities on my shoulders, I can tell you that he kept my head above water once when we were working together down Lethbridge way, so I'm bound to do my bit in return, don't you see?"

"Saved your life, did he?" asked Fred, looking at Blue Pete's long length and powerful frame, and wondering a little how a small, weak-looking man like Athabasca Bill could have succeeded in towing such a big fish out of the water.

"Aye, that he did," replied Blue Pete, stooping to re-light his pipe at the fire, and then sitting down with a fatigued air, as if his short stroll through the osier beds had been quite too much for him. "We were patching up a dam that was risky near Magrath, when I happened to get caught by my foot through the sinking of one of the props against the barricade which kept the water back. Just at that moment, when Athabasca Bill was nearly smothering himself in mud, to try to get my foot free, with a crack like a gun going off, the barricade gave way and let the water down on us. It was every man for himself then, and every one bolted, leaving me to drown, except Bill, who clung for dear life to the bit of the barricade that didn't give way, and held me above water till they were able to shut it off higher up, and set me free."

"My mother says that Athabasca Bill is as brave as they make 'em," responded Fred, with shining eyes.

"Aye, he's that, and more; for he is unselfish, and that is a very uncommon sort of virtue," Blue Pete said, with a windy sigh, as his pipe went out, and he had to stoop to re-light it.

When he was through with his wood-cutting, finding that he had still nearly an hour of daylight left, Fred slipped Jenny's chain from the fence, and winding it round his arm for security, brought her to the ragged jacket; then bidding her smell it well, told her to go and find.

Tugging at the chain, the dog went round and round the inner room, round and round the outside clearing, finally starting off by a narrow track leading to the higher ground away from the river.

Fred had gone as far as he deemed it wise, in view of the fading light, and was in the act of coaxing Jenny to relinquish the hunt that day, and return with him to Blue Pete's cabin for the night, when he heard a whistle, and saw Athabasca Bill coming quickly towards him through the deepening gloom.

"Did you think I had cleared on a new trail, without stopping to let you know?" asked the trapper, whilst Jenny gave one sniff at him, then turned away in disgust, because he was not the "find" for which she was seeking so ardently.

"No, I trusted to you to let me come too," replied Fred, and then, having at last induced Jenny to come back home peacefully, he turned and walked along the narrow path by the side of his friend.

"Blue Pete has given me Jenny to help in tracking down that Guy Herrick, and she is as hot on the trail as can be," he said eagerly; then bethinking himself of Bill's long absence, he inquired, "Did you find Snaky-Shoes, and did he know anything that might be likely to help you?"

"I found him, certainly, and I should say he's about as slippery as an eel; Snaky-Shoes isn't a bad name for him, all things considered. But if what he has told me is true, we've got some rather queer game to run down, Fred, my boy, and a precious long way to go to do it," Athabasca Bill replied, with a grave face.

"Oh?" the boy's tone and face were full of a questioning wonder, as he waited for the other to speak further.

"Snaky-Shoes says that this Guy Herrick, the young man with the desperately bad cough, is an official of the Hudson's Bay Company, and that he is to work right through Athabasca, visiting every outlying fort and trade depôt, in order to report on each."

"I don't care what he is; if he took that money, and threw the blame on my father, he has got to be found and made to answer for it," replied Fred stormily.

"So I think too," said Athabasca Bill, and the next morning, with their packs on their backs, they set off into the unknown, with Montana Jenny for a leader and guide.





CHAPTER XVI

‘FOLLOW MY LEADER’

The travellers carried four days’ provisions, which at a pinch might be made to serve one day longer; even Montana Jenny had a pack on her back, containing her own especial rations, and a pot and kettle for the use of the bipeds.

Carefully stowed away among his personal luggage, Fred carried the ragged jacket, which had to serve as a clue for the hound to work upon. By the advice of Blue Pete he had wrapped it in a bit of rubber sheeting, which not only served the purpose of keeping it dry, but also preserved the scent intact, by keeping it from mixing with other odours.

“This reminds me of the old game of ‘Follow my Leader,’ that we used to play when I was a boy at school,” Athabasca Bill said, as he and his companion panted along in the rear of Jenny.

“We played it too, and jolly hard work it was sometimes, though I don’t think we ever found it so tough as this,” Fred replied, feeling as if his right arm was being pulled out by the roots, from Jenny tugging so hard at the leash, when the scent was good and the trail easy to follow.

“It was funny that old man Arlo was willing to sell a dog like that for a dollar and a quarter,” Bill remarked, as they lay basking on the ground in the hot sunshine for a noontide rest. Though so late in the season, the weather was exceptionally bright and fine, the nights were certainly keenly cold, but the noonday sunshine was hot as summer.

“So I thought; why, the chain and collar must have cost all that,” Fred said, passing his hand caressingly over the big brown head which rested on his knee; he had not felt much drawn to Jenny on their first acquaintance, but now that she belonged to him, and was doing her level best to run down the real thief, his affection for her, and admiration of her shrewd intelligence, grew with every hour.

“Perhaps the old man isn’t quite so sane as he used to be, or too poor to pay for

the creature's keep; a dog like that takes some filling up every day," Bill rejoined sleepily; the soothing warmth of the sun made him drowsy, and as this was the second day out on the trail, he was foot-weary, and glad of the noonday resting spell.

"What I can't understand is that Guy Herrick should have told you he was bound for Beaver River, when Jenny is keeping us due north; for Beaver River must lie a goodish bit to the north-east from here," Fred said presently, after a silence, which Bill had filled in by a gentle doze.

"I can," the trapper replied, with a stretch and a yawn. "It's one thing to talk about the Beaver River, and quite another to get there, for there ain't many trails like turnpike roads in North Alberta and Athabasca; so when that chap got across the Saskatchewan, if he knew the lay of the land at all he'd steer straight through here, as we are doing, to Morinville, and from there out to the main trail from Edmonton to Athabasca Landing. When he got there he could strike off into any one or the other of the hundred and odd trails that open from that one, and my opinion is, that if we don't catch him before he reaches the main trail, we've a precious poor chance of catching him at all, especially if it should come wet to wash out the scent."

"We had best be pushing on then," Fred said, all alert and eager to be off again.

Jenny was eager too; the scent was plainly strong at this point, though several days must have passed since the man they sought travelled that way, but there had been no rain, and nothing baffles the tracker dog like wet weather.

The trail they followed was one used largely by Indians, trading between the advancing tide of civilization and the Reservations, and it went for the most part through a country of rolling hills and gentle valleys, the rising ground clad in resinous pines, the lower levels abounding in osier beds, and willow swamps.

Here and there a solitary settler hailed their approach with a hearty welcome, and open-handed hospitality, asking nothing in return, saving news of the outside world, which in those wilderness solitudes was harder to obtain than gear, or gold.

There was a shed, partly filled with hay, designed doubtless as a shelter for horses and cattle later on in the season, that they reached about sundown, and into which Jenny led the way with a calm confidence due to a strong scent, and once she was under the shelter of the roof, she became wildly excited, plunging hither and thither, and leaping up at the stack of hay in frantic efforts to get free and swarm to the top, failing which, she threw up her great head, howling in a dismal and heart-breaking fashion.

Fred's heart began to beat so fast that it seemed almost as though his companion must hear its thumping, but he had not the courage to put his thoughts into words,

looking instead for some means of getting to the top of that heap of dried grass, to investigate for himself the dog's reasons for being so excited about it.

Then he espied a handy piece of timber, with notches at the sides where the boughs had been lopped off short, and dragging it with some difficulty into position, dropped it against the side of the stack, and began to clamber up.

"Are you in such a hurry for bed that you have forgotten your supper?" Bill called out, looking up from his fire-building to wonder what had come to Fred, who was usually a steady help, not given to whims and fancies.

"I'll come and help you in a minute, after I have had a look up here," Fred called down, then just succeeded by a spring in launching himself on the top of the pile, though he narrowly escaped coming to the ground with a tremendous thump instead; still, as the old saying has it, "A miss is as good as a mile," and he was none the worse for so nearly falling.

Having with great care and skill got his fire laid to his liking, Bill was down on hands and knees, blowing and puffing to make the tiny flames spring higher, when he heard an eager shout of, "Bill, Bill, do come and look! I believe that fellow must have spent a night up here in the hay."

Athabasca Bill left his fire to its own devices, and proceeded to clamber up the rolling, slippery piece of timber, which swayed and shook in the most uncomfortable and disagreeable fashion; but he reached the top in safety, and crouched beside Fred, looking at a nest in the hay, that was like the form of a hare, only many sizes bigger, whilst tossed carelessly on one side was the fragment of a *Manitoba Free Press*, and an empty match-box.

"Some one has slept up here pretty recently, that's clear, and they weren't afraid of making a bonfire of themselves either," said the trapper grimly, as he picked up the box which had held matches, and dropped it again.

"He can't be far in front of us now; do you think we shall overhaul him tomorrow?" queried Fred, who was fairly panting with eagerness and impatience.

Athabasca Bill shook his head doubtfully.

"Can't say, I'm sure; but by the look of the sky, and the general feel of the weather, I should say there will be snow within twenty-four hours."

"Snow?" Fred's face was a pucker of wonder and dismay, for except in bad seasons they did not as a rule get snow for another fortnight or three weeks, by which time he had hoped to be safe at home again, with incontestable evidence of his father's innocence; but a snowstorm at this juncture might retard matters for weeks, might even bring their efforts to complete failure, and possibly cost them their lives, if they were out in the open when it began, for as a rule snowstorms in North Alberta

were no joke.

“That’s about it. You may think it early, but I’ve known a bad storm earlier than this; come outside and have a look at the weather,” the other said, deftly swinging himself back on to the shaky timber, and sliding from thence to the ground.

Fred followed in silence; all the fine flow of his spirits had gone, dashed down by that one word, snow.

“See them white rags?” queried Athabasca Bill, with a lean forefinger upraised to the sky, where fleecy clouds, like billows of cotton wool, were piling themselves about the sun-setting.

Fred nodded, his heart too full for speech; then after a minute or two spent in battling with the big lump that had come into his throat, he said anxiously, “What do you think of doing?”

“Having supper, and a good warm; while that’s in progress we can settle the next thing to be done,” the trapper answered, going back to his fire, and working at it with great energy, until it was in a condition suitable for cooking him some tea.

Fred secured Jenny to one of the posts of the shed, then sat moodily down on the ground, staring at the leaping flames, and wondering for how many hours longer the trail would hold, which they had followed so successfully hitherto.

It was so cruelly hard to be faced with failure, just when he had imagined himself within reach of success. He would not have felt so bad about it, but for finding that nest in the hay, where, without doubt, his quarry had lain such a short time ago.

“Cheer up, boy; there’s no sense in owning yourself beaten until you’ve been bowled out,” Bill said, deftly lifting his kettle from the fire just as it began to boil.

“We shall be bowled out, and that pretty clean too, if the snow begins,” Fred answered, feeling that he had no appetite for his supper even, with such a prospect in front of him.

“There’s one thing we may do, if we have any sort of luck,” said Athabasca Bill, casting one eye upwards to gauge the weather prospects; “we may beat the snow, unless you’re tired out, that is.”

“Oh, I’m not tired—not worth mentioning, that is,” rejoined Fred briskly, though fifteen minutes before he had been feeling that it would be quite impossible to go any further without a long rest and sleep.

“And I feel pretty fit. So although that haystack looks uncommonly inviting, I propose that we take an hour to eat our supper, and then set out again as soon as the moon is up. A very good pace we shall be able to make, too, with the wind in our backs, and as we’ve been coming uphill steadily for the last two or three hours, the chances are that we may have downhill in front of us when we start again,” Bill

said, as the two started upon their supper, with Jenny crouching at Fred's elbow to share in the feast.

"I had forgotten the moon; but will it be up in an hour?" Fred asked, giving Jenny a push, as, forgetful of good manners, she thrust not merely her nose, but her whole head under his arm, and seized the fragment of food he was lifting to his mouth.

"Nearly, by then; it may be an hour and a half, but it won't make much difference, for we can rest until it comes up, take a taste of the haystack, don't you see, only it won't be wise to go to the top, as that friend of ours did, for fear we go off so sound that we forget to get up when the moon does."

"We ought to get a good distance on by that means," Fred said, looking up at the sky, where the drifting, billowy clouds hung, rose-tinted from the sunset, on the clear grey of the western sky.

"We ought, and so we'll hope that we shall," Bill replied, and Fred was too much absorbed in trying to drink some scalding tea to notice the dubious ring of his tone.

It did not take them long to finish supper, and then, when Bill had lighted his pipe, the two crept close under the haystack to rest until the rising of the moon.

They were both sleepy, and when Bill's pipe had dropped from his lips a second time, he rose to his feet, and going to a little distance, carefully knocked the ashes from the pipe, then stowed it away in his pocket.

"It always seems to me like tempting Providence to smoke under a haystack, especially when a man's drowsy," he remarked, coming back to settle down in his old position once more. "Now, boy, we've about three quarters of an hour, so let us make the best of it."

And make the best of it they did, huddled close together for warmth, with the dog curled up beside them, and adding not a little to their comfort. But when the three quarters of an hour were at an end, they still slept on, worn out with the long, weary tramp of the day before, while the moon came up, and after battling awhile to keep clear of the clouds, slid behind the billowy grey vapours, worsted in the struggle.





CHAPTER XVII

A BAD NIGHT

The hours went by, and Fred, who was cramped with his constrained position, and cold from keenness of the night air, began to dream that he had reached the courthouse, where his father's case was being tried, but though he had with him the clear and certain proofs of his father's innocence, old man Arlo barred his entrance to the court, even threatening to set the hounds on to him, if he persisted in trying to get in.

"Very well, set them at me, and see what will come of it," he was saying valorously; "for your Montana Jenny already loves me better than she does you, whilst Ruby and Smiler would never attack my father's son," when a burst of fierce and angry barking from Jenny brought him quickly out of dreamland, whilst the energy with which she tugged at the chain that was fastened on his arm, almost upset him.

"Hullo, what's wrong?" inquired Athabasca Bill, coming out of his heavy slumber with a groan and a sigh, for to a man as tired as he was, the process of waking could not fail to be painful.

"Have we slept too long?" cried Fred, with palpitating fear in his tone, for something seemed to have gone wrong with the quiet night, as sobbing bursts of wind swirled through the tree tops, and moaned away in the distance, while Jenny barked and raved, springing fiercely at her chain in the eager desire to pull down something or some one.

"Yes, we've slept too long, that's plain; past midnight I should say it is, by the look of the sky. There's not much moon either, and no stars. We shall have to be brisk to beat the snow now."

"Never mind if we do beat it," Fred said, as he fastened his pack on to his shoulders, and proceeded to harness Jenny into her burdens, a difficult task this, by reason of her dashing and straining.

"Quiet, old girl; quiet, I say; what is the use of making all that row?"

"I expect she has seen some ponies; they would be sure to gather on this higher ground if there is bad weather coming," Athabasca Bill answered, as he hung his burdens round his shoulders, slung his gun into place, then groped in the darkness for the stout staff, that was such a help in getting over soft places.

"Is there a horse ranch out this way?" Fred asked, in surprise at the other's mention of ponies.

Athabasca Bill laughed.

"They don't call them ranches, I guess; but for all that, the Indians raise scores of ponies every year for the southern markets, and for their own use; that is what the shack is for, and that stack of bunch grass. I expect a drove of the little beasts trotted up, thinking to be near shelter if the weather turned out bad, and then Jenny gave tongue; lucky she did, or we might have slept there like pigs until daylight."

"I expect we are all the better for what we have had, only I can't help feeling that I should like a little more," Fred said, as the procession moved on again in its old order: Jenny in front with her nose on the ground, himself next, and the trapper, with staff and gun, bringing up the rear.

Sometimes Fred would be towed along at a tremendous rate, Jenny pulling so hard as to nearly drag him off his feet; then she would stop dead so unexpectedly, that he all but tumbled over her.

Her course and her pace to-night were much more erratic than usual, and she overran the scent so many times, having to hark back to pick it up again, that Fred would have been seriously discouraged, but for his remembrance of Ross Johnson's words, that Montana Jenny could track a man through the crowded city street, yet never lose the trail.

The path they were following abounded with pitfalls, and as every hour the moon grew more obscure and the light fainter, they were presently compelled to pull up and spend the remainder of the time until daylight crouched close together under the shelter of an overhanging bank.

Jenny keenly resented this pause in her work, and it was as much as Fred could do to soothe her into quietness. Even when he persuaded her to sit down peacefully beside him, she would remain still for about two minutes and a half, then leap up with a tearing rush, and commence baying and struggling like a mad thing.

"What is the matter with the creature, do you expect?" said Fred, when for the fourth time he had dragged her back, compelling her to temporary obedience and quietness.

"Can't say. Them tracker dogs are altogether beyond me; it is possible we are pretty near what we want to find, or it may be she knows the weather is not what it

should be. Hullo! what is that?" and Athabasca Bill craned his head forward in a listening attitude, whilst Fred strained his ears into listening also.

The wind swept through the trees with a moan and a shriek, branches creaked and groaned in every direction, but Fred could hear nothing else, and said so.

"I did; I heard a cock crow, and a dog bark. I don't think it will be long before the dawning, either; not by the look of the darkness, but I don't like the sound of that wind."

"And I don't like the feel of it. I could wish we had stayed in our snug quarters under the haystack, for there at least we had a roof over our heads," Fred said, as a swirl of wind swept round the corner of their bank, and nearly blew them out of it.

"You needn't wish it, for it is very likely that long before daylight comes, that shack, and the stack too, will be a heap of ruins. It takes a well-built place to stand a circular wind like this; don't you notice how every blast seems to twist and twirl almost like a humming top? I have been in an Indian village when a wind like this was blowing, and I have seen every wigwam in the place shorn of its topping; so I've come to the conclusion that I'd as soon be out of doors as anywhere, when such storms rise, until the downfall begins, that is, for then there is mostly such a smother, that it is as much as you can do to see your hand when you hold it up in front of your face," Bill answered, with the quiet philosophy which was a part of his nature.

"Ugh! I hope it won't begin to fall before daylight, then," the other said, with a shiver.

They sat in silence for awhile after that, as close together as they could press, and with nose and knees on a level, whilst Jenny sat just in front, with an air of fierce alertness bristling all over her brown and white coat.

Would the darkness never end, and morning dawn again? Cramped and shivering, chilled to the bone, Fred sat straining his eyes for some sign of the breaking of day, until from sheer exhaustion he slid into a doze, a kind of half-awake slumber, which left him keenly conscious of his physical discomfort, though it dulled his perceptions to what was happening around him.

"Here comes the light, such as it is; and now, boy, we'd best be moving," said the voice of Athabasca Bill, seeming to come from a very long way off.

Was that daylight? Fred scrambled to his feet, rubbing his eyes, because he thought the blame lay with his organs of vision.

"Is it a fog, or what?" he demanded, nearly toppling over, because one leg seemed to have no life or power in it, and gave way under him when he tried to put his weight on it.

"The clouds are hanging so low, that is what it is; come along, boy, we'd best get

to shelter if we can, before the smother begins," the trapper said so urgently, that Fred made some sort of shift to get along, although at first every step was torture.

For a mile or two Jenny led them along at a fairly steady pace, then suddenly began to waver and grow uncertain, running this way and that, throwing up her head as if the scent lay above instead of below, then howling weirdly.

The trail, too, had become faint and confused, whilst with every mile the ground grew more broken and hilly, so that it was not merely the downhill that Bill had hoped for, and reckoned upon, but uphill also, and plenty of it.

"Here comes the snow," panted Bill, as a white cloud seemed to drop upon them, and all at once the air became too thick to breathe.

A groan from Fred was all the response he could make, for at this moment Jenny began pulling and tugging, uttering a low whimpering cry, which said more plainly than words, that she had found the trail again, and was for following it hard.

"Let her go, boy; I'll keep up. The scent won't last ten minutes longer, but maybe it will be enough," panted Bill, and Fred was fain to obey, even though it meant going at a run over very rough ground, then up a sharp, steep hill, where it was all he could do to keep from coming down on his hands and knees.

With every step the smother of whirling snowflakes grew thicker, and when presently Jenny slackened speed a little, giving him time to look round to throw a word to Athabasca Bill, who should have been toiling along in the rear, his words met no response, and to his horror he realized that he and his companion had become separated, in the gloom of the whirling snow-cloud.

"Bill, where are you, Bill?" he shouted, the quavering horror in his heart lending a penetrating insistence to his tones.

But no answering shout came back from the whirling smother, and Jenny was tugging so hard that he could scarcely hold her in.

Still he would have stayed where he was, or endeavoured to go back on his track in search of his friend, had it not been that he heard just then the bark of a dog, and what seemed to him the faint echo of a human voice.

Now dogs and voices meant, doubtless, help near at hand, and shouting wildly as he went, in the hope that some echo of his calling might reach his companion, he let Jenny pull him forward, which she did at a tremendous pace, though it was plain she was no longer following scent, since the snow already covered the ground, compelling her to depend on her instincts rather than her nose.

He was growing numbed and bewildered, being scarcely able to keep his eyes open because of the sting in the cold, when suddenly the path seemed to slip away from under his feet, and he shot forward with what seemed to be frightful velocity,

getting mixed up with Jenny's chain as he went plunging downward.

Would he never reach the bottom? He thought of the bad dreams of falling that he had sometimes had after eating too many roast potatoes for supper, and of the relief it used to be when he bumped at the bottom to wake up and find himself safely in bed; but this fall seemed to have no bottom to bump upon, and he was just beginning to wonder if it was going on for ever, when he came into violent collision with something or some one, there was a sharp, stinging pain in his shoulder, and then a chorus of grunts and ejaculations, shrill scolding in an unknown tongue, and then a blur of confusion that might have lasted two minutes or two hours, so little capable was he of measuring time, or understanding what had happened to him.

Then he came back to his senses again, to find Montana Jenny industriously licking his face, whilst a crowd of dusky faces were grouped in the background at a respectful distance, for Jenny, although chained, was not the kind of animal to be rashly intruded upon, or interfered with.

"Oh, I say, there's my chum Athabasca Bill away back on the trail; he can't be more than half a mile behind. We got parted; you see, the dog dragged me on so fast, and I didn't know he wasn't following," Fred said, with appealing eagerness, pushing away the dog's diligent tongue, and striving to sit erect.

"Smother too thick. Athabasca Bill all right. He know what to do when blizzard come," jerked out a particularly unlovely red man, who seemed to be in authority.

"I fell down somewhere—how was it?" asked Fred, trying to collect his wavering senses firmly enough together to make a still more imperious demand that his companion should immediately be searched for, even though the smother was so great that it had to be cut with a knife.

But at that moment Jenny sprang up with a roar, dragging so fiercely at the chain that his arm seemed to be wrenched out of joint.





CHAPTER XVIII

POTIPHAR'S FRAGMENT

There were several men lounging in the store at Errol's place, some of them with merchandise for barter, and others paying for goods with cash, or having them on credit, as the case might be.

Mrs. Errol was behind the counter, helping her husband to minister to the various needs of the buyers and sellers, putting a word into the conversation now and then, or letting her light-hearted laughter ripple out; for no cloud brooded long over her merry heart, and though she had wept copiously at Fred Crawford's terrible fate in the seething turmoil of Denaree's Leap, it was of no use to go on sorrowing, since no amount of grieving could undo the tragedy.

Naturally enough, the conversation turned on the accident, which, although over a week old, was still news to some of the customers thronging the store, and Mrs. Errol's smiles were waxing wan and tearful, when the half-breed Potiphar, whose misadventure in the water had been the cause of Fred's disaster, came into the store, his lank, black hair seeming to stick straight up with importance, whilst his face was screwed into a pucker of mystery.

"Back again, Potiphar; did you find any wreckage?" she asked, for the half-breed had been sent down to Black Pine, and over the fifteen miles portage, to the other side of the Valley of Death, in order to see if the river had flung up any wreckage, at the end of the twenty miles' succession of rapids and whirlpools; and he had taken his time in going and returning, not believing in over-much exertion of any sort.

"No wreckage whatsumever," he jerked out, in his own peculiar style; then seeing that all eyes were turned on him, and the running fire of talk had died down to an expectant hush, he went on, pulling something from under his arm and waving it in the faces of all present, "but I foun' dis here, half-a-mile off the portage trail atween Black Pine and the other end, and I say how come it there?"

"What is it?" demanded Mrs. Errol crisply, leaning forward to get a better view;

then her husband reached his hand out over her shoulder, and caught the article which Potiphar was holding as if it were a banner.

"Why, it is one of our meal bags," he said, turning it and catching sight of his own name in letters two inches long on the other side.

"That is so," replied Potiphar, in a pompous voice. "It is that same one bag what went down in canoe to Black Pine portage, and tumble into Denaree's Leap."

"Nonsense, it could not be," retorted Mrs. Errol sharply, having little patience with the flights of fancy in which the half-breed was wont to indulge.

"It am," replied Potiphar obstinately. "See that hole in the corner; I tied it up wid the babby's hair-string, and cotched it arter for letting the papoose lose it."

"He is quite right, George; that is Mamie's hair ribbon, and I did grumble at him for letting her lose it," cried Mrs. Errol, examining the pink fragment with which the hole in the bag was tied, and instantly identifying it as having formerly belonged to baby Mamie.

"But how could it have got over to the trail?" queried Mr. Errol, in hopeless bewilderment, for river and trail were in some places as much as three miles apart, owing to the windings of the waterway, and the necessity which existed for making the portage as short as possible.

"Two legs and two hands kin carry a thing most anywhere," remarked Potiphar, fumbling in his clothing for something he had hidden there, yet failed to find on searching for it.

"You mean it may have been thrown up as wreckage, and found by some one, perhaps an Indian, who carried it to where you lighted upon it?" asked Mrs. Errol, knowing by experience that Potiphar's mind usually worked faster than his tongue.

"Whatsomever did it, the thing was there, the mark of a fire not many days old, and this," replied the half-breed stolidly, having at last found that which he was searching for, and which he handed to Mrs. Errol.

It was a half-burned fragment of paper with some writing on one side, and as Mrs. Errol bent forward to get a better light to read by, every head in the store was craned to, if possible, get a glimpse of the writing too.

"But Bill and I are on his track, and we'll be sure to run him down in time to clear father, so don't worry about us. Your loving Fred,'" read Mrs. Errol, then cried out in amazement, "Whatever can it mean? If the boy really wrote this, he can't have been drowned in Denaree's Leap, that is certain."

"He was, for I saw him," announced a burly lumberman from Black Pine, who was stroking a rough-coated terrier, which tried hard, though unsuccessfully, to bite him.

"But 'Bill' must mean Athabasca Bill, and as Fred had not seen him before he got into Denaree's Leap, it is pretty plain this must have been written since," objected Mrs. Errol, who was going first red and then white with excitement.

"Perhaps it was a different person altogether who wrote that paper," suggested a man who lounged against a flour-barrel with the air of a person of leisure.

"Scarcely," replied Mrs. Errol quickly; "for in such a sparsely settled country, it is not likely that there could be two Freds wandering about in search of something to prove a father's innocence."

"So I should say," struck in George Errol, with an air of decision. Then chancing to turn his gaze in the direction of the open door of the store, he caught sight of an arrival on horseback, and hurried out to greet him.

This was Tom Marsh, who had ridden over directly Saidie returned from her journey to break the news of Fred's death to his people.

"Morning, neighbour, are we going to have some snow?" asked Tom, casting a weather-eye upwards, and not so much asking for information on the subject, as showing himself prepared to give it.

"I don't know; what do you think about it?" inquired George Errol, sending his gaze in the same direction, and looking as if nothing in the world interested him at that moment so much as the condition of the atmosphere.

"Well, I should say we are in for it, and that before very long, too, so I'll do my errands and start back as quick as I know, for I'm not keen on being caught in a smother, and Saidie will be more than a little worried if she is left alone in a snowstorm," said Tom, tying his horse up, then inquiring in a casual sort of way, as he turned to enter the store, "No news of that poor boy, I suppose?"

"We just got hold of something which may be news, or on the other hand it may not," replied George Errol; then walking up to his wife, who was still absorbed by the fragment of half-burned paper, he said, "Nancy, this is Tom Marsh, Saidie's brother; tell him about that piece of paper, will you?"

Tom Marsh proved readier of belief in Fred's continued existence than the other men had done, but that might have been owing to the fact that he had never seen Denaree's Leap, and so was no judge of the dangers to be reckoned with there.

"My word, won't Saidie be glad!" he exclaimed, rubbing his hands together with a gleeful air. "She has cried quarts since the accident, and if the youngster had been a matter of ten years older, I should have been as jealous as a yellow grasshopper, to think my sister liked another fellow best."

"But you ain't got no proof, only speculation, that he's still kicking," drawled the leisurely loungeur by the flour-barrel, when the laugh raised by Tom's quaint tone had

subsided.

“And I saw him drown, poor little chap,” put in the lumberman. “Precious bad it made me feel, to hang like a great hulking coward on the bank, and never plunge in to try and pull him out; but in that race of water, he must have been washed half-a-mile by the time I could have jumped in.”

“Just so,” remarked Tom, with a nod. “But miracles do happen sometimes, even in these days, you know, and we shall see young Fred come marching this way again before long, or I shall be very much mistaken.”

“Well, if it’ll make you any happier, leave it at that for awhile,” remarked the lumberman, with good-natured toleration, adding, however, with a lugubrious shake of his head, “But I saw him drown, poor little chap!”

Tom turned away, this kind of Job’s comforter getting on his nerves to quite a serious extent. Moreover, he had his business to transact, and was more anxious even than before to get it done speedily, so that he could set out on his return journey.

He had brought both his horses, riding one for half the journey, and then changing to the other; but going back he would ride one animal all the way, whilst the stores were packed on the back of the other. His intention had been to stay at Errol’s place for a couple of hours, to rest the animals; but the appearance of the sky, and the news he had heard, decided him on starting homeward with the least possible delay.

The stores were all laden, and he was tightening the girths of his saddle, when Mrs. Errol came tripping out of the door of the store to have a word in private with him before he went.

“Mr. Marsh, I don’t think that you are half as nice as your sister, for she certainly would not have rushed away again in such an immense hurry, without telling me the news.”

“It would not do for us all to be alike, ma’am; there’d be no variety in life. And as to the news, there is precious little of that stirring at our place, except that the speckled hen has laid four eggs since last Saturday; but I’m afraid she will leave off again, if we are going to have a cold snap.”

“You are quite the most aggravating man of my acquaintance, Mr. Marsh,” the little woman exclaimed, with an impatient stamp; “for you know quite well that the news I want to hear about so badly, is how that poor Mrs. Crawford bore the shock of hearing about her son’s terrible end, and how the poor man is bearing his life in prison. I never felt so sorry in my life for any one, even though I have not seen them, and had not heard of them even until your sister brought the boy along.”

"Mr. Crawford has luckily been bailed out, so was at home to help his wife stand up under the most knockdown blow the poor soul had ever experienced, I reckon. But Saidie said she suffered cruel, because, you see, it was she who had sent the boy off into the wilderness like that," replied Tom, who felt very bad himself every time he thought of poor Mrs. Crawford, and the terrible remorse which she laboured under.

"I wonder if the boy did really write that scrap of paper, and whether he wasn't drowned after all!" Mrs. Errol cried, shivering a little, for the weather was growing colder, even though the sun had not left off shining. "You've got it safe, I hope, Mr. Marsh?"

"Yes, I've got it safe, and I will see that his people have it as soon as there is a chance to send over. I shan't get much clearing and ploughing done at this rate, with the horses away so constantly, but one must be neighbourly, you know."

"So I think, only it comes a little awkward when the particular neighbour you have got to befriend lives fifty or sixty miles away across country," Mrs. Errol said, with a laugh. "Well, good-bye, Mr. Marsh, and I hope next time you come our way, that you will have a little more leisure in which to cultivate my good opinion."

"I'm sure I hope so too, ma'am, if it will be any sort of gratification to you," Tom replied, and then he walked his horses up the long rise, giving them easy work at first, because he knew he should have to press them hard later on.

Anxiously he watched the sky as he rode, for although he was new to this part of the world, he was not new to that particular class of storm known as a smother, and he was very desirous not to be caught in it before he reached his own location, which already was beginning to wear the semblance of home.

In this he was successful, for although the heavens were black and lowering, while the wind moaned and shrieked through the tops of the pine trees, no snow had fallen before he reached the end of his journey.

Then Saidie ran out to welcome him, and to assist in caring for the weary horses, crying out as she came, "Tom, Tom, Mr. Crawford is here; he came about an hour ago, and was going straight on to Errol's, only I wouldn't let him, for he is clean done up; but he says that he must go and see for himself the place where his poor boy died."





CHAPTER XIX

MAKING THE BEST OF IT

When the smother began, and Athabasca Bill toiled along in the rear of Fred and the dog, he had the feeling that he could not possibly keep the pace up for long, only he said nothing about it, hoping that the distance to shelter might be short.

There was a tightness in his chest, a wavering in his legs, and a singing in his ears, which rendered his walking unsteady, and breathing a matter of difficulty. But he plodded on with painful perseverance, growing blinder and more stupid with every step, until chancing to catch his foot in the protruding root of a tree, he crashed forward on his face, falling the more heavily because of the load on his back.

He uttered no cry as he went down, however, and by the time he had picked himself up, re-settling the load on his shoulders, Fred and the dog were out of sight; out of hearing, also, for the roaring of the wind, and the creaking and snapping of the trees effectually deadened all other noises.

The very magnitude of his disaster served to rouse him, helping him to throw off the sensation of illness and lethargy which had been creeping over him. Hitherto his hope of reaching shelter and safety had depended on Fred and the dog; now he was flung upon his own resources, and it was marvellous what the knowledge did for him, in bringing back his courage, and whipping up his powers of endurance.

Toiling on with a fresh access of energy, it was soon plain to him, however, that it was a waste of strength to go forward, since he might after all be wearing himself out by walking round and round in a circle; so when in the gloom of the smother he butted against a tree, that was hollow on the lee side, he was grateful for his good fortune, and determined to stay there.

Luckily the tree was a big one, not only containing him and his baggage, but with a little room to spare as well, which enabled him to settle himself comfortably, mopping the encrusted snow from face and eyes, whilst he reviewed the situation.

Then in moving his foot it struck against a piece of dried wood, whilst another

fragment hit him on the shoulder, the two blows serving to suggest a way of deliverance that might not have occurred to him until it was too late. He knew well that the danger of a smother like this lay chiefly in the keen frost accompanying the fall, which quenched the life out of man and beast unduly exposed to the fury of its piercing cold.

But with dry wood he could kindle a fire, the warmth of which might keep life in him until the storm was over, since the first smother of the season would not be likely to last many hours.

Going to work with the carefulness of long experience, he collected a little heap of dry chips, shredding them into fine shavings with his pocket knife, then lit one of his jealously-hoarded matches, his fingers trembling with eagerness and cold, so that it was a miracle that the tiny point of flame escaped extinction.

But escape it did, growing and increasing until it was a leaping, crackling fire, sending clouds of smoke into the cavity of the hollow tree, and nearly choking the man who crouched behind the cheery blaze.

Many times he wondered what had become of Fred, but it was of no use to worry about him, for the instinct of the dog would doubtless lead him straight to some habitation, where shelter and warmth could be obtained until the storm was over.

The warmth of the fire made him drowsy, so piling on more splintered fragments from the decaying trunk, he yielded to his desire for sleep, and slumbered on in blissful unconsciousness for hours.

When he awoke he was shivering with cold, and his fire was out, but the snow had ceased falling, and it was still daylight, or rather twilight, the clouds still hanging so low as to render the light obscure, with a promise of another fall later on.

Provisions were getting painfully low, and stopping only to munch a fragment of biscuit, and a small bit of bacon, Bill set out to find a more permanent sort of shelter before the next smother began.

There was no trail visible, of course, and having walked so far in the smother before taking refuge in the tree, he had no knowledge of the ground either before or behind, to guide him in the way he should take.

Then he espied a hill rising steeply in front of him, and as he had no remembrance of descending a hill when they were toiling through the smother, he decided on going that way, more especially as the higher ground would afford him a chance of seeing the lay of the land.

The fresh fallen snow was difficult to wade through, and the hill much steeper than it had looked in the distance; moreover, the cold was bringing back that

sensation of illness which had troubled him so much before.

With all this to fight against, it was not wonderful that, instead of going straight up the steepest part of the incline, which was the way taken by Fred and the dog, he veered more and more to the left, where the slope was easier.

The top of the ridge was reached at last, and hardly had he gained the summit than a column of smoke, or rather a collection of smokes, arrested his attention away on the left.

"It's Morinville; I honestly believe it's Morinville. God send that the boy has reached there safe!" he ejaculated fervently, feeling that if one of them had to perish, it was better that it should be himself, who had, as he thought, no one to grieve over his going, than that Fred should lose his life in a vain attempt to track down the doer of the deed of which his father stood accused.

It was easier walking on the high ground, for the wind had blown the snow clear away, leaving the ground in places quite bare, and Bill was able to go forward at a good pace, increasing with every step, although he did not know it, the distance between himself and Fred.

The smoke was further away than it had looked, whilst the daylight was fading now in good earnest. No use for Bill to attempt an increase of pace; his walk, instead, grew slower and slower, as he descended from the high ground to the plain, with his boots sinking to the ankle in soft snow at every step.

The night came down black and impenetrable, when he plunged into a belt of pine trees intervening between him and his goal, and he had not fumbled and stumbled his way out to the open ground beyond, before the roar and rush of water caught his ear, pulling him up short with dismay at his heart, for water rushing along like that meant a stream to cross, and how was he to do it in the black darkness of the night?

Unable to answer the question with any sort of satisfaction to himself, he plunged forward again to investigate, so far as he could, the size of the watercourse, and the swiftness of its current, when he ran up against an unmistakable rail fence, whilst the dim outline of a log cabin showed faintly against the sky.

"A house, and here!" he exclaimed, in great amazement, for he had not looked to find houses until he reached the quarter from where he had seen the smoke rising, and which he calculated must be still quite a mile or more away.

But seeing there was a house, he was not minded to go any further in search of shelter, and scrambling over the rails, without troubling to search round to find an opening, he walked up to the house, and began to search for the door.

Finding this where he had expected to do, right in the centre of the log-wall, he

rained a shower of resounding knocks on the panel, accompanying this exercise with shouts and cries, in order to arouse the occupants to a sense of his need. Then his heart sank lower, as it became evident to him that the house was empty, perhaps deserted.

Next he tried the door, for at least it would be a shelter, a place where he might lie down; and though he was hungry, food was secondary to rest, because of his failing strength, and the sensation of impending illness which had oppressed him so much all day.

But the door was locked, which for the moment nonplussed him; then taking that ever ready knife of his, he gently inserted it in the keyhole, withdrawing it with a smile of satisfaction, when he discovered there was no key in the lock.

Then he began to feel round the door, and between the interstices of the logs where the chinking was imperfect; he was searching for the key, and hoping against hope that it had not occurred to the owner to put it in his pocket when going from home.

Ah, there it was, hidden away in a nook under the shingles; and drawing it out, he fitted it in the lock, turned it, and lo! the door stood open.

He dragged himself across the threshold, then stopped, sniffing warily, after which he struck a match, looking about for lamp or candle.

A small kerosene lamp stood on a shelf near the stove, and lighting it, he paused to look round.

Some one lived there, plainly, since a heap of hay in an old sack, with a rug tumbled down upon it, plainly stood for a bed, whilst a home-made bench with a rickety leg represented a table, and a mighty block of wood reposing on the floor by the stove plainly served for a chair.

“Bachelor’s diggings; might be worse,” he said tersely, then turned to shut the door on the black night he had left outside.

If only Fred and the dog had been there, he would have been happy and content, despite the faint sinking of hunger, and the pain that already was beginning to tear at his frail body; as it was, a depressing loneliness was upon him, he who had been so solitary in his life, that often when away trapping in Athabasca he passed weeks, even months, without seeing a human being, saving an occasional Indian.

There was kindling wood lying ready by the stove, though it is doubtful whether, in his exhausted condition, he would have troubled to light a fire, had not a canister on the shelf beside the lamp suggested tea.

But when the fire was really crackling and roaring in the crazy, broken old stove, he was thankful indeed for the cheerful warmth, gaining strength and courage from it

to prospect round a little in order to discover the chances, if any, that there were for supper.

There was no compunction in his mind about thus making free with another man's goods, for in that lone country, where shelter meant life, and exposure sometimes stood for death, every house was a hotel to a belated or hardly bestead traveller.

But there was a lack of cleanliness and order about this unknown individual's housekeeping arrangements which caused Athabasca Bill to shake his head in solemn disapproval several times, especially when he lighted upon a greasy, dirty old saucepan, the only cooking utensil the house afforded.

"I don't reckon he's much class, whoever and whatever he calls himself," the solitary man said to himself, as he carefully scraped the cookery accumulations from the inside of the saucepan, and scoured it with wood ashes from under the stove, before boiling the water for his tea.

A search round had revealed no water, but that was a small matter, for the supply outside was practically unlimited; so when the saucepan had reached the requisite condition of cleanliness, he opened the door to fill a bucket with snow.

The smother had begun again worse than ever, and nothing was visible from the door but a wall of whirling whiteness.

"I'm in luck to-day, that's certain," he muttered, as, filling his bucket with snow, he backed into the house again. A fierce spasm of pain shook him then, bringing the perspiration in great drops to his brow, and forcing him to sit and rest awhile before he could put the snow on the fire to melt for the tea.

"I'm in luck, that's certain, for I couldn't have walked much further, and I must have died sleeping out in such weather," he repeated later on, as he sat sipping his boiling hot tea, and soaking in it a bit of stale, mouldy bread that he had found pushed back on the shelf behind the tea canister.

But the pain was gripping him still, and he moaned with the anguish of it, as he muttered to himself over and over again—

"If only I could know that the boy was safe in shelter, I don't think I'd have a thing left to wish for."





CHAPTER XX

A FUTILE SEARCH

Fred uttered a sharp cry of apprehension and pain when Montana Jenny went on the warpath with such disconcerting suddenness, for there right in front of him was a huge deerhound, ready and eager for the fray, whilst the fierce wrench at his arm had appeared to almost dislocate the joint.

But it was not a moment for dwelling on personal pain, and though he could not use that arm to much purpose, he threw the other round Jenny's neck, dragging her down, and holding her so tightly that she was nearly choked, whilst the red men on their part dragged the ferocious-looking deerhound out of sight and sound of the enraged new-comer.

Then Fred proceeded to examine into his hurts, which were quite numerous enough to make him feel very much of a cripple; the arm which Jenny had wrenched so violently being bruised and sprained, whilst his shoulder was very painful, having been cut by a jutting point of rock, which had sliced through jacket, underclothes, and flesh.

The red men among whom he had appeared so suddenly by crashing through the roof of the wigwam, were, as it turned out, old acquaintances of Athabasca Bill, and he could not have introduced himself more happily, than by mentioning the trapper's name, for the red man has a memory almost as long as a bloodhound, and Athabasca Bill had done this section of the tribe more than one good turn, so it was important, from the red man's point of view, to treat the young pale-face with kindness and consideration.

It was this reference to Athabasca Bill which made the red men willing to condone the damage to the roof of the wigwam, which had been built in that fashion under the hill, in order that it might have the shelter of the steep, cliff-like bluff, which, rising like a huge wall on the north-east, protected it from the worst of the tempests of the wild and stormy winter.

All this was made clear to Fred later, but his one absorbing thought and care at the first was to induce the red men to go in search of Bill, who might even at that moment be perishing in a snowdrift.

But the red men were wary, and weather-wise too. They knew that the storm would not be of many hours' duration, and they knew also the utter hopelessness of searching for any one whilst the smother lasted, so they turned a deaf ear to Fred's entreaties, or answered only by grunts and ejaculations, until at last he was forced through sheer exhaustion to cease from his importunities, and await developments.

Meanwhile he lay on a couch of deer-skins piled on aromatic mountain hay, listening to the shrill scolding of the indignant squaws, as they set to work repairing the hole in the roof, whilst several dirty papooses rolled and tumbled about on the floor, to the imminent danger of themselves and every one else, sending Fred into a tremor of fear every time they rolled his way, lest Montana Jenny should take it in her head to make a meal of one of them.

But the dog was quiet enough now that the deerhound was out of sight, and lay contentedly by Fred's couch, her great head resting on her paws, and with only the alert bearing of her ears or an occasional sigh to show that she was awake.

Except for the smoke from the smouldering fire, which had no outlet saving a tiny hole in the roof, the interior of the hut was comfortable enough, and Fred, despite his hurts, would have been happy and content had it not been for his wearing anxiety on Bill's behalf. So he was not a little relieved when the very ugly red man, who rejoiced in the name of Jumping Frog, on account of the agility of his movements, put his head into the smoky interior of the wigwam to announce that the smother was at an end for the present, and that they were ready to go in search of the missing one.

"I am going too," exclaimed Fred, rising with difficulty, for he was stiff and sore from his sudden descent through the roof of the wigwam.

"Pale-face not fit," objected Jumping Frog, with a grunt of disapproval.

"Oh, I am fit enough, and I just hate myself for having run away and left Bill in such a fashion!" retorted the boy, with stormy vehemence, entirely overlooking the fact that the running away had been entirely unconscious, so far as he was concerned.

"Ugh!" ejaculated Jumping Frog, in a tone which might have meant many things, but that was entirely untranslatable to Fred, who trailed painfully out from the smoky wigwam, to commence the search for his comrade, followed by Jenny, whose strong characteristic was her devotion to her master, whoever that master might be.

But Fred had entirely miscalculated his strength, and his attempt at a search was, after all, very much of a failure, for he fell down three times, and eventually had to be

carried back to the wigwam on the shoulders of one of the stolid red men, where he lay fretting and fuming for the rest of the day.

Jumping Frog and his assistants returned just as darkness fell, declaring that they could find no trace at all of the missing man, although they had searched in every direction.

These tidings reduced Fred to a condition bordering on despair, in which the loss of the trail he had been following, and the fear of not being in time with the help his father needed, seemed as nothing in comparison to the loss of Athabasca Bill.

The night was one of the longest and most intolerable he had ever spent, the wigwam being crowded with well-greased but unwashed humanity, rolled in dirty blankets, and sleeping on the floor like pigs.

At another time he might have borne the discomfort with equanimity, for the glory of being able to say that he had really passed a night in an Indian wigwam; but the trouble of Bill's loss took the flavour out of everything.

He had learned from the red men that Morinville was only about five miles away, so when morning came he set about making arrangements to get there.

A difficult task it would be without snow-shoes, for snow had been falling all night, and although it was freezing, the surface was not yet hard enough to keep travellers from sinking in up to their knees at every step.

But he succeeded in getting the loan of these, and the services of a guide to Morinville for the sum of half-a-dollar, whilst another half-dollar went in satisfying the demands of Indian hospitality; the red man understanding to a nicety the art of getting money without the trouble, or, as they reckon it, the degradation of hard work.



“THERE HAS BEEN ONE FRESH FIRE INSIDE THE TREE,” REPLIED THE RED MAN.

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Jumping Frog having elected to take the office of guide himself, because he chanced to have business in the town, took Fred by the shortest way, which led past that same hollow tree where Athabasca Bill had sheltered from the storm.

The sun was up and shining broadly, though its cheerful brightness had no power to warm, and Fred was skimming along in the wake of Jumping Frog, surveying the

expanse of dazzling whiteness, and wishing it did not make his eyes ache so much, when the red man stopped so suddenly, that it was only with difficulty that he avoided a collision with him.

"What is up now?" Fred asked, though a much more correct rendering would have been to ask what was down, seeing that he himself was struggling on hands and knees in the snow unable to regain a perpendicular position, until Jumping Frog seized hold of him, and carefully set him on his feet again.

"There has been one fresh fire inside the tree," replied the red man, with imperturbable stolidity.

"A fire?" The puzzled wonder of Fred's tone was reflected in his face, as he turned it towards the tree, where Jumping Frog was carefully scooping away the drifted snow with his hands, and Jenny tugged hard at her chain in order to go to his assistance, just as if she knew all about it.

A sickening dread lest they might find Athabasca Bill lying stark and cold below crept into the heart of Fred, leaving him for a moment or two powerless to do anything; then, when it passed, he followed the example of Jumping Frog, by slipping his feet clear of the snow-shoes, and using one as a shovel to dig with.

A few minutes of strenuous toil served to clear a space down to the ground, revealing the brands and ashes of a burned-out fire, but nothing more.

"Then it might not have been Bill at all!" exclaimed Fred, in disappointed tones.

"Fire made yesterday," announced Jumping Frog, with an air of profound conviction; then putting his head into the hollow place in the tree, he uttered a further word of wisdom, "Some one shelter here from big smother outside. Ugh!"

"How do you know?" demanded Fred, with a sceptical air, as he too surveyed the cavity.

"Ugh!" snorted Jumping Frog, then fell to work again at digging away the snow with quite extraordinary vehemence for a red man.

Fred followed suit, and even Jenny scratched a great hole big enough to bury herself, barking every few seconds, as if she had come upon a find of great importance.

Presently, having excavated a great space all round the tree, Jumping Frog desisted from his labours.

"No use to dig; Athabasca Bill not here," he said, straightening his back, which ached with the vigour of his digging.

"Are you sure?" demanded Fred, still doubtfully, not having a very great opinion of the red man's wisdom and skill.

"Athabasca Bill dead, we find him here; alive, he walk away—Morinville

pelaps," Jumping Frog replied, bringing out the last word with an air of triumph. He had learnt it from a Chinaman, and was tremendously proud of the acquirement.

"In that case we might as well be moving," Fred said, not a little relieved by this suggestion concerning Morinville, and trying hard to persuade himself that the red man must know best.

So they set out again, Jenny being with some difficulty dragged from her hole-digging, for she was of a rather obstinate turn of mind; and having once settled to a thing, hated to have her attention distracted from it.

Dropping down into the plain from a different angle taken by Bill when he left the tree, Jumping Frog led the way by a half-mile detour to the right, in order to gain a rough log bridge over the river, and by so doing the little hut in the pine belt was left far away in the other direction; and the ears that might have been gladdened by the sound of Jenny's deep-throated baying, heard nothing all through the long, weary day, save the sough of the wind through the pine trees, and the noisy babbling of the little brook, which would be a river, deep and wide, when the snow began to melt, but which now an active man might cross at a jump.

"What sort of a place is Morinville—a town?" inquired Fred, as the place which had been in sight for so long began to loom nearer and nearer.

"Ugh! white man live there," announced Jumping Frog, in a tone which seemed to imply that it could not be much good if a pale-face held sway.

Despite the rapidity of the pace they made on snow-shoes, it took some time to reach the row of straggling log houses which represented Morinville, and it was noon before they halted in front of the store, which was by far the most imposing building in the place.

The door was in the gable, and flanked by two windows crowded with various sorts of merchandise, whilst a goodly row of skins, hanging from pegs on the wooden walls, showed that the season of barter had begun, the long-distance Indian and white trappers bringing in their furs, and receiving provisions in return.

A crowd of men were gathered about the door of the store, shoring up the posts of the lean-to porch and peering in at the windows, from whence came the sound of angry voices, as if a pretty lively row was in progress within.

So absorbed were the loungers, that they had no time or attention to bestow on the new arrivals, although strangers—more particularly white ones—were not so common in Morinville as to pass unremarked.

"What is the matter—what is the quarrelling about?" asked Fred, pulling at the sleeve of a corpulent individual, who wore a coat made of white and grey hareskins.

"Hullo, younker, where did you spring from?" asked the man; then, not waiting

for an answer, went on, “There’s that H. B. C. man, Guy Herrick, inside, quarrelling with a half-breed, and they’ve come to blows.”





CHAPTER XXI

WOULD HE DIE?

Guy Herrick?" The name broke from Fred in an irrepressible shout of amazement, relief, and joy. He even forgot his anxiety about Athabasca Bill, in the excitement of knowing that he had run his quarry to earth.

"What, is he kin to you?" asked the corpulent one, bringing his attention now from the riot within the store to fix it upon Fred, who was chiefly of interest because he was a stranger, and life was apt to be monotonous up Morinville way.

"No, he isn't, I'm thankful to say, but I've been on his trail for days; tracked him right up from the Saskatchewan, and never lost scent until the smother came yesterday," replied Fred, tacitly calling attention to his companion by a caressing pat on Jenny's head, to which that intelligent animal responded by a whine of entreaty, for she had heard the riot inside, and earnestly desired to take an active part in the *mêlée*, according to her nature.

"That your dog?" The corpulent man surveyed Jenny with great admiration, for her beauty and the excellence of her points were undeniable, and he loved a good dog.

"While I want her, yes. She is Montana Jenny, one of the finest tracker dogs this side the boundary; will hunt a man through a crowded city street and never lose the trail," said Fred, repeating the well-worn formula, with all the more conviction because of the way in which he had himself proved the excellence of Jenny's nose; then he added, in a voice that had an odd, strained break in it, "I saw her run a man down once."

"Did you?" The corpulent man stared at Fred, as if he expected shortly to stand an examination as to the boy's looks and appearance, or to identify him from among a thousand or so of other similar youths. "What do you call yourself, now—mounted police?" this last with a wink to one or two other loungers, who were bringing their attention to bear upon the boy and his dog.

A laugh broke out at this sally; but Fred was equal to the occasion.

"No, I'm not in the mounted police, because I've nothing to mount on except Jenny, and she has quite enough to do on her own account, without carrying me. But I'm tracking this man down on my own account; my father has been arrested and imprisoned for a robbery he never committed, and which I'm certain this man knows something about; so Athabasca Bill and I have trailed right down the Saskatchewan, from Rocky Raps, to come up with him."

"Is Athabasca Bill here with you?" queried another loungee, craning his head round in eager search for the noted trapper.

"He was with me till yesterday, when we got parted in the smother; then I pitched head first down a bluff into an Indian wigwam, and though search was made, not a trace of Bill could be found when it left off snowing. This morning, when Jumping Frog guided me here, we came upon fresh traces of a fire in an old hollow tree, but nothing else; I was hoping you might have heard of him here in Morinville," and Fred's eyes scanned the face of the other with an anxious scrutiny.

"Not a sound. But don't you worrit, kiddie; Athabasca Bill is about as well fitted by nature and training to take care of himself as any one I ever heard on, and you may reckon for him to turn up bright and smart sooner or later, most likely sooner."

"You think so?" Fred's relief at this was so great, that he forgot to be indignant at being styled a kiddie; and he was about to ply the man with eager questions as to whence he had come by his knowledge of Athabasca Bill, when his attention was distracted by Jenny, who for the last few minutes had been busy nosing among the trampled snow by the door of the store.

Now she began running hither and thither, pulling hard on her chain, and uttering the whimpering cry by which she made known the fact that she had found the trail again.

"Let me pass in, will you, please? it is pretty nearly a matter of life and death," urged Fred, his face drawn and white, as he realized how near he was to the end of his long quest.

"It'll be a matter o' your death if you poke your nose in yonder now," said the corpulent man, barring the way with his portly personality. "Rows like that between Guy Herrick and Sneaky Mose mostly have a way of ending in shooting; ah, they're beginning on it now," he exclaimed, as a noise from within made the crowd surge closer round the building. "No, they ain't; belike one of 'em knocked a pile of canisters over, and they ain't got no use for shooting irons yet, though I misdoubt but they'll be at it soon."

"I say, what makes you suspicion Herrick of robbery?" asked another

bystander, who could not peer over the shoulders of the others thronging about the window by reason that he was, like Zacchæus, a man of short stature. "He is about the last man to do a thing o' that sort; indeed, the row going on in yonder is all because he caught Sneaky Mose cheating a greenhorn at cards. The green 'un hadn't got any fight in him, and ran away d'rectly Sneaky Mose squared his fists; but Herrick 'lowed he'd punish him, and I reckon he's doing it, only it seems a pity they can't finish as they began, with their fists, instead o' taking to barkers, as they're morally certain to do if the half-breed gets the upper hand."

"I haven't anything but circumstantial evidence to go upon, but that is pretty strong," replied Fred, seeing instinctively that his best—indeed, his only—chance of forcing the man inside to a confession, or explanation of his share in the mystery of the robbery at the railway depôt, was to get this group of men on his side.

There was plainly no chance of getting inside yet, and so he used the time of waiting in telling the story of his father's arrest, the finding of the cap and comforter, and all the subsequent experiences and adventures which had befallen him since.

At first there were only two or three who paid any heed to him, but before his narration had gone very far, others joined in the circle of listeners, until, before he had done, the whole crowd had come pressing round him, finding his story of more interest even than the row inside the store, which had waxed momentarily tame, Herrick and Sneaky Mose being engaged in hurling hard words at each other, while they rested their bodies and recovered their wind.

"It sounds rather tall," was the comment of the short man, spitting thoughtfully; he had passed some years of his life in the States, and appeared to have spent the time in acquiring as many bad habits as possible.

"It's a mighty interestin' story, anyhow," applauded the corpulent person, admiringly. "Tell you what it is, kiddy, you'll miss your vocation if you don't go in for being a lawyer, or a parson, or one of them novel writer chaps; for it's plain you've got the gift o' the gab to an uncommon degree, and I've always maintained that it took a real born genius to make lies sound like truth."

The laugh that went round the circle at this was like a dash of cold water flung in Fred's face, and he searched in vain for that look of conviction on the countenances of any of the bystanders which should show that they believed what he had said.

"Why can't you believe I'm telling the truth? Do you think I'd have trailed all this way just to heap you up with an improbable tale at the end?"

His indignant questions provoked another burst of merriment, and there was not one among the loungers present but thought they were having a fine time of it that day, with such a red-hot row going on inside the store, and this stranger youngster

weaving impossible yarns outside.

"If only Athabasca Bill were here to say I told the truth, would you believe me then?" he demanded, with such a tragic air that the crowd were once more convulsed with laughter.

"Aye, that we would, every word from beginning to finish," chorused the delighted circle, who by this time had decided that the boy's statement about Athabasca Bill was as much a piece of fiction as the rest of his story.

"Even that bit about your going through Denaree's Leap, and not getting sucked down in the whirlpools of 'the Valley of Death,'" put in another man who had not spoken previously, although he had joined heartily enough in the laughter. "I was lumbering down that way myself last winter, and tramped the fifteen mile portage more than once, so I know just how much to believe of that part of your adventures," and he threw back his head with a loud guffaw of amusement, in which the others joined.

It was lucky for Fred that he had learned some lessons in self-control, for a wave of over-mastering passion shook him now, and it was all he could do to hold in check a fierce desire to set Jenny on to the mocking mob, and bid her do her worst.

This, indeed, was what that intelligent creature most ardently desired to do, as she pulled and tugged at her chain, alternately growling savagely at the mirth-makers, and turning wistful, yearning glances at her master, as if asking in dumb, dog language why he let such insults go unavenged.

But white with anger though he was, Fred kept a steady grip of Jenny's chain, and faced his detractors with a steady, fearless air.

"Well, gentlemen, you must do as you like about believing what I say. But I do beg that you will let me have fair play, and if my dog pins that man Herrick down, that you will stand by me in insisting that he shall explain his part in that robbery business; or if he won't, that you will help me in handing him over to the police," he said, his quiet tones carrying more conviction with them than any amount of bluster or shouting could have done.

"That we will, kiddy," replied the corpulent man, in a jovial, hearty tone, speaking for the rest, some of whom nodded their approval. Then, because he was fond of fun, and loved a good laugh better than anything, which was perhaps one reason of his great bulk, he added slyly, "And we'll vote you into a berth in the mounted police corps too, as soon as you are big enough to ride a donkey without falling off."

The mouths of the crowd were agape for a fresh burst of laughter at this, when the sounds of revolver shots, followed by a hoarse, dreadful shriek, checked and

choked the merriment back in their throats.

“I said there’d be damage done, if they wouldn’t be content to settle it with fists,” ejaculated the corpulent man, with a shake of his head, as he pressed forward with the others to gain the inside of the store.

A shiver of horror ran through Fred, whilst the sound of that death yell rang in his ears.

Suppose it should be Herrick that was shot! Then he would have lost his chance of being able to establish his father’s innocence for ever, and he ground his teeth in a sudden rage at his own helplessness.

But the suspense was unendurable. So, fastening Jenny’s chain to a hook in the wooden wall of the store, he pushed and squeezed his way through the crowd, surging to and fro in the narrow doorway, until by sheer agility he had worked his way inside, where the crowd was even thicker than in the porch.

It was not a cheerful scene. The interior was in a state of wild confusion, as if the assailants had at first amused themselves by flinging bales and bundles at each other, before it came to a hand-to-hand fight.

But now one man lay on the floor limp and dreadful, whilst the other, supported in the arms of the storekeeper and his assistant, coughed in a terrible racking fashion, whilst a third man tried to stanch the red flow from a wound in his arm.

“Sneaky Mose is stone dead,” said the storekeeper, in a tone of awed reproach, he holding that though wounding was justifiable in aggravated circumstances, murder was murder, and nothing could palliate it.

“It was his own fault; he fired first,” said the wounded man faintly. “And I shan’t be long in following him, for I’m deeper hit than you think.”

“Sneaky Mose worn’t no good anyhow—” began the assistant, when Fred, pushing himself forward, cried—

“Oh, you must not die until you have told me all about that robbery at the Millet railway depôt.”





CHAPTER XXII

THE CREDITORS OF SNEAKY MOSE TAKE POSSESSION

Guy Herrick turned his head on hearing Fred's vehement speech, but the pure and undisguised amazement on his face was a sight to see.

"So you accuse me of that, do you, younker? Well, of all the absurdities I ever heard of, that is about the most absurd," and he laughed feebly, then coughed again.

"But you know something about it—oh, surely you must do?" burst out Fred, in tones of pleading, trembling agitation, for boy though he was, and inexperienced in the ways of the world, that look of amazement on Guy Herrick's face had told him more surely than speech that whoever was guilty of the robbery, this man was not.

"I know something about it, certainly; that is, I saw it done, but——"

"Look out, pard, he's fainting!" exclaimed the storekeeper, excitedly, as the wounded man ceased speaking suddenly, while his head drooped forward, and an ashen grey overspread his face.

"He's dyin'," cried the assistant, in a tone of horror. Being a young man and nervous, the tragic end of the fight had considerably upset him, and the prospect of there being two deaths instead of one filled him with horror.

"No, he ain't, he's only fainted from loss of blood and exhaustion; swab his face down with water, and pour a little brandy into him, he will soon come round again," replied the storekeeper, who, being a married man, had a wider experience of swoons than some of the others, for his wife was delicate and given to fainting.

But Guy Herrick's teeth were too tightly clenched for any spirit to be forced between them, while the water so liberally applied to his face had no effect, save to make him very damp.

"Looks to me more like a seizure than a faint," said the corpulent man. "Here, stand back, you fellows, and give the poor chap air, and for mercy's sake don't slop any more water over him, or he'll die of chill, without a chance to die of anything else."

Thus admonished, the crowd fell back a little, the hindermost ones being by this means forced nearer to that silent figure lying at the other side of the store than was pleasant, and from which they recoiled in horror.

“Ah, there’ll have to be an inquest, I reckon,” put in the storekeeper, who appeared to be master of the ceremonies. “Here, two of you fellows pick up Sneaky Mose and carry him round to that shed at the back, then go and tell the coroner he’s wanted. It’s as well to do things decent and in order when you can.”

“Isn’t there a doctor to be had here anywhere?” demanded Fred, who had grown sick with apprehension lest the man should die now with his explanation unspoken.

“There ain’t one in the place,” said the corpulent man. “We did have two, but one went south to get married, and ain’t got back yet, and the other started for Klondyke this week. This place is so healthy, you see, that doctors ain’t necessary as a rule—only in emergencies like this, which happily don’t often happen.”

At this moment a big, bony woman, weather-beaten, but kindly of face, entered the store, and approached Guy Herrick’s unconscious form.

“Poor chap, he does look bad! and you’ve wetted him cruel,” she said, stooping over him with a gentle, motherly expression on her face that instinctively inspired confidence and respect.

“Will he come round, Mrs. Sims?” asked the storekeeper, rather anxiously, for Guy Herrick’s long swoon was beginning to frighten him.

“I hope so, but he won’t stand much chance here; best bring him round to my house, and let me put him to bed; he’s damp enough to get his death without anything else.”

“Just what I said,” put in the corpulent man, going to the assistance of Mrs. Sims, who was making energetic efforts towards the transportation of the sufferer to her own abode.

But he was so big and fat, so encumbered, too, with his voluminous fur coat, that he was glad to stand aside, and let the more nimble Fred take his place as burden bearer.

Slowly, and with difficulty, they carried the wounded man out of the store, and round the corner of the next block, to the small wooden hut Mrs. Sims called home; the very short man, who was also assisting in the work of transit, turned out to be the good woman’s husband, a rather onerous post, if one might judge from the manner in which she ordered him about.

Jenny, who was still fastened to the hitching-post, whined and cried as Fred went past, making so much demonstration that Mrs. Sims found her attention

momentarily called off from her patient.

“That’s a handsome creetur; is that your dog?” she asked of Fred, who was toiling along at her side, bearing more than his share of the burden, whilst the short man opposite took especial pains not to work too hard.

Fred nodded; this was plainly no time for a long-winded explanation as to how he had come by the dog, or his own determination to regard it only as a loan to be returned to Blue Pete when he had done with it, despite the fact that it had come to him as a gift.

“Well, it is a handsome beast, and I do love a good dog,” Mrs. Sims rejoined heartily; and then, before Fred understood what she was going to do, or could intervene a word to warn her, she walked straight up to Jenny, and putting her arms round the dog’s neck, imprinted a sounding kiss on the great head.

Perhaps Jenny was taken unawares, or it might have been that she thoroughly appreciated the kindly notice, for she whined softly, put out her tongue to lick the woman’s face, and wagged her tail in token of amity.

Deceived by this appearance of gentleness, one of the loungers following behind determined that he too would go and pat the dog’s head; but with a resounding roar Jenny sprang straight for him, which so scared him that he rolled over backwards, whilst the dog raised such a clamour of barking, that the man who was being carried past in unconsciousness, stirred, opened his eyes, and looked about him.

“Not done for yet,” he said, with a smile which was peculiarly sweet and pathetic.

“Feel bad, eh, dearie?” inquired Mrs. Sims tenderly, as she helped to lay her suffering guest on the bed in her tiny, but spotlessly clean abode.

“Rather,” he responded with a sigh; then, as a fresh uproar of barking burst from Jenny, he said, “What a magnificent noise that dog can make! I haven’t heard anything like it since that year I was in the state prison of Montana. Don’t be scared, Mother Sims; I wasn’t a prisoner, only a warder.”

“I wasn’t thinking that you were,” she said warmly, adding, with a touch of beautiful womanliness, “Not that it would have mattered much, now that you are all bashed up and want nursing. Whatever made you go getting mixed up in a row with a low, dirty half-breed like Sneaky Mose; it was downright beneath you.”

“He’d been cheating, Mother Sims; playing cards with that poor young Charlie Webster, till he’d swindled him out of his bottom dollar. I couldn’t stand by and let that go unpunished; and Charlie, poor chap, hadn’t the pluck to stand up to him.”

“Well, he won’t do any more cheating,” said Mrs. Sims, with a strain of solemnity in her tone.

"I'm sorry I shot him. I truly am, Mother Sims; for it's awful to have murder on your soul," and the poor fellow groaned in anguish of spirit.

"There, there, it ain't no sort of use crying over spilt milk; he'd have killed you if he could, and not have groaned over it either," she said hastily, her eyes filling with tears at the sight of his misery; then turning from the wounded man, she ordered her husband to bring in more wood for the fire, then banged the door in the face of the crowd, yet took no notice of Fred, who stood in silent trouble at the foot of the bed, not liking to venture the question that trembled on his lips, and fearing lest the vigorous Mrs. Sims should order him from the place.

The wounded man appeared to have forgotten all about him, and lay in a half-doze, that was little removed from stupor, after his wounded arm had been bound up, and his wet garments removed.

Presently Sims, the short man, came hurrying back in a state of great agitation, but without the firewood.

"Betsey, Betsey! Bully Jim and Bob Jones are going off to the little house in the pine belt where Sneaky Mose lived, to lay hands on what he's left, because he owed them money; but he didn't owe them as much as he did us, anyway."

"What we've got to do, then, is to put our claim in first, and so I should recommend your setting off right away, dodging across lots; and when you get there, defy 'em to lay a hand on anything until we've got the worth of our lot; and as possession is nine points of the law, you oughtn't to come out so very badly. I'd go myself, if it wasn't for this poor chap."

"I'd be only one against two, and Bully Jim ain't an easy chap to stand up to," replied the small man, with a shiver.

His bigger, and more aggressive, better-half flounced round with an air of extreme exasperation, and in so doing caught sight of Fred, who stood well drawn back in a corner, and the sight appeared to give her a new idea.

"I tell you what," she said eagerly. "You get the boy to go with you and take his dog; I guess no one won't want to take liberties with you while that animal is in possession. You'll go with Sims, won't you, lad?" she asked, turning to Fred. "I'll pack the two of you up a bag of food, so that you shan't want for supper."

"But suppose—" Fred's eyes turned anxiously on the wounded man, as if fearing lest he should get up and run away, with the story untold.

"Oh, he won't die—not before to-morrow, anyhow; and equally he's too ill to get up and run away from you, which I don't for a moment believe; for whoever took that money, he did not. Wild, loose, and reckless he may be, but Guy Herrick ain't a thief. Now, will you go? I'll pay you two dollars, and find you in food, if you'll

see Sims through this muddle, for he's neither very strong nor very plucky."

"I will go," replied Fred, swallowing down his reluctance by a great effort.

"Very well, then; you hurry along, and fetch the dog as quick as you can go, while I shovel some food into a bag for you. Spry is the word, now; for it is a case of first come, first served. And they do say that Sneaky Mose kept his money in a hole in the floor under the stove, so mind you keep your eyes open and stir well in the ashes."

Fred nodded, then shot out of the door to fetch Jenny; now that he had conquered his reluctance to leave Guy Herrick, the adventure rather appealed to him than otherwise, whilst the prospect of pay, and free food, was also eminently satisfactory.

He was unhitching Jenny's chain, and controlling her transports of delight, when he noticed the snow-shoes he had worn to Morinville standing outside the store, whilst Jumping Frog leaned against the wall, smoking stolidly.

Acting on impulse, Fred rushed up to him.

"I want the loan of those shoes for another day; how much?" he asked breathlessly.

Jumping Frog looked up at the clear cold of the blue sky, and round at the snowy waste for inspiration; then, because he thought Fred had only another dollar in his possession, and he coveted it, he said—

"No loan snow-shoe any more; sell outright one dollar."

"All right; there you are," said the boy, stuffing the dollar into the amazed red man's hand; he picked up the light framework shoes, and bounded away round the corner, while Jenny's joyful barking filled the air.

Fred was careful not to let the dog put her nose inside the house, fearing lest she should pick up scent of the trail she had followed so long, and fly at the helpless man on the bed; but strapping the generous bag of provisions supplied by Mrs. Sims on his back, and fairly routing out the timid and slothful Sims, started with him across lots, and down through some willow scrub to the pine belt that bounded the horizon.

"There go Bully Jim and Bob Jones," cried Sims, in a panic-stricken tone, pointing to two dark figures showing up against the snow away to the left.

"Hurry up, then; hurry, do, and we'll beat them yet," cried Fred, in tremendous excitement, shooting ahead, and setting a pace that was hard to follow.





CHAPTER XXIII

WHAT THEY FOUND

Bully Jim and Bob Jones, unconscious of rivals in the field, had taken the longest way round by the bridge, in order to avoid getting wet in crossing the river.

The two were proceeding leisurely enough, talking of the tragedy of the morning, and comparing notes as to the sayings and doings of the deceased Sneaky Mose, when their attention was attracted by the barking of a dog in the distance.

"Sounds like that younker's tracker dog; what's he doing out this way now, I wonder?" Bully Jim remarked, in a tone of query, sending a swift gaze over the snowy landscape, yet seeing nothing of his rivals in the field, because they chanced at that moment to be hidden by the sedges on the river brink.

"That dog is like an oil-painting—most appreciated at a distance," remarked Bob Jones, who had begun life as an artist, and could not quite forget all about it, now that he was a Morinville trapper, working two days in a week and lounging through the other five. It was he who had been obliged to tumble backwards, in order to get out of Jenny's way, and so he had no very pleasurable memories of their meeting.

"I'm puzzled to know what the creetur is out this way for now," Bully Jim said, sending another eagle glance in the direction from whence bursts of joyful barking still came; and then he caught sight of two figures emerging from the sedges and willows bordering the stream, and making their way into the pine belt, and then he began to dance and yell as if he had been stung.

"It is little Sims—I should know him anywhere, and the boy with that yelping brute of a tracker dog. They are going straight to the hut, and I know that Sneaky Mose owed Sims money—a goodish bit, too, without counting his debt to Mother Sims for nursing and medicine when he had cholera."

"I say, can't we run for it?" suggested Bob Jones, quickening his pace; he was

lighter in weight than his companion, and fairly active when he chose.

"We may beat them, but I doubt it, especially if they see us coming; anyhow we can try," replied Bully Jim, gliding forward on his snow-shoes at a great pace, whilst Bob pressed after him, both absorbed in the task of getting over the ground as fast as possible.

Fred and his companion looked behind and saw the others coming, but they were well ahead, and knew themselves to be in no danger of being over-hauled under ordinary circumstances. Then suddenly one of Sims's snow-shoes went snap, pitching him head first into a snowdrift, and the whole aspect of things was changed.

Luckily they were just inside the tree belt, and so their pursuers were for the present unaware of their disaster, but the situation was sufficiently serious.

"Take my shoes and go on; you'll get there in plenty of time," suggested Fred, stooping to free his feet for the sake of his companion.

"No, no," panted Sims, who was an arrant coward, and was turning all colours from fear and apprehension; "I can't go on alone, for the dog wouldn't come with me, and I should be scared of the beast if it would; besides, they do say the place is haunted by a white man, as groans awful when anything is going to happen."

"What are you going to do, then? We can't surely give up after coming so far; besides, what would Mrs. Sims say?" he demanded ruefully, thinking that failure to hold the fort would certainly mean the loss of the two dollars she had promised him.

"Oh, do you go on alone; you'll be in time, and the dog'll take care of you; then I'll just sneak round behind some of these trees, whiles I mend my shoe, and I can join you later. Go on, boy, for all you're worth; here they come." So saying, little Sims darted into the shadow of thick-growing pine trees, which completely hid him from view.

Then Fred flew forward again, giving Jenny a word of warning to be quiet, which the good dog chose to obey with commendable promptness, being pretty well winded with her long run.

Fred could see the little hut now, standing in the tiny clearing at the end of a long vista of pine trees, but he could also hear his pursuers behind him; while twice, when he had glanced round, he had seen them rapidly gaining on him.

His breath was failing him fast, and a wild despair was gripping him, at the thought of failure after so much effort, when there came a yell from behind, and a glance round showed him a great flurry of snow, and two prostrate figures struggling wildly to regain their footing.

The sight made him forget his fatigue, and he burst into a laugh of amusement over his fallen adversaries, as he reached the little hut, and paused a moment to slip

his feet from his snow-shoes before entering the abode of the late Sneaky Mose.

To his relief the door yielded to his touch, and he crossed the threshold into the gloomy interior, his snow-shoes in his hand, and Jenny pressing close in the rear; when, to his exceeding horror and amazement, a deep groan sounded from the dark corner behind the stove.

All at once there flashed into his mind what Sims had told him concerning the ghost of a white man which haunted the hut, groaning its warnings of impending disaster.

For a moment he hesitated, with his foot on the threshold, whilst Jenny, who had also heard the sound, uttered a low growl of menace.

Then Fred heard the shouts of the men behind, who had regained their feet and were sprinting gaily down the glade.

That decided him. A ghost, whatever its nature, could scarcely prevent his earning two dollars, whilst those men behind could, and most certainly would, if once they set foot in the house. So he hastily stepped into the room, dragging Jenny with him, and banging the door, dropped a big wooden bar into the socket, and so secured the door against all comers.

But there was the window. And as he had no fancy for seeing Bully Jim's revolver stuffed through the glass, he slid the wooden shutter along, and then began to feel a little safer as to his chances of keeping the intruders out.

This arrangement, however, left him in almost total darkness, and whilst he was fumbling for a box of matches, another hollow groan sounded from the corner behind the stove, and then a voice said faintly—

“Who is there?”

“Bill?” he shouted in unbelieving joy. “Bill, is it really you, old fellow?” and in his hurry to get across the floor in the darkness he stumbled over Jenny and came crash down to the ground, whilst the good dog yelped with pain.

“Fred, lad, is it you—you and the dog? Then God be praised for His great mercy, and it don't matter at all what happens to me now,” replied the weak voice, breaking down in a sob of utter thankfulness.

But Fred had by this time succeeded in finding his matches, and striking a light; then espying the lamp, lighted it, and stooped down by his friend.

“Bill, old fellow, what's the matter, are you ill again?” he asked tenderly, remembering how terribly Athabasca Bill had suffered a year ago.

“I've had a pretty bad time, what with pain and the worry of not being able to find you. Then I'm nearly clemmed, too, with hunger and cold, and I don't think I'd have been alive in the morning, if I had been forced to face another night of it. But

where have you been, lad, and what is all the knocking about?" inquired Bill feebly, yet with a ring of hope in his tone, for no circumstances could be utterly disastrous all the time the boy was alive and well.

"Oh, my adventures will keep until I have got you something to eat, and the knocking don't matter either, unless it makes your head ache," replied Fred, as a loud knocking sounded at the door, which Jenny replied to with such a roar of barking, and such deep, menacing growls, that the besiegers thought it better to quit banging the door and attempt a parley.

But the boy in possession had no time to spare for them until his friend was warmed and fed, so he turned a deaf ear to the appeals from those outside, whilst he opened the package of food Mother Sims had given him.

He was hungry himself, not having tasted food since he left the wigwam of Jumping Frog that morning; but his appetite could be appeased later, and Jenny's also, for Mother Sims plainly understood the art of catering, and had provided very bountifully—a bird of some sort, a great slab of bacon, a wedge of cheese, a loaf, and some tea and sugar, promised a feast indeed.

"Can you sit up, old man, and get to work on this bird—I think it's a duck by the look of it—whilst I get the fire lighted?" he asked, hastily stripping off his jacket to make a pillow for the weak head to rest against; then slicing off a strip from the breast of the bird, bade Bill begin to feed.

There seemed to be no wood in the house for fuel, saving some odd sticks in the corner behind the door; but there was the table; and the bench, the latter of which he determined to break up and burn first, getting to work with great vigour.

Then the knocking began again.

"Hist, Jenny, at 'em, lass," he cried encouragingly, as he piled sticks in the stove, and the dog dashed at the door as if she would tear it down in order to make short work of the men outside.

"It ain't no go, Bob; we're plainly done, and by a bit of a boy that ought to be at school with his nose in a lesson book. If that shutter worn't shut, I'd try whether an ounce o' lead wouldn't act as a persuader in making him open that door," said Bully Jim savagely, as he fell back a pace or two, fingering his revolver with an eager touch.

"No, you wouldn't, Bully Jim; or if you did attempt it, I'd let a little daylight into that thick skin of yours. The boy is downright plucky, and he's got the laugh of us this time, no mistake," said Bob, in his slow, drawling tone, that yet had in it a resolute ring.

"But what are we to do? we can't hang round here all night, and it is beginning to

get dusk already.” Bully Jim looked fairly nonplussed, and the sight made his companion laugh.

“No, I guess we can’t, or we shall be frozen stark in no time at all; our best plan is to go back to the town as fast as we can, then come out again in the morning; the boy will be hungry by that time, for I shouldn’t think Sneaky Mose kept a very large stock of provisions on hand, so a hunch of bread and bacon for the boy, with a bone for the dog, may settle the business,” Bob replied languidly, as if he had lost all interest in the affair.

“But there is Sims dodging round somewhere; perhaps he’s got some grub with him, and so your bread and bacon won’t be much good,” sneered Bully Jim; who, though he was noted for the strength of his fists, and his skill in knocking people down, never shone at strategy, and, what is more, was well aware of it.

“Oh, Sims; I don’t fancy there is much need to be afraid of him; I expect he is more than half-way back to Morinville by this time,” replied the other. “Anyhow, he’d be scared nearly out of his life to spend a night in that place, for you know Sneaky Mose used to vow it was haunted by the ghost of that poor Pat Martin, that was found dead there with a bullet wound through his head a year ago.”

“Folks did say that Sneaky Mose ought to know best who fired that shot,” remarked Bully Jim, as the two, realizing the futility of waiting longer, turned to retrace their way homeward.

“Well, in that case Pat Martin has been avenged to-day; such things mostly meet their own punishment,” Bob said thoughtfully. Then, as they emerged from the tree belt he burst out laughing, as he pointed to a black spot actively wriggling through the deepening dusk on its way back to the town. “There goes Sims; just see him sprinting along home, and won’t his Betsey give him a welcome when he gets there!”

“All the more chance of the younker getting starved out the quicker,” growled Bully Jim, with a ferocious growl.

“He’s a plucky boy, though, and I admire that sort of thing—in other people,” rejoined Bob slowly.





CHAPTER XXIV

UNDER THE ASHES

By the time Fred had made a roaring fire in the battered old stove, Athabasca Bill began to feel a little better, though he was terribly weak and exhausted from the fierceness of the pain he had endured, and his long fast.

"Now I'll make you a cup of tea, then you'll begin to feel quite fit again, and we can take the adventures at our leisure afterwards," Fred said, beginning to hunt round for water.

"I'm afraid it will have to be water without the tea, lad, for I took all there was in the canister last night; ah, what a night it was, and me not knowing what might have happened to you." Bill shivered as he spoke, at the remembrance of his long hours of bodily suffering and mental torture.

"Oh, I've got some tea. Mother Sims took care of that; she boards me while I'm on this job, don't you see, and she is a good generous sort where supplies are concerned, that is pretty evident."

"I'm more than a little curious to know what your job is, and why you have to blockade yourself in here," Bill said, in a stronger voice, as Fred displayed the tea and sugar among his other provisions.

"You shall know all in good time. But I say, I shall have to venture out for water, or at least for a pailful of snow, which is the same thing. I wonder if those two fellows are cooling their heels outside still, or whether they've decided not to wait. I think I'll take a look out. Any one about, Jenny?" he asked, for the dog was lying stretched out on the floor with her nose to the crack of the door.

But she only wagged her tail with resounding thumps on the floor, then got up slowly in order to let Fred open the door and peep outside.

His scouting happened at a fortunate moment, for he was just in time to see the figures of Bully Jim and Bob Jones turning out of the long vista between the pine trees on their way back to Morinville.

"Hurrah!" Fred cried, in a jubilant tone, coming back into the hut with his bucket of snow. "I thought they would take the hint, and not risk catching colds by hanging round here on the off-chance of finding me napping with the door open. I wonder though where Sims is, and how soon he will be along? I think it would be wise to take the keenest edge off my appetite before he comes, for he has got the look of a pretty good trencherman."

"It is just as well to be on the safe side," Bill replied, with a wan smile, as he leaned against the wall, basking in the warmth from the stove.

Before the light failed, Fred made several excursions to the wood pile, leaving Jenny on guard at the door. He was determined that there should be materials on hand for a good fire through the night, for it was freezing sharply now, and would be keener still later on.

When he had carried as much wood inside as he thought necessary, and replenished his water supply with another bucket of snow, he began to wonder not a little as to what had happened to Sims, for even supposing the snow-shoe to have been broken past repair, there was ample time for the little man to have waded through the soft snow and reached the hut long ago.

"Do you think I ought to go and look for him?" Fred asked his companion presently.

It was quite dark outside by this time, whilst the pleasant blaze of the wood fire shone through the open door of the stove, lighting up the grimy interior of the hut, the lamp having been extinguished with a view to husbanding the petroleum.

"No, I don't," said Athabasca Bill. He had been listening to the story of Fred's adventures with keen interest, and had already formed his own opinion regarding the character of little Sims.

"Well, I don't want to go, that's certain, for it is uncommonly comfortable here," replied the boy, yawning widely as he stretched his feet out to the fire.

"It wouldn't be any use if you did, for I expect he is on his way back to Morinville, or safely there, by this time, having left you and Jenny to tackle the ghost alone," Athabasca Bill said grimly.

Fred laughed.

"I own to feeling queer myself, when I came in at the door and heard you groaning, but as I had to choose between tackling the ghost with Jenny to help me, or being done out of my two dollar job, why, of course, I decided for the ghost. I'm jolly glad I did too, all things considered; and, by the way, that reminds me——"

"What about?" inquired Bill, as Fred went down on his knees, and commenced to stir over the heap of ashes under the stove with the aid of a piece of wood.

"Why, Mother Sims said that Sneaky Mose kept his money, when he had any, in the ashes under the stove, and so I'm going to have a look, for if he has left any cash behind him, my client might as well have the advantage of it," answered Fred, as he scooped the ashes out in a heap on the floor, leaving the cavity under the stove open and bare.

"It's a queer place to use for a savings bank, but I have heard of queerer," Bill said, as he leaned forward to peer into the little hollow. "It strikes me that stone is loose, try if you can lever it up; gently, mind, ease it a little, and worry it about a little; that's right, here it comes!"

Dropping the rusty iron bar which served as a poker, Fred seized the heavy stone in both hands and dragged it away.

"Nothing there but bare earth!" exclaimed Fred, in a disappointed tone.

"Scoop it about a little, gently—ah! that is right, I thought there would be something," said Bill, as, obeying directions, Fred stirred and dug in the soft earth with the poker, finally succeeding in bringing to light a small tin box, with the name "Patrick Martin" still discernible on the lid.

"Why it must have belonged to that poor Pat Martin, who was murdered here," said Fred, in an awed voice, when he had made out the name on the lid.

"Perhaps it was the very reason of his being murdered, if there was anything of value inside, that is; open it, lad, and let us see what it contains," urged Athabasca Bill.

But that was easier said than done, and it was some time before Fred, even with the help of Bill, succeeded in forcing open the lid of the box.

When it was done, a motley collection of articles were revealed, a pipe with an amber mouthpiece, the faded portrait of a sweet-faced woman, which bore on the back written in pencil, "My mother, died—" and a date which was ten years old. There was a tobacco pouch, filled with something that was not tobacco, and a canvas bag which was weighty after the same fashion.

"It is money by the feel of it," gasped Fred, in strong excitement, then he emptied the little bag on to the rough table, turning out a heap of dollars and half-dollars; but when the tobacco pouch was emptied there tumbled from it a bright rain of gold—ten English sovereigns, as bright as when they came from the mint.

"That is what that poor chap Pat Martin was murdered for," exclaimed Bill, when he saw the gold. "Then when the deed was done, Sneaky Mose, if it was he who did it, found that the money was of no use to him at all—not here, at any rate. So he set to work scraping and saving, witness the dollars and half-dollars, which were doubtless his own, in order to get the money to clear right out for Halifax,

Montreal, or somewhere, that he might spend the gains come by in such an unholy fashion.”

“Well, the money will come in useful for settling up with Mother Sims, for she is a great deal too good to be cheated out of her due,” Fred said, as after counting the money he put it back again into the tin box with the other articles, then slipped it for safety into the big inner pocket of his leather jacket.

“If I were you I should put the stone back, and shovel the ashes into the hole to make it look natural and undisturbed; it isn’t always wise to leave evidences of what you have been doing,” Athabasca Bill suggested in that quiet way of his, and although Fred was so sleepy, that he could scarcely keep his eyes open any longer, he set to work restoring the place to the outward condition in which he had found it.

When this was done, he made up the fire again, then lay down by the side of Bill for the slumber he so greatly needed, whilst Jenny lay close by, and for a time deep silence reigned in the solitary hut, broken only by the soft crackling of the fire or an occasional growl from the dog, as if she was dreaming of foes to be encountered and overcome.

Bill was sleeping peacefully, with a smile on his face as of a little child, whilst Fred was dreaming that he was coming home from school with Sam and Johnny, when they met old man Arlo and the three dogs hunting a man, and were forced to take refuge in the trees from being hunted themselves.

The vociferous barking of dogs was in his ears, and he roused from his dream to find Jenny barking wildly, and dashing about the house as if she would batter the walls down to get at the foe outside.

There was some one knocking loudly at the door, and a voice shouting his name. What could it all mean? Trying to rouse himself more fully in order to understand the cause of the riot, Fred rubbed his eyes vigorously, calling on Jenny to desist from her noisy demonstration, so that he might hear what was being shouted from the outside.

“Have your friends come back from Morinville at this time of night, in order to catch you napping?” asked Athabasca Bill in a drowsy tone, for he too had been very fast asleep until awakened by Jenny’s loud barking.

“Well, they succeeded pretty fair, for I was firm off and no mistake, but they did not get in, although they happened along so unexpectedly,” laughed Fred, getting on to his feet and shaking himself in readiness for any emergency that might come.

At this moment the knocking was re-commenced, and a voice, rough but kindly, made itself heard calling—

“Laddie, laddie, don’t be afraid, it is only Mother Sims, and she ain’t likely to hurt you. Let me in, boy, I’ve come to keep you company.”

“Do you hear, Bill, it’s Mother Sims, and she’s come all this way in the night, because she thought I was alone!” exclaimed Fred, whilst Jenny sniffed curiously at the door, and whined, because her instinct told her the intruder was a friend.

“Then let her in, lad, and be sharp about it. The night isn’t warm enough to keep a lady standing out in the cold,” replied Bill urgently, sitting up on the poor apology for a bed, and trying to give a day-time air to his appearance by putting his hat, which, by the way, was that peculiar article made of various kinds of fur, that looked so grotesque, yet was so comfortable.

Fred slid out the bar, and opened the door, keeping one hand on Jenny’s collar to restrain her from leaping out upon the arrival.

A big woman, looking all the bigger for her heavy wrappings, was Mrs. Sims, and it seemed doubtful to Fred whether the doorway would be wide enough to admit her, but she sailed in comfortably, and then he saw that Sims was dodging along in the rear, looking meaner and more craven-spirited than ever.

“I was in such trouble about you, lad, that I could not rest, and I just had to come and see for myself that you weren’t being frightened into lunacy by them tales about ghosteses that Sims has been stuffing into your ears; nor freezing to death for want of a fire,” she said, turning a look on her husband that made the little man shake in his shoes, then catching sight of Athabasca Bill, exclaimed in wonder to see a stranger there.

“He’s my chum that was lost in the snow. I found him sheltering here,” Fred explained.

“I told you the boy would be all right till the morning, Betsey, without dragging me all this way at night,” protested Mr. Sims, in a petulant tone.

“You might have stayed at home,” she rejoined tartly.

“What! with that dead man——” he began, with a shudder.

“A dead man?” broke in Fred, in tones of dismay.

“It is poor Guy Herrick,” said Mother Sims in a solemn tone. “He broke a blood vessel two hours after you started, and was gone in a few minutes.”





CHAPTER XXV

THE EVE OF THE TRIAL

Here, mother dear, Celia and I have finished all that packing, and there is nothing more to do until supper-time, so couldn't you go and rest for awhile?" Ella asked, coming out from the bedroom, where she and her younger sister had been busy for the last hour or more.

Mrs. Crawford looked up from her sewing with a weary white face that was pitiful to see.

"I could not sleep if I went to lie down, Ella, and sewing is more bearable than sitting with my hands idle," she said, plying her needle the more swiftly, as if that were the only way in which distraction could be found.

Ella sighed a little impatiently, then stood staring out of the window, drumming her fingers on the wooden sill, as her gaze wandered over the stretch of snow-covered fields, yet saw nothing save the black cloud of trouble which had crushed all the joy and hope from the home-life.

Being so young, it was only natural that sometimes she should chafe and grow restless under the galling load of mortification which had been her lot during the past few weeks.

School was the worst part, and she evaded attending whenever possible, only as she had not told her mother the reason of her dislike to going, there were some days when she could not escape the ordeal, and had to bear as best she could the shrinking avoidance of her schoolfellows, and the taunting remarks about her father being a gaol-bird out on leave, a thief, and a person whom all respectable folk should shun.

When Sam and Johnny had things of this sort flung at them, they turned and fought, no matter how big the opponent, or how badly they were beaten; they had at least the satisfaction of incurring black eyes and bleeding noses in vindication of their father's honour, and that was consolation and satisfaction of a sort.

But girls don't fight as a rule, and their tongues are more cruel, their sarcasm

more cutting than that of boys, so Ella had been compelled to bear a very heavy load indeed.

Yesterday had proved an especially trying time, and she had been thankful indeed this morning, when her mother had said there could be no school for her to-day, because of house-cleaning and packing that must be finished before evening.

"Can you see your father coming yet, Ella?" Mrs. Crawford asked, just as the light began to fade.

"No, mother, has he gone anywhere; I thought he was in the barn?"

"He said he was going over to old man Arlo's place this afternoon, to see when the new owner is coming into possession here, because he thinks it will be so awkward for me to be left in charge, with only that slow Dolty Simpson to look after things for me. Of course I shall be very thankful to be quit of the responsibility of taking care of a stranger's property, yet my heart does cling to the old home now that the time has so nearly come to leave it," Mrs. Crawford said, with a wistful look at the brown walls which had been her world for so long.

"Perhaps the new man won't want to live here yet, and then we might stay on for awhile, until—until we know what is before us," Ella said, with a hesitating break in her voice.

"I had thought of that, only old man Arlo told your father that the owner would be sure to live here," Mrs. Crawford replied.

"What a mysterious person old man Arlo is; if he were not so wretchedly poor, one would be disposed to think he had bought the farm himself out of pity for our troubles," Ella said, coming from the window to the fire, for her hands were blue with cold.

"Poor old fellow, I am afraid he will be pinched terribly in this bitter weather, and it has set in so early this season. I gave your father that little old flannel jacket of poor Fred's to take over for him. It is very old, but so thick and warm that it may help to keep a little of the cold out," Mrs. Crawford said, as she stooped the lower over her work too, because of the mist of tears which had gathered in her eyes at the mention of her missing son.

"Mother, don't you think it possible that Fred may be still alive?" Ella whispered, in an awed tone. It was another sharp sorrow at this time for them that hope should have been revived, only to die a lingering death again.

"Ella, I can't; I have tried so hard, hoping against hope, making allowance for delays, for bad travelling, for all sorts of contingencies, but it is all of no use, my own knowledge of the boy assures me that if he had been alive, he would have contrived somehow to let me know that he was all right, and doing his best," the mother said,

dropping her work all of a heap now, because the tears would come.

Celia came stealing into the room at this juncture, more wan and white-faced than of old, whilst Ella, hearing a whistle outside which she knew to be her father's, caught a shawl down from a peg and hurried out to meet him.

He had to go to the barn before coming indoors, so she went with him, rejoicing to be out in the cold clear air and away, if only for a few minutes, from the brooding depression of the house.

Dolty Simpson was moving to and fro feeding the animals, his manner as slow and lethargic as ever, but he was honest and faithful in spite of it, and Mr. Crawford paused before leaving the barn, to settle the question of the future.

"Dolty, old man Arlo isn't sure even now when the new man will come in, so if I don't come back from the trial to-morrow, will you hold on here for a week or so, looking to old man Arlo for orders and wages?"

"I ain't going to work for old man Arlo if I knows it. Why, I'm skeered to death at the very sight of him, and the ugly faces he do make at me, sets the shivers a-running up and down my back most dreadful to feel," retorted Dolty, with a shudder, looking as if he were disposed to set off and run away at that very moment.

"It is quite true, father, for Sam and Johnny were in the cart with Dolty one day when old man Arlo met him, and he shook his fist at Dolty, saying that he would bring it all home to him some day—and serve him right too," chimed in Ella, with a thrill of indignation in her voice.

Mr. Crawford looked worried; there were so many things depending on him now, and he had only scanty time in which to make fresh arrangements, if such were necessary.

"Now look here, Dolty, do be reasonable, there's a good lad, and hold on here until the new owner comes to take things into his own hands, for my sake. You need not be afraid of seeing old man Arlo round here yet awhile, for he is too ill to leave his bed, and I have had to arrange with Dan Pearson's sister to go in and look after him, and you can go to her if you would rather, instead of facing the old man."

"Well, I'll catch hold for a few days longer then, for I do love the animals here, and the place is more home than anywhere, but I'm clean scared of old man Arlo, certain sure I am," replied Dolty, with another shudder.

"It is funny why that old man should display so much animosity against Dolty; I've seen it myself, and wondered at it," said Mr. Crawford to his wife later on, when they were sitting by the fire discussing the matter, whilst the children cleared away and washed the supper dishes.

"Perhaps he thinks that Dolty has injured him in some way," replied Mrs.

Crawford. "But I am sorry the poor old fellow is ill; what is the matter with him, a chill?"

"It looked to me more like a regular break up of the system, and I should not be surprised if he does not live very long. He said some queer things to-day. I should have thought his mind was wandering, if it had not been that he is always more or less queer. What do you think he gave me as I was coming away?"

"It would be difficult to guess, for I never heard of old man Arlo giving anything away," Mrs. Crawford answered, with a smile.

"Well, this was not exactly a present, but a letter to the judge, which I am to give him before he pronounces sentence, if the verdict goes against me to-morrow; he said it may lighten the sentence," her husband said, half drawing a letter from his inner pocket.

"Maitland, what is it, I must see that letter?" and she stretched out an eager hand for it, but he drew back with a grave face.

"No, my dear, you can't do that. He made me take an oath, swear it on the Bible (I did not know that he had one until to-day), that I would not open that letter, unless the verdict was against me, or he himself was to die, and I can't go back from my word in any case."

"Of course you can't, but oh, suppose it should contain something which should lead to the conviction of the real culprit." Mrs. Crawford caught her breath in a half-strangled sob as she spoke.

"Not likely," replied Mr. Crawford. "I expect that it is merely a certificate of my good character from his point of view, and a recommendation to mercy on that account; for my own part I would rather not hand it in, since it may possibly make me look foolish, but I have promised and so I must do it."

"Yes," remarked his wife slowly and thoughtfully. "You must certainly do it if you promised."

"Here comes a horse, I wonder whose it is?" exclaimed Mr. Crawford, with a hasty step in the direction of the door as the hoofbeats of a horse sounded on the bit of road outside where the snow had been scraped away.

Mrs. Crawford turned a little whiter, and there was a sick flutter of hope and apprehension at her heart. It was always like that now, was since her husband had come back from Tom Marsh's place with that scrap of half-burned writing paper, which had been found by Potiphar on the fifteen mile portage. A quicker step, a raised voice, or an unexpected laugh was enough to enkindle the hope, which died so hard, of Fred's being still in life.

The children had rushed out in a body to identify the visitor, and now it was

Celia who came scurrying back.

"Mother, mother, it is Miss Marsh, and she says that she has come all the way over here, on purpose to go with you to the trial to-morrow."

"Celia, Celia, did she say if she had heard any news of Fred?" cried the poor woman, standing erect now, but clinging to the table for support.

"No, mother, I'm sure she has not, for the first words she said to father, were to ask if we had heard of Fred," Celia said pitifully, creeping closer up to her mother and kissing her tenderly, as if the love of the living children should compensate the sore heart that grieved over the one supposed to be dead.

A momentary struggle for self-control, and then Mrs. Crawford moved forward to greet her visitor, who at this moment entered the house.

"I had to come, Mrs. Crawford, just to stand by you to-morrow. I'd been hoping I might have had good news to bring you to make up for the bad I brought before, but it does not seem as if I am to be favoured in that fashion," said Saidie Marsh, who looked as fresh and bright after her long journey as if she had only just had to ride over from Millet.

"It is very good of you to come so far, dear, on such a sorrowful errand," Mrs. Crawford replied, as she busied herself in removing her visitor's wraps and preparing a hasty meal.

"Perhaps it won't be a sad errand, it might even be a very joyful one, who knows!" cried Saidie, in a happy spirit of hopefulness which made them all feel better. "At least it is of no use anticipating the worst until the worst comes; it might even be an occasion for bonfires and crackers, so to be on the safe side I stopped in Millet as I came through, and bought that for the young ones," she went on with a laugh, producing a great package of nuts and candy from an inner pocket of her cloak and tossing it to Sam and Johnny.

But despite the cheery brightness of her manner, and her resolute attempt to inspire them with hope, they were sad hearts that lay down to rest in the little brown house that night, and the heavy cloud brooding over the home was unlightened by any instinctive foreknowledge of the relief the next day might bring.





CHAPTER XXVI

JUST IN TIME

So many people had come along in the cars from Millet to hear the trial that the court-house was crowded to the doors, and Mrs. Crawford, with Saidie Marsh, was squeezed away in a little odd corner near the dock, where she could see without being seen.

Mr. Crawford's case was the first on the list to be tried, and a very bad time he seemed to be having of it, every witness adding something to make the weight of evidence heavier against him, until even the good, faithful wife began to be assailed by doubts as to whether in a moment of temptation he might not have laid hands on what was not his own.

Not that she would have admitted the doubts, even to herself. But they were there, stinging and torturing her through the long time of examining the witnesses, and she was beginning to feel the strain so unbearable that she had turned to whisper to Saidie that she must get out of that crowded place, when there arose a commotion at the end of the room; a great pushing and struggling, then the bark of a dog, a deep, resonant roar, that made the crowd sway and break, then surge together again in a disturbed fashion.

"Silence!" said the judge, with a frown.

"Silence!" roared the ushers, making much more noise and commotion than the dog had done.

"Turn that dog out," shouted some one else, an order that no one appeared in the least hurry to obey; then the crowd surged to and fro again, like the restless waves of the sea, as a passage was forced through the thickest of the standing mass for two people and a dog.

A very battered, travel-worn pair the humans were, although the dog looked fresh and fit, and very much disposed to resent any undue familiarity from the crowd, who shrank respectfully backward on to their neighbours' toes, or anywhere else

where standing room could be found, to give the great beast space in which to pass.

"Turn that dog out," shouted the official voice again, while a majestic wave of an official arm indicated that part of the building where a door might be found.

"If you please, sir, the dog is a witness; at least, it is evidence," replied a fresh young voice, which recalled Mrs. Crawford from a half-fainting condition into sudden life and vigour again, whilst Saidie sprang up, and stared around, crying out impulsively—

"That is Fred's voice; I am sure of it!"

"Silence!" roared the ushers again, turning such wrathful glances in Saidie's direction as made her sink down abashed, looking as if she wished the floor would open and swallow her out of sight.

Mr. Crawford, standing in the dock, turned sharply too, then cried out in amazement, as Athabasca Bill struggled through the crowd, and emerged into the open space before the judge's desk, wearing that selfsame cap which had been found in the despoiled station house, or, at least, one just like it.

Close behind Athabasca Bill, gaunt, pale, and desperately ragged, was Fred, but wearing a look of such beaming happiness as caused the father's heart to leap with a sudden tumultuous rush of hope, for surely the boy would not look like that if he had no good news to bring.

But Fred was alive, and well, and for the moment that was happiness enough, Mr. Crawford felt, as he clutched the narrow rail in front of him, and tried to gather his scattered wits together in order to understand what all the buzz of talk going on around him meant.

It was the lawyer whom some one had instructed to defend Mr. Crawford that made the next move, standing up with a paper in his hand, which he begged permission of the judge to read.

The buzz of talk and comment, which had seemed just like the noise of an angry swarm of bees, dropped into a silence so profound that the ticking of the clock over the press bench sounded quite unnaturally loud by contrast.

Jenny sniffed curiously at the counsel for the prosecution, greatly to that gentleman's discomfiture; then, when she had decided that he was not included in her list of suspected persons, laid quietly down and went to sleep, with one eye open, sighing profoundly, as was her custom when at rest.

Mr. Crawford had recognized the dog at once, but among so many causes for amazement had no time to spare for wondering how it fell out that she should be the companion of Fred and Athabasca Bill.

Before the judge would permit the paper to be read, he wanted to know what it

was, and where it came from.

“It is the dying statement of a man named Guy Herrick, taken at Morinville, on the trail to Athabasca Landing,” replied the lawyer. “And it throws new light on the robbery from the railway depôt at Millet, of which my client stands accused.”

“Is it a confession?” demanded the judge, who was an irascible man, impatient of interruptions.

“No; this man, Guy Herrick, now deceased, was not the culprit,” replied the lawyer, whose brows were creased in a thoughtful pucker.

“How was the paper brought here?” demanded the counsel for the prosecution, speaking in a nervous, jerky tone, for Jenny had roused from her one-eyed slumber, and lifted her head to look at him.

“That can be explained later; the paper should come first,” said the other counsel, looking at the judge, who at once nodded his head as permission for him to proceed.

The lawyer cleared his throat, as if in warning to the keenly attentive crowd that he was about to begin; a very unnecessary thing, by the way, as every one was already straining his or her ears for the first words.

“I, Guy Herrick, feeling that my end is drawing near, am making plain what I know of the robbery from the railway depôt at Millet, in order that the wrong person may not have to suffer for the crime; and that the brave boy who has followed so long and so perseveringly on my trail may not go home disappointed.

“On the night of the robbery, I was wandering about in a state of great misery and despair, for I had lost a pocket-book containing valuable papers, for which I was responsible, and money that was not my own, and as I had been loafing in bad company, I believed it to have been stolen from me.

“I had a bad, racking cough, and during an unusually severe paroxysm, a tall man with a kindly voice accosted me, expressing sympathy with my affliction, and asking if nothing could be done to alleviate it. I told him it was likely to get worse, rather than better, as, owing to my poverty, I should have to sleep rough; but that if it finished me off, I should not be sorry. He said a few kind words to me after that, then unwound the woollen scarf he was wearing on his neck, and gave it to me, and went on his way. I did not put the scarf on, but wandered aimlessly on, over the way I had come earlier in the day before

discovering my loss, when suddenly my foot struck against something, which proved to be my pocket-book, with papers, money, and everything intact. I was so overjoyed at this that I could have shouted and danced with delight. As a matter of fact, I did nothing of the kind, but carefully putting my restored treasure in my inner pocket, and carelessly stuffing the scarf in an outer one, with a long end trailing out, I started for Millet as hard as I could pelt, because I knew I could procure a horse there with which to continue my journey.

“But I lost my way somehow, and, instead of following the road, came across lots clean into the yard of the dépôt, which was all shut up and deserted for the night. I was pausing a minute to get my bearings, when I noticed a window open, and the figure of a man come stealing out of it, carrying a bag or box of something, which seemed uncommonly heavy, judging by the way he puffed and panted over it.

“Without a minute’s thought or hesitation, I sprang forward then, intent on catching the thief, who, however, instead of running away, turned and fought; the two of us wrestling so fiercely, that I soon found I was getting the worst of it, and made a bolt for it as fast as I could go. When I got away, I found my hat, or rather fur cap, was missing, also the scarf given to me by the kindly stranger; and not being sure but that the robbery might be laid at my door, if the thief was as handy with his tongue as he was with his fists, I shook the dust of Millet off my feet with all speed, walking the best part of the night, and buying a horse next morning of a homesteader hard up for cash. The thief seemed to me to be a small man, with a harsh, croaking voice, and he panted considerably for breath, but he was so muffled about face and head that I could see nothing of him.

“This is all I know of the matter, and as I am a dying man, my word may be believed, for men do not pass into the presence of their Creator with falsehoods, written or spoken, on their tongues. Nor has this statement been wrung from me by force or fear, but I have made it of my own free will, so that, if possible, wrong may be made right.

“GUY HERRICK.

“Witness, BETSEY SIMS, married woman.”

The crowd, who had listened with bated breath, drew an almost spontaneous respiration of relief when the reading ceased; but the judge looked more gloomy and disgusted than ever, as well he might, poor man, considering what avenues of doubt

and perplexity Guy Herrick's written statement had opened up.

Then the counsel for the prosecution had it out with Fred and Athabasca Bill, letting Fred off more lightly than he otherwise would have done, because of the glances the big dog, Jenny, bestowed upon him every time she lifted her great head.

Fred recounted his adventures modestly enough—as many of them as were required by the counsel, that is, and then gave place to Athabasca Bill, whose entry into the witness-box was made the occasion for a cheer from the crowd, who had been quiet for so long.

But Bill could only corroborate what the boy had said, producing a letter from the coroner in Morinville, as a sort of credential that they had come from that place; the letter also containing particulars of Guy Herrick's life and death, so far as the coroner knew of them.

Bill also attested to having met Mr. Crawford earlier in the day, and although, as he well knew, it was not sufficient to prove an alibi, it went a long way towards helping to a belief in the prisoner's innocence, since a man returning from an absence like that could have known nothing of a box labelled copper nails standing in the office of the *dépôt*.

It was Guy Herrick's description of the thief, a small man, with harsh, croaking voice and panting breath, that was the strongest evidence in Mr. Crawford's favour, however, and secured him an acquittal in the end; for he was a big man, tall and burly, with a kindly voice; so, plainly, whoever the thief might be, they had not caught him yet.

There was quite a demonstration in the corner of the court-house when the trial was over, Fred and his mother standing with tightly-clasped hands, their hearts too full for speech, whilst Jenny sniffed at Mr. Crawford in a dubious fashion, as if remembering the time when she had tracked him down in the pursuance of her duty; then seeing that Fred treated him with every appearance of love and respect, whilst her own instinct told her that his nature was good and kindly, she decided to let bygones be bygones—and licked his hands.

Athabasca Bill, looking very wan, and old, and ill, feeling too that the future was not very rosy for him just then, seeing that he would probably get no trapping that winter, and was not strong enough to work at lumbering, was standing somewhat apart from the Crawfords, when to his amazement a pretty girl, bright and vigorous, walked up to him, and putting her arms round his neck, gave him a resounding kiss on his cheek.

‘I should have known you anywhere, Willie, even if you hadn't given your name in the witness-box as William Marsh, for you've mother's eyes, and the worn, sad

look that father had, when he tried so hard to find you, but could not. I'm your sister Saidie; Tom and I have come to Canada to find you, but I don't know that we should have ever managed it, if it had not been for that boy Fred."

She broke down in an odd, quavering laugh, which was much better than crying, although very near akin to it, whilst Athabasca Bill, standing with his arms clasped round her, and his head in a whirl forgot all his anxiety for the future, and remembered only that he was the happiest man of his acquaintance, let the next happiest be whom he might.





CHAPTER XXVII

A CURIOUS REVELATION

Athabasca Bill and Saidie went home with the Crawfords after the trial, and that night the little brown house was as full as it could hold of happiness and joy, the reaction from heavy trouble, and wearing apprehension, being almost more than some of them could bear.

Breakfasting next morning by lamplight, which is the western farmer's way of making the most of the short winter days, Mr. Crawford bethought him of old man Arlo, and determined to set off without delay to see how it fared with the invalid.

"May I come too, father, and bring Jenny along with me?" asked Fred; "I guess old man Arlo will be just considerably surprised to find that his grand Montana tracker dog belongs to me."

"Yes, my son, you can come; for I suppose you scarcely feel settled down enough after your travels to start on going to school again yet," the father replied, with a contented laugh.

"Not quite," said Fred, with a little grimace, he not being fond of books, and the kind of knowledge which comes from their study, although he was a keen student of everything that was to be learned out of doors. Then he turned to the trapper, asking

—
"Are you coming too, Bill?"

"That is according to whether my sister says I may," Athabasca Bill rejoined, his eyes turning with wistful love and affection towards Saidie, as if it seemed to the lonely man an uncommonly beautiful thing to have a sister who would order him about, and extract from him a prompt and complete obedience to her commands.

"You will have plenty of time, for we won't start until noon; Tom does not expect me until to-morrow, anyway, and there is no sense in reaching the creamery until about sundown," she answered, with a smile.

The brother and sister had begged the loan of an old box sledge of Mr. Crawford, and as the snow was frozen hard enough for sleighing, the one horse

which had brought Saidie over to the little brown house would take the two of them back with ease and comfort.

Athabasca Bill looked about ten years younger this morning, and as happiness is a very great beautifier, he looked almost handsome also, as he set out with Mr. Crawford and Fred across the snowy fields to old man Arlo's place.

They had not gone very far before a long-drawn and intensely mournful howl smote on their ears, followed by another which was almost weirder still. At the sound, Jenny, who had been walking thoughtfully along, with her nose nearly touching the snow, flung up her head and sent back an answering howl of a most dolorous description.

"Old man Arlo's dogs, poor beasts; it is pitiful how they miss the old man, now he is sick," said Mr. Crawford.

"Perhaps they are hungry," Fred suggested, remembering the time when his father had succoured the animals from death by starvation.

"I took care about that the day before yesterday, and left them enough to keep them from starving, in case of accidents, for some days to come; though Matty Pearson, who goes in to do for the old man, declares she is no more afraid of them than she is of her brother's calves," Mr. Crawford answered; then shading his eyes with his hands, to soften the glare from the snow, he peered at a figure stepping briskly along on the snowy path in front of them, and exclaimed, "Why, there goes Matty Pearson; she is late this morning, and we shall catch her up before she reaches the house."

So they did, and very full of congratulations the good woman was over the happy turn of yesterday's affairs for Mr. Crawford, whilst her delight at seeing Fred, alive and well, knew no bounds.

"La sakes, if that ain't Montana Jenny, or else I never saw a dog before!" exclaimed Miss Pearson, making a little dive forward as if she seriously intended embracing the great hound, but Jenny stopped short, uttering a low, warning growl, which caused the good woman to fall back in a fright. "La, what a great ugly beast, to be sure! I don't wonder old man Arlo was glad to get rid of her; and just hear how them other two dogs are a-howling; I declare it makes my flesh creep."

"How was the old fellow yesterday?" asked Mr. Crawford, laying his hand on the gate, to open it for her to pass through first.

"Just as bad as he could be all the first part of the day, and as restless as if he was possessed of an unquiet spirit; but when the telegram came as you'd got off, he turned as peaceful as a baby that has just had its supper, and went off to sleep beautiful. He was fast asleep when I left him, so I'm hoping to find him better this

morning.”

“Very good; go in and see how he is, and tell him I should like to have five minutes’ talk with him if he is fit,” said Mr. Crawford; and unlocking the outer door, Miss Pearson passed into the house, whilst they waited in the little yard before the door.

Then they heard a sharp cry, and the good woman came hurrying out with her face the colour of ashes.

“Mr. Crawford, the poor old man is gone. Dead and cold he is, and he must have passed away in his sleep, for the bed-clothes ain’t rumped, and everything is just as I left it—come and see.”

They followed her into the house, with heads bared, and a look of awe on their faces, for death is solemn, let it come as softly as it may.

Very quiet and peaceful the old face looked, with half the wrinkles already smoothed away, and the wisps of his scanty white hair curling softly about the brows that would frown no more.

“What is this?” said Athabasca Bill, drawing a folded paper from under the dead man’s face, as if he had slipped into his last long sleep with his head pillowed upon it.

“Instructions about his funeral perhaps; I see him with that paper yesterday, but he was mighty particular not to let me put a finger on it,” Miss Pearson replied, and then Athabasca Bill handed it to Mr. Crawford, who spread it open and read—

“‘I’ve left all my property to Maitland Crawford, because of the wrong I did him, and my will is at Lawyer Grimes’s office at Edmonton.’”

“What does it mean?” said Mr. Crawford, in a bewildered tone. “He never did me any wrong that I know of.”

“Fancy his talking about his property; he must have been a little gone in his head, poor man, for he’s told me often enough that he was all but starving, and that this place was mortgaged for more than it was worth,” Matty Pearson cried out, with uplifted hands and a face full of amazement.

“Grimes was the name of the man who bought my farm; it is possible it may be this same Lawyer Grimes; I think I must take train to Edmonton to-day to see him,” Mr. Crawford said, as he left the house with Athabasca Bill, whilst Matty Pearson and a woman hastily summoned from the nearest house set about performing the last offices for the dead.

Fred had already gone to feed the dogs, Montana Jenny fraternizing with her former comrades in a rather patronising fashion, owing to her having travelled so far

and seen so much, whilst they had merely vegetated at home.

"I think you had better bring Ruby and Smiler back with Jenny, Fred; they will only scare the women with their howling, and if, as the bit of paper states, the old man has left all he had to leave to me, why, I suppose the dogs are more mine than any one else's," Mr. Crawford said, putting his head in at the door of the dog-pen, where he received quite an ovation of welcome from Ruby and Smiler.

"Father, what did the old man mean when he wrote about the wrong he had done you?" Fred asked, as they went back across the fields together.

"Ah, that is the very thing I am puzzling about myself," replied Mr. Crawford, and then he fell into a reverie so profound that neither Fred nor Athabasca Bill could rouse him from it.

When he reached the little brown house, he went straight to his bedroom, and feeling in the inner pocket of the jacket he had worn on the previous day, took out the sealed envelope old man Arlo had given him, with the injunction that it was only to be opened in the case of a conviction, or of the old man's death.

He was dead now, and Mr. Crawford felt that in view of that peculiar statement concerning the wrong done to himself, he must know what was contained in that sealed envelope.

It was blank on the outside, not being addressed to any one, and he carried it out to the family room, and opened it there in presence of them all.

The enclosure was a folded sheet of letter paper, covered with writing in a very shaky hand, which was to the following effect—

"Maitland Crawford is not guilty of the robbery at the railway depôt, for I did it myself, and a fine lot of bother I've had over it, which of course serves me right, though not pleasant to bear. Happening to go into the office of the depôt on the day in question, I noticed a box of copper nails standing in a corner near the window, and as I happened to be rather badly in want of nails of that kind, I made up my mind to stay in town till after shutting-up time, and then help myself to that box. This I did, getting in at the window and walking off with the box as easy as possible. But no sooner had I set foot on the ground outside the window, than a man, who must have been watching, sprang upon me, collaring me by the throat and nearly choking me. I was mad then, and fought like a wild cat till the fellow was glad to take to his heels, and by his running and general appearance I judged him to be Dolty Simpson, Maitland Crawford's hired man, so I determined to pay him out in a way he wouldn't like. I

therefore opened the box, shot the contents into a sack I had handy, then taking a scarf, or woollen comforter that I'd clawed off him when we fought, I carried the box and dragged the scarf all the way to Crawford's barn, where I hid the box, then tramped back to Millet and threw the scarf in at the office window together with a cap that the fellow had also left, but that was too wet to be of any use as trail; then I took the sack, and went off home, pretty well tired out. But when I had opened that sack and found five hundred dollars instead of the copper nails I'd reckoned on, I declare I felt as if I should go mad, and was more than ever keen on fastening the guilt upon Dolty. My dogs followed the made trail beautifully, for the comforter was very soiled with perspiration and carried the scent well, but when that beast Jenny pulled Maitland Crawford down, and he owned up to that wretched old comforter, I felt as if my heart would break, and I've known no peace nor happiness since. Everything has disappointed me in the way it has turned out. I bailed him out of prison with the five hundred dollars that I stole, but when I advised him to run away, he was too honest to go; so there is nothing left but for me to confess to my own wrong-doing, in order to save him from prison.

“Signed, TOBIAS ARLO.”

“So the old man did it; I thought as much when you read that paper this morning,” said Athabasca Bill.

“Poor old man, he must have suffered more than I did, for at least I had the comfort of a quiet conscience,” replied Mr. Crawford. “But I think I had better take this paper with me for Lawyer Grimes to see, then he will let the proper authorities know, but the old man's memory will be spared the shame of a public exposure.”

The visit to the lawyer brought a great surprise, Mr. Crawford learning that old man Arlo had died a really wealthy man, his talk about mortgages and destitution being only fictions invented to keep people in ignorance of his possessions.

So the Crawfords gave up their idea of taking up ground in the Lake Wabamun country, and settled down to farm their broad acres in comfort and plenty, for it was old man Arlo's money that had purchased the stock and crops and land of Mr. Crawford before the trial, and thus it all reverted to him again.

Fred sent the price of Montana Jenny to Blue Pete, and that worthy animal lived to a good old age, maintaining her great reputation to the last, but Ruby and Smiler died the same winter as old man Arlo.

And so, as Athabasca Bill was wont to say, it all came right in the end.

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Some photographs have been enhanced to be more legible.

[The end of *Athabasca Bill: A Tale of the Far West* by Elizabeth Bessie Marchant Comfort]