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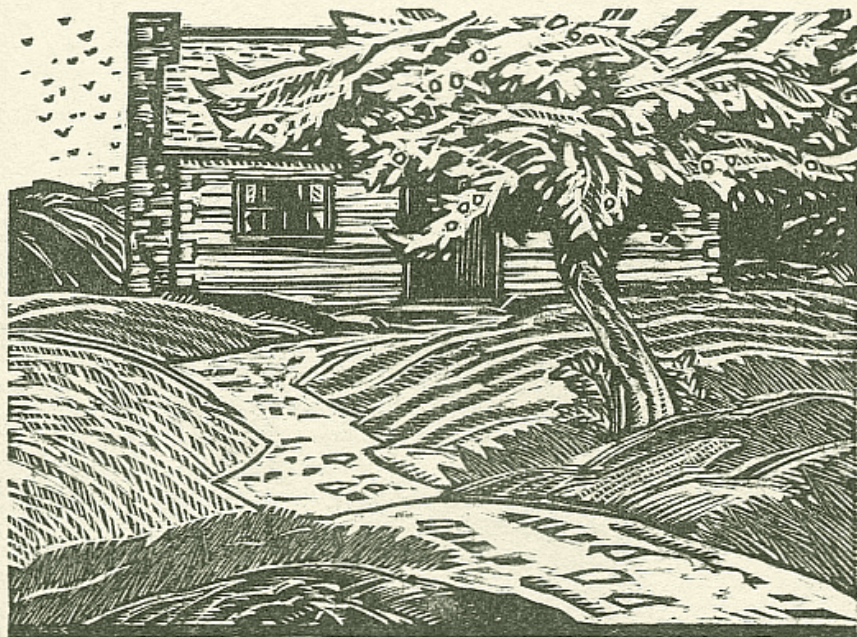
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THORN-APPLE TREE

GRACE CAMPBELL



70 Bond St. COLLINS Toronto



THORN-APPLE TREE

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The fifteen illustrations in Thorn-Apple Tree were designed and engraved on wood by Franklin Carmichael, R.C.A., O.S.A., who planned the entire book and directed its typography.

DEDICATED

TO THE MEMORY OF MY FATHER

ALEXANDER GRANT

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Characters

IN THE ORDER OF THEIR APPEARANCE

MICHAEL ROSS, *fur-trader*
JOHN MACLEOD, *minister*
FAIRLIE FRASER, *from Edinboro'*
JANET MACMILLAN, *her serving-maid and companion*
ELLEN ROSS, *mother of Michael*
ALEC ROSS, *his brother*
FINLAY BAN ROSS, *his father*
ALAN ROSS, *another brother*
KINOCAS, *an Indian*
LACHLAN, *the miller*
DUNCAN, *his son*
RORIE BREAC MACRAE, *a neighbour*
ELSPETH MACLEOD, *the minister's wife*
IAN MACLEOD, *her little son*
RED HUGH MACDONELL
NORA, *his wife*
DUNCAN MACDONELL, *Hugh's uncle*
PIERRE BEAUDETTE, *river-boss*
PAUL LECLAIR, *fur-trader*
PETER MACLENNAN
HUGHIE BAN MACLENNAN, *and*
MORAG MACLENNAN, *his wife*
ANGUS ARCHIE MACGREGOR
LOWANNA, *an Indian girl*
YOUNG ALEC, *Fairlie's first son*
COLIN ROSS, *Michael's uncle*
RORIE, *Hughie Ban's son*
LIZZIE, *a serving-maid*
LACHLAN MACALLISTER
CAPTAIN DOUGALL MACKENZIE
THE DOCTOR
KENNETH, *Fairlie's second son*
NISKA, *an Indian girl*

RENÉ, *a voyageur*

Glossary

BABICHE—*a leather thong.*

BANSHEE—*a wailing ghost.*

BOGLE—*a hobgoblin.*

BERLOT—*a French-Canadian term for sleigh or cutter.*

BRULÉ—*land burned over in process of clearing.*

CALÈCHE—*a light carriage.*

CEILIDH (*pronounced kaylee*)—*a neighbourly gathering, enlivened by story and song.*

CORDUROY ROAD—*a road made of logs laid crosswise.*

DREICH—*dreary.*

FUTELESS—*useless.*

KEEN—*a wordless cry of grief.*

M'EUDAIL (*pronounced maydal*)—*my darling.*

MOCHREE—*my dear.*

PAWKY—*sly.*

PEAVEY—*a cant-hook that has a spike at the end of the lever.*

PRECENTOR—*a leader of the singing in a church.*



◆ MICHAEL COMES HOME ◆

Chapter 1

MICHAEL ROSS, fur-trader, was on his way home from the North-West. On the last leg of his journey, alone and eager, he plunged his paddle strongly, and the canoe leaped forward at every stroke.

It was a small craft, light and graceful. On the prow was written in vermillion, *Qu'appelle*. Michael had himself put it there. He liked the name. It sounded foot-loose and free. Besides, that was what the French called the trading-post at Calling River where he had served the Company for five good years; and where he would still be but for the illness of his father that was now bringing him home.

A warm June wind came down the river. It billowed out his linen shirt and lifted the sun-bleached hair from off his forehead so that his brow showed white beneath it. Except for that, he was as brown as an Indian. But no Indian ever had eyes like his, wide, gray Highland eyes, set deep and fringed with black lashes.

Near the shore the trees shaded him from the afternoon sun. They leaned over, festooned with wild grape-vines that stirred softly in the wind and gave off a faint, sweet perfume. The water was dark as steel, and cool. He was, it seemed, alone on the river. Not that it troubled him. He felt he could go on forever, his paddle flipping, and the little waves meeting him and running past. A thousand miles and more he had come down out of the North-West, by river and lake and portage, down the dark Ottawa, up the wide St. Lawrence, and was now on the Black River that bore deep into Glengarry which was his home.

His home, and yet in a way it was strange to him. The country with its deep forests, its log barns and houses, and fields of grain, was different in every way from the place out of which he had come. Even the rivers were different, flowing dark and deep and shadowed by trees. The water-ways of the West, in their wide basins, gave back the blue of an immensity of sky. And on the plains the long grass bent and blew in the free sway of the wind. That was his country, untouched, inviolate.

Yet these trees were something to see after five years away from them. The way they flung themselves towards the sky, straight as lances, fifty feet and more, and at the top, a far, green canopy of shade. Pine, maple, butternut, basswood—a lumberman's paradise.

Then the woods thinned out. Grain-fields stretched on either side of the river. The smoke from farm chimneys and from burning brush-piles spiralled bluey into the air. The water was no longer black, but pale and dancing in the sunshine.

The road ran close to the water's edge here, and Michael felt all at once that he was back in civilization. For, jolting along the corduroy came the stage-coach from Lancaster, and drew up short just abreast of him where a creek ran down into the river, with a bridge over it.

He laid his paddle across the bows and watched. The coach door opened and the passengers alighted, a man in black and two women. With a thrust of his paddle Michael shoved the canoe up on the grassy bank and walked over. He saw that a wide plank in the bridge had broken and fallen through.

"Will you give us a hand?" the driver greeted him. "If you and the minister here will help shove the other planks over, then we can just fill in the side with some branches. Och, aye—that's the way."

"But I know you," cried the minister suddenly, shrugging himself into his coat again.

"And I you," smiled Michael.

The two gripped hands.

"You're home to see your father," surmised the Reverend John MacLeod.

Over his shoulder Michael glanced at the other passengers. One was square-built, gray-haired and grim. The other was not. The hood of her cloak had fallen back, and her hair was dark and curling and her eyes blue. She was young, and flushed from the heat or the excitement. All this Michael saw in the brief minute when their eyes met. Their gaze held for a moment and he had a sense of stillness and intimacy. Then she gathered her cloak about her and stood very straight and dignified while the minister introduced them. She was Fairlie Fraser, sister to Mrs. MacLeod, the minister's wife, and the big woman with her was her companion and serving-maid, Janet MacMillan. They had come from Inverness in Scotland on a visit, and the Reverend John had met them at Montreal.

The bridge mended, the stage was driven cautiously over. The passengers climbed in, the driver cracked out his long whip, the horses threw themselves against their collars, and the heavy coach lumbered on over the corduroy road. Michael walked down to the river and was again on his way.

The sound of falling water came to him—the grist-mill at Glen William. But the river forked here and he took the south branch. Over the rise of the bank and above the trees he could see a slim spire shining in the sun, where the village was.

“That will be the new stone church,” decided Michael.

With bright, remembering eyes he watched now for land-marks by the way—a deep hole beneath the willows where the big fish lurked, a spreading cedar that rose like a dark green pyramid.

Again the river forked, and the nose of the little *Qu'appelle* turned into the Beaver Creek, and Michael's heart stirred. He was now among his near neighbours.

The door of Hughie Ban MacLennan's log house stood open, and as he passed up the creek he could hear good Gaelic voices within. He pushed on between daisy-starred meadows and fields of young oats, and there on the shoulder of the hill was the long, low log house, tree-shaded and friendly, where he had been born.

The woods were dark behind it, and the sloping fields before it green, and walking down the path to the creek was a woman. She walked smoothly, composedly. She had not much changed then, her dark hair only a little frosted. He could see her plainly, she coming down the path, and he paddling hard, see her gray eager eyes even, and the flush on her cheek.

“Mother!” he cried, springing from the canoe as it grounded.

“Michael, Michael,” she murmured with a low chuckle of laughter.

“I knew it was you coming, far off.” She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. “But I said nothing.”

“Father?” he asked soberly.

“In bed. He'll be glad you came.”

They stood for another moment looking at each other, then they walked up the hill together, a compact, small woman and her tall, fair son. They

were, in one thing at least, alike. They had the same smooth, easy, swinging walk.

“Here’s Alec,” cried Ellen, and a long-limbed boy came running from the barn, laughing and shouting.

“It’s Michael. Michael’s home.” Then, suddenly shy, he offered his hand.

Michael drew him to him. “Five years, and the bairn’s a man.”

“I’m sixteen,” declared Alec.

The house was dark to their sun-used eyes. Gradually it took shape, the hearth, the table, the windows bright with scarlet geraniums. Then came a clamour from the far room.

“Who is it? What’s going on?”

Michael bent his head to the low lintel, and there was Finlay Ban Ross, his father, sitting up in bed, a gaunt crag of a man, gray-haired, gray-bearded, but with eyes recklessly young and blue.

“Michael, by the thunder of heaven!”

Ellen moved swiftly to his side. “Lie down now, Finlay. Michael will sit by you.”

It was as if he had not even heard. He reached out a hard old hand to his son. “Come near.”

His eyes travelled over him, the arrogantly set head, the wide shoulders, the slim waist, the long legs, all so like to himself, and up again to the mane of fair hair and the gray eyes looking with affection into his own.

“Good!” he cried, his inspection over. “And now I’ll get me up, and we’ll sit in the sunshine, and you’ll tell me of your travels. You’ll be hungry?”

“Och now, Finlay!” came his wife’s soft voice. “Lie still, the doctor said.”

“The doctor!” on a gust of contempt. “Now get you out, the rest of you. Alec, hand me my pants. And would I not get up!” They heard him rumbling to himself as they went out.

Michael’s eyes met his mother’s. There was concern in hers, and pride, and a little laughter.

He sat at the table, and she brought food and put it before him. He smiled at her over the rim of his cup. There was the sound of a foot scraping on the step without.

“Alan,” ventured Michael, and rose, and the door opened and the two brothers met, hands hard-clasped. They were the same height, the same size, alike as twins, except that with Alan there was the black hair of his mother’s people.

“I saw the canoe,” he said breathlessly. “I thought it must be you.”

Then in the door of the bedroom loomed Finlay Ban himself, dressed and erect. He looked about him, and they looked back at him in a sudden silence.

“Now I am ready,” his great hollow voice filled the room. “With my three sons at my back and my wife beside me, whenever the good God wants—” his words trailed off. He sat down beside Michael and his voice was suddenly matter-of-fact. “Tell me now, what like were the Indians where you were, and is it with horses they hunt the buffalo?”

The sun poured in at the open door, and the warmth of it was like the warmth of affection that lay on them all. Ellen put a bowl of broth before Finlay and broke a scone for him, and he ate absent-mindedly, not taking his eyes off Michael. Young Alec sat hunched on the door-step, his arms about his knees. He whistled softly, and Spogan, the dog, came and thrust a cold nose under his arm, then lay down, head flat and his eyes watchful. Alan leaned forward in his chair, his dark face intent on Michael. But Ellen sat with her hands easy in her lap, her eyes moving slowly over them all, enfolding them, as if to fix them in her mind. They were all with her again. Her family circle was complete.

But for how long, she was wondering, as she stirred the porridge at the hearth the next morning, when Finlay Ban stepped quietly out of the bedroom. Spoon in hand, she raised herself and stared at him. For weeks now he had spent most of the day in bed. He looked at her with a light in his strangely young blue eyes, and his step as he crossed over to his chair by the window was firm and steady.

She came and stood by him. He took one of her strong, small hands in his, smoothing it. “I’ve something to do today, and do you help me.”

“What would it be?” Her low voice was a little fearful.

A laugh rumbled in his vast chest. “I’m going to take the lad up on a high hill and tempt him.”

“Michael?” breathed Ellen.

“Yes. You’ll not stop me?”

“Maybe I should.”

“But you’ll not. Because we understand each other.”

She turned away. Tears pricked behind her lids as she laid out the blue bowls for the porridge, but when they gathered for breakfast she seemed only deeply happy.

Afterwards Michael sought her out in the milk-house. “Father wants to walk over the hill with me. Is he able?”

“Hardly.”

“Then we won’t go.”

She looked at him. “Yes, you will. What strength he has left, he has a right to use as he wants. He has been cooped up.”

Michael looked at her dumbly.

She smote her hands together. “Do you not know that if I had my way, I’d keep him happed in wool and by the fire-side? That I might have him longer with me. But he is not that kind of a man.” Her face relaxed suddenly into humour. She pushed Michael from her. “Do as your father tells you, long lad,” she said.

Turning matter-of-factly back to her milk-pans she slipped the skimmer under the yellow, clotted cream and looked sidewise up at Michael and smiled.

Then the door of the house opened, and Finlay came out, and Michael’s heart lifted in a sort of pitying pride. A big plaid was wrapped snugly about his gaunt frame in spite of the warmth of the day, and he carried a knobbed stick in his hand. He waved it at Michael. He looked excited and happy.

“You’d think you were off to a ceilidh,” smiled Ellen.

“Aye, so,” agreed Finlay, and took Michael’s arm in his. The dog Spogan who was lying on the sunny slope of the root-house stirred himself, stretched and came to heel. They looked into the dim stable where the oxen munched placidly. In the corner of the pasture stood two round-bodied French-Canadian horses, flicking at the flies and stamping. They crowded close. One stretched out his head and laid it on Finlay’s shoulder, nuzzling him.

The old man rubbed the stiff ears affectionately. "He's missed me. I well believe it, he has."

Cattle browsed in the pasture, red and white and brindled. They walked among them, and Finlay laid his hand on their smooth flanks as he passed. The cows hardly moved out of the way, but chewed their cud and looked at them with liquid, trustful eyes.

"They're tame," said Michael.

"We keep them near the house."

"Wolves?"

"Not so many as there used to be. It's the sheep they get after."

They walked eastward along the brow of the hill. Below lay the fields, wheat and corn and oats, in a soft green patch-work. Beyond was the river, the burned-over land in the process of clearing, and beyond that, the forest. Finlay found a flat stone in the shade of a thorn-apple tree, sat down carefully and clasped his hands over the knob of his stick. His forehead was damp.

"Tired?" asked Michael.

"No." He took off his bonnet, and the wind moved through his gray hair. "Look you, Michael, when I first got this grant of land I came to this spot and I said to myself, here will I build my house. Then I asked your mother, and she said, 'On the slope of the hill where it turns to the west,' and because she was herself and dear to me, I agreed. But summer and winter I've come here. Look you at it now."

Michael looked.

Far to the south the trees were like a restless green carpet, and to the north was the forest, untouched and primeval. Between lay a great strip of rolling country, water-crossed, tree-shaded, fertile. Smoke rose from chimneys, cattle and sheep dotted the pastures.

Finlay gestured with his stick. "That fence running north to south divides the land into two equal parts. The west half I have willed to Alan, and this to you." He turned, and beneath his shaggy brows his blue eyes searched Michael.

"But—" Michael paused, then began again. "But there is no need. I earn well as a fur-trader, with good chances now of advancement. And what of Alec?"

“My brother, Colin, has taken him for his heir. A hundred acres is all a man can well work. You and Alan side by side, that is my plan.”

There was a short, uneasy silence. Finlay sighed. “I know you like the free life of a fur-trader. You have had it. But the time comes when a man wants a home and a woman in it, and those who will come after him. Look!” He pointed to the thorn-apple tree. “Do you know what it’s like in the spring-time? I’ve never cut it down. It seemed to me a right pretty tree to bloom by a door-step.”

There was laughter in his eyes, but Michael saw that he was trembling. He reached and put one hand on the other’s knee, the thin, up-thrusting knee of a man who had been strong and was now weak. He looked soberly into those blue, restless eyes.

“My thanks to you, Father,” he said.

Finlay’s breath came in a great gust, and he rose unsteadily to his feet. Michael put an arm under his elbow and steadied him as they walked along the brow of the hill, his own mind in turmoil.

“It will be mine,” he said to himself. “But not yet. For years to come the west is my place.” But he could not bring himself to say that to his father.

He was glad that he had not said it. That night as he lay with his brothers in the big bedroom that was the entire up-stairs of the house he was wakened by a light at the head of the stairs, and there stood his mother, a candle in her hand, and her face as white as her gown.

“Get you up now, boys,” she said quietly, but with a note in her voice that struck them all awake and fearful.

They pulled on their clothes in the dark, and Michael heard Alec’s teeth chatter with nervousness. He put a firm hand on his shoulder, and the boy was at once taut and steady.

Downstairs, Finlay Ban was propped up against pillows. The candles on the bureau sent long shadows across the room, and in the dim half-light Finlay loomed up, huge, like a figure out of mythology. His gray, back-swept hair, his curling beard were the same, and his eyes were as wide and blue as ever. But his face was ridged ivory. His great chest heaved and laboured, and his breath came whistlingly.

“Easier now?” asked Ellen softly.

“Cold,” he said, and pointed to his feet.

Alan brought a stone, warm from the fire-place, wrapped in a shawl. Ellen had a cup of broth hot for him.

He shook his head. "Come near," he said. Alec knelt by him, and the rest came close, Ellen sitting on the edge of the bed. His hand reached for hers and enclosed it. His other he laid for a moment on Alec's fair head. His eyes rested on Alan, then on Michael. "My fine boys," he whispered, and then was quiet; but his fingers twined and tightened in Ellen's.

The lids began to droop over his eyes. They fluttered, and lay still. The fingers still clung, but lightly. His breathing went on heavily, paused, then continued, but gently, shallowly. It stopped. The strong hand fell sideways, lay inert.

"Father!" cried Michael incredulously.

Alan bent and laid a hand on the forehead, and his breath caught. Alec began to sob.

But Ellen sat still. With a terrible intensity she gazed into Finlay's dead face—a long bleak look. It was a farewell to happiness, an acceptance of grief and bitter loss. It was more. Life was drained out of her. It was as if her spirit had left her quiet body tenantless, and was winging far, was even now just over the rim.

Alec flung himself on her. "Mother!" he cried. Her face moved, broke up. She held him to her.

Three days later Finlay Ban Ross was laid to rest beside the stone church in Glen William. Two nights they waked him at his own place, the house full of friends by day and by night. Men sat, stern-faced and sad, at the foot and at the head of the bier, or knelt beside it. Those who were Catholics slipped their beads softly through their fingers and crossed themselves, and put a prayer on him for his long journey. An old woman keened once, and the sound of it shivered through the house, a lonely bitter cry against an old enemy, death.

That cry was answered on the third day in the strong, steady, sustaining words of John MacLeod, minister. "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord." An iron ring in the words bade them remember their faith. Then in the prayer his voice changed, turned to the Gaelic, became soft as rain, and the mourners' hearts were shaken and cleansed and comforted in the sure hope that those who have died do yet, somehow, live.



❖ ❖ FAIRLIE ❖ ❖

Chapter 11

IT was a month later. It was full summer, lush with growth and hot with sunshine. Driving down the river-road with grist for the mill in Glen William, Michael flicked his long babiche over the backs of his horses, while the waggon lurched and bumped over the corduroy, and he rode it like a ship in rough water.

His spirits were lighter than they had been for some time. At home, the weight of bereavement was still heavy on the household. His mother's face was wan though composed, and there was in the home that sense of disorganization that comes when the head of it is no longer there. He felt, as well, an uncertainty about his own position. Always in his mother's eyes was the unspoken question to which he had not yet given an answer. Would he stay and work the east farm, or would he go back to fur-trading?

Well—with a curl of the babiche he lifted a fly deftly off Shanlan's shining black shoulder—he would stay the year out, but when the ice broke in the spring, then the little *Qu'appelle* and he would be off on the long trek west. Perhaps in another five years, if he were not by then a partner among the Nor'-Westers, he would build him a house by the thorn-apple tree and settle down to a quiet life. But for a long time yet, he would be where the tall trees did not hem him in, where he could see for a dozen miles in every direction. He was hungry for the prairie, for the brown skin tents of the Indians, for the wild thrill of a buffalo hunt with Kinochas. With his friend, the Indian, Kinochas.

It was more than four years since he had first seen him, at a sun-dance on the Assiniboine. His heart beat a little faster even now at the memory of that barbaric scene. It had been vivid enough to remember—the beat of the drums, the mesmeric, high Hai-yai-Kai-yai of the dancers, and their painted, sweating, brown bodies. And the testing of the braves! That had been strong medicine. Green withes were thrust through the shoulder muscles of the young men and attached to the halters of unbroken ponies. Round and round they moved in great circles, closing in till they reached the centre of the camp. One horse, maddened by the drums, snorted and reared till the blood ran down the torn brown back of the Indian, and Michael felt sick watching.

Relentlessly the pony was edged on and in, and presently the old men were pulling out the withes and smearing on salve, and murmuring in approval, "Your heart is strong, brother."

That brave was Kinochas. Michael saw him a little later resting on one knee, his face still wet and his muscles twitching from fatigue. He turned and his eyes met Michael's—tired, defiant, dark eyes. A subtle, queer warmth grew between the two. Michael touched with his finger-tip the bare shoulder where blood and paint were clotted together. The Indian looked down at it, and a wry little smile twisted his mouth.

"Pain is a fine colour," he said in his soft Assiniboine speech.

And that, too, Michael could, in spite of his white blood, understand. A contempt for pain was not enough. For that fierce courage one must learn to savour it.

Two days later they sought each other out in the buffalo-hunt, and rode knee to knee. And they always did thereafter. Once, when Michael's pony threw him and he was hurt, Kinochas pulled him up over his own horse and saved him from being trampled by the herd. From Kinochas he learned much wood-craft, and skill in stalking and hunting, and gained a knowledge of herbs. It was a good, satisfying friendship between them, true-balanced by mutual respect, and it lasted all the years of Michael's service with the North-West Company.

"You will come again, brother?" Kinochas asked that last morning by the Calling River where they stood with the new sage soft under their feet and the clean dry smell of it in their nostrils.

Michael had given his promise. And meant to keep it.

He still meant to keep it. His resolve hardened as he drove along the river-road, the sun beating down on the backs of his shoulders and the waggon jolting him.

He could now see the spire and roofs of Glen William. Soon he was rumbling over the bridge, down the long street, past houses and shops, to the east end of the village where the grist-mill was.

By the open door of the mill a little knot of men stood talking, each with a dog at his heel. The miller was there, a short man, fine-dusted with meal. Four others gathered about him, gesticulating and excited.

"Here's Michael Ross," cried one. "The very man."

“It’s a bear,” exclaimed Duncan, son of Lachlan. “He got one of Rorie Breac’s heifers.”

“When?”

“Last night. We’re thinking of going after him. This morning he crossed the road into the bush. I saw him.”

“Have you your musket with you, Michael?” asked Rorie.

Michael unslung it from the side of the waggon-box.

“We could spread out fan-wise,” Duncan suggested, his voice tight with eagerness.

Lachlan, the miller, slapped the door-jamb with his dusty bonnet. “He can’t have gone far.” He gestured to the woods. “He’ll be in there somewhere, sleeping off the beef he ate, the great gomeril.”

The dogs felt the excitement. They padded about, slipping cold muzzles into the hands of their masters and whining softly.

“You’ll not have a dog by you, Michael? Perhaps mine would follow you.”

“Never mind that.” Michael squinted along the sights of his musket. “I’m used to going alone.”

Lachlan chewed the ends of his moustache in his excitement. “Boys-oh-boys! Wouldn’t I like to be going with you! If it weren’t for this grist . . . But mind, now. Be careful. He’s a big one.”

“Put a good wish on us then.” Rorie Breac snapped his fingers, and his two black dogs fell in promptly at his heel.

The little creek that came out of the woods and curved through the fields behind the village was the way allotted to Michael. He was in luck, he thought. An hour to while away, and a bear-hunt to enliven it. Points of excitement played in his gray eyes. He moved swiftly and lightly through the long grass that edged the stream.

Once in the woods he paused. It was cool and quiet there. The light was pale-green and translucent, like the light beneath water. Michael waited for a moment till his eyes focussed in the dimness. Then he picked his way carefully, treading softly over the crackling bracken and slipping sideways through the tangle of underbrush. His body was taut, his face contracted and keen and full of the utmost concentration. It was a falcon face.

A twig snapped, and he whirled, his musket to his shoulder. A squirrel chattered querulously from a high branch, and a lone bird sharpened a note experimentally. There was no other sound. He moved on.

A windfall lay across the creek. Michael threw a leg over it, and then stiffened into immobility. The bark was scratched in a six-inch swipe and there in the soft earth at the side of the creek was the print of a paw the size of a plate.

“A big fellow, by thunder!” breathed Michael.

The trail took him now away from the brook and up a little rise. Between the straight, gray trunks he could see a far glimmer of sunshine. He was returning in a wide circle to the cleared land behind the town. To the east a dog barked sharply, once. Michael breathed a little faster and his nostrils quivered.

The trail held, but was hard to follow. Here a crushed fern, there a bruised imprint on a mossy rock, while all the time the forest lightened and sunlight struck in through the branches.

Then it was he saw the girl.

She was standing in a pool of wild phlox, in a little clearing, and her arms were full of the flowers.

A quick anger took possession of Michael. What was she doing there, in danger, and spoiling his hunt? Could he now go on to stalk the bear and leave her unprotected?

Grasping his musket firmly, he strode towards her. Then he stopped. She had lifted her head, and stood quietly looking at him. She was Fairlie Fraser.

For a moment neither spoke. And Michael felt his foolish anger drain out of him.

All the sunshine in the little clearing seemed focussed on her. She was high-lighted by it, as she stood there against the gloom of the forest, blue-eyed, blue-gowned, in a shimmer of blue flowers.

Michael drew a long breath. He had come striding out of the dark forest intent on his quarry, and had found this. He pulled off his hat. “I have been following a bear,” he began.

“No!” she glanced quickly about her. “I’ve never seen one. Near?”

“Near enough,” he smiled.

There was a little silence. The perfume of the wild phlox rose like a soft warmth about them both. Then the quietness was shattered. A dog barked, a quick salvo of high, excited yelping.

“I’ll go with you,” suggested Michael, and gave her his arm.

They walked across the meadow towards the village, and came into the orchard behind the manse. By the fence lay the smooth bole of a fallen birch-tree. Michael looked inquiringly at Fairlie. They sat down. He laid his musket carefully at his feet, and she put her armful of phlox down beside it. Her wide hat had fallen back across her shoulders. She had a white, childish forehead, and her cheeks were pink like a child’s.

For a moment or two neither spoke, and Michael had an odd feeling that words were unnecessary. Then, directly—“Do you like this country?” he asked her.

She smiled and nodded, then started up in alarm.

There was a sudden clamour to the east of them, a wild barking, the shouting of men, then a shot. And another. The dogs had found him then, the bear, and someone had finished him off with a musket. It seemed now entirely unimportant.

“It’s over now,” he reassured her. She sat down again, spreading her blue ruffles.

Michael looked down at her hands as they lay in her lap, little hands slender and white, with nails like rosy shells. He laid his own out on his knee, a long, strong, sinewy hand with a wide flat wrist and a sprinkle of fair hair on the back. Thousands of miles of the paddie lay behind his. Behind hers, an Edinboro’ finishing-school and a gentle home in Inverness.

Her eyes met his, and he had a sudden feeling that her mind followed his, and she knew what he had been thinking.

“You’ll stay a good while in Glen William?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. My uncle did not want me to come. Nor to stay long, if I did.” She rose. “They will wonder about me,” she exclaimed. “Especially since the shooting.”

She was right. Elspeth MacLeod was standing in the garden, shading her eyes and looking uneasily towards the woods when Michael and Fairlie came through the orchard. At the same moment, the minister himself walked down the steps towards them.

It was a pleasant place, the manse garden, bright with holly-hocks and pinks and sweet-william. Yellow roses made a hedge by the turning-green, and there were benches in the shade. There they sat, the four of them. Elspeth tossed back her red curls and looked keenly at Michael, and asked him about his years in the far West.

“It must be a hard life.” The Reverend John MacLeod hitched one knee over the other. “I can’t understand its attraction.”

“It’s free,” considered Michael. “That’s it.”

“Free to freeze or die of hunger.”

Michael laughed a little at that. “Not at Calling River. Madame Paquette cooks well.”

The minister frowned. “We hear of that too. Of the Indian wives.”

Michael looked at him straightly. “What you hear is quite true. A number of our men take wives of the women of the country. But not all. And Madame Paquette was married a quarter of a century ago by the priest at Three Rivers.”

A little flush ran across his cheek-bones as his eyes met Fairlie’s. She had broken off a yellow rose and was holding it cupped in her two hands. Suddenly he wanted the rose. Could he ask her for it? His throat tightened. He could not.

But, when she came with him to the garden gate, and he said good-bye to her awkwardly with the blood beating in his temples, somehow he had the rose in his hands, and as he walked down the lane into the village he folded it away securely in an inner pocket.

At the mill he went quickly over to his horses where they stood in the shade, switching at the flies, and tugging at the grape-vine that ran along the fence. He was glad not to speak to anyone for a while. His hands were trembling a little as he pulled the harness into shape.

“Fairlie,” he said over experimentally to himself under his breath.

Except for his mother, and old Madame Paquette for whom he had had a humorous, half-affectionate regard, he had never really known a woman. And now here was one, all of a sudden entwined in the very fibre of his being. With a queer, deep intimacy between them, a recognition, that was like nothing that had ever happened to him before.

He thought, "I could have a house by fall. So fine and lovingly I'd build it."

Then he started. It was Lachlan behind him.

"Did you get him? Did you now? The bear?"

"Oh, the bear," vaguely. "No. I lost the trail."

"Aye. Well, better luck to you next time. But I heard a terrible loud barking a while back. It sounded like those black dogs of Rorie Breac's."

"No doubt," agreed Michael. "I think they got him."

As he rumbled home along the river-road with his load of grist, he wondered. Was it only this morning he had planned to go back to Calling River to trade in pemmican and buffalo and beaver-skins? It seemed to him that he had been a raw boy then, dreaming idle and foolish dreams.



◆ ◆ THE NEW HOUSE ◆ ◆

Chapter III

MICHAEL ROSS was building his house. Building it four-square and substantial. Building it out of seasoned pine logs, hand-squared and smoothed. And building also out of his own ardent dreams. Every foundation-stone set solid into the hill-side, every spadeful of earth that deepened the cellar, every great beam laid true, and his heart beat high with pride and achievement.

The site had been, as it were, fore-chosen. On the brow of the hill, hard-by the thorn-apple tree, where one could see far out to the east and south and up the strip of clearing to the west, there it was to be.

Michael was fortunate in that his father and Alan had felled a great pile of pine logs and left them to season. With a good heart Alan turned the whole over to Michael, and worked early and late with him through the late summer and early fall, at the building.

Nothing was too good for this house. Michael scoured the country-side for workmen. From Cornwall came a stone-mason who set in the two fire-places of squared stone from their own hill-side. Even the rocks Michael examined carefully, and set aside the smooth, the crystalline, those with the fossilized remains of fluted shells from some primeval sea. These he kept for the east fire-place which was to be smaller and finer than the other. By mid-September the building was well on the way.

The house, downstairs, was divided roughly into two parts. On the west side there was the great stone hearth fitted with irons, cranes and hooks for cooking. The wide puncheon boards of the floor were bare. A door opened from the south, another to the north where the wood-shed abutted the rear wall.

But the eastern half was to be Fairlie's domain. The fire-place was smaller, the mantel lighter and more graceful, the smooth stained floor was covered with a square of rag rug. Michael's mother had given them that, and the blue braided one as well that was in the adjoining bed-chamber before the high tester bed, plump with pillows and feather tick and woven blue coverlet.

“Let me now,” Ellen had insisted. “I haven’t been so happy since your father left us.”

Then Michael made a trip to Montreal, and had freighted up a small, curved, mahogany sofa, upholstered in rose and blue tapestry, and a great length of rose brocade to hang at the windows, and tall brass candle-sticks, and fine blue-patterned china. He felt prodigal, extravagant. He felt tremendous. He was in love.

He wanted Fairlie to see it at once.

But—“Later,” she said, and gave him her bright, trustful smile.

It was something that she could keep trustful and serene these days. Storms of protest and dismay were breaking about her.

First it was her sister Elspeth and her brother-in-law.

“You don’t understand,” pleaded Elspeth. “You’ve no idea how the women in this country have to work. It’s a hard weary life.”

“There’s Michael’s mother,” countered Fairlie. “She looks like a composed, sweet person, and well.”

“True,” agreed John. “Yet that same small woman has probably bound grain, and made soap, spun and wove and dyed and sewed and cooked and cleaned . . .”

“And looks yet like a lady. It’s kind of you, my dears—” she turned to the stair and paused, hand on the rail—“to be so concerned for me. But don’t be troubled, please”—with a smile that was shining and invincible.

Elspeth’s eyes brimmed. “She’s so young,” she whispered.

John scowled and ran his fingers through his black hair. “For one so gentle and pliable to be so stubborn—”

A smile glimmered through Elspeth’s tears. “Gentle, but I’d not call her pliable. Uncle Ian wouldn’t, I’m sure. He’ll hold me responsible now for this,” she added drearily.

“This other suitor, the tea-merchant, what was he like?”

“A sober, good man. In his thirties. Well-to-do.”

“Money, comfort, and a good man. Yet,”—John looked meditatively into the fire and nodded. “There was another girl I knew, from Inverness, who married a poor preacher and came to the wilds of America against all good sense and worldly wisdom.”

Elsbeth laughed. "I think we're crazy," she said, pulling the tips of his collar up against his dark cheeks. "Crazy, and very worldly. After all, she's made up her mind. There'll be hard work, but she can have Janet. And we won't bedevil her any more."

She gathered up her knitting, tucked her arm in her husband's, and walked out into the garden, swinging her yellow ruffles and prancing a bit, and looking, herself, extremely young and childish to be the mistress of a backwoods manse.

In due course a letter came from Scotland, and a little later a stout chest that had been Fairlie's mother's.

Wrote Ian Alastair Fraser of Inverness:

"It is a grief to me that you, my dear niece, should have chosen to undertake this marriage with one who must have been till recently entirely unknown to you; not to mention the fact that, as you well know, Duncan Forbes, a sound man of assured fortune and irreproachable character, has long sued for your hand, and was only waiting for your consent once you returned from this ill-fated visit to which, as you will remember, I was from the first opposed.

"I can only say that if, on further consideration, you should decide against this hasty and, I am sure, ill-advised action, we shall be happy to welcome you again to our home which will ever be yours; in which hope your Aunt Margaret fervently joins. In the belief that this may happen, I shall not acquaint Duncan Forbes with the news of your proposed marriage till I know that it has actually occurred. Then, of course, I shall be forced to give him the melancholy information.

"However, according to your express injunction, I have shipped to you the great chest of your mother's, containing various articles of your own and some others which your aunt wished you to have. I was fortunate in that I was able to connect with a swift packet bound for those distant parts.

"Your aunt joins me in affectionate but regretful greetings to yourself and to your sister. I beg leave to remain, my dear niece, your devoted uncle and well-wisher,

Ian Alastair Fraser."

Fairlie was thoughtful for a while after she read the letter. It brought clearly before her a familiar, well-ordered, safe existence. She could shut her eyes and see the stone house that overlooked the loch at Inverness, that kind, quiet woman, her aunt, and her uncle's dour but steadfast face. There, in that old Highland town, was comfort and shelter and an ordered, seemly life; servants and friends and tinkling tunes on the spinet, and Duncan Forbes coming to call, Duncan with his sober face, controlled and steady except for the sudden fire of his dark eyes.

While, here in this place, were Elspeth and her husband and bairn, and the dark forest, and the crude little towns, and cruder farms, and the vigour and excitement of a community in the making that was like a raw, strong drink on the palate. And here was Michael.

Her heart skipped a beat. Yes, here was Michael, she thought, feeling him in the very fibre of her. There was, after all, no argument about it. It was fore-ordained. Wise or foolish, she could not help herself. Where Michael was, there she would be, if he wanted her. And he did. She flushed a little, remembering his ardent face, his importunate eyes.

The chest from Scotland arrived. Fairlie and Elspeth went over its contents together.

"She gave you the silver tea-pot," exclaimed Elspeth, "and the sword from Culloden." Her red curls dived into the big chest and came up again. "Well, you're not a dowerless lass anyway."

They repacked the silver and the linen and the creamy Shetland shawl, and laid the big Fraser plaid on top. Then the chest was sent to Ellen's, and a few days later John and Elspeth and Fairlie drove up the river-road in the light calèche.

Ellen greeted them, her face full of kindness and welcome. And Michael's eyes blazed with excitement as he came quickly in. For a seemly time they sat in the big room with its white sanded floor and sunny windows, and Ellen gave them tea and scones, and the talk was merry and friendly but with an undercurrent of significance.

Fairlie said little. Shyness overwhelmed her. Her eyes veered away from Michael's, and a pulse beat in her throat. He seemed to sense her mood, and became gentler, more courtly. He talked in a companionable, quiet way with John and Elspeth, though aware, one could see, in every nerve, of Fairlie sitting silently by the window.

"We'll go now to the new house, shall we?" said Ellen presently.

Alan came to help, and they lifted the great chest and carried it over the brow of the hill. The women followed after, talking matter-of-factly and ignoring the catch of excitement in their voices.

Colour was spilled prodigally on the hill-side, the gold of the elms and the scarlet of the maples and the blue autumnal sky over all. The thorn-apple tree was bright with its small crimson fruit. And there, by it, stood the new home, complete and ready. Even the chips had been swept up and carried away.

The house looked new, yet permanent. The two stone chimneys anchored it to the earth. Smooth-faced logs and shingled roof, it was the colour of new honey. Fairlie laid a hand gently on the door-post as she passed in.

The men put the chest down before the fire-place, and stood up flexing their arms and laughing.

“Heavy, that,” said Alan.

There was a silence. Fairlie felt they were all watching her. She felt flushed and helpless, then she raised her head determinedly and her eyes travelled frankly about the room, appraising it all—the clean newness, the table, the chairs, the stone hearth, the small-paned, shining windows. Her face broke into laughter and delight.

“Michael,” she breathed, “it’s beautiful.”

At her look he came striding across the room. “You must see the rest of it,” he urged, and they went into the east part alone.

Here was the mantel, finely-proportioned and graceful, here the tapestry-covered sofa, the Windsor chairs, and the corner cupboard with the blue gleam of china behind the glass. Fairlie ran from one to another, touching with her fingers, tip-toeing to see into the top shelves of the cupboard, exclaiming.

Then she came back and leaned against Michael’s shoulder, her mouth tremulous. When she raised her face to his, she saw that his gray eyes were wet. They kissed with a great solemn lift of heart that, it would seem, united them forever.

It was three days after the wedding. It was early morning. The sun slanted in at the small window and touched Fairlie’s face, waking her. She sat up. Michael had gone out. The hollow in his pillow was still there. She laid her

hand in it, and smiled a little, and flushed. Then she plunged again under the covers and felt the warmth and softness of the feather-bed beneath and about her.

She closed her eyes, and against the lining of the lids she saw her wedding-day. Oh lovely, cried her heart. The manse parlour sweet with fall flowers; John's kind, keen, well-wishing face; the old heart-shaking words of the ritual—"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here . . . this man and this woman . . . Do you, Fairlie, take . . . ?" And Michael beside her, tall and straight and white of face, with a pulse beating in his cheek; Elspeth with tears slipping down over her smiling face, and young Ian, the bairn, by her; and Janet in the door-way, looking grimmer every minute because she was moved.

Then there was the welcome-home at Ellen's, a great supper by candle-light, and dancing after, to the music of Rorie Breac and his chanter. It was a friendly, laughing night, warm with good will, yet delicate, too, and restrained in mirth. Was she not a stranger and softly reared, and new among them? She felt and understood the restraint. She was aware that night, it seemed to her, of the very heart-beat of the people among whom she had come, a proud, passionate, kind people, full of laughter and hospitality, yet with subtleties of perception and with an underlying turbulence. They were her kind. She was at home.

And here she was in her own house now, so sweet a place, and the fields and woods about her, where she would live her life. She sprang up and padded on bare feet to the window, and looked out on a crisp and sunny world. The pane steamed with her breath. With a ruffle from her sleeve she wiped it and looked again, then at a sound she turned, and there was Michael in the door-way.

She looked at him a little abashed. With childish dignity she started over to the bed again, but Michael laughed and picked her up and carried her. She leaned luxuriously against him.

"How nice it is that the cupboard's full of food," she observed.

Michael nodded. "And on Sunday, Janet comes." He lifted her hands and spoke against them: "I'd like them always to be like this. Soft."

That afternoon Fairlie walked north over the pasture and into the woods, alone. The trees seemed immediately to close in behind her and enclose her in a strange, bright world. The light was not green as in summer, but filtered down through a gold and scarlet screen. There was no sound except a high, thin rustling in the branches.

Fairlie stood by a tall maple and leaned against it, her head back to look. Up, up, with a sort of passionate splendour, the great trunk reared itself, wreathed with crimson and touched into a blaze of brightness at the top. The colours were vehement, triumphant, like great music.

Fairlie's heart beat hard and her eyes dilated. This fierce primal beauty sang in her blood. It took possession of her. Never had any place seemed to her so majestic and meaningful.

Stirred and shaken, she turned home, but when she tried to tell Michael what she had felt she found she had no words for it.



❖ ❖ RED HUGH ❖ ❖

Chapter IV

It seemed to Fairlie that all of a sudden it was deep winter. Throughout a mild November the scarlet leaves had drifted down, and the silvery rain had slanted over the brown fields, and only by imperceptible degrees had it grown colder. Till one night a dark, shrieking wind had come out of the north, and a great swirl of snow with it. An iron cold set in that lasted for weeks. More snow came, and still more, till the pine boughs were weighed down with it, and the fences hidden, and the fields one vast, white immensity of it. Then, one morning, the sun came out and broke on it in a million tiny facets of light.

Fairlie was enchanted with this white radiance. She ran from window to window, steaming a spot with her breath and wiping it clear of frost. Every twig, every branch, the clothes-line, the wood-pile, each carried its snowy burden. The eyes blinked against the brightness.

At the north window she could see Michael drawing water for the beasts. From the open stable door they came crowding out in liveliness and confusion. The cattle tossed their horns and charged each other playfully. Black Betsy came, snuffing the air and shying, then suddenly buried her velvet nose in the icy water and drank. The oxen lowed deeply once and ploughed their way to the trough. In the bright air their breath smoked up in frosty columns. The yard was full of sound and quickness and animal vitality.

Fairlie watched with bright, interested eyes till the last tossing head had disappeared into the stable. Then she turned to her house again. A fat partridge was simmering in a black pot among the coals, and Janet was baking bread. Fairlie's nose wrinkled at the good and various smells.

They were savouring that same partridge at supper when Michael laid his fork down suddenly.

“Red Hugh's back. Alan told me. With a wife.”

“Who is Red Hugh, and where has he been?”

Michael laughed and buttered a bannock. “Hugh MacDonell. Born here to the east of us. Home from the North-West. He came to the Calling River post when I left. I never saw his new wife.”

“Have they moved in with old Kirsty and Duncan?”

“Kirsty has gone to her brother’s, but Duncan is there. They were married quietly a week ago, I hear. Think of that!”

“Why?”

“Hugh’s not the quiet kind. Shall we go over and see them tonight?”

“I’d like to.”

Fairlie was excited. It would be good to have a girl of her own age next door. A quiet place, the house to the east had been. Now it would be young and gay. She dressed herself in a frock of fine wool that had belonged to former days, and folded a fringed, pink cashmere shawl over her shoulders.

“Am I fine enough?” she asked Michael.

“Too fine.” He put his hands about her waist and swung her gently. “You’ll put Hugh’s eye out and make him forget his bride.”

“Is he like that?”

“Well—he may have changed.”

They walked down over the brow of the hill, crossed the small creek, then came up the rise to the house whose windows winked goldenly in the darkness. A brown collie gave them a noisy welcome, then the door was flung open, and a great, red-gold man stood there against the light of the fire.

“Michael, by the thunder of God!” he exclaimed joyfully, and clapped him on the back.

“This is my wife, Hugh,” explained Michael with a thread of pride in his voice.

Hugh bent over her hand, then as he took her hooded cloak: “Sure, I’ve heard of you.” He had a curiously rich and resonant voice. “A flower of Edinboro’ blooming like a rose in our wilderness. Where are you, Nora?”

“Coming, coming,” and there were foot-steps on the stair. Nora came down, a candle in her hand and her face lit up by it. She had on a creamy linsey frock, and she looked sweet and young.

“It’s our neighbours, Nora,” said Hugh lightly.

Chairs were drawn in to the hearth. Hugh stirred the fire, and the pine knots blazed, and bathed them all in the warm yellow light. Fairlie held out her hands to the glow. They were rosy and transparent against it.

“What news from the Nor’-West?” asked Michael.

“Och, nothing much. Heat and high wind in the summer, and cold and misery in the winter.”

“But how goes the post at Calling River?” Eagerness crisped Michael’s voice. “And what of my friend, Kinochas, the Assiniboine?”

Hugh swung the crane over the fire, and the kettle began to steam. He glanced at Nora. “Oh, Kinochas! Surly devil, wasn’t he?”

“I wouldn’t say so. Once he saved my life.”

“So!” There was a sardonic note in Hugh’s voice. “Well, once he tried to take mine.” And he laughed and turned to Fairlie.

Nora was spreading a cloth and laying out oat-cakes and cheese. She lifted the kettle off to make tea, then filled it and put it on again.

“Draw in your chairs, do,” she urged with shy hospitality.

The candle-light shone full into the faces of the four gathered about the table. It was like a play, thought Fairlie. It was like the beginning of something important in all their lives. There was Michael, looking a little brittle and resentful, his nostrils quivering and his lips stiff. Nora’s brown eyes were clouded. Fairlie herself felt vaguely uneasy. Only Hugh was happy. He was more—he was gay and electric. His eyes, she now saw, were yellow like his hair. They turned on her, ablaze with vitality and interest and a touch of deviltry.

“Sure now, when I look at you, Mistress Fairlie, and then remember Calling River and the dirty, thieving Indians, and the hot winds and the monotony, I think how the good Lord has favoured my friend Michael.”

“He was good to you, too,” she countered.

“Och, don’t I know it?” and his eyes, turning to Nora, softened. Then to Michael, “I see you’re cutting the oaks down by the Beaver.”

“Aye.”

“Can you raft them?”

“Put them log to log with pine. That floats them.”

“Do you tell me now! It’s a smart man you married, Mistress Fairlie.” There was mockery in his eyes now and a note in the velvet voice that brought a flush to Fairlie’s cheek.

Michael’s face hardened. His voice was carefully casual. “I suppose the Assiniboines are by now up-country. Did Kinochas marry the young Lowanna? It surely looked like that. Old Konomis hardly needed to hunt at all. Every morning a choice piece of meat hung at the flap of the tepee.”

Fairlie laughed. “What a strange courtship!” Nora smiled too, but not the men.

“I suppose by now they are married,” pursued Michael relentlessly.

Hugh sat crumbling his oat-cake. He looked up. “No, by the way, they are not,” he answered smoothly, and his eyes and Michael’s met, like swords crossing. There was a moment’s complete silence. The kettle boiled over and hissed into the fire. No one moved.

Then Fairlie turned, laughing and voluble, to Nora. “I’ve never eaten such good cheese. Do you make it? I wish you’d show me. Michael’s mother gave us some. Janet cuts it in squares and toasts it on the long iron. You have to pull it back at just the right moment, or it drops.”

“We used to do that as children.” Nora’s voice was small and a little tremulous. Her hands twisted in the folds of her linsey skirt.

At that moment old Duncan came in, brittle with years and infirmity, but full of friendliness. Presently he took down his fiddle, and the rest of the evening was easy enough against a background of smooth, companionable music.

Hugh held Fairlie’s cloak for her as they were leaving, and just for a moment his hands came down hard on her shoulders. Immediately there was in Nora’s face a bleak comprehension, and no warmth at all in her good-bye. Fairlie was glad to be outside.

As they climbed the rise of the hill, Michael said stiffly: “My mother can teach you to make cheese, if you want.”

“But, Michael! It was because of Nora.”

He was silent, then he pulled her over against him. “I could have broken him in two,” he said harshly, “when he touched you.”

There was another silence. “Do you mind my feeling like that?” he added.

She shook her head against his shoulder. “I like it,” she confided.

Then laughter seized the two of them, and they clung together in the snow. A rime had formed on their lashes, and as they kissed it melted against their faces.

As Hugh had remarked, Michael was cutting oak near the Beaver Creek. There was a fine stand of it there, and to the south the forest was dark-threaded with pine. All through the cold weather Michael and Alan worked steadily with their axes, felling and trimming and rolling to the water-side, logs that were destined for ships of the Royal Navy.

“Who will raft them down to Quebec for you?” Fairlie asked idly one night before the fire in the east room. She sat with her feet curled up under her, and her hair was in long braids for the night. The rose curtains were drawn, the fire chuckled on the hearth and picked out points of light on the silver tea-pot and on the hilt of the old sword.

Michael turned and looked at her with a flicker of hesitancy in his eyes. “We were thinking, Alan and I, that we might take them down ourselves.”

Fairlie’s eyes widened.

“Why not? It would be quite a trip. A half-dozen of us might go. Each would build his own cribs, and in big water we’d raft them into one. There’d be cabins. Snug as bugs, we’d be.”

“Yes,” she replied drily, “Especially in the rapids. Or in a storm.”

He laughed, rose and stretched out his hand to pull her to her feet.

That night after he was asleep she sat up in bed and looked at him. The fire-light from the next room played fitfully over his face. It made him look remote and a little strange. Nearly three hundred miles to Quebec. He’d be a long time away. He’d be in danger. She sighed and lay down again, and stared soberly at the ceiling as the fire-light licked and flickered over the room. Till her eyelids grew heavy, and she slept.

So, just a little, she shrank from the coming of spring. Here they were, she and Michael, in a warm, happy, self-sufficient world of their own. If she could, she would stop the onrush of time, and keep their life forever as now, so rich and fine and sweet a thing it seemed.

Nevertheless spring was inevitably on its way. Early in March the ewes lambed, and one blustery night twins were born, awkward, lovable little fellows with tightly curled wool and black, wobbly knees. The weak one Michael brought into the house, and Fairlie sat on the floor before the fire and held the little, sprawling body on a blanket. It lay with its small, warm head flat against her knee. It looked trustful and innocent and good.

“Och, losh!” cried Janet. “The poor beastie. So like a bairn.”

“Meh-eh-eh,” bleated the lamb suddenly, and Fairlie laughed and wrapped it and carried it out to the barn.

The sheep-pen was closed off at one end of the stable. A lantern hung from a nail and sent long rays of light into the dusk where the sheep lay ruminating, deep in straw. The mother ewe lifted up her voice, and the lamb with little nuzzling noises crowded close to her.

“They’re all right now,” said Michael, taking down the lantern. Fairlie paused a moment to listen to the soft breathing of all those docile good creatures who were dependent on them.

Every day now the sun was warmer. The snow-banks were dark and honey-combed with moisture. The red rooster flew to the top of the straw-pile and crowed lustily. The cattle were restless. For a while each day, Michael let the sheep and lambs out in the small, sunny paddock by their pen.

The lambs were now strong and playful, but the little one that Fairlie had held by the fire had an especial air of delicacy and grace. When she came out among them, it would lean against her trustfully, or lower its little head and butt her playfully. She liked to curl her fingers in the fine wool. She liked the way it would suddenly bend back its little knees and fold them under it and lie peaceful and meditative in the sun. In a far-away Scottish graveyard, on many a child’s tombstone, a small stone lamb lay so.

Many things about her domain delighted Fairlie these days. The strong country air stimulated her. She was full of health and high spirits. She was still a little like a child playing at house-keeping, and was glad sometimes to be alone in her house. That was how she felt one day when Michael was cutting timber, and Janet was helping Ellen with her spinning.

The place smelled sweet and fresh. It smelled of pine knots smouldering on the hearth, and of bread just baked, cooling on the kitchen table. In the east room, the candle-sticks and the rose-coloured curtains and the curved, elegant sofa gave the place an air of refinement that did not look like the

backwoods. Neither did Fairlie herself in her blue gown, wide-fichued and dainty, with the rose-sprigged muslin apron she wore in the afternoons.

Humming a little wordless tune, she filled the tea-kettle and hung it over the fire, and raked up the coals under it. All at once she started, was still for a moment listening, then she flung open the door and ran towards the barn. She snatched an oak cudgel from the wood-pile as she went. From the paddock came a frantic bleating and scurrying. The sheep were huddled in one corner. Two. Three. But not all. She ran to the open door of the sheep-pen. And there lay the torn, struggling body of the littlest lamb. And there was a timber-wolf. He was big and shaggy, and his lips were drawn back. He snarled.

Fairlie slammed the door shut behind her. Grasping the cudgel firmly, she moved on the animal. He gathered his muscles. He sprang. The heavy oak cudgel thudded across his eyes. He circled warily and she turned with him. He slavered. She felt hard, and self-reliant, and ready.

He sprang, and his fangs tore a red furrow along her fore-arm, but her staff cracked against his spine. Once she stumbled over the lamb, but she recovered. She kept her eyes on her adversary. Then with a cold fury she struck again. His fore-legs snapped. This time he failed to rise. And the staff rose and fell with all the strength of her back behind it, until there was just a sprawled mass of bloody fur on the earth floor of the pen.

She stood for a moment, then rubbed her arm shudderingly across her eyes. She bent over the lamb. It was dead. The curly wool was torn and stained, and the meek little head was still. Tears slipped down over her face. The strength went out of her. She stumbled to the door and sank down on a log beside the paddock. And bent her head down on her knees and sobbed.

A step scraped on the gravel, and there was Red Hugh before her. She stared dumbly up at him. He looked in at the open door for a long moment, then came and sat down.

“I did it,” she cried, and her tears came again.

He took out a handkerchief and gave it to her. “And did you now?” His voice was soft and deep. “And a good job you made of it.”

“I had to. The lamb . . .” She looked at her apron of sprigged muslin, torn now, and a long sobbing sigh struggled up. “I had to, but I feel terrible.”

He laughed softly, and his hand closed warmly on hers. Then he saw the scratch on her arm. “Och, a sore hurt! You’ll wash it well, and care for it?”

She nodded.

“And now, brace yourself, that’s a good girl, or—” his face came close to hers—“I’ll have to comfort you.” Little lights of mocking tenderness danced in his eyes, and his voice caressed her.

A sudden red whipped her cheeks, and her tears dried.

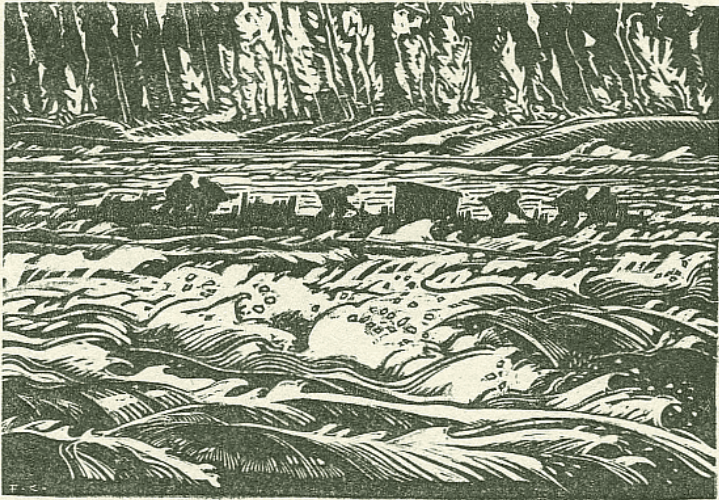
“How did you know?”

“I came to borrow a whet-stone, and I heard as I came.”

“Then I thank you for coming to my rescue.” She smiled and rose, and began to take control of the situation.

“But I was too late. Always too late, Mochree,” and he swung over the fence and was off down the hill-side whistling.

He forgot the whet-stone, thought Fairlie, looking thoughtfully after him.



◆ ◆ RIVER-MEN ◆ ◆

Chapter V

WITH the coming of April the ice in the streams began to heave and buckle. Preparations for the rafting of the logs to Quebec were quickly completed. It seemed that half the men in the neighbourhood were going, Michael, Alan, Alec, Red Hugh, a half dozen others, and a sprinkling of good French rivermen to boot. All were young, sturdy and adventurous.

The undertaking released a great surge of masculine vitality and high spirits. The women were quiet and a little apprehensive. They were also out of the picture. This was a man's job, and the pleasure that was in it—excitement touched with danger, money for their pockets, hard work and hilarity—was of a masculine kind.

Arrangements for Michael's absence were made. Colin Ross, his uncle, would stay with Fairlie and Janet, and look after the stock. Elspeth and John MacLeod did not quite approve of the venture. They had been shocked by the episode of the wolf.

"How could you?" Elspeth inquired curiously of Fairlie who was just then pouring tea from the silver pot, her lower lip caught in her teeth in her absorption. She seemed young and fragile. Handing John his cup, she smiled shame-facedly at them both.

"It was an old wolf, driven out by the pack. I wasn't in much danger. Something came over me."

"Just the same," insisted Elspeth, "I wish you'd come home with us while Michael is away."

Michael shifted a little uneasily. "If you'd like to, Fairlie," he agreed.

She shook her head. "Janet will be here, and Uncle Colin. Besides, I'll have to see to things."

She found it hard to explain, but she felt that it would be easier to wait for Michael here, in their own place.

All of a sudden the thaw came. A rain in the night, first a soft patter on the roof, then a steady downpour, and the snow melted away. The ice in the

Beaver broke, crushed grindingly as it lifted, then went cruising off down current in big spongy pancakes. Logs and débris came floating down from the west. The swirling, hurrying gray water fascinated Fairlie. There was a look of urgency about it. She began to envy Michael a little.

The day for departure came. The cribs were ready and so were the men, a small army of them in spiked boots, plaid shirts and home-spun pants, with pike-poles and peaveys and axes to hand. Alec rumped the ears of the dog Spogan, and blinked hard after telling his mother good-bye. Michael put his arms around Fairlie, gave her a long warm look and a hard kiss, and stepped on board.

The cribs sucked against the water, then, poled into the current, moved slowly down the creek and around the bend.

Fairlie watched till the last of them was out of sight, then put her arm through Ellen's and they walked up the hill. The sun was warm on them, and the air was full of spring. But the house looked forlorn already.

Ellen sat down silently. Her hands lay flat along the arms of the chair. "I'm afraid, Fairlie," she said in a low voice.

"Come," said Fairlie. "We'll have a cup of tea and a scone, and you'll feel better."

Ellen seemed not to hear. She sat looking sombrely into space. "I'm afraid," she repeated in the same expressionless voice. "But I don't know which one," she whispered suddenly, and leaned her head back against the chair, and closed her eyes.

An eerie feeling pricked at the back of Fairlie's neck, and Janet, coming in, stood and stared apprehensively.

Fairlie touched Ellen's arm. "Come now, drink your tea," she urged in a comfortable, friendly voice.

Ellen stirred, smiled uncertainly, and broke a scone. "I shouldn't be troubling you, and you so kind. And before we know it they'll all be back again—I trust."

There were no premonitions or fears to mar the holiday spirit in which the members of the little backwoods flotilla were faring forth, with a wind at their backs and a current to carry them. Into the South Branch they swirled, and then, presently, into the wider, darker Black River, and so on their way to the St. Lawrence.

Michael stood braced on his pike-pole, his eyes watchful. The sun and the wind penetrated even the heavy wool of his clothing. He felt the warmth and tingle on his back. It exhilarated him. The smell of new pine stung his nostrils. Below him was the slap, slap of the water. He was conscious of a keen pleasure in the sun and the wind and the motion. And in the fact that he was on his way again, going somewhere.

He thought of Fairlie, and she was like a warmth at his heart. But —“She’ll be all right,” he thought comfortably, and moved to ease the crib away from a jutting promontory.

Where the Black River debouched into the St. Lawrence, the cribs were joined together into a great raft. With twisted withes and chains and lashing-poles, they bound them, giving them play enough to take the strain. Then up went the square sails, and with a fair wind from the west they went sweeping along the rippling wide blue water.

Pierre Baudette, river-boss, smoothed out a sandy hearth for the fire, and soon there rose the sizzling smell of frying pork. Hugh took a bannock from a box by Michael, broke it, and laid a slice of pork between the halves.

“Fairlie makes good scones,” he commended, his mocking eyes on Michael.

“Janet’s,” put in Michael shortly.

Alec sat opposite, the wind lifting his fair hair. His eyes were big with the strangeness of it all.

“Here, mon enfant,” called out Pierre, and tossed him a slice. Alec held out his tin plate, missed, and picked up the meat uncertainly. Hugh laughed.

“You mind the dirt, no?” asked Pierre. “By the time you get to Kebec you eat like a river-man.”

Alec flushed. But he ate.

All day the good breeze held. The work at the sweeps was light. The Frenchmen sang as they bent rhythmically, their voices floating plaintively out over the water. The shore to the north slipped by, and to the south it was only a haze on the horizon. They were on Lake St. Francis.

Night fell. A slim crescent moon edged up over the horizon, and rode high over the water. Michael sat on a log at the back of the raft. He leaned and looked down at the river, and at the stars drowned in it. The water was dark as iron, but every little wave had a silver crest. The wind blew keen. There was a cold, astringent beauty to the night, the green wash of the sky,

the black shore and the chill, sweet air. It cleared the mind and sharpened the senses.

He looked up to see his brothers stepping towards him over the traverses.

“Luck that none of us were drawn for the night crew,” observed Alan.

“Oh, I don’t know. Are you warm enough, youngster?”

Alec nodded. “Michael, you remember my big mast?” A tall pine, straight as an arrow and without blemish they had marked for a mast, and it was to be Alec’s, and the money from it his own. “If I get eight pence a cubic-foot, it will be a great deal of money, won’t it?”

“Right. What do you want to do with it? Spend it?”

“Some of it.” Alec squirmed with eagerness. “I’d like to get something very fine for Mother. Something nicer than she’s ever had.”

“In Quebec,” agreed Alan. “We’ll see to it there.” He was whittling on a piece of cedar, a small deer growing into shape under his knife-tip.

Michael leaned back, hands clasped over his knee, and through half-closed eyes watched his brothers. He felt the tug and warmth of kinship. Here they were, three men of one family, faring forth together on a small adventure, and alike in the very architecture of their bodies, in the length of shin and thigh-bone, and the high, square shoulders. In the old days they would have been three fighting men at the back of their chief. Now, their adversaries were the trees of the forest and the strength of the streams. Well, in a tight corner, he’d ask no better men behind him.

He rose and stood, feet wide to balance himself, and grinned down at the two. “Come now, and see what it feels like to sleep with the waves slapping the bottom of the bed.”

Red Hugh called to them from the fire. “Time to put the young one to sleep.” His laugh was light and mocking.

Michael paused and looked soberly at him, but Alan touched his arm.

“Some day we’ll have to turn in and fight that fellow,” he remarked mildly as they bent to enter the shelter.

Two days’ travel and the lake had narrowed into the river, and they saw white water in the distance. For the great and formidable rapids, like the LaChine or the Cedars, they would dismantle the raft and ease each crib down separately, but this brief flurry looked not too dangerous.

“But wait till the morn,” advised Pierre. “She’ll look beeg enough when the waves go right over.”

At sundown they anchored securely close to shore, and the dull roar of the rapids was in their ears all night. The men were a little subdued. Plans were discussed. Pierre Beaudette was the acknowledged boss of navigation, but each man had his assigned place and knew what was expected of him.

Morning came. As they moved on with increasing swiftness, the water took on a new character. It was no longer smooth. It dimpled and swirled. Sometimes it flowed in long green swoops. Then the black crest of a rock broke through and it spouted up in a wild, white fountain. They hugged the north shore. To their right the green waves curved like scimitars and broke hissing into froth. The water was like steel, and felt like it. The impact of it was terrific.

The continual hoarse roar deafened them, but every eye was on Pierre. Strong-muscled arms gripped the poles desperately, and just as they felt that the timbers would be torn asunder beneath them, suddenly they slid into smooth water, and the rapid was only a sound in their ears behind them.

Pierre stood bandy-legged, dark and squat, and looked them over. He spat appreciatively. “Bully boys,” he said. “By gar, I’ll make river-men of you yet.”

They turned to each other with small smiles on their lips. They were drenched to the skin. Their muscles ached and their breath still came short, but every man was warm with pride of achievement.

When they reached Quebec, they were seasoned river-men. They were bronzed with the sun and full of high spirits. When they walked up the steep streets of the old city, among the small-statured Frenchmen, these MacDonells, and Grants, and MacLennans, and Rosses, with their blue eyes and their wide shoulders and their long legs and the lordly, yet innocent look that was on them, they seemed like men from a far country.

“They look like angels,” said a tavern-keeper ruminatively. “But—by gar!—leave them alone. They fight like forty black devils.”

Their logs were sold. In the timber-cove they had been eased into the hold of an ocean-going vessel. Alec had watched his big pine lifted by chains and rolled into the receiving port-hole. And the stout money-belt he wore about him now had a good weight and sag to it.

The three visited the shops, Michael having enough French to make himself understood. Alec got his gift for his mother—a golden cairngorm

bordered with seed-pearls, very delicate and fine. Alan found a wood-carver's shop, and there among the shavings and shadows was a small statuette of basswood that looked like ivory, a girl with one hand lifted as if listening.

"She looks like Hugh's Nora," exclaimed Alec.

"So she does," agreed Michael.

Alan said nothing, but wrapped it carefully himself, in soft paper.

Michael bought a Paisley shawl for Fairlie, of misty colouring and intricate design, with a foot-wide, luxurious fringe. They felt of the fringe, the three of them, with their hard calloused fingers, and smiled at the softness of it.

"Mon Dieu, you buy out the store," cried Pierre at their elbow, and he thrust an arm into Alec's. "Come with me, mon enfant, and I show you a fine, foreign merchantman come into the harbour last night."

"Be a little careful," warned Alan.

"Sure, I be careful. Not drink. Not fight. Swear only a little. By six o'clock we be back at the Coq Rouge. Bien?"

"Bien," agreed Michael, and they watched the two swing off, the broad, grizzled river-man, and Alec, slender and fair.

"Perhaps we'll go too," suggested Michael. But he had not counted on meeting Paul LeClair.

"Where you going so fas'?" A voice came plaintively from an apothecary's door-way. "What for you not speak to your frien'?"

Michael whirled. Paul flung his arms about him and kissed him resoundingly on the cheek.

"Come in, come in, and have one leetle drink. Oh, your broder?" He bowed ceremoniously.

"What are you doing here, Paul? When did you get back from the high plains?"

"Me, I take a leetle vacation. My home is here—my moder, fader, six broder and five sister." He waved expansively. "Three weeks since I came. Calling River very lonesome now. Next time, maybe, I go further north. Plenty fur, the Indians tell me—beaver, mink. And you, my frien'?"

"I am married now. Settled down."

Paul shook his head. “Me, I could not do that. Never to feel the ground shake from the buffalo herd, or to see the wind in the long grass, or hear the meadow-lark. No, not even for wife and fine familiee. Besides, the Indian girls, they not bad.”

It was late enough when they left Paul. Twice Alan had touched Michael’s foot with his as they sat about the little table in the back of the shop. They finally made their farewells, and hastened down the steep little street to Le Coq Rouge.

Michael was silent, his mind still in the west country. Before them at the end of the street, they could now see the tavern. Suddenly three men tumbled out of the door and, running low, were lost among the houses. They looked foreign and sinister. Four others, river-men, followed.

A quick glance flew between Michael and Alan. They broke into a run. But before they reached the door-way Pierre burst out and waved despairingly to them. After him came the fat tavern-keeper, gesticulating—in anger? or in fear?

Alan had Pierre’s arm in a grip.

“Oh, mon Dieu!” and tears suddenly poured down his swarthy cheeks. “Come and see.”

There was enough to see. There was the cleared floor of the common-room, benches over-turned and men standing against the walls, and on the floor the still length, the fair, boyish face—of Alec. His jacket was off. His shirt was wet with a dark stain that spread and spread.

They knelt on either side of him. Michael put his hand within his shirt. He bent and laid his ear against him.

“A doctor!” His voice cut the silence.

“I ’ave sent,” said Pierre, humbly.

The room was quiet except for the heavy breathing of men. The two brothers still knelt by the boy who was so like them both.

Alan leaned low.

“Alec,” he whispered.

The lids fluttered, then opened. The wide, blue eyes moved from one to the other, then closed softly. There was a little sigh, relaxed and easy. Then there was no more breathing.

After a moment the landlord and Pierre raised him, and laid him on the table. One, Peter MacLennan, unwrapped his own plaid and covered the body.

Then Michael turned to the roomful of men. His voice was unsteady. “Will some one tell me how this came about?”

There was a shuffle of feet. Red Hugh stood behind the table. He was pale. Michael’s eyes darkened as they flicked over him.

Pierre stepped forward. “I will tell you. We came back to this place. Three sailors were here from the Portugee ship. We drink all round. Alec drink a little too. Not much—just a leetle.”

“Drank? He never drank.” He whipped around. “Who taunted him to it?”

“I did,” answered Hugh quietly.

“And then?” as quietly from Michael, but even the breathing of the men seemed now suspended.

“And then one of the Portugee do a song-and-dance and want to fight. He pick on Alec. I say to Alec, Non, non. But—” he spread his hands.

“And Hugh laughed,” suggested Michael.

Hugh nodded.

“They fought,” went on Pierre, “and Alec threw him. Then like lightning out came the knife, and before we knew it the three were away. Four of our boys followed them. But—you know the rest.” He went and stood in the door-way.

The landlord sat down heavily on a bench by the door. “Mother of God,” he moaned, “this will be bad for business.”

Michael went and folded back a corner of the plaid. The face was even now settling into the rigid contours of death. He covered it again, and turned, and was face to face with Hugh.

With a great, sobbing bellow he flung himself at him. Hugh went down against the piled-up benches.

He got up and tossed back his hair. “I’ll take that, Michael,” he said, “under the circumstances.”

“You’ll take more.”

“No.” Alan’s hand was on Michael’s arm. He motioned towards Alec. “Not here. Not now.” Then, to Hugh, and in a soft voice that was chill with menace, “One day, for this, we’ll have a reckoning.”



◆ ◆ AT HUGHIE BAN'S ◆ ◆

Chapter VI

ALEC'S death grieved and angered the whole community. That his family should feel an unrelenting bitterness towards Red Hugh for his part in it was accepted as only natural. Indeed, the whole neighbourhood looked on Hugh askance.

"There's a devil gets into him," said Peter MacLennan. "There are men like that."

Nevertheless, when Peter's brother, Hughie Ban, who lived where the Beaver flowed into the South Branch, was raising a new log barn, he invited Hugh and Nora with the rest of the neighbours.

"I grieve for Alec," he said, "and there's no doubt Hugh carries some blame. There's a bad streak in him. But it's more than two months gone, and there's naught gained in making an outlaw of him."

The gathering at Hughie Ban's promised to be more than a raising. "Come early," was the word sent out along the river-road and across to the next concession. And they all knew what that meant. If the barn was up by noon, then Highland games would take up the rest of the day.

So, come early they did. One by one or in little groups, on foot or on horse-back, or slipping down river in cedar boats, the men of the neighbourhood gathered. The women came too. John and Elspeth MacLeod drove up from Glen William with young Ian standing between his father's knees in the calèche and flapping the ends of the reins. Not to every barn-raising did the minister come, but Hughie Ban was an elder in the Kirk and a strong supporter of all good works.

When Fairlie met Nora, there was a moment of strain, but Mistress MacLennan—Morag to her contemporaries—was a large, friendly person, and immediately both were enveloped in an atmosphere of good cheer and hard work. There was an enormous noon meal to be prepared, and all the women set about it. With sleeves tucked up, they peeled potatoes and patted out scones, and set the meat bubbling in the stew-pots or sizzling on roasting-spits before the fire. Their wide skirts billowed out over the sanded white boards of the floor like full-blown bright flowers. And their talk was

the friendly talk of women who are often alone and who are glad to spend a day together.

In spite of a momentary unease on entering, one could see that Nora was more content in mind than she had been. She glowed a little. The reason occurred to Fairlie. Since Red Hugh was in ill-favour with the community, he had turned to her more for companionship.

Fairlie herself was happier this day than she had been since the tragedy of Alec's death cast a gloom over them all. When she first wakened in the morning, and looked out, it seemed to her a light-hearted day. And when she stepped outside, the thorn-apple tree was in full bloom. The spikes were lost in a cloud of blossoms, and the perfume filled the air. She cupped her fingers about a cluster of flowers, and a wild bee flew out and zoomed away in the sunshine.

Michael came round the house and stopped beside her. "My father would be glad to see you there by that tree," he said, and ruffled her hair with his big hand.

So the day had promised well, and continued so. Morag made much of Nora and Fairlie as the two newest brides. A huge hydrangea plant stood in a butter-tub on the porch, and was heavy with great clusters of bloom. Morag cut some strong slips from near the root. "For you two girls," she said, and put them in water. "Plant a few grains of wheat with them, and keep them in the dark for a week, and they'll grow, so they will. For they're given with a good heart."

"Indeed, we know it," declared Fairlie, and looked at Nora with friendly eyes and smiled. After all, she thought, it was not her fault.

Meanwhile the barn was going up. The pile of logs lay cut, seasoned and ready. One by one these were hoisted into position, notched at the ends and made ready for the next tier. As the walls rose higher, skids were placed to roll them up, and the men heaved and toiled and sweated, till with a great Horo Boys! up went the logs into place. From time to time the women took out cooling drinks, and the men drank thirstily, and some went down to the creek and splashed water over their faces and necks.

Morag took young Ian out to the old barn to look for eggs, because he would follow Michael about and they feared for him should a log slip. Fairlie and Nora went too. In a strawy corner a new red calf was tethered. He lay blinking his long light lashes at them and chewing thoughtfully. Ian squatted plumply in front of him, and the two baby things looked gravely

into each other's eyes. Then the calf baa-ed suddenly and stumbled to his feet, and Ian fell over backwards in astonishment. Fairlie laughed and picked him up, and showed him how to scratch behind the stiff ears and to put his fingers in the eager, wet mouth.

"But watch for his new teeth," she cautioned.

"Here's Michael's mother coming," observed Nora quietly.

"I'll go and help her over the creek," said Fairlie, and Morag went with her.

"Then Ian and I will get the eggs." Nora stooped and looked into his face. "You'll come with me?" she coaxed, and he laid his warm little hand in hers.

Morag put out a friendly hand to help Ellen over the narrow plank of the foot-bridge. "Is it yourself now? Sure and it's been a long day since you visited here, and you and me old friends!"

Ellen was the same composed, kind body that she had been before tragedy came to her, but she was quieter now, more lined of face, older. All this Morag noted and acknowledged in the warm concern that was in her welcome. The two women exchanged a quiet glance of understanding and affection.

The sun now rode high and dinner was in the final stages of preparation. The long table was spread and the dishes laid. Savoury odours filled the kitchen as the stew-pots were tipped and the blue platters filled and potatoes were piled high and snowy in big yellow bowls. Morag's best preserves glowed red in her treasured glass dishes—wild plums and small sweet strawberries, very rich and fragrant. Doughnuts were set near the fire to warm, and the tea was made. Morag took down the dinner-horn from above the mantel and came and stood in the door-way with the others crowding behind her.

"They've finished," she said with satisfaction. "And a fine long afternoon left for the games."

Then she lifted the horn, and an answering cheer rose from the men. They stood back for a moment to survey their handiwork, then trooped noisily down to the creek to wash.

Nora and Fairlie helped with the serving. Laughter and badinage flowed freely, muted only a little by the presence of the minister who sat at his host's right hand. Near the other end of the table was Red Hugh, and once

Fairlie saw Nora lean briefly against him as she passed. A sudden quiver crossed Hugh's face. He is aware, thought Fairlie, of the feeling against him, and of her support. She felt her heart go out to Nora, because she, like herself, was young and in love and so, vulnerable.

Dinner over, the men went out and laid themselves down on the green in front of the house. While the women cleared the tables, ate their own meal, put the remaining food in readiness for supper, washed the dishes and swept the floor.

Morag glanced out at the lounging figures under the maples. "Sure they're resting themselves for the tug-of-war."

"Did Rorie bring his pipes?"

"Last night. They're in the bedroom. Lay the dishes now, girls, and then we'll not have a thing to do till supper."

That done, the women trooped out and sat down on the long bench in front of the house. And Rorie blew up his pipes and marched smoothly up and down between the two maple trees. Or at times stood, his toe tapping and the rhythmic small spring of the muscle in his sinewy knee marking the beat of the tune, while out over the green fields and the greener forest and the quiet-flowing water shrilled the clear, careless challenge of the pipes. It was an old tune, that most laconic of the marches of the clans, "Si coma leum cogadh na shea—Peace, or War if you like!" There was a bite in the bright reckless music, and the faces of those listening to it came instantly alert. As if a deep nerve had been touched in each, and a tingle ran through mind and body and set the blood racing.

Then Rorie shifted his pipes and paused and eased his back against the strong trunk of the maple, and a gentle meditative melody floated out on the summer air. A sweet soft tangle of sound that wove itself in and around the small noises of the out-of-doors, the rustle of leaves and the smooth-flowing river, and then died away into silence. A silence that for a while no one wanted to break.

Then Angus Archie MacGregor got stiffly to his feet. "Well now, who's for throwing the hammer?" he asked cheerfully, and the men followed him across the creek to the level pasture-field, and began to lay down markers in the short grass. The girls picked up their skirts and followed eagerly. But Morag and Ellen sat still on the bench in the dappled shade of the maples.

"At our age it's nice to be alone and quiet for a spell," remarked Morag comfortably.

And it was quiet. The voices from the pastures were muted by distance, and there was just the soft full sound of the water that was now louder in their ears.

Ellen stirred and sighed. "I was just thinking that all my life has been lived within sound of water."

There fell a little silence then, and the sunny lawn and the arching elms and maples faded from before Ellen's eyes, and she saw instead the silver birches of Glen Moriston, and another stream came leaping and tumbling over the rocks on its way to Loch Ness. A gray stone house was there with the soft curve of a hill behind it, and a view down the wide glen, in front. And in the sun-lit birch wood by the water, she and young Finlay Ban sat talking urgently together.

"Scotland's a sad country." His warm, hard hand held hers. "And has been ever since Culloden. But America's a new place, and free. There's a river there, and a bonny valley by it. A cousin of MacIlan MacDonell, one Sir William Johnson, is a great chief in that valley. There the future lies, and there's our chance, Ellen."

And Ellen had looked out at the quiet glen and her home in it, and then into the blue importunate eyes and the rugged lovable face of Finlay Ban Ross, and she knew that were it to the ends of the earth, if he asked her, she would go.

Raising her eyes now she met Morag's humorous, understanding gray ones.

"You know," Morag clasped her hands over her knee, "I grieved, it is true, at leaving my home in the Highlands, but what fair affronted me was when we had to leave the Mohawk Valley. Sometimes I have wondered; fifty years before, all of us Jacobites and out for Charlie, then when the colonies fought England we were King's Men."

"We had given our oath," put in Ellen reasonably.

"Och aye! And our men followed Sir William and Sir John as they had their chieftains before. But it was a good farm that we had at Fort Johnson. And we had just built a new house." She laughed gustily. "You wouldn't believe it, but what I think of most is a set of dishes I left behind. China, they were, so fine and thin, with a sprig of moss-rose in the centre of each piece. We packed them in a box, and buried them in the back yard, and smoothed the ground well, then built a little fire on the spot to hide all trace. You'd think that in the years that followed I'd have had enough to think of,

to forget about those dishes. The cup was very dainty, and the handle curved—like that!”

Ellen laughed gently, then turning towards the pasture, and shading her eyes with her palm, “Look you, the minister has his coat off.”

The hammer-throwing was now narrowed down to three, Michael, Red Hugh and the Reverend John MacLeod. Hugh was about to throw. He was in high spirits. He tossed back his tawny mane, and his laughing amber eyes swept the crowd. He was stripped to the waist, his great shoulders and torso gleaming white in the sunshine.

For a moment he stood, braced, then he exploded into action. Three times the big hammer swung round his head, then soared through the air and thudded in the grass at the far end of the pasture. Rorie Breac paced out the distance from the toe of his foot to the point of impact.

“Your turn, Michael,” said Angus Archie quietly, and Michael took his place. His blue shirt was open at the throat and his sleeves were rolled up. He looked young with the sunshine on his fair head, but cool and steady too. Fairlie, watching, saw his nostrils flare white, and her heart beat strongly, partisanly, for him. She knew that beneath the casual friendly mask of his face was an intensity of desire to beat Red Hugh. She set her mind to help him. And on the far side Alan moved in closer.

Michael weighed the sledge, then whirled it and swung. He bettered Hugh by a yard. A shout of applause went up, and Fairlie blinked back tears of excitement.

“And now you, Sir.” Angus Archie turned to his minister.

John MacLeod stepped out in front. He seemed pale and scholarly beside the big, sun-bronzed fellows about him, but he carried himself like an athlete, they noticed, and his bare arms were hard and muscular, if lean.

Angus had a little pucker of anxiety between his brows. “You’ll need to let yourself out, Sir.”

Fairlie tucked her arm in Elspeth’s. “Are you nervous?”

Elspeth shook her red curls and laughed.

She had reason for her confidence. John MacLeod made up in skill what he lacked in weight. He swung on his left foot and, patting with his right, he whirled himself around three times, the hammer swinging after, till with a sudden straightening of body and arms, it broke away in a great soaring arc over the pasture-field.

“God bless my soul,” muttered Rorie as he paced out the distance.

Hugh hitched up his belt and laughed grimly, and with all that he had behind it, the hammer hurtled mightily and far before it thudded to the ground.

“Dhia! A draw!” Excitement gleamed in the eyes of the onlookers. Their voices were tight with it.

Then it was Michael’s turn. But his foot slipped, and he failed to touch his former mark. He grinned ruefully and stepped back.

The minister again. His face was remote with concentration as he pivoted and swung. The explosive force released was so smooth and perfectly timed that it seemed effortless. But he was six inches up on his last throw. This was good hammer-throwing, by thunder! And the man of God was a man of muscle too. Laughter and excitement rose like a wave about the two who stood side by side, the minister lean and tall and well-in-hand, with dark humorous eyes, and Hugh with his half-naked body and his handsome red head. He picked up the hammer and stood swinging it lightly in front of him, and his eyes were both mocking and friendly. Then, with an ironical bright smile, and in his rich sliding voice:

“Och, sure Sir, it would never do for the powers of darkness . . .” and he dropped the hammer at the other’s feet.

There was a moment of silence, then a shout went up, and Hugh and the minister were shaking hands and laughing while the men surged about them.

Thought Fairlie, they’re beginning to forgive Hugh; he’s one of them again.

“Some day I wish you’d show me that double whirl, Sir,” he was saying.

“Glad to. It’s just a trick. It gives momentum.”

Hughie Ban was now coming from the barn with a rope for the tug-of-war, and Fairlie and Elspeth walked back to the house lest young Ian should be wakened from his nap and be alone. They sat by the sleeping child till, at a sudden shout from the pasture, he roused and lay blinking himself awake. Then Nora appeared in the door-way, and when he saw her he bounced off the bed. “More eggs,” he demanded, and she and Elspeth looked at each other and smiled.

“Shall I take him?”

“If you like.”

Hand in hand Nora and young Ian fared forth again to the old barn.

Then Morag came in with Ellen.

“Janet’s gone home to the milking,” she told Fairlie. “And they’re tossing the caber now, over in the field. If you girls would like to watch, Ellen and I will build up the fire and put the kettle on.”

At the door, Fairlie paused and stood shading her eyes with her hand.

“What is it?” Elspeth spoke at her elbow.

“See? Down the river. A boat.”

“Well,” unconcernedly.

“There’s a woman in it.”

The others gathered to watch. It was a canoe, coming lightly and swiftly towards them. They stood for a few seconds in silence, then Morag started down the path towards the river. The rest followed.

At the edge of the water they stood and waited. “She’s dark, like an Indian.” Elspeth spoke softly, for the boat was now before them.

The nose of the canoe pushed in nearer shore. The woman laid her paddle across the bows and looked at them. She was tired, that was what they thought of first. There were hollows beneath her eyes, and the swarthy skin was drawn across the high cheek-bones. She wore a shapeless leather garment and her hair was in two long braids. She was undoubtedly an Indian.

Morag stepped forward. “Good day to you, my poor soul,” she said.

The voice was kind, and a flicker of feeling showed in the dark, impassive face. She moved in a little closer, and in a level voice, as if repeating a lesson, “I am looking for my ’usband,” she said. She spoke liquidly, with a French accent.

“Perhaps a half-breed,” thought Fairlie. “No, a squaw.”

“For my ’usband,” the other repeated dully. Then with a flicker of excitement, “I think I am near.”

“Have you come far?” asked Fairlie.

“Ver’ far.”

There was stir behind them. It was Michael. For a long moment he stood staring, then, “Lowanna!” he cried on a note of pure wonder.

“Oh, M’sieu Ross!” Her impassive face broke up into a wide, tired smile. She pushed the canoe in and stepped on shore.

“Where did you come from? Who brought you here?” demanded Michael.

Her face set stubbornly. “I have come to my ’usband.”

Fairlie glanced at Morag, at Elspeth. Shock and anger were in their faces.

“No, no,” she cried inwardly, in fierceness and pride. “It’s not Michael.”

Ellen stepped forward then. “Who is your husband?” she asked in a level voice.

Lowanna raised her head and her black eyes met Ellen’s proudly. “My ’usband is M’sieu Hugh MacDonell.” The words fell into a well of silence.

“Tell me where I find ’im,” she went on patiently, and waited.

“Where is Kinochas?” countered Michael sternly.

“I don’ know. Long time since I see,” dully. Then piercingly, “Where is M’sieu Hugh?”

Fairlie looked back over her shoulder. Nora was coming from the barn. She ran with Ian, swinging his hand and skipping a little.

“Go away,” cried Fairlie suddenly to the Indian woman. “Your husband is not here. Go in your boat. Quickly.”

“Fairlie!” cried Michael sharply.

Nora and Ian were now near. He had picked a tight little fistful of dandelions. His happy voice rang out, and hers, answering him. He hurled himself against his mother. “Look,” he cried, and she took the flowers and kissed him.

“Who is it?” asked Nora in her cool, friendly voice.

“Just a wandering Indian woman,” exclaimed Fairlie lightly, then paused, her throat tight, for Hugh came striding down the path. “This is what we’ve all been waiting for,” Fairlie thought, “waiting hypnotized and helpless.” He looked magnificent. His red hair shining in the sunlight, his arrogant height, his free striding walk—he was like a great stag crashing through the forest and scenting danger. When he saw Lowanna his eyes dilated, his head went up.

“Hugh,” called Nora, and on the same instant, “M’sieu Hugh,” cried Lowanna and ran towards him, then stopped.

There was a pause, then—“What are you doing here?” His voice was harsh and loud with anger. It cut like a whip.

She answered him in Indian, in a soft, guttural flood of words into which he broke incisively. “Go.” He pointed to the river, then turned on his heel.

For a moment he stood irresolute, then “Nora!” he cried, and the word was stark with outrage and pleading and anger. He recovered himself and looked towards Morag. “Will you excuse Nora and myself?” His voice was smooth and easy. “We must hurry away home now. There’s the milking.”

He touched Nora’s arm, and she turned to him a face that was white and completely expressionless; then she nodded and walked with him up the path and over the little bridge, and across the meadow to their own place.

Lowanna turned back to the canoe, and reached in for a hide-bound bundle.

“Where are you going now?” frowned Michael.

“I go too.”

“Where?”

She gestured with her head.

“You can’t. She’s his wife.”

She nodded sadly. “Me, I be noder wife.”

There was a silence. “What shall I do?” asked Michael in a low voice, of Fairlie.

Morag spoke up. “You can all come and have your supper. You, too,” she added, looking warily at Lowanna.

“Come,” said Michael peremptorily and Lowanna followed after.

That supper was not the hospitable, cheerful occasion it had given promise of being. Not with Lowanna wolfing her food, her black opaque eyes moving suspiciously about the room. It was a meal that was remembered, however, if for nothing else than the suppressed excitement, the surmisings and the questionings that passed, low-voiced, with the bread and the salt.

When it was over, Fairlie and Michael took Lowanna home with them. There was nothing else to do. But no one was happy over it. Fairlie explained her arrival to Janet, who was at first amazed, then intrigued, then gloomy. "She must be daft," she concluded. "She should have stayed in her own place."

"If she only had," thought Fairlie fervently, looking at her squatted by the fire, her black, beady eyes dull and fixed on space. Only out-of-doors did she show signs of alertness and intelligence. For hours she would lie on the sunny slope of the hill looking down over the farm to the east. She was still, but she was not asleep. There was about her the terrible intentness of a hawk or of a weasel. One day Janet found her near the line-fence, tempting Hugh's brown collie with bits of meat. And that night at dusk she was slipping through the bushes by the creek when Michael came on her. He spoke sternly, and sent her back. Never was she to go there.

"Why not?" she demanded proudly.

"This is the white man's country. Hugh is married now, the white man's way. You are not his wife any more. Do you see?"

"Maybe," she said, and turned away.

Michael straightway walked up to the house, and found Fairlie setting bread. She listened thoughtfully as she tipped the wide-lipped stone jar and poured the yeast into a depression in the flour.

"We'll have to get rid of her," she concluded.

"If she'd go, I'd take her back to Kinochas where she belongs."

Fairlie lifted her spoon out of the batter. "Do you mean you'd leave me alone and go a thousand miles into the wilderness to take that Indian woman home?" She covered the bread-sponge carefully and wrapped it against drafts. "Well," she added crisply, "she wouldn't go with you. She doesn't want to." There was a new hardness in her voice, and in her heart.

But it was Janet who precipitated the crisis. She burst into the kitchen one day, panting with righteous anger.

"Do you see that?" On her thrust-out palm lay a slim, wicked-looking knife. "I took it off the squaw woman."

"What was she doing?"

"Doing? Trying to stab me, that's what. There she was, sprawled on the ground before the men, the hussy! 'Get up,' I said and took the flat of my

hand to her. She sprang at me; and out flashed this knife. I took it. I should have broken her arm to her.”

She sat down heavily, and wiped her forehead with her apron. “I’d do a lot for you, Mistress Fairlie, and well you know it. But I’ll not stay in the same house with that she-wolf.”

Fairlie pushed back her hair distractedly. “We’ll have to be patient, Janet, that’s all.”

The trouble was, she felt anything but patient, herself. She was disturbed, and angry, and upset. She came out of the house and walked down by the Beaver to rest herself in the quiet and the sunshine. There she was diverted by the movements of an old speckled hen and her flock, among them two wild ducklings. A month before, Alan had found a wild-duck’s nest in the swamp, and had brought the eggs to Fairlie. She had put them under a hatching hen, and that hen was now watching distractedly from the bank while two little puffs of dark gold down went floating down the creek. The wind propelled them along like small schooners, lifting their feathers softly. At times they raised their tiny wings and flapped gleefully, while the mother-hen clucked from the bank and the dozen little chicks peeped shrilly with her.

Fairlie dipped her hand into the water and scooped up the soft little bodies. Their webbed feet paddled energetically against her palm for a moment, then she set them on the bank and shoo-ed them up the path.

At the thud of hoofs in the dirt road, she turned, and there was John MacLeod in his calèche. He pulled up, and came and sat with Fairlie on the top rail of the fence.

“Elsbeth was anxious about you. About you and your guest. How are you?”

Fairlie shook her head. “I don’t know what to do, John,” she said seriously. “She and Janet are at logger-heads, and I’m like that old mother-hen with the wild ducklings.”

“What is she like in the house?”

Fairlie laughed shortly. “She’s terrific. Not that she can help it. She’s just an Indian. We tried to get her to change that buckskin shift for a dress of mine so we could wash it. I wanted Michael to explain to her in her own language. But he only laughed. He said, wash buckskin in soft soap and it will shrink to nothing. And heaven knows it’s short enough.”

John laughed and blew a little tune through his teeth.

“What does Michael propose to do?”

“He has written to his friend, Paul LeClair, to find out the next time a party goes west with women in it. We are waiting to hear.”

“What about the big fellow yonder?” he jerked his head to the east.

Fairlie shrugged. “I never see them. I feel sorry for Nora.”

“I can even find it in my heart to be sorry for Hugh,” observed the Reverend John, drily. “Anyhow, you can’t keep her here. It’s not good for you just now. I think I’ll take her home with me.”

“You will?”

“Yes. I’ll get Michael to talk to her. I’ll have to get her consent. There’ll be scandal enough in the congregation with me bringing home a squaw-woman. If she has to be held down, it will look worse.” His dark face quivered into mirth.

Fairlie clasped his arm. “John, you’re so kind, you and Elspeth. But you shouldn’t, really. She’ll be a great nuisance.”

“Tut, now,” said John. “Come up to the house and wish me luck.”



◆ ◆ LOWANNA ◆ ◆

Chapter VII

LUCK was with the Reverend John. Lowanna went with him peaceably. Michael explained that Fairlie was not well, and that it was better for Lowanna to stay for a while at the manse. She nodded dumbly, but just for a moment her eyes met Fairlie's and there was a look of complete contempt in them. Fairlie was a little nonplussed. There was a certain dark nobility about Lowanna, she had to admit, as she stood there impassive, adjusting herself to their programme yet giving them nothing of what was in her mind.

But in Elspeth's sunny presence she seemed to unfold. And young Ian ingratiated himself into her confidence with the friendliness of a puppy. She watched Elspeth at the table, and made an effort to eat like her, wielding her spoon valiantly, if awkwardly.

Elspeth solved the problem of the change of garments by buying a length of scarlet material and making her a very gaudy dress. The bodice front was trimmed with rows of shining jet buttons, and Lowanna's delight was unbounded.

"Good, good," she said again and again, smoothing out the bright fabric.

The buckskin shift came off and was washed, and did duly shrink as was feared. So Elspeth cut it down into a little smock for Ian who was extremely proud of it. Lowanna fashioned a head-band of turkey feathers for him, and John made a little bow and arrow, and Ian crept about the barns and outbuildings, stalking his quarry like a mighty hunter of the plains.

John was proud of Elspeth's success. "You've tamed her. With wit and kindness you've done it," he declared.

"I'm not sure," mused Elspeth thoughtfully. "At times she has a look."

Meanwhile, the work of the farm went on, and the long summer days were full. Michael cut the hay in the meadows. His tall body swayed rhythmically to the sweep of the scythe as it swished through the long grass and left the smooth windrows behind. The smell of new-cut hay was sweet in all the country.

The days were full for Fairlie and Janet too. For one thing, Ellen helped them make cheese. The warm milk was curdled with rennet, and the curds cut fine and salted. Ellen brought over her new cheese press. They lined it with old linen and filled it with the curds. A smooth, round board fitted in for a lid, and on this was laid a weight, and the whole was put away to dry. That shelf of small cheeses curing gave Fairlie an inordinate sense of housewifely pride.

Summer deepened into August, and the fields were golden with ripe wheat. All day the men bent to the sickles, and Janet went out with them to bind. Fairlie, watching from the house, saw the yellow corn and the wind lifting it, and the workers in the field, and thought of Boaz and Ruth gleaning in Judean fields.

But she, too, had her responsibilities. The wild pigeons were so thick over the grain-fields that at times they darkened the sky. A half-dozen of them lay plucked and dressed on the wooden table. Of these Fairlie was making a pigeon-pie.

The iron bake-kettle was lined with pastry, then she placed the pigeons within, breast up, and with a dab of butter on each. Salt was added, and a cup of water, and over all a cover of pastry, and then the lid. She lifted the heavy kettle close to the fire, raked the embers under and around it, and a few coals on top. She was rising from the hearth, a satisfied smile on her lips, when she stopped, crouched over, and held herself motionless for a long minute, then raised slowly. Her eyes were round and startled.

Above the mantle hung the long tin dinner-horn. With hands that trembled a little from excitement, she reached for it, then went to the door and blew three short blasts.

Down in the field she saw Janet lift her head suddenly and start towards the house, walking heavily but swiftly over the stubble. She was not yet at the door when, over the lift of the hill, came Ellen. Her gray eyes were dark with concern, but her voice was steady and full of comfort.

“You won’t let my pigeon-pie burn,” said Fairlie, and they laughed and humoured her.

In the dark of that night Fairlie’s son was born, a lusty, crying infant, who seemed immediately a person, not just a new-born baby. His blue eyes met the world, it would seem, with understanding and challenge. He had a fuzz of hair on his small, round head, a straight little nose and a definite chin.

“Och,” crooned Ellen, holding him to her. “Now we see him, himself. In a day or two he’ll be just a bairn. But now!” She ran a practised hand up the flat little back and over the firm shoulders, and met a level look from his blue eyes. It’s Finlay all over again, she thought; it’s Finlay come back to us. And she swaddled him warmly and brought him in to Fairlie, lying there, white-faced and happy.

The next day Fairlie had a bite of her pigeon-pie. She was ravenous. Nothing had ever tasted so good to her. Then Janet took away the plate, and Michael came in and sat with her. With his finger he traced the blue vein that ran from her wrist, up over her fore-arm to the elbow. He looked beyond her to the small bundle lying next to the wall. A tiny hand shot out like a pink star-fish, waved aimlessly and fell back. Michael thought of a small mariner stranded on a strange shore. He felt a queer twinge of pity. He looked at Fairlie with the circles of exhaustion under her eyes, and he thought of her as he had first seen her.

“Are you sorry for it all?” he asked curiously.

“You know I’m not. Are you?”

“Me? No, of course not,” came back explosively.

She sighed, and slid her hand again into his. Then weakness overtook her, and she slept.

They named the baby “Alec”. If Ellen had a private feeling that it should have been “Finlay”, she said nothing of it, and it touched her deeply that they had given him the name of her dead son. Not that he’s going to be like him, she thought. Her Alec had been a friendly, guileless lad. This Alec would be more imperious, more demanding. Fate would not destroy him at seventeen. He would mould fate.

Nora came to see the baby one day. She came with Morag MacLennan. As Fairlie greeted them she had a moment’s quick relief that Lowanna was safe in Elspeth’s care.

They sat by the open kitchen door and the sunshine shone in across the sanded floor. The baby lay in a wooden cradle that had been the other Alec’s.

Morag lifted him and held him against her ample breast, and clucked lovingly at him. From the cocoon of the white shawl he looked back at her with a discerning look in his very blue eyes. “Bless him,” cried Morag. “Do you see the proud look he has on him? Will you hold him?” she turned to Nora.

Nora smiled deprecatingly. "I haven't much experience."

"Nor have I, yet," laughed Fairlie, and they put the baby back in the cradle and Morag, with a practised toe on the rocker, kept it jogging.

Nora was pale and thin, Fairlie noted with pity. If only Lowanna continued to bide quietly with Elspeth, and when plans were complete, go west with the fur-brigade . . .

"You must come over often," she urged impulsively, as they prepared to go. "You bring her, Morag."

"I will that. Och, quiet you now, heart's darling. He hates to see me go." She laid her hand flat on the hood of the cradle. "Look now, it's a good wish I'm putting on him. See, he's quiet. He knows."

Summer waned and September came mistily to hill-side and valley. The wild asters and the golden-rod hid the rail fences, and the choke-cherries hung in dark red clusters. The elder-berries, too, were ripe. Fairlie took a small basket and lined it with grape-leaves, and walked down by the creek that flowed out of the woods from the north. She bent the branches and shook them, and the small dark berries fell softly into the basket. Soon her fingers were stained purple. Her basket was full. The afternoon sun was warm on her hair and on her shoulders.

Idly she followed the little stream into the edge of the wood where a spring came bubbling up. It was a quiet place. There was only the sound of the stirring of leaves. She sat down, her basket in her lap, and dabbled her fingers in the cool, brown water.

If I had a mug, she thought. She cupped her hand, dipped and raised it, but most of the water was lost on the way. She laughed softly.

Then she saw Hugh standing and looking down at her.

"My luck is with me," he said.

She smiled at him. It was too lazy and too good a day to be anything but friendly.

He sat down and she held out the elder-berries. He tipped some into his hand and ate them slowly. He seemed less arrogant today. Then he looked at her directly.

"I have wanted to tell you how sorry I was about Young Alec, last spring."

Her eyes clouded.

“I never meant to harm him.”

“I know,” she sighed. “But I can’t understand why you taunted him into danger.”

“Why?” He was silent and moody for a moment, then, “Because of Michael, I suppose.”

“Why Michael?”

“Why, indeed?” he repeated softly, and looked away into the woods.

A flush of resentment touched Fairlie’s cheek-bones. In the silence that followed Janet appeared on the brow of the hill.

“She’s coming this way. For the cows,” surmised Hugh gloomily. “The world is too full of women.”

“But there’s only one that counts.”

He lifted his eye-brows.

“Nora.”

“I suppose so. But Nora is not very pleased with me now.”

“Did you expect her to be?”

“No. I did not.” His face was for a moment unguarded, and full of distress.

“You can make her happy.”

He shook his head. “Not any more.”

“But you can.”

There was a short silence. “You may be right,” he assented courteously. “And now will you give me a drink?”

Their eyes met.

“My hands are not clean,” he said softly.

There was a glimmer of mirth in her face. “Wash them,” she said. He stared at her for a moment, then he laughed, and the air between them was suddenly free and companionable. He dashed water from the spring over his palms, then scooped and drank.

He rose, gave Fairlie a smile that was at once warm and rueful, raised his hand to her in a half-salute, and went on down the creek, a tall and swinging figure in the sunshine.

The mellow afternoon darkened to dusk, to midnight. The moon, sailing through the open places of the sky, shone in an upper window of the Glen William manse, and touched the dark face of Lowanna, the Indian girl. She moved restlessly, then her eyes flew open, and she was awake.

She rolled softly out of bed, and knelt by the window. The air was warm. The little leaves moved mysteriously. The red moon soared in the sky. This was the time. The weeks of waiting were over.

The Moon of Young Leaves it had been when she came. She was wiser now. She was also more beautiful. The red dress with its brave jet buttons lay over a chair. Quickly she slipped into it. Quickly she smoothed and braided her long black hair. She was careful. She knew which of the boards in the floor creaked, which step on the stair. Softly she crossed the dim kitchen, softly withdrew the bolt and padded in her moccasins down the path and into the village.

Like a shadow she slipped from one clump of trees to another, and then down to the river-side. Boats lay moored. She took a canoe and pushed out into the river.

The trees were dark masses on either side. The water was like flowing steel, between them. Sounds came out of the night, the bark of a fox, the quavering cry of a racoon.

Effortlessly she plunged her paddle. She felt strong. Her very skin seemed smooth and rich. The dark ecstasy of the night flowed over her. Her eyes smiled.

In time she came to the mouth of the Beaver Creek. Deftly she turned in the nose of her canoe, hugging the shore and paddling warily.

She bent forward flatly and went under the narrow plank bridge by the new barn. But when she came opposite the log house of Red Hugh MacDonell she pushed in and pulled the boat up on the shore.

Walking lightly, she neared the house, circled round it, and came to the door of the wood-shed abutting it. The brown collie leaped to his feet with hackles rising. She slipped a firm hand over his muzzle, and talked to him softly, and he lay down again, nose on paws, watching her.

She could have laughed at the ease of it. Because she had been here before. While Michael and that wife of his, with her cool, blue eyes, and the fat Janet whom she hated, had thought her asleep. She knew how to insert her fingers in a loose board by the wood-shed door, and so slip the bolt.

The door swung open. She was within. The hearth was cold. The moonlight was ghostly on floor and table and chairs. But she was not afraid.

She smoothed the bright crimson folds of her dress. Even in the dusk it was rich as the petals of a red flower. Hugh had never seen her like this. He would, he must like her. Had he not before?

Her father had had two wives, and she the child of the second. At times he had been fierce in his anger against one, and had turned to the other, but the one scorned had bided her time, and soon he turned again to her. It was the pattern of life of her people. It was a good pattern. It had always worked.

A sheepskin rug lay on the floor just outside the bedroom door. Lowanna curled herself up on it, sighed deeply, and was at once asleep.

Morning came. Birds chirped sleepily, then broke into full song. The level rays of the sun shone mistily over the dewy grass of the little lawn, and lit up the bed of red geraniums that centred it. A long pencil of light slanted into the bedroom. Nora woke and lay still for a long moment, trying to remember something. That she was happy, that was it. It was a long time since she had been happy. But since last night the bitter weight of resentment that had lain on her heart had rolled away. She felt relaxed and content. After all, it had been easy to forgive.

She turned her head carefully on the pillow, and there was Hugh, his red-gold hair falling back off his broad white forehead. She gazed on him, and thought, "Everything will now be well." She would look ahead, and not back. The Indian woman would soon be away out of the country. Fairlie had told Morag, and Morag had told her. She would never mention her. They would build anew, and forget this bleak summer. She would ask less of life, give more. She would be good to Hugh. She thought of ways. She slept again.

When she woke, Hugh was dressing.

"Lie still, m'eudail," he said in that tender, deep voice that played on her heart strings.

She laughed and slipped out of bed, padding on her bare pink feet to the door. She flung it open, then recoiled, her hand against her mouth.

A dark figure uncurled itself from the rug on the floor. Hugh looked over Nora's shoulder. It was Lowanna.

A shattering scream broke from Nora, then another, then she was silent.

Lowanna smiled slyly up at Hugh. With outspread hand she smoothed the bodice of her red dress. “You like, no?”

He strode across the room to the fire-place. From above it he took down the long musket. His voice was cold and deadly.

“Go.”

He levelled the gun.

There was no mistaking the enmity in that white face, the flanges of the nostrils wide, the mouth cruel, the blazing, yellow eyes.

“But where I go?” wailed Lowanna.

“What do I care? Drown yourself.”

She went out of the house. He followed her with the gun in the crook of his arm, till he saw her go down the path to the creek.

Two days later they found her. She had tied her ankles and wrists together with wild vines. The gay red dress was sodden and muddy, but the jet buttons shone bravely in the light.



❖ ❖ WINTER ❖ ❖

Chapter VIII

It was Alan brought the news of Lowanna's death to Michael and Fairlie. As they listened, Michael's face darkened, and he sat staring into the fire.

Fairlie cried, "Oh, poor Nora!"

Michael turned sharply. "What of Lowanna?"

Fairlie looked at him dumbly.

"She's right." Alan's voice was harsh. "Nora has to live with the shame."

The three sat silent, each intent on his own thoughts.

Fairlie had an uneasy feeling that she had not herself behaved well towards Lowanna. For that dark, fierce, child-like creature, in all the uncertainty and desperateness of her position, she had had scant sympathy. Why? Because of her feeling for Nora? No. She forced herself to complete honesty. It was because Lowanna had come from those far-away western plains, and was in some way a symbol of them. Her presence embodied a part of Michael's life that was to her alien and strange. The Michael who had roamed those plains was still alive in her Michael. That was why she had been afraid.

Ironically, only a few days after the funeral, a letter came from Paul LeClair saying that there was a place for Lowanna with a party going west. Michael answered the letter, his mouth set grimly as the quill scratched over the paper. And then, as if by common consent, the incident was closed. No more did they mention Lowanna between them. It was almost as if she had never come. Almost, but not quite.

Soon late autumn was upon them and all the work that went with that season, the battening down, the storing up and preserving for the winter. Fairlie's spirit rose to meet the demand with eagerness and alacrity. She and Janet salted pigeon-breasts, and stored them in crocks, and some they fried and covered with hot fat. Crab-apples were gathered, and a royal red preserve they made, done in maple syrup and put down in big brown jars. Janet made wine from the wild grapes that climbed over the stone fences, and they all pronounced it good. Butternuts and hickory-nuts were gathered.

One day Ellen brought over a little seedling apple-tree, and they planted it carefully and drove in three staves about it for protection.

“Some day we’ll have an orchard here,” declared Fairlie. “Plums, cherries and apples, on the sunny slope of this hill.”

All the time young Alec was growing sturdier and more demanding every day. It amused Fairlie to see the definiteness and vigour with which he turned to every phase of his small life. At times his blue eyes would crinkle into a smile of pure pleasure, and he would crow and kick in an ecstasy of mirth; then, when he was hungry, he would stiffen and arch that flat little back of his, and open his pink mouth, and roar his demands to the world.

Before the cold weather set in, Michael’s Uncle Colin came to stay with them. He had been alone in his house in the next concession, and lonely. So he brought over his clothes and divided his time between the two homes, Alan’s and Michael’s. He constituted himself young Alec’s willing slave. He would sit patiently by the cradle, his hard old thumb tightly clasped in the baby’s rosy fist, waiting for the moment when the white lids would fly open, and the fat little arms reach out to be taken up.

“He’ll be spoiled,” grumbled Janet.

“Of course. Every bairn should be,” countered Colin, who gave way to no woman.

With the approach of winter, Michael began to cut timber.

“I’ll have more cribs this year,” he told Fairlie.

She had come out to meet him as he came from the woods.

“To take to Quebec?”

“Yes. Where else?”

Fairlie thought of last spring.

He looked at her quickly. “I know. I’m remembering. But nothing will happen this time. Mother will worry, perhaps.”

“Mother!” echoed Fairlie a little bitterly. “What about me?”

He laughed and drew her to him. He was full of high spirits at the very thought of the trip. “You, worry? You have too much sense. Look at that tree.”

In the field west of the house there was a huge maple. Growing by itself in the clearing, it had attained tremendous size and spread of branches. In

the spring it had been a mist of claret-coloured blossoms, and in the fall a great, bright banner of colour.

“It hides the view to the west,” continued Michael.

“But—you wouldn’t cut it down?”

“We could see further.” He ran his finger along the blue edge of his axe.

“I don’t want to see further,” she cried.

He seemed not to hear. He was looking out over the sea of tree-tops to the south, and there was a remembering note in his voice when he spoke. “From the rim of the valley of the Calling River you can see for miles. You can see the grass waving in the wind, and brown, moving patches that are buffalo, and maybe an Indian on a pony, or maybe nothing at all but the grass moving in the wind. They say that plain stretches a thousand miles to the south.”

“Nothing but grass blowing in the wind,” echoed Fairlie, her very voice dreary.

“No fences, no trees, no boundaries,” went on Michael dreamily.

“Will it ever be broken up into farms?”

“God forbid.”

Fairlie turned to the house. “Cut the tree down, Michael, if you’d like,” she said, in a small, tight voice. There was no answer. But as she walked on without turning she could hear the axe bite into the hard maple. She drew her shawl closer. A wind whistled through the bare spiked branches of the thorn-apple tree as she passed.

Uncle Colin proved to be a great help. Many small tasks and chores that Michael found irksome, he liked to do. He mended the harness and greased it, and saw that there was a keen edge on every tool. In the phrase of the country-side, he “took an interest.” Fairlie liked him. There was a sound wisdom and affection about him that satisfied something within her. Perhaps it was that she missed her uncle in Inverness, and he seemed to fill the place.

She came out to the barn one wintry day, and heard as she came the soft thump of the flail on the barn-floor. Michael and Colin were threshing grain. The place was filled with a dusty golden light. On either side were the mows, bulging with hay or sheaves. The winter sunshine slanted in through chinks in the wall, and dust-motes danced in the bars of light.

When the two men saw her, they came and sat with her on the low beam that edged the mow.

Colin smiled at her. "I've just been asking Michael how he'd like to raft down some logs of mine in the spring and put the money by for the bairn."

"You're too good to the bairn," she exclaimed.

They sat quietly for a while in an easy companionship. Fairlie looked about her and had a swift vision of her former home—the austere elegance of an Inverness drawing-room, the spinet in the corner, her aunt at her embroidery. She laughed inwardly at the contrast.

Yet here she was, sitting on this low beam in this log barn, between two men who were dear to her, and she had a warm close sense of belonging and of being in her own place.

It was a little cold, though. She got to her feet and looked down at the others and laughed. "Janet made a milk-pan full of doughnuts for supper."

Michael swung down the steep step from the barn-floor, took Fairlie by the elbows and lifted her. Colin clambered stiffly after.

"You did well, Michael," he said, "getting a good-looking girl like this into the family."

"Best thing I ever did," agreed Michael, holding Fairlie's arm close. And Fairlie rubbed her head against his shoulder, and thought, "He's happy, too. He really is."

She thought it again that evening. Ellen came over, and Alan with his fiddle, and Hughie Ban's son Rorie, and they sat around the fire for an hour of neighbourly talk.

Then Alan took his bow, and drew a long note, and waited, then broke into a skirling mesh of sound. They cleared a space on the floor, and young Rorie, a slim, shy boy with shining eyes, slipped off his boots, and so nimble and light were his feet that they seemed to spin a lace on the bare boards. The others leaned and watched, with warm, appraising eyes. Every move of the dance, every lilt of the music they knew. It was an old pattern of pleasure that went far back in their race, and their hearts opened to it with familiarity and friendliness. When, at the final note, with up-flung arm and flexed knee Rorie stiffened into immobility, and then—suddenly shy again—sat down quickly, they drew in their chairs, and patted his shoulder and praised him.

Across the room Fairlie looked at Michael. The fire-light played over him and he looked blond and handsome. His face was relaxed, and his

laughter when it came was carefree and happy. Reassurance lay warm at her heart.

For a week or more Michael cut timber on Colin's place. "For you, young fellow," he'd say, prodding his offspring in the ribs in a comradely way and calling forth that little, gurgling chuckle that was the baby's latest accomplishment. Then he'd ride off on black Betsy, his lunch in his saddlebag and his axe beside him.

"Take Alan with you," admonished Colin. "A man's a fool to be in the bush alone."

And often Alan did go with him, or young Rorie, but sometimes he went alone. One morning the mare went lame on him and limped painfully the last mile to the log stable at Colin's. The day's work done, Michael left her there and, axe on shoulder, set out for home.

Dusk fell. The pines and spruces made black splotches against the snow. A wind soughed through them and creaked in the bare branches of the maples. But the road was well packed, and the going was good. Till he came to the place where he cut across the concession to his own land. There he paused a moment, looked steadily at the north star, then plunged into the bush.

A round silver moon edged up over the trees and lighted him. He could pick out land-marks, a splintered oak, a thick growth of cedar. He skirted the cedars, and then stopped in his tracks. A long wailing sound shivered up to the moon, and a fear that went back a thousand years tightened the skin at the back of his neck. Wolves.

There was a branching maple fifty yards ahead. At least he could get to that. He reached it. Then the long howl came again. But it was east of him, clearly so. He could then be on his way. At the worst there were always trees to climb. After a pause to check his bearings, he tramped on swiftly and silently towards home.

Then he heard it again, a medley of yelps and howling. He heard something else too, a man's voice. "Horo, horo!" It too came from the thick trees to the east.

Michael stood for a moment rooted. His heart beat lurchingly. Then he broke into a run. And as he ran he felt his strength harden within him, his body taut and light, and his blood quick.

Another call came. The voice was weaker. It was a familiar voice, but whose, Michael could not at the moment tell, and took no time to wonder.

Axe gripped ready, with long leaping strides in the clearings, and weaving swiftly between the thick trees, he made his way. Then the moon lit up an open space, and there was a big oak and a circle of timber-wolves around it, and leaning against the tree, someone.

“Climb, man,” groaned Michael, then, “He must be hurt.”

A wolf crouched and sprang. There was a flash of an axe, and the beast rolled over. A short cry broke from the man. It was Red Hugh.

With a yell Michael leaped into the circle. Slashing and whirling, in a moment he was beside Hugh, and the wolves were hovering uneasily in a wider circle.

“Good man,” gasped Hugh. “I’m glad to see you.”

“What happened?” They stood shoulders touching and their eyes intent.

“Cut myself. Axe slipped . . . bled a long time, I think . . . fainted . . . came to and it was dark.” He spoke pantingly. “I made this tree . . . There’s a shanty beyond that scrub, not ten yards away, . . . I tried to get there. But they came . . . I’d left a trail of blood.”

“Is that the shanty?” A dark mass loomed to their right. “Can you walk, Hugh?”

“I can try.”

“Good. Lean on me.”

“No. I’ll go on my own two feet, if it’s the last . . . och!” He almost fell into Michael’s arms.

Michael bent and heaved him up over his shoulder, then swinging his axe with his free arm, he plunged through the underbrush and reached the shanty. There was no door to shut, boards were missing from the roof, and the moonlight streamed in; but it meant shelter and probably safety. He eased Hugh to the floor.

“Rest there,” he cried, and went to the door. “Come on now, you devils.” His voice took on a high, singing note. But the wolves only skulked in the shadows.

“Look you, Michael. There are dry leaves here. And wood.”

With a flint and steel Michael made a spark, then a tiny blaze behind his hand, then as he fed it, it grew and it lightened the whole cabin. There was, praise be, a pile of cedar sticks, and a few pine knots. And now there was a

fire, a roaring, crackling blaze. Hugh laughed weakly, and pulled himself up on his haunches before it.

“We’ll burn the damn’ place down,” he said, and toppled over sideways.

“Now I can look to your wound,” said Michael.

There was a great gash in the upper thigh, and blood everywhere. The high boot was full of it.

Keeping a wary eye on the door, Michael slipped off his jacket, then tore the sleeve out of his shirt, and that into strips. He bound Hugh’s leg with it. The blood still oozed. He drew the bandage tighter, but there seemed no end to it. He rolled up his coat and put it under Hugh’s head.

The fire-light played over him as he lay. His hair was the same red-gold mane, but his face was like ivory and ridged with weakness. The yellow mocking eyes met Michael’s, but there was no mockery in them now. They were clear and quiet.

Michael found a block of wood and sat where he could command the door. He reached back and tossed more wood on the fire. “The moon’s fading. When day comes we’ll be on our way.”

“How?”

“I’ll take you on my back.”

“You’re a stout man, Michael. Even to think of it.” His eyes closed.

After a while Michael reached out and felt his pulse. The lids flew open, and there was a queer, gentle smile in the golden eyes. Michael smiled back at him, then got up and tried to find above or below the wound a spot where the pressure of his hand would stop the red flood. He failed.

He took up his vigil again. There was no sound save the crackling of the fire, and an occasional pad-pad in the snow without. Hugh slept. Michael hoped uneasily that it was only a sleep.

Then, all of a sudden, came a great trampling and shouting, the shine of lanterns, voices calling, the crack of a musket, then another. It was Alan and Rorie, and Hughie Ban himself, and Colin.

They had heard the wolves in full cry, and had thought of Michael coming home alone. And then, as they came nearer, they saw the fire.

Poles slipped through the sleeves of their jackets made a stretcher. They crossed the snowy surface of the South Branch, came up through the

wooded flat, and then over the fields to Red Hugh's own door, while young Rorie ran quickly on to reassure Fairlie and Ellen.

They laid Hugh on his bed. Water stood out on his forehead, and it seemed more than he could do to hold his eyes open. Nora tore up a linen sheet and washed the wound and re-banded it, and slipped a trickle of brandy between his lips. But he could scarce swallow.

The neighbours were there by now, and Ellen took charge. "Warmth at his feet," she said, "and against his heart. And the wound must be somehow stanchied." Nora went white-faced about, doing her bidding.

Then Ellen came softly out of the bedroom, and put her arm about Nora's shoulders. "I should tell you," she said, and there was a break in her even voice, "that he is now much weaker."

Nora's eyes held hers for a moment, then she broke away. Like a flash she was on her knees beside the bed, her arms flung out across him, her small pale face tight with terror.

"Hugh," she called.

His lids fluttered open, and a smile grew and glimmered in his eyes. "Nora," he said deeply. Then, when he would have said more, his voice failed him. His hand lifted unsteadily, laid itself in a tender, rumpling motion on her hair, then slipped sideways and lay still.

At their own place, later, Michael and Fairlie sat before the fire, their hands tightly clasped.

"You risked your life for him," said Fairlie. "That wipes out any old score. It was fine of you, Michael."

"No, it wasn't," he countered bluntly. "When I saw that red head of his against the tree, I felt towards him as I always have. But he was a man, and the wolves were on him. And I was a man too. That was all, then. But as the night wore on, and we were together there in the cabin, and death was with us, we were like brothers."

He lifted his hand and let it fall. "It's strange. But if it hadn't been that I hated him, I'd have loved him. He was that kind of a man."



◆ ◆ SUGAR-WEATHER ◆ ◆

Chapter IX

WHEN the March sun began to honey-comb the snow, and the sun was warm on the south side of the house, then came sugar-weather. There was no doubt about it. Everyone felt it. A softness and an exhilaration ran in the blood.

Colin leaned back in his chair at the table one mid-day. "Well, the sap will be running."

"Will it, indeed?" rejoined Michael absently, his mind on other things.

"Aye." The old man's voice was eager and decisive. "What would you say, Michael, if I brought over my pans for the sugar-making?"

"Pans! But we have no arch."

"Plenty of stones on that hill-pasture. Give me two days with yourself and Alan and we'll make an arch, and put up a shelter as well. And we'll have better syrup than you ever made in open kettles on the other place."

"Let's," urged Fairlie.

Michael looked up indulgently. "All right," he agreed.

They were two days of great activity. Alan came to help, and young Rorie as well. The snow was cleared off a level place, and flat stones were laid in the shape of a large, open-ended rectangle two feet high. The surface of the stone was levelled off with sand. That was the arch. Over it they raised the shelter, and roofed it with bark.

Then the big pans were brought over from Colin's, and a store of wooden sap-buckets as well. Across the arch the pans were placed, and under them pine knots and shavings laid for kindling.

"Now," cried Colin briskly, "get the spiles and we'll go out and tap."

Fairlie followed them from tree to tree, her feet sinking in the soft snow and her eyes bright with curiosity. With his auger Colin bored a hole on the sunny side of the tree, tamped in a wooden spile, and hung the bucket from it.

“Some make a gash with the axe. Wasteful, and hard on the tree.” He was crisp and business-like. He was the expert.

By the next morning the buckets were full, and by that time the arrangements were complete. Close by the arch a great hogshead stood, to store the sap, and a puncheon was laid on its side on the ox-sleigh, and braced there, for gathering.

Then the oxen plunged through the snow from tree to tree, and the sleigh lurched after, and there was the continual soft splash of sap being emptied from buckets or slapping from side to side in the barrel. The squirrels chattered shrilly and ran along the branches above them, while Spogan threw himself against the trees below and barked hysterically. The bush was full of sound and action and new life.

The fire in the arch was kindled then. The pine knots spluttered, then steadied into a hard, roaring blaze. Wood was continually fed into the great maw. The sap began to steam, and then to bubble in the pans. Colin skimmed it carefully with a wooden ladle.

“You boys see to the gathering,” he said as the afternoon wore on. “Joints getting stiff.” Ladle in hand he sat on a pine-block, half-hidden by the billows of steam that rose about him. He smiled across to Fairlie who sat back on her heels at the open end of the arch, throwing in a pine knot occasionally and watching for the resultant bursts of flame. The air was full of the sweet smell of the boiling sap, and the aromatic sharpness of the pine smoke.

“Have you had a drink of sap yet?” Colin got down off his block. “Come.”

From the nearest tree he dipped for her, and she drank. It was a sweet, cold draught, bland but exhilarating.

“It’s good for you,” said Colin. “It’s spring coming up in the trees.”

Dusk had fallen when they took off their first syrup, strained it through flannel into a milk-can and brought it home on the sleigh. Janet had supper ready and they were all ravenous. When Fairlie buttered her buck-wheat cake and poured on it a thin, amber stream of the warm syrup, she tasted it a little solemnly, then looked up entranced.

“It’s beautiful. Even the smell of it is.”

But the climax of the whole undertaking was the sugaring-off. Early in the day word was sent to the near neighbours, and by late afternoon they

were all there.

The taffy came first. The liquid was thicker than syrup but not yet sugar. It bubbled and swelled silkily. Rorie gathered pans of clean snow, and Colin dribbled thin streams from his ladle, making swirls and patterns on the snow. Then it was hit sharply by the side of a fork, wrapped around the tines, and so eaten.

Never was anything so good. The contrast of the cold crispness of the snow and the warm sweetness on it was sharp on the palate. Nora and Fairlie sat on a log with the level sunlight slanting across them, and Alan brought a pan of taffy to share with them. Carefully Fairlie snapped off a swirl and twirled her fork to wind it, then looked up suddenly and surprised in Alan's face such a look of intentness as he watched Nora that she turned her own gaze carefully away.

A burst of laughter came from Rorie. He had rolled up a soft ball of taffy and offered it to Spogan who snapped it up trustfully. Then stiffened and a look of amazement and reproach spread over his face. His jaws were clamped shut.

Rorie laughed again and patted him. "He's not very smart. Every year someone plays that trick on him."

But now the syrup was thickening. It was a time of stress. It might boil over. It might burn. One had to calculate the exact right moment. Colin leaned over it, ladle poised. Then when it boiled up thickly into a yellow froth all over the pan, he gave the word, and it was tipped and turned out quickly into whatever dishes were available.

Rorie had a half-dozen goose-egg shells to fill. Bread-pans, cake-tins, buckets were all pressed into use. Fairlie chose a large mould and brought it to Nora.

"Please take it," she urged. "But it's still hot, and it's heavy. Maybe Alan will help you."

Alan nodded gravely, and they walked away through the trees.

Scarcely was sugar-weather over when the ice went crashingly out, and the streams were in flood, and the time had come for the raftsmen to be on their long way to Quebec.

Undeterred by the tragedy of the year before, a great company of men were going from the settlement. The Beaver Creek was full of cribs as far as

one could see to the west, and, as before, men gathered on the shore with pike-poles and peaveys and provisions.

“Oh, take care of yourself,” breathed Fairlie fervently as Michael’s arms went around her.

He gave her the quick, hard kiss he always gave her in parting, and rumbled her hair, and told her he’d be back before she knew it. And they were away.

Those that were left walked slowly back to the house, with them, young Rorie, who was feeling aggrieved because his father had not let him go with Michael.

From under shaggy brows Colin looked at him and smiled. “Rorie, how about you and me spearing suckers tonight? We’ll make a pine torch and take Michael’s canoe.” The boy’s face brightened into eagerness.

Ellen was not apprehensive this time, Fairlie noticed. Only sad, remembering. She brought over a piece of tartan cloth. “We’ll make the child a little kilt, now that he’s crawling.”

They fitted the small blouse and the pleated skirt about Alec’s fat little body, and laughed as he patted it pridefully.

“Give him a bonnet and a black-cock feather, and he’ll be off on a foray, so he will,” declared Janet.

They sewed and span and worked together in a quiet, woman’s fashion and were content enough, and the weeks went by. And suddenly Michael was home again, and vitality filled the house once more, and men’s voices, and happiness.

It had been a good trip. No danger. Well, practically none. There was a moment or two at the rapids at the Cedars, and again on Lake St. Peter. Michael looked at Alan, and a rueful, laughing glance passed between them. But they had got good money for the logs, and had seen the sights—ocean-going vessels in the harbour, a man-o’-war among them, the bustle of the steep-streeted old city, the stir of things in Montreal, voyageurs at LaChine. It had been good, exciting.

The night Michael came home Fairlie lighted a little fire in the east room, and they sat on the rose-coloured sofa before it, and were warm and happy and together again.

“The next time, I wish I could go with you,” observed Fairlie idly, her head against his shoulder.

He looked around at her, genuinely shocked. “Losh, it’s no trip for a woman. Besides,” pushing her head down again, “you’re nice to come back to.”

“The trilliums are out,” observed Fairlie after a while. “The woods are white with them. It will soon be time for seeding.”

“Soon,” Michael agreed idly.

“It would be better if those stumps were cleared out of the brulé,” she considered.

Laughing, he turned to her. “Woman, are you trying to get work out of me?”

“No,” she protested, “but it looks a little untidy.”

“All right, we’ll haul them out.”

And they did. It took two weeks of gruelling labour with oxen and log-chains. They prised at them with crowbars to get a purchase for the chains. Then the big oxen hunched their shoulders, and put their heads down, and with slow inexorable force they tore the clutching tentacles out of the earth. For two weeks there was shouting and sweating and hard work. Fairlie was filled with compunction.

“Oh, Michael,” she cried. “I never knew how hard it was.” She held a towel for him as he sluiced off his head and arms at the basin outside the kitchen door. He was black with powdery loam, and his eyes were red-rimmed and tired.

“Never mind,” he said, scrubbing vigorously. “Think of all the johnny-cake we’ll grow on that patch.”

“You’ll be planting corn, then.”

“Aye. According to Colin that’s best. We’re making land, he says,” with a humorous, wry grin.

The corn was duly planted after the plowing and the harrowing was done, planted when the oak leaves were as big as a squirrel’s ear and in the waxing of the moon. Out of a broom-stick and straw and an old coat, Janet built up a fine, imposing scare-crow to keep the birds away. Soon there was a green mist of growth all over the field.

It was a lovely spring. The thorn-apple tree was like a bride for beauty. When the sun was warm, the perfume of the blossoms lay over the whole hill-side. When dark fell, it made the night air sweet and filled the house

with fragrance. At the foot of the hill, the choke-cherries billowed white, and as May moved into June the elder-berry bushes held up their flat, sweet clusters of bloom, and the bees hovered hummily over them.

Fairlie had a flock of tiny chickens that were like yellow balls of down. The mother-hen was tethered by a leg to a stone, and the small things ran about in the short green grass among dandelions as golden as themselves. Fairlie sat among them one sunny day, feeding them crumpled curds, and felt that of all the months of the year surely June was the most nearly perfect, the most beneficent, and gracious and kind.

She was wrong. That night the frost came. By morning the crops were black. The patch of corn that had been the brulé was wilted and destroyed. So were the potatoes, the wheat, the tender shoots of peas and beans in the garden. The watering-trough had a layer of ice on it.

Michael came in to breakfast, tight-lipped and silent. Fairlie, too, was silent. Only Janet kept up a running comment of lamentation and complaint.

Finally Fairlie asked, "Will you re-seed it?"

"Some of it. But it will be late. It will probably get the frost at the other end of the season, too," he added bitterly. "I'm afraid we won't get much johnny-cake off the brulé after all."

"Not this year," assented Fairlie soberly.

She went about her tasks that morning in silence. "After all his hard work," she kept thinking. She kept thinking too of those in the neighbourhood to whom the frost would mean real hardship. Michael had the money from the logs and could buy grain, if he had to. That is, if there was any in the country to buy.

"You'd better seed it again," she cried in sudden alarm.

Michael nodded.

Colin comforted them. "You'll see, as the country is more opened up there'll be less frost in the summer. I mind now thirty years ago, frost was apt to come any month in the year. You've just got to take your chance, that's all."

Michael made no answer. He stood by the window, whistling through his teeth and looking out at the blackened potatoes.

Presently Fairlie went out and lifted a wilted plant and looked at it. It was not only wilted and black, it seemed since the sun had come out to be

melting away into nothingness. She dug into the earth, and brought up the sprouted tuber with its earthy roots.

“Maybe a new shoot will come up,” she thought hopefully. “If it doesn’t, what shall we eat?” She sat back on her heels and considered. “The wheat, too. Perhaps there won’t be any flour next year.”

She went back into the house and fed young Alec his milk and his oatmeal porridge dusted over with maple-sugar. Then she put him down and dropped a kiss on his curly head. “We’ll not let you starve, anyway,” she promised.

Janet was making soap in the back yard. So Fairlie carried Alec out to a grassy spot nearby and sat him on a quilt. Then, with a strip of home-spun tied firmly about his sturdy middle, she tethered him to a stone.

“You’re like the old biddy,” she told him, and he rolled over on his back and kicked up his fat legs, caught a pink foot in one hand and popped his toe in his mouth. Then he was over again on all fours at the edge of the quilt, pulling up the dandelions and throwing them vigorously into the air.

Janet poked at one with her foot. “Queer how the Lord spares the futeless things and takes the very bread out of our mouths,” she grumbled.

Fairlie’s spirits rose in contradiction. “We’ll be clean anyway,” she promised.

The big black kettle was swung over a fire that crackled pallidly in the bright sunshine. In it the rendered fat heated, and to it was cautiously added lye that had drained out of the ashes in the leach. With a long stick Janet stirred the bubbling cauldron. Her gray hair blown by the wind and her striped, home-spun skirt kilted up above her red petticoat, she was an arresting figure.

“She’s like a witch,” thought Fairlie, laughing inwardly, “a stout and friendly witch stirring up a potion.”

“I think it’s done.” Janet looked critically into the kettle. She spooned some of it out in a saucer, and when cooled it proved properly gelatinous.

“It’s done,” she repeated with satisfaction, and doused the fire with a bucket of water. The pot was covered with a board, and the soft soap left to cool.

“Now, come the morn,” she said, “we can wash the blankets.”

And wash the blankets they did. And always Fairlie was to remember that day as a dividing point in her life.

Not that there seemed anything portentous about it. It was a sunny end-of-June morning, with the birds swooping and singing, and the earth sweet-scented and warm with growth.

Down to the creek at the east side of the hill they carried the tubs and the blankets and a bucket of the new soap. When the blankets were duly soused, with a quick look in all directions they slipped off their shoes and stockings, lifted up their skirts and stepped into the tub.

“Oh,” shivered Fairlie, and then suddenly it was pleasant. The soapy water and the wet, spongy fabric were soft to her feet. She steadied herself, then with hands on hips she lifted her knees and tramped valiantly while the suds bubbled and splashed over the edge.

“It’s like bairn’s play,” she cried.

“For a while,” agreed Janet, puffing.

They lifted out the blankets, changed the water, rinsed them, and presently hung them, clean and dripping, on the rail-fence.

Fairlie sat down on the grassy bank, dried her legs on her petticoat, pulled up her stockings and snapped the garters into place. She felt relaxed, happy, primitive. She liked the warmth of the sun and the coolness of the water. She liked the healthy tiredness of her muscles. She leaned back and pressed her fingers into the short, soft grass, and had a queer fey feeling that long ago all this had happened to her before.

For a long time had women washed their clothes by the water-side in the green of the summer. For ten thousand years, maybe. She smiled to herself and shut her eyes, and felt full of a primeval content. Perhaps anything you do that follows an old, familiar pattern of your kind brings with it a certain content, she considered. You’re in a groove of race-consciousness. Her thoughts grew misty. She was drifting softly into sleep when Janet’s voice broke in.

“There’s a canoe coming up the Beaver Creek.”

“Michael?”

“No, a stranger.”

Fairlie followed her quickly up to the house. Her mood of warm content was shattered. Here she was, looking like a washer-woman, wet and untidy,

and her hair tousled.

She had just time to change into a clean print and smooth her hair and tie on her rose-sprigged apron when there were men's voices without. One was Michael's, pleasure in it and excitement, and the other she did not know.

"Fairlie, here's Paul LeClair," Michael announced jubilantly. "My wife, Paul," and Paul bent gallantly over her hand.

"Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! Now I know why my frien' forsake his fur-trading."

Fairlie was friendly and hospitable to him. No wonder. He was so quick and dark and likeable, and fond of "le bebe". "Oh, le grand enfant," he'd cry, and toss him up and butt him playfully in the stomach, and young Alec would clutch his hair and shriek with joy. A hilarious companionship was at once established between them.

With Uncle Colin he was easy and friendly, and to Janet deferential. But why is he here? Fairlie wondered.

"I missed you in Mon'real in the spring," he told Michael. "And so I say to myself, 'Mon Dieu! I'll go an' see him in that Glengarry of his, among all the beeg Scotchmen.' What do they eat," he turned to Fairlie, "to make them grow like the moose in the forest? On a portage, Michael here, or that high-headed rascal, Red Hugh, they carry the whole load. The rest of us just walk along behin'."

"Don't believe him," said Michael. Then, quietly, "Red Hugh is dead. Hurt in the bush."

Paul's face sobered, and he crossed himself. "Peace to his soul then. But not too much peace. He'll like a little of the hooraw-boys over there, n'est-ce-pas? To play on the harp all day not ver' good for Hugh, eh?"

Fairlie smiled. "No, not very good for Hugh," she assented.

After supper they sat by the fire and talked till late, Paul and Michael laughing mightily together. Then Paul turned to Fairlie.

"Now, Madame," he cried, "you must not lose your, what you call your beauty-sleep. Michael an' I, we have yet three, four years to cover. All night it will be, 'Do you remember this?' or 'Where is Baptiste?' or 'Where Big McGillis?' So, don't wait up for us." He flashed a smile at her.

She got up and stood with the fire-light flickering over her, looking from one to the other. Michael rose too, and took her elbow affectionately.

“I’ll carry your candle for you,” he said.

In the bedroom he set the light down and kissed her, and hurried back to Paul. Fairlie stood for a long moment, her eyes meeting the eyes of the girl in the mirror over the bureau, and in the flickering candle-light there was uneasiness in them both.



❖ MICHAEL MAKES A CHOICE ❖

Chapter X

PAUL was staring pensively into the fire when Michael came back.

“Maybe I did not do right, coming here. When I see your wife, so kind, so lovely, I think—why am I here to make her unhappy?”

“What do you mean?” Michael sank slowly into his chair, his eyes wary.

“I will show you. Have you a sheet of paper, a pen?”

Michael brought them.

“See now.” He leaned over the table and sketched rapidly. “I think I do not need to draw in the way up the Ottawa to Lake Superior, my frien’; we have been there.”

“True.” Michael was breathing a little fast.

“Here, you see, is Lake Winnipeg, and that too we know, and the Red River flowing into it, and the Assiniboine. Yes, and here’s Calling River, an’ the Nor’-Wester’s post at Esperance.”

“The lakes come in—there.”

“Oui, oui. But—past the lakes where you, mon ami, ’ave not been. See. Now, around this way comes the South Saskatchewan, and bends sharply like a man’s crook’d elbow. And between the beginning of Calling River and that elbow is only a little lift of land. An easy portage.”

“You draw well, and quickly.”

“I learned from David Thompson. His maps I have used. But this he did not know. He had not been ver’ far up Calling River.”

“Who told you of it?”

“Your frien’, Kinochas.”

Michael’s eyes widened, and his nostrils flared with excitement. “What are you getting at?”

“Let me finish my map. Now we follow down the South Saskatchewan to where it joins the other river of the same name. We double back on the

north river, not ver' far. And there is a way there that leads in through great stands of spruce. There are lakes everywhere, a beeg one to the Nor'-west that the Indians call Waskesiu. But this lake that Kinochas find is not ver' beeg. A little river runs into it out of the north. And there is such fur there, Michael, as you and I 'ave not seen."

"Why have the companies not tapped it?"

"It is not easy to reach. It is north of the Saskatchewan, south of the Churchill, and so off both routes. The way in is ver' difficult, but Kinochas knows it."

Michael sat down. "That's interesting, Paul, but why do you tell me?"

Paul rested his two hands flat on the table. "I think, my frien', you know. In a few weeks you and I could be away. We could join Kinochas at Calling River, get into that country before freeze-up, and winter there."

"The expense of outfitting, food, goods for trade, what of all that?"

"To that I now come. I have an uncle who live in LaChine. But not always. For long time he was independent trader up Nipigon way. Have ver' hard time with the companies. Nor'-Westers, Hudson Bay, all the same. He like ver' much some day to steal a march on them both, to get in behind them. So, when I tell him about this place so rich for fur, his eyes shine. 'My bhoy,' he say—he is half Irish, mon oncle, French mother, marry a squaw—oui, one grand mix—'My bhoy, I give you the best voyageurs on Lac St. Louis, canoes, outfit, stuff for trade, everything. Go into that contree, bring out fine load of fur, an' we both make one beeg lot of money.' Then, of course, I think of you. Not so lonesome for me. An' fine chance to make you rich man, too."

"If nothing happens."

"Ah, oui. That risk we always take."

There was a silence. Michael drew his hands slowly along the arms of the chair. "What of Fairlie and the boy?" His voice was suddenly harsh.

"Now that, my frien', is of course too bad. That is what I 'ave said. To make her lonely, that is ver' sad. But here she is comfortable, safe too. Your kind old uncle, the big woman you call Janet, they guard her bien, no? And it would not be ver' long. In the spring we come out quick by way of Lake Winnipeg."

Silence fell again. Michael sat with his chin in his hand, staring steadfastly into space.

Paul watched him for a moment, then said softly, "What I see all the time is that little river running between the dark spruces down from the north. No white man has been there before, I think. From the beginning of time. The moose an' the deer come down to drink, the white sand is bright in the moonlight, the stars shine in the water. Ver' lonely. Ver' lovely."

Michael's breath came in a long sigh. He rose to his feet. "We'll talk again in the morning," he said, and folded up the map and put it away.

There was but little sleep for him that night. In every nerve and fibre he was conscious of Fairlie sleeping warm and quiet beside him. He raised himself on one elbow, and there in the moonlight was the trundle-bed in which young Alec now slept. He could see the pale blur that was his face, and the little up-flung arm. His son. His wife. His home. He was a fool even to think of leaving them. He turned over and composed himself to sleep. And saw a little river flowing silently down out of the north, between tall trees. "Blast Paul and his map," he thought, and was again wide awake.

In the morning they told Fairlie, and showed her the map. She looked quietly and thoughtfully at it, and then at each of them. They were abashed.

"Finish it," she said, "and write in the names of the places."

So Paul set to work with her watching, while Michael went out to the fields.

With her slim finger she traced the river courses, Red, Assiniboine, Calling River. "Why did they name it that?"

"'Ave you not heard? 'Qu'appelle,' my people call it. A ver' long time ago a French trader married an Indian girl of that tribe. For some reason he go home to France, an' while he is away she get sick an' die. Then he come back. As he get close to her lodge, he hear a voice crying his name. He call, 'Qu'appelle?'. Only the echo answer back, 'Qu'appelle?'. Again he hear her voice, an' again he call, an' again the echo answer. So, they name that river the Qu'appelle, or Calling River."

"I see," said Fairlie softly. "He came back, but too late."

Paul looked sideways up at her through his dark lashes, but she was again intent on the map. Saskatchewan, Pukketowoggan, Waskesiu. "What names!" she sighed. Then, looking fully into his eyes, "Will you leave me—the map?"

"But of course, with pleasure," he cried, and passed his hand over his forehead. "Understand, Madame Fairlie, if Michael like better not to go—,"

he spread his palms.

She smiled a little wryly. "We'll have to leave it to Michael."

In a few days Paul left, and took with him Michael's promise to be at LaChine in two weeks if he were going. He bent over Fairlie's hand. "I am so ver' glad to have met you. An' if so be I take that long lad of yours away for a few months, I promise you I bring him back safe an' soun', and his pockets full of money."

"So long as you bring him back," she told him gravely.

"That will I do," he promised.

Michael was restless. At times moodily silent about the venture, at other times he talked volubly of it, of the price of furs, beaver skin, marten and mink, of the revenue to be won by the independent trader who had the confidence of the Indians and a piece of special knowledge such as Paul possessed. At times he looked into the future.

"We could have a great stone house here, or would you like better to live in the city?"

Fairlie looked around her, and through the open door, at the sunny hillside. She bent and laid her cheek for a moment against his blond head. "Darling," she breathed, and there was a hint of heartbreak in her voice, "I like it here."

"I know. But it would be fine if you never had to do any hard work again."

He bent over the map. "See, this is the way," and he traced for her the journey, his voice crisp and eager. "And here is where we'd winter with Kinochas and his Indians."

"This Kinochas, can you trust him?"

Michael was shocked. "As my own right hand. He was to me like a brother. He's not a true Stoney, you know. They took his mother in a raid, and he a papoose in her arms. They were Blackfeet. Her husband had been killed. When she saw his scalp in the lodge of her captor, she stabbed herself, and the chief of the Stoneys saved the papoose because he said he was the son of a warrior and of a woman with the heart of a warrior. The old chief adopted him. He has great honour in the tribe. Once, did I tell you, he saved my life."

He was conscious, suddenly, of Fairlie's silence, and the words died on his lips. Then he turned straightly to her as she stood by him. "What shall I do? Shall I go or stay?"

She went and sat on the other side of the table. "That is for you to decide."

"Why so? Why shouldn't you have a say in it?"

She looked out of the window. Should she say what she really thought, brush away his arguments about wealth and security, and tell him he was choosing between his home and her in it, and this urge he had for the unexplored path and the far country? Did he himself know the truth of it? Did he divide clearly between his desire and what he thought he desired?

All she knew of a certainty was that he wanted to go. Wanted to go because he longed to see again that wild and distant land that he loved. For that he was willing to leave her. "And not for a single day would I be willingly away from him," she thought bleakly.

"You must decide for yourself, Michael," she said.

He looked deep and searchingly into her eyes. "We'd be very lonesome for each other." His voice was unsteady. "But the time would pass."

"Yes, the time would pass," she agreed. But after he had gone out, she stood looking at the map, and her tears splashed down on it.

Michael took a day to visit his cousin, Captain MacKenzie, whose farm edged the St. Lawrence. There the June frost had not come and the grain and potato crop promised well. So he arranged to have Fairlie provided with all the potatoes and flour she needed, if his own frost-blighted crops were too late to harvest. Young Rorie was always available for hire, and Colin and Janet would be there, of course, and Alan and his mother close-by.

So the issue seemed to have been settled without its ever coming to a sharp decision. And the little core of bitterness at Fairlie's heart grew. But she discussed Michael's choice with no one.

"The man's daft," declared Janet explosively, and Fairlie silenced her with a look. John and Elspeth were aghast, and Ellen was troubled.

"That black-avised man might better have stayed at home," she observed.

Michael stared at her. "Can you not all see," he told her impatiently, "that it's only a matter of months? A winter's catch? By summer I'll be

back.”

“Aye,” said his mother, “and what may not happen in a winter?”

He looked after her, frowning. At least, Fairlie understood. Or did she, she who went about so silently these days? To quiet the little stir of uneasiness at the back of his mind, he flung himself into preparations for the journey, and the excitement bore him up.

Only on the last night did Fairlie break into tears and cling to him. The loneliness ahead appalled her suddenly. She wept stormily for a while, and then was quiet. He kissed her wet eyes and fondled her, and told her that every moment she would be with him. And she, looking into the future, could see him pressing on, eager and interested, and thinking of her only now and then. She didn't believe him, but she loved him. So, when they said good-bye the next morning, there was so much love and pain in her heart that there was no room for bitterness.

He folded her fiercely to him.

“Oh, take care of yourself.” She tried to smile.

“And you,” he cried, looking deeply down into her eyes.

He was gone. And the house was, no matter who was in it, empty. Perhaps ten months, she thought, and felt she could not endure it. But she kept her head high, and went about with a proud, serene look, because she knew her friends pitied her. Her pride suffered.

So she turned valiantly to work. And there was scope for all her energy. The harvest was late, on account of the June frost. In the interval she set herself to preserving the small summer fruits, the raspberries, goose-berries and currants. She boiled them with a little sugar and spread them on pans, and dried them in the sun. They were then cut into squares, sprinkled with sugar, and stored in a box.

“In the winter,” advised Ellen, “stew them up into a sauce. And as for the black-currants, just pour a little boiling water on a square and you have a fine drink for a sore throat or to cool a fever.”

As always, Fairlie felt a satisfaction in this storing-away for the winter. But there was now a difference. She missed the childish pleasure she had had in telling Michael of her every exploit. What had been before interesting and exciting was now no more than a task satisfactorily performed.

Mercifully the frost held off till the harvest was ready. Not this year did Fairlie watch from the window and find the scene Biblical and pastoral. She

was in the field with Janet. She was needed. Colin was in bed with rheumatism. Alan swung on ahead with the big cradle, and they came after, catching up the even swathes and tying them into sheaves. For an hour Fairlie found it pleasant, with the warm sun beating down and the golden grain all about. Then the muscles along her back began to stiffen, to ache. Her hands got sore. The fine loamy soil blew up into her face and stung her eyes. Sweat came out on her forehead and trickled down between her shoulder-blades.

At the end of the row, Alan laid down the cradle. "You go up to the house," he urged. "We'll get Rorie over to do this."

She pushed the damp hair off her brow, and shook her head and smiled grimly at him. But by noon she could hardly hold herself upright as she walked up the hill. Never had anything sounded more welcome than the dinner-horn.

That afternoon she lay on the sofa. Ellen put her hand briefly on her forehead, "Child," she said kindly, "you must take care of yourself."

Tears of weakness pricked behind Fairlie's lids. "I know. But tomorrow I'll do better, and in a week I'll be used to it."

That was true. Soon she worked automatically beside Janet, and felt her muscles harden day by day. By the time the grain harvest was over, though she was thinner, she was strong and supple. But her hands were hard, and the skin of her face was ever so slightly weathered.

Ellen noticed it. "Look you," she said. "Gather a handful of tansy and soak it in buttermilk and wash your face with that, against the tan."

Fairlie laughed. "I don't feel like bothering."

But Ellen was blandly insistent. "You'd better bother. Because you've been lucky in the face God gave you is no reason for neglect."

The tansy grew along the stone fence. It had stiff, green, up-standing stems and feathery foliage, and at the top, clusters of yellow, button-like blooms. The very smell of it was astringent. Fairlie crushed the green leaves and the firm little flowers into a bowl of buttermilk, and duly anointed her face and arms and neck.

"Though why I am doing it I don't know," she thought desolately, and went to the drawer in the table and took out the map and traced the journey with a finger that was browner, harder than before. Were they now on the wide, wild waters of Superior, or pushing up some winding prairie stream?

She folded the map again, and at her heart was an actual pain of loneliness and anxiety.

But the others conspired to help her. Colin took on himself the guardianship of young Alec who was now toddling about and getting into mischief. John and Elspeth came often to see her, and tried to persuade her to come and stay for a while with them. But with her heightened sense of responsibility to the place, she could not contentedly do so, so Elspeth did the next best thing. She brought young Ian and spent a good week with Fairlie at the farm.

Colin took Ian under his wing as well. The three went on many an expedition. They found eggs in nests deep in the hay-mow. They gathered butternuts from the tall trees in the pasture. The two little boys played about the hill-side in the autumn sunshine with the old man to guard and care for them. Fairlie felt a sense of respite and ease. With Elspeth she went back a little into her girlhood, and laughed over old incidents and remembered people she had not thought of for years.

They were digging the potatoes just then on the sunny west slope of the hill.

“Stay you in with your sister,” urged Ellen. “She works too hard,” she said later privately to Elspeth.

“I know. It’s because she is lonely.”

Ellen sighed. “That’s true, and I’m sorry for it.”

Elspeth’s voice softened. “You yourself, Mrs. Ross, are you quite well? You’re thinner.”

Ellen gave her a composed but wintry smile. “It’s just the passing of time, my dear. I’m getting old.”

“I could never think of you as old. Don’t get old.” And she laughed, and slipped her arm about Ellen’s waist.

Alan, as well, had seen the change in his mother. So he drove into Cornwall, one day, and hired a girl to help her in the house. The new-comer was from the north of England, newly out, had been trained as a byre-woman in the old land, and was willing and eager.

Janet looked dourly at her. At her straight, yellow hair, her wide, high-coloured face, and the plump curves that seemed to be continually on the point of bursting her clothes.

“Aye, she’s sonsie, all right,” she admitted, “but she has her eye on Alan.”

It was shortly after that that the matter of the husking-bee came up. Said Alan: “The boys along the road would like to help you with the corn. They’ve offered to come and husk it some night. But it seems to me it would be better to have the husking-bee in our barn, and to bring your corn over there. Then we could have a bit of a dance and a ceilidh.”

“Fine,” agreed Fairlie.

So it was planned. The barn-floor was swept clean, and the corn piled ready. Planks were placed over blocks of wood to make seats, and lanterns hung from the beams and along the wall. Fairlie and Janet came over to help prepare the food. The new girl, Lizzie, was eager to assist, but was in such a fever of excitement that she seemed incapable of concerted action.

“Is it true,” she begged, “about the red ears? That when a boy finds a red ear he has to kiss the girl next him?”

“It has been done,” assented Ellen dryly. “The lass is a bit daft,” she said to Fairlie as Lizzie bounced out of the door. “But willing, and a good worker when she’s not excited.”

They were all busy. Fairlie was making scones, Janet frying doughnuts in a huge pot of fat, and Ellen was cutting into a new cheese.

“It’s not like a logging-bee,” she explained, “Still, they eat well.”

As evening set in, one by one the men and boys crossed over the fields or came up from the road, slipped into the barn and started to work, while the women congregated in the kitchen. Lizzie was nowhere to be seen. Janet walked out to the barn, and stood in the door watching.

The seats had been pulled into a big circle, and the men were industriously stripping the husks from the ears and throwing them on a pile in the centre of the floor. And there was Lizzie among them, sitting motionless beside Alan, and watching closely as his strong fingers tore off the husks.

“She’s waiting for a red ear,” surmised Janet, and walked into their midst.

“Your mother needs you,” she told Alan, and sat down in his place and picked up an ear.

“Raise a song, boys,” she said comfortably.

“It’s too early. We’re not warmed up yet.”

“There’s a pail by the door with a tea-cup floating in it. That should warm you.”

“Later,” they told her, and laughed.

“You sing, Janet,” suggested one. “Sure, we’ve heard you’re the boss-bully singer of the country-side.”

“Aye, then,” she assented. “What’ll you have?”

Without waiting for an answer, she swung into the old song about the Highlandman and the laird’s daughter. Her voice was deep and rich and rollicking. She sat, knees wide, foot tapping, her gray hair ruffled about her strong-featured, humorous, square face, and soon they were all keeping time and joining in the chorus.

“Another,” they cried. “Give us more.” And Lizzie bounced on the bench and giggled. “I wish I could understand it,” she said.

“Here’s one for you now, my brave lass,” offered Janet. But it was still in Gaelic. It was a song they all knew, “Horo mo Nighean Donn Bhoidheach,”—the Nut-Brown Maiden. But the maiden was not nut-brown. She was yellow-headed—Janet was improvising—“a plump partridge, new-come to our glen. And which of you will snare her? You, young Eric, son of Donald? You like the brown hair better. Aye, so. But you, Lachlan MacAllister, with your long shin bones and the black hair pushed stiff off your forehead, you in your lonely cabin, look, look on the Sassenach girl with her round, smooth arms and her strong ankles. Look at the swing of her—swoosh! See her at the making of beds or the churning of butter—Horo mo Nighean—! See her like a peach on a warm wall, or an apple on a high branch, but not very high, not very high at all, dropping—Horo!”

Fairlie was standing in the door. The song stopped.

Lizzie jumped up and sat down again. “If I only knew what it was about! It sounded so exciting.”

Janet still patted with her foot, and hummed and stared into space. Fairlie looked into the faces in the circle of the yellow lantern-light—long, enigmatic faces, sober as judges, but a devil danced in each Highland eye. Two red spots were bright on Lachlan’s high cheek-bones, and his dark eyes smouldered, but not with anger.

Fairlie glanced at Lizzie. “As well, perhaps, you didn’t know,” she said dryly.

Then came a sound of laughter and foot-steps, and there surged into the barn, bright-eyed and ready for the frolic, the half-dozen girls of the settlement and their mothers. Immediately they were interspersed among the others.

“There’ll be lots of red ears now,” remarked Janet.

Fairlie touched her elbow. “What were you up to?”

“Sure,” was the easy reply, “I did the girl a good turn. Found her a husband, I think. She’s better married, that one.”

Rorie Breac came in now with his pipes. Up and down in the space at the end of the barn-floor, he walked, his kilt aswing, to limber up, so he said. With the smooth, cajoling sound of reels and strathspeys in their ears, the huskers set to feverishly, and the corn was finished within the hour.

The floor was then cleared and swept again, and Rorie blew up his chanter and the pipes shrilled out, and skirled into a Highland Schottische. To the heartening strains of “What the Devil Ails you?”, a dozen couples swung into the dance. Then came an eight-hand reel. When Lachlan led Lizzie out on the floor, protesting and giggling, but eager, Janet gave Fairlie a satisfied, grim look, and settled back.



A DREICH SEASON



Chapter X

It was, in Janet's words, "a dreich winter". The snow came early, and the winds blew down from the north, and it was cold. The days were short, and the nights long. The bare boughs of the trees looked brittle with frost.

Fairlie stood at the window and looked down over the flats below, and watched the snow smoking up over the edge of the ridges, and drifts forming and reforming with the wind, till the level field looked like a billowy, frozen sea.

She shivered and turned from the window as Colin came in. His cheeks were red and his eye-brows frosty. He looked ancient and brittle and purposeful.

"What are you going to do?" asked Fairlie curiously.

"Going into the bush with Alan." A knitted scarf was wound about his throat, and his jacket was buttoned up snugly.

Fairlie came over to him. "You be careful, Uncle Colin," she begged. "Don't work too hard."

"Och, sure I'll be careful." He patted her shoulder. "This just does me good."

And in a way he was right. Being the man of the household had revitalized him, given him a brief last fling at responsibility. Fairlie thought: perhaps I should bestir myself more. She wrapped a shawl about her and went out to the barn.

As she entered, the warm, heavy air of the stable met her, and Betsy neighed a welcome, and whuffled gratefully into the oats that Fairlie put in her box. In their stalls the cattle chewed placidly, their heads thrust out and their bodies motionless. They looked patient, or were they just stupid?

But the young ones, the yearlings and two-year-olds that had been out to pasture all summer, were still smooth-limbed and wild and restless. They drew back with brown, wary eyes when she came near, and clashed their

horns against the stanchions in protest against their captivity. "They're not patient," thought Fairlie, "not yet."

The sheep lay huddled together, wisps of hay in their wool, and their jaws moving rhythmically. They jumped up quickly and crowded around Fairlie, and laid their gentle silly heads in her hand. She got them salt, and they took it off her palm, and she felt a certain comfort because she had given comfort to them.

In the mows the hens clucked and scratched in the cold hay, and made nests for themselves deep under the rafters. But there was no use going up to look for eggs. Not till the sun began to warm a little would the hens lay.

Outside again, the cold air smote her. It stung her nostrils and made her breathing hard. She clutched her shawl and buried her head in the folds of it. Even her hair felt cold.

But—Oh, much colder would it be by that far-away northern lake, half a world away. How fared the two adventurers? She had no means of knowing.

"There is one thing to remember," Ellen told her, as they sat spinning together one afternoon. "And that is that time passes. It is a terrible, and it is a blessed thing. The time of waiting passes, and the time of loving passes. But with you it is the time of waiting, and spring will come."

Ellen was a comfort to her. And so, strangely enough, was little Alec. It was not only that he was a lovely, sturdy child and she loved him as any mother would, but that, whereas before he had been all health and vigour and imperiousness, he now seemed to develop in affection. It was almost as if he divined the desolateness of her spirit. He would sit quietly beside her on the settle, his plump, warm little body close against her. She would look down at him and his blue eyes would look thoughtfully up into hers, and Fairlie felt that a strong bond was being forged between them, one that would endure.

Janet took on most of the burden of the work, and scolded Fairlie roundly if she over-tired herself. Colin made things for her in the long evenings. With knife and adze and axe he hewed out a big wooden bowl and ladle for working butter. He helped Janet with the candle-making, as she fitted the moulds with wick and poured in the melted tallow. He himself made a few special, hand-dipped candles and put resinous buds in the melting fat, so that they burned with a sweet, piney odour. These were for the candle-sticks on the east mantel.

The fires were his special care. Always he had at hand a store of feathery cedar shavings and pine knots that burned on the hearth with such a clear, blazing light that candles were hardly necessary in the room. No matter how the wind whistled and whined about the eaves, the fire roared up the wide throat of the stone chimney, and the flames curled around the logs of hard maple, and the house was full of comfort and warmth.

“Would some fish tempt you?” Colin asked one day as Fairlie picked at her meal. “We used to get some good ones in the St. Lawrence, through the ice. Rorie and I might go.”

“It will be cold,” objected Fairlie, “and it’s a long way.”

“Whisht, woman! You’d think I was an old man.”

The next morning they set out in the light sleigh with their axes and pails and fishing gear, and a cold packed lunch. “But we’ll go up to Dougall MacKenzie’s for a warm bite before we start for home,” decided Colin.

Fairlie watched for them a little anxiously as the day wore on, but by sundown they were back with a fine catch of bass and pike and one big muskelonge.

“This will be a good change from salt pork.” Colin’s voice was brisk with satisfaction. He turned to Janet, “Now, boil up a big pot of potatoes, and we’ll put some of the fish by in a barrel.”

A new keg was washed and scalded. Janet cooked the potatoes and laid a layer of them in the bottom of the barrel, mashed and salted them. Meanwhile, the fish had been cleaned and boiled whole. Then Colin took one by the tail, lowered it into the barrel, and gave it a deft and vigorous shake. Immediately all the flesh broke away from the skeleton, and fell in flakes on the potatoes.

“There you are, woman,” cried Colin in high excitement. “Bring more potatoes.”

They alternated so, till the barrel was filled. Then it was solidly headed-up, and set outside to freeze. From that barrel they had fish-cakes all winter.

For Alec, Colin fashioned a little sleigh, and on it he drew him over the snowy hills. He took him in his arms and carried him about the barn, teaching him to stroke the smooth noses of the horses and their velvet muzzles, to lay his hand on the red flanks of the cows, to look into the pen of the noisy, grunting pigs without fear.

They were looking at the young cattle one day when Alec, in his excitement, bounced suddenly in Colin's arms, lost his balance and fell. Fell against a stone in the foundation of the barn. He was unconscious when Colin carried him into the house and laid him on Fairlie's bed. The sturdy little body was inert, and the lids heavy over his eyes.

Fairlie undressed him. "His arm," she cried sharply. It fell limply. It was broken just above the elbow.

"What shall I do?" she thought distractedly, then forced her mind away from panic. Heat, that was it. Warmth to his limbs. A stimulant. Janet brought some toddy, and they forced a little between his lips. Then a pillow was placed beside him to support the hurt arm.

On the back of his head a lump was rising. From time to time he moaned softly. The look of vigour and sturdiness that had been with him all his short life seemed suddenly gone. He looked little and weak, his skin transparent, blue veins showing on his temples. Fairlie took the small hand and held it, and warmed it with her own, and willed him back to life and consciousness. But there was no change.

Ellen came in, composed and steady. She laid her hand on the baby's forehead, and said a prayer in Gaelic. Then she lifted the lids and looked at the pupils of the eyes, and felt the feet for warmth.

"The arm will have to be set. Colin can be making splints. And Alan will go for the doctor."

She pulled the covers up and laid her hand again on the cool little forehead, then turned and looked up, listening. There was a jingling of bells and a creaking of runners on the snow without. Ellen moved towards the door. It opened, and there, wrapped in a great plaid, stood a tall, lean old man. He lifted one hand and gave them greeting:

"Beannaich so!"

"And blessings to you," responded Ellen courteously. "Is it yourself, Dougall? We're glad to see you on this anxious day."

It was Captain MacKenzie who had driven over from his place on the St. Lawrence to see how Michael's young wife was faring.

When he had warmed himself a little, and they had told him of their trouble, he came into the bedroom and looked down at the quiet little figure. "Concussion, I've no doubt. You've sent for the doctor?"

"Not yet."

“I’ve the best team in the county, and they’re still harnessed.”

He wrapped his plaid again about him, crunched his fur bonnet down over his brow, and was away. From the window they watched the big berlot swing down the hill and up the road to the west, leaving behind a windrow of feathery snow.

Ellen nodded. “Dougall is a good man in a hurry.”

Colin came in then, lugging a heavy sack. “He brought this for Alec.” He untied it, and out tumbled a yellow collie pup. Stiff-legged and blinking, he stood for a moment, then recovering himself, he bounded from one to another, barking, and swiping at them with a friendly tongue. He wagged not only his tail but his whole hind-quarters.

“Och,” cried Janet, “and will we not be good to him!” She poured some milk in a bowl, and set it to warm on the hearth.

All afternoon Fairlie sat by the bed, and into the evening. The baby was entirely still, except for the slight rise and fall of his breathing, and an occasional movement of his nostrils. Fairlie leaned over him and as the hours passed the cold fear in the pit of her mind grew and grew till it filled her consciousness. Her hands clutched hard in her lap.

Then the miracle happened. His lids fluttered a little, flew open. There was recognition in the blue eyes, there was affection, there was himself. Young Alec had come back.

He moved slightly, and his head hurt, and his arm hurt, and he began to whimper. Then Fairlie looked up, and the doctor was in the door.

They set the little broken arm, using Colin’s cedar splints. Ellen helped the doctor, and Fairlie stood at the end of the bed, holding a candle and smiling encouragement at Alec with stiff lips. It was over finally. He dropped immediately into a healthy sleep.

Janet had a meal ready, and Ellen insisted on sitting by the bed to watch, while Fairlie went out and poured tea for the three old men who were her guests. Colin sat opposite her. Beside her was the doctor, grizzled and humorous, and complaining of the way the Captain had bounced him over the snowy roads. And on her other side, Dougall MacKenzie himself, lean and straight as a ram-rod, with a hard-bitten, dependable face. Fastidiously dressed, once an officer in His Majesty’s army, he was like someone out of her old world. He would have been at home in that gray stone house beside the loch at Inverness.

“Tut, lass,” he said to her. “You’re not eating.”

“Too happy,” she confessed, and it was true. In the reaction from the long anxiety of the afternoon, just the fact that Alec had wakened and recognized her, and was now peacefully sleeping, seemed to her sheer felicity. “He’ll be as good as new in a few days,” the doctor had said, “and in a month his arm will be healed.”

So, in thankfulness and relief, she laughed shakily, and her eyes were like stars. Not since Michael had left had she looked so flushed and lovely.

The Captain turned to her with a grim smile: “I think my friend Michael is a fool to be away.”

“Oh,” she cried. “But it will soon be spring, and he’ll be starting home.”

As the doctor had promised, Alec’s arm mended rapidly, and though they kept him in bed for a while and fed him on milk and broth and thin gruel, he soon recovered entirely from the concussion. When Colin came in to see him one day, he lifted his arms, and “Up,” he said, clearly and peremptorily.

“I doubt you’ll trust him with me now.”

“Don’t be foolish,” scolded Fairlie. “There’s no one I’d trust more.”

So Colin was re-established as Alec’s chief guardian and companion. And the collie pup became a third member of the trio. Janet named him “Bran”, after a great, historic dog of the very old days, and he increased from week to week in size and in high spirits.

No longer was Ellen able to spend so much time with Fairlie. For, one day, Lachlan MacAllister had come, like Lochinvar out of the west, and had borne off the exuberant Lizzie. At the manse in Glen William they had been wed, and now Ellen was again alone.

“Didn’t I tell you?” said Janet.

That was not all. Nora came up the hill, one day again, and she and Fairlie sat by the east fire for a long afternoon, knitting companionably together.

“I wanted to tell you,”—Nora flushed and looked into the fire—“Alan and I plan to be married soon.”

Fairlie laid her hand on her knee. “I’m glad,” she said simply.

Nora looked different now. She looked secure. Her sweet, pale face, with the pointed chin and the frame of russet hair, seemed not so child-like nor so

vulnerable. But still, thought Fairlie, she'll always look a little young, even when she's old.

"I'm sure you'll be happy with Alan," she continued warmly.

"Oh, I know it," declared Nora. "He's," she paused for a word, "a real man." And flushed, remembering one who had not been. Then she looked at Fairlie and repeated, "He is," and pride and content shone in her face like sunshine.

It's only just, reflected Fairlie after she had gone, that she should now have a true, steady man to love her and stay with her and hap her about with kindness.

Nevertheless, she waxes while I wane, she thought, on a sudden bitter fancy.



◆ ◆ WAITING ◆ ◆

Chapter XII

EARLY in April Fairlie's second son was born. When they laid him beside her on the bed, she cupped a tired hand over his small, dark head, and thought, "I'll name him after my father, and me alone to do it." From then on, he was Kenneth.

Alec came in and stood by the bed, and looked at the baby with wide, wondering eyes. Fairlie reached out for his warm, firm little hand, and held it, and said to herself, "I have two men by me, anyway," and felt a little weak when she remembered that Michael would now be on his way home. Sometimes it seemed as if she could not bear to wait.

Said Ellen, looking gravely down at the baby, "If Michael had known, he wouldn't have gone."

"No, I suppose not," agreed Fairlie, and added privately, "But he'd have wanted to."

Warm weather came early that year. The hill-side was green with grass and gold-dusted with dandelions, when Fairlie walked about in the sharp, spring sunshine, and felt young and slim and strong once more.

One afternoon Captain MacKenzie drove up, with his new carriage mud-splashed, and his bay team weary.

"Atrocious roads, my dear," he greeted her. "Never went through worse. Would have waited for them to dry up, but I had something for you."

He pulled from under the seat a long, burlap-wrapped bundle.

"What d'ye think I have here?" He looked down at young Alec. "An orchard, that's what it is. And when I've got my breath a bit we'll go out and plant it."

After supper they all went out with him into the cool spring twilight.

"They're not all fruit trees," declared Dougall. "I brought some lilac, and rowan."

"I'm glad for that," cried Fairlie, "especially the rowan."

“Aye. They keep the bogles and the banshees away. Now you tell us where.”

On the sunny west slope of the hill they put the apple trees, and the three plum trees, and an English cherry. The lilacs were set close to the house, and near them the slim, feathery, little rowan tree, or mountain ash.

Fairlie walked down the slope a little, and saw her home, not as now, but with lilacs frothing into purple, and apple trees pink with bloom, and the plums a mist of white; or maybe as it would be some autumn afternoon twenty years hence, with the orchard in fruit and the rowan tree a flame of scarlet berries.

Dougall MacKenzie dusted off his hands. “It’s fine soil. Anything will grow here. It’s better than on my place. You’ll have a good farm, you and Michael, to hand down to your two big sons.”

“Not very big yet.”

“Tut, woman! Give them time.”

He cocked his head and frowned at the house. “You could do with a stoop,” he considered. “Shady place to sit. Plant some hop vines beside the posts and you have a rustic arbour.”

That was so. A verandah across the front would give them more living space in the hot summer. “Perhaps when Michael comes home.”

“True. Must leave something for the lad to do. What will you do for the seeding?” He turned to Colin who was tamping down the ground around a slim switch that would, in time, be a lilac tree. In contrast to Dougall’s hard drive and irascible good humour, Colin seemed thoughtful and remote.

“We’ll get Rorie, Hughie Ban’s son, from east the road. Alan will help of course.”

“Aye. Alan’s married, I hear.”

“Two weeks ago.”

“I’ll step over and see them.”

The air was now chill with evening. Fairlie and Colin came into the house, and Colin stirred up the fire and flung on a pine knot. Fairlie lifted little Kenneth from his cradle, and held him in the crook of her arm as she sat before the fire. Then Alec came and climbed sleepily on Colin’s knee, and settled his bright head against his shoulder.

Dusk filled the corners of the room. The candles were not yet lit. Only the fire flickered and flamed on the dark hearth.

Colin began to hum softly, then to sing. His voice had a mellow, rumbling sweetness, in spite of age. It was a quiet old psalm he sang, full of serenity and confidence. It rested Fairlie. She looked into the fire, and held her sleeping babe, and felt a sure beneficence about her. God had been good. The time of the singing of birds had come. Her loneliness would soon be a thing of the past.

After a few experimental rumbles Colin began “Air tròcair Dhe”, —“God’s mercies will I ever sing”. She sensed he was doing more than putting Alec to sleep. He was giving her his faith. A silence fell.

“You’ll not be feeling hard to the lad for leaving you?” Colin’s voice was low and intimate.

“No,” she breathed, and laughed softly. “Only anxious to have him back.”

“Good lass,” he said, and carried Alec to his trundle-bed.

That was early in May. June came in, and went. And Michael had not come. Fairlie grew a little pale and fine-drawn, waiting. At every unfamiliar step, every time the young dog Bran barked in the night, she started and waited, her heart a-beat. Then it was July and deep summer. “I’ll set a date,” she decided. “I’ll try not to worry till the month is out.”

It was August. It occurred to Fairlie that of late no one had mentioned Michael to her, or his coming. Were they thinking . . . ? What were they thinking? She went to Ellen and put her hands in hers and cried, “Why doesn’t he come?”

Ellen held her close, and looked out over her head with quiet, sad gray eyes into space. “Child,” she said. “It’s a long way, and many things may have happened to delay him.”

Fairlie wiped her eyes, and they sat down together.

“You don’t think,” she twisted her hands and whispered—“that he’s dead?”

“No,” said Ellen. “If he were, I think I’d feel it.” Her sombre eyes brooded over the other. “There’s nothing so hard as waiting. For a long time women have waited for men, and looked for them down many roads. You’d think we’d be used to it. But we’re not. I wish I could help you.”

“You do. You have. I’ve not talked of it to anyone else.”

She left with her head up and a bright determined smile on her face, but conscious all the time of what neither of them had dared mention, the possibility that Michael might be staying in that far country because he liked it there. It was in the night-time that the thought came and stayed with her, and would not be routed. By day she went quietly about her work with no visible sign of the dark, desperate sea of fear and doubt and misgiving that was her mind.

The harvest was now on them. And it was borne in on Fairlie that she must cease to look for Michael from hour to hour and from day to day, but must plan and decide and act as the head of the household. Coming to that decision, she felt that she had left a part of herself permanently behind. Her whole nature seemed to firm up and become crisp and decisive.

Rorie was given a man’s wages and worked mightily to prove himself worthy of them. Colin, she saw, must not be allowed to work too hard. He was aging. His body was weakening, though his blue eyes burned with a stronger flame of spirit. She had to plan to save his waning strength. She herself worked with a complete disregard of fatigue. She felt impervious to it. She felt a callous staying power, and a hard nervous urge as well that seemed at times to consume her.

Alan was anxious to help her, though he was now a little pre-occupied with his own happiness. He was a new, revitalized Alan, full of a pawky humour. It was a new Nora, too, who came often to sit with Fairlie in the evenings. Her creamy little face shone with content and happiness. And she was kind. Often when Fairlie and Janet had to be busy in the field, Nora took charge of the little boys, and so helped her.

“She’s sorry for me,” thought Fairlie. “Before, I was sorry for her.”

Harvest was finally over, and still Michael hadn’t come. Fairlie tried to ignore the fear that lay like a stone in her breast.

When Sunday came, she went to church. She sat in the boxed-in pew with Ellen and Colin, and there in the high pulpit was John, her brother-in-law, but today her minister, in gown and bands, and lifted up, and set apart to his office. Below him stood Hughie Ban, precentor, tuning-fork in hand. The people rose and sang, and the music of their voices filled the building up to the high roof. Then the minister read from The Book, and expounded it with vigour and earnestness; and prayed to a God who seemed strong and good and near at hand. From a round window above the pulpit, bars of

coloured light fell over the congregation. They made a golden halo about Colin's gray head. "The Lord's my shepherd," the people sang, the old women swaying with the tune, and lifting ecstatic, trustful faces.

"But I don't just now want a shepherd, nor quiet waters," Fairlie thought rebelliously. "I want Michael. And I want some cure for this dark load of loneliness and fear and anger and despair that I carry with me."

She was silent on the way home. In the afternoon she went out by herself to the pasture by the woods, and sat hunched on a flat stone. It was sultry. It was going to rain. Storm-clouds massed to the west and to the north, and rumbled to each other. Little sudden breezes marched across the tops of the trees. No birds sang. No crickets chirped. All were in shelter.

"So should I be," she thought.

Lightning ripped through the dark clouds, and thunder crashed over the hills. She watched with gloomy satisfaction. Rain drops spattered across her shoulders and were cold on her warm skin. She got up and stood close by a tall old butternut tree.

"This is foolish," a warning voice told her. "Lightning may strike the tree, or the wind blow it down." She was not interested in the voice.

The rain came now like a great curtain of water. The wind tossed the curtain and slashed it into shreds. The branches bent sharply, and sprung up, and were twisted and wrung. Fairlie put both arms about the tree and pressed herself to it. Long shudders passed down the trunk as the wind assaulted it. "Grip well, O tree," she cried, and laughed suddenly aloud. She was drenched to the skin, her hair was heavy with water, her garments were swirled wetly about her. But she felt released, exhilarated. She felt free.

As suddenly as it had come, the storm was over, and Fairlie walked home through a cold, drenched world that was washed clean and beautiful.

When she came into the kitchen, the rain ran out of her clothes to make a puddle on the clean floor. Janet fell on her in consternation. But Colin looked keenly at her, and smiled.

Later in the evening, when they were alone, Colin turned speculatively to her. "Did you ever think that perhaps Elijah made a mistake, when he couldn't find God in the earthquake or the wind, but only in the still small voice?"

"I never thought of it," confessed Fairlie.

“Well, I have. And it’s my opinion that it was because he was getting old. When a body is young and strong, he’s got to find Him in the wind, and in the earthquake.”

They were both silent for a while.

“You think He’s in the wind?” she asked hesitatingly.

“Why not?” He rubbed his hands along the arms of his chair. “He’s everywhere. Now, when I get up in the morning and am off with Bran to bring the cows in from the night-pasture, I stand there on the top of the hill and look down at the mist drifting over the fields, and the big trees tossing themselves awake, and the sun coming up over the rim of the world, and I take off my bonnet to Him that made it.

“Then, when I come down to the meadow, and there is the purple clover and the blue vetch twining through it, and the daisies like a drift of snow, I think to myself, ‘Aye, He has taste.’

“And on a day like this, when a storm comes up and the trees crash and the thunder roars, then I say, ‘Sure, the Lord’s having a bit of Hooraw-boys.’”

Fairlie laughed a little. “I never thought of it like that.”

He shook his head at her. “How do you suppose God’s going to be any good to you, unless you think of Him?” Then, squinting thoughtfully into space, “They don’t draw very good pictures of our Lord. They make Him always Israel’s Gentle Shepherd. As a matter of fact, He was a strong, violent young man from the country. He was often in trouble. Like the one in the old ballad,

‘He lived a life of sturt and strife,
And died by treacherie.’

But he came through. He attained.”

Colin hitched his chair closer to the fire, and held out his hands to it and chuckled. “I doubt if I’m orthodox. Don’t tell the minister all I say.”

Before Fairlie slept she stood at the open window, and looked out. The smell of dampness and of green growth came up to her. The night, moonlit, star-sprinkled, windy, called her. She felt one with it. There was a dark ecstasy of the earth of which she would always be aware. It went far back in her mind, and in the mind of her race. Her God would have to walk with her

there. Because there she knew Him by instinct, and felt Him in her very blood and bones.

And then she thought of a troubled Young Man who sat alone on a Galilean hill-side in the dark of the night and listened to the wind blowing where it listed. Him too she could know.

She went to sleep with a companionable sense of there being something there, close at hand, for her to reach out and grasp.

Soon after that a letter came from Inverness. Said Fairlie's uncle:

“My ever-dear niece:

I have had from your sister, Elspeth, the welcome news of the birth of your second son, and I hasten to convey to you the heartfelt congratulations and good wishes of both your aunt and myself. We note with satisfaction that you have named him after your father, who was to me a very dear younger brother. We can not help feeling a strong desire to see you and your two children, which brings me to my second reason for writing.

According to your sister's letter, your husband is still absent in the distant parts of the continent. Elspeth writes that he will in due course return, but as an impartial observer I am forced to the opinion that she is unduly optimistic. I grieve for you in your anxiety, but I feel I must ask you to face the fact that the long continued absence may mean death from exposure or from wild beasts. I would suggest that you first make inquiries among the agents of the fur-companies, and failing to get satisfaction there, then, my dear Fairlie, you must think of your future and that of your sons. It would seem to be entirely unnecessary for you to continue to live in a place which, while it may have great natural beauty, nevertheless lacks social and educational advantages.

You are aware that you and your sister are the nearest kin your aunt and I have, and I can think of no happier solution to your problem than that you bring your little boys back to your old home. I will gladly assume financial responsibility for their education and establishment in life. If you do so you will be advantaging them, and will be conferring a great happiness on two people who have sorely missed you.

If you but send me the word, I shall be glad to journey out to Canada myself, and personally conduct you home. Need I add that

your aunt joins me in my proposition, and waits with the most affectionate anxiety for an affirmative reply.

Ever your devoted uncle,

Ian Alastair Fraser.”

Fairlie sat for a long time with the letter in her hand. Her first emotion was one of irritation. With the whole road home a water-way, how soon did he think Michael could start in the spring? When the letter had been written, he had not been much overdue.

But he was now, she had to admit drearily. And what her uncle was offering was a home for her and her bairns. She should be grateful.

She laid the letter in the drawer, on top of the map at which she could now seldom bring herself to look, and shut the drawer with a click.

A few days later John and Elspeth came to see her. They, too, had heard from Inverness.

“After all,” Fairlie told them, “Michael has not been gone much more than a year. Why does everyone take it for granted that he’s dead, or that he won’t come back?” The indignation with which she began her speech ended in a whisper.

“You’re right.” John’s voice was steady and matter-of-fact. “It’s much too soon to take anything for granted. And I’ll say as much in my letter to your uncle. Michael may come at any time. Nevertheless, I wouldn’t entirely close that avenue. I mean,” he went on firmly, cutting sharp and clean, “that you must realize that there is a chance that some fatal accident has befallen Michael. If you get certain information about that, then your uncle’s offer might be worth considering. It would be hard enough for you to manage a farm, and a long time before Alec would be old enough to help you. So, I say, make no final decision now. Just tell your uncle that for the present you must remain here.”

When they left, Fairlie stood looking after them, till at the curve of the road Elspeth leaned and waved to her, and they were then lost to view. Then she walked slowly out towards the barn, and there was such an intent and pre-occupied quietness in her face that Janet called back young Alec who was toddling after her.

The chickens came peeping about her feet, so she got oats from the box in the stable, and threw it to them, hardly knowing that she did it. In the big north door-way of the barn she paused. It was quiet here. No one would

disturb her. Here she must face the words that had been ringing in her mind ever since the letter came. What if Michael did not come back?

Well, what? She looked out over the farm. The hot sun beat down on it. The pasture was dry. It needed rain. There were stones on it, the remains of an old glacial drift, that would have to be picked laboriously by hand. There were trees to be felled, slash to be burned, brulé to be cleared, and crops to be sown and tended and harvested. There was twenty years' work before her eyes. The barn where she was standing was of logs. So was her house. She was wearing a short blue home-spun frock. Her hands were brown and hard.

But she had two small sons of her own. And a home for them. Here in this country that was raw and new and hard and demanding. But rich and fruitful too, and very beautiful.

"This is my home," she thought. "I've made it mine. And here will I live, and my boys with me, whatever happens." She laid her hand against the smooth pine of the door-frame, and the very feel of the hewn wood was strengthening.

"I'll still be lonely." Her mind moved on relentlessly. "But I'll live with my loneliness. I'll still love Michael, and miss him by day and by night. I'll live with that, too. I can."

She sat down on the low beam where she had sat with Michael and Colin on a winter's day that seemed long ago. She sat now alone.

There was a sound of running and laughter. Alec came in, with Bran bounding after him. He flung his arms about Fairlie's knees. "Finded you," he cried happily, and climbed up beside her.



◆ ◆ NORTHERN RIVER ◆ ◆

Chapter XIII

JUST then, in a cabin on the shore of a far-away lake, two men sat up in their bunks and stared at each other. They were bearded, gaunt, and dirty. Their clothes were rags, their blankets tanned buffalo skins. The face of one suddenly glimmered into a smile.

“Mon Dieu, Michael, if I met you anywhere else, I’d swear I’d never before seen you.”

Michael sighed gustily, then with thin fingers he began to explore his face, touching chin and brow and cheek.

“Tell me, Paul, am I much marked?”

“There is one small pit over the left brow, and—” he leaned and looked critically at the bare torso—“as for the rest, I regret to say that on your chest there are maybe five ’ondred spots. But maybe, Fairlie, she won’t mind that. And now, for me? Will I frighten the girls in old Kebec?”

The other’s eyes clouded. “You look fine, Paul. Thin, that’s all.”

“Mon ami, you lie,” Paul asserted cheerfully. “I see it in your face. A man with gray Scotch eyes ought not to lie. It shows.”

Michael laughed weakly, and dropped back, and pulled the buffalo-hide up to his chin. His eyes seemed to shut of themselves. He slept.

When he awoke, it was noon. He was alone. It was hot. He pushed the cover off and lay staring up at the roof of the hut. Built of spruce logs, chinked with clay, rough-roofed with bark slabs, it was not a fine habitation. Nor clean. And too long had he been in it.

He could shut his eyes and see the bedroom in his own home, and it seemed to him the ultimate in order and peace and cleanliness. He remembered the ruffled curtains, the soft pillows, the smooth feel of the linen sheets.

He remembered food on the table. Scones hot and buttery, with maple syrup poured over them. Steaming pot-pies. New bread. Rich milk, cold from the cellar, and in a clean dish.

Most of all he remembered Fairlie. A thousand Fairlies. Fairlie laughing. Fairlie grave. As he had seen her first. As he had last seen her. Sometimes, when he had been very ill, she had seemed to be with him. He imagined it, of course, but it had helped him through the worst days.

Then, as in a series of small swift pictures, he saw himself and Paul on their way west. He saw them leaving LaChine, their two great canoes loaded to the gunwales and well manned. Past St. Anne's, where the church bells rang out in a sweet, sad tangle of sound that was like a long farewell. Up the Ottawa, full of high spirits and hilarity, plunging their paddles and singing. Then the Mattawa, and Lake Nipissing, and the French River. And then the big lakes and the Grand Portage, and soon—the west country.

His thoughts thinned out, became vague. He dozed. He was wakened by the pad of moccasined feet. A young squaw stood before him, her two hands cupped about a bowl. He took it, smelled it, looked into it, and shuddered. Broth of the buffalo. Well for him that he could not see the settlings in the bottom of the pot. But there was strength in it, and he needed strength. He lifted the bowl, and drained it.

A shadow struck across the door. A tall Indian entered and looked down at him. "Good?" he questioned.

Michael nodded. "Very good, Kinochas."

"My woman cook good," with satisfaction.

He squatted on his haunches and looked critically at the other. Michael flexed a bare arm, and frowned at its thinness and lack of muscle.

Kinochas grunted tolerantly. "M'sieu Paul take a walk. Little twig across path. He trip, fall down on knees. Swear." His dark face creased suddenly into a grin.

Michael sat up. "When can we travel?"

"Eat big. Sleep. Maybe two weeks."

"Two weeks. How are the men?"

"Good. Like you. Little bit stronger."

"The furs safe?"

"Locked. There the key." It was around Michael's own neck, on a rawhide thong.

"I had forgotten."

A baby squalled outside. "Yours, Kinochas?"

"Mine," Kinochas straightened proudly. "Three weeks."

Michael lay back, and Kinochas pulled the buffalo-hide over him. "Sleep more," he said. "Get strong quick."

But Michael lay and thought. That was how he spent all his waking hours.

He remembered how affronted he had felt when he found on reaching Calling River that Kinochas had taken a wife. Was this the Indian who, not so long ago, had tried to kill Red Hugh in a jealous rage? Here he was with his plump young squaw, Niska, and here was the papoose. He had forgotten Lowanna. When Michael told him, as gently as he could, of her fate, Kinochas listened impassively, grunted once, and never referred to it again.

But it had been good to see the post at Calling River again, to smell the soft, dry perfume of the sage, and look out over the wide prairie with the long grass stirring in the wind, and the buffalo herds like moving brown blankets on it.

Up the Calling River they had come, the light canoes of the Indians with them. Then across to the Saskatchewan, and down that river to the forks, and up the northern branch. After that they struck deep and still deeper into a wild, new, wooded land.

It was late fall by that time, and the weather crisp. By devious streams and across a portage, Kinochas led them, till one evening they came to a small lake, and crossed it, and there before them was a little river flowing silently down out of the north. A cold crescent of a moon hung in a green sky. The spruces were black. The air was so astringent with pine-scent that it tightened the nostrils. It was lonely, as Paul had said. It was also lovely. And exciting. It gripped the heart.

Kinochas pointed with his paddle to a headland bare of trees. It was a good place to camp. And there they had built their cabins and settled down.

It had not been a bad winter. Plenty of firewood. Plenty of game. Plenty of fur.

Their provisions were adequate, peas and pork and biscuits, and pemmican that they had got at Calling River. These were eked out by fresh fish, caught through the ice, and beaver-tail and buffalo-tongue, and other delicacies of the country.

Their store of furs grew. And such furs! Soft brown beaver-skins, sleek otter, muskrat and marten and lynx, all with that thickness and that sheen that meant first quality. The wood-buffalo they killed for meat.

But with the approach of spring a restlessness seized them all. Eagerly they set about getting ready for the time to go. They examined their canoes, repaired them, or made new. They baled the furs. With great good humour they baited each other about their zeal.

“That plump, little girl in the white house by Lac St. Louis, she give power to the elbow, eh?”

René slapped the beaver skin into place. “Par Dieu, when I think of Rose Marie, I work like one beeg fool.”

The weather warmed. The snow melted. The sun baked the ice on the lake, till it became porous and heaved up spongily, and a wind rose and broke it and piled it on the far shore. The little river cast its fetters, too, and the cold, clear water slipped smoothly down into the lake again.

Birds came back. Buds swelled.

“Why not now?” asked Michael.

“Man, do you forget? The ice will be deep and thick on Lake Winnipeg. And down the Saskatchewan come the great chunks and pile up. Ver’ bad for bark canoe. Wait one week. Then we go.”

From the time the ice had gone out Michael had eyed the little river. Where did it come from? From what secret lake, or from what cold spring deep in the heart of the forest? No white men had been there before them, Paul had said. Someway, it belonged to them, to him, that little river. He would take his canoe and push up under the dark, overhanging branches, between the tall trunks, and find what lay around the bends and far into the forest.

“But, of course,” agreed Paul. “We ’ave time. Better wait a few days here than further down.”

Kinochas and Niska came with them, and a few voyageurs. Michael had a moment’s compunction as they embarked. Was he going still further away, instead of homeward? But that was foolish. It was only for a few days.

They thrust their canoes into the smooth flow of the little stream, and in a moment the trees had closed in about them. The air was chill. In some places snow lay in ledges, in others where the sun came through, the grass showed green. A jack-pine leaned across the river, and they had to bend to

pass under. Michael broke off a bough of twisted cones. They curled about the branch, close-set and enduring, and in the pattern they made was something of the hard enchantment of the north.

The further they went, the denser grew the trees, and the light through them was green and dim. It was very still. It was like a great church. No one spoke. Only the paddles dipped softly. And then the light shot through a gap in the branches, and they came round a bend, and there on a rise of land, on a clear space green with grass, stood the brown skin tents of an Indian encampment.

No smoke rose from the tepees. No braves lounged on the grass. Only a mangy dog ran out snarling, and they drove him away. Michael raised his voice and called out. There was no answer.

“Misère,” cried Paul, “but they are ver’ quiet.”

They walked up the slope towards the tents.

Michael called again. No answer. Paul and he exchanged glances of sudden gravity. Niska drifted away from them among the trees. Paul strode over to the nearest tepee and pulled back the flap of the tent. The rest crowded to look.

“Have a care,” cried Paul. “Can you not see what it is?”

“Mon Dieu!” exclaimed René, and crossed himself. “That explains the stench.”

It was death in the tent. Death by small-pox. The bodies of two women, a little girl, and a man were there. They had been dead for some time.

Michael’s voice snapped an order. “Don’t touch a thing. Remember!” His eyes moved peremptorily from one to another. “I know there’s a fine blanket there. And furs, and muskets. Touch them and you die of the pest. To the boats, every man of you.”

There was no need to urge them. They trooped down the bank, tripping in their haste. Kinochas stopped short. “Niska,” he called.

“I am coming,” and she appeared between the trunks of the spruces.

“It’s the pest, Niska,” explained Paul hurriedly. “Did you look into a tent?”

“I looked,” she admitted breathlessly. “I saw papoose.” Her black eyes filled with tears.

“You didn’t touch anything?”

“Oh, no,” she breathed, and they all took their places in the canoe and pushed out into the water.

Down stream, this time, by common consent. And now the green gloom of the spruce-shade was not so much like a cathedral. There seemed something sinister about the silent trees and the filtering sunshine, and the little stream slipping unconcerned and lovely out of the forest, but with pestilence on its banks.

At the encampment they made plans for immediate departure. The bales of fur were bound tight with buffalo-hide. Provisions of smoked meat and pemmican were assembled and securely packed. A last inspection was given the canoes. In less than a week they were ready.

Then the storm came. It turned cold suddenly. A wind came shrieking out of the north, rain in it, then sleet. A film of ice covered everything. Waves lashed on the lake. It was like the beginning of winter.

“We’ll build up the fires and settle down for a few days,” said Paul. “This northern spring is what you call treacherous.”

It took four days for the storm to blow itself out. Then the sun appeared and it grew suddenly warm again. In a few hours they were once again ready, and the little fleet of canoes pushed out across the lake on the first stage of the long journey.

They camped that night on the farther shore, and scarcely had they pulled up on the grassy bank when Kinochas sought out Michael.

“My woman sick,” he said.

Michael looked at him for a long minute. “Sick?” he repeated, in a dull, foreboding voice. “How, sick?”

“She very hot. Her back ache. Arms go stiff when she paddle.”

Michael called Paul and told him. Paul nodded soberly. “An’ I have to confess to you that I ’ave not been well today. Stiff. Fever.”

They held a council, the three of them, and then they called in the others, and laid before them the situation. There was not much doubt that it was the pest. If any of them wanted to leave, there was nothing to stop them. But Michael, Paul, Kinochas and Niska were going back across the lake to the encampment.

Said René, "Let us also go back, but keep separate till we see who has caught it." The other voyageurs agreed.

After a hasty discussion, the Indians left at once. Their brown bodies flashed against the sunset as they dipped their paddles and were away.

Michael frowned suddenly. "No one touched anything at the pest camp, is that right? Did you pick up a blanket, or a gun, or a knife? Did you? Or you?" His fierce glance played over the little group, and touched Niska lying curled up like a sick animal. She moaned softly.

"Did you touch anything?" he demanded, and she lifted her head and looked at him with sick eyes.

"Only the little hood," she gasped, and lay down again.

"What?"

"The little hood. Here." She pulled it from the front of her deer-skin dress. It was woven of strips of soft fur, shaped cunningly to fit a small head. "That papoose not need it any more," she explained. "I think for noder one," and she tucked it again in her bosom.

Kinochas snatched it and threw it far into the lake. His face was like iron. "What you wish me to do to her?" he demanded of Michael.

Michael shook his head. He was suddenly weary. "Take her back to the encampment."

Paul looked up with haggard eyes. "Michael," he said in a low voice, "You remember that I opened the flap of the tent."

So, back to the encampment they went. And here, after a long weary summer, they still were.

But not all. René would never see again his Marie-Rose, and three other graves were beside his on the little headland. Paul had been gravely ill for a long time, and even yet was scarcely able to walk. Michael fell sick, after nursing Paul and then René. But Kinochas had had the disease as a boy, when the pox had swept the prairies and, so, was immune. He helped with them all as one by one they sickened. When Niska was better, she too nursed them, and cooked for them, and trapped and hunted for the larder. There were long weeks which were just a blur of misery in Michael's memory. But the heat, and the flies, the death of his friends, the sound of digging without as Kinochas made a grave for René, these were cut deep in his consciousness, and he could not forget them if he would.

“But now,” he pushed off the buffalo-hide and heaved himself up. “Now we can get ready to go,” he said aloud in deep satisfaction.

Leaning on his stick, and still weak, he supervised the preparations. What furs they could take with their weakened and diminished crew, they would. Pemmican and smoked meat they had in readiness. The long stay in these pestilential log huts was at last over.

The little flotilla pushed out again into the blue lake, and moved towards the spruce-lined farther shore. Then, proceeding slowly, resting often on the portages, they worked their way along the tangled route which took them finally out on the wide Saskatchewan.

At the forks of the river, Kinochas’s way lay up the southern branch. There they said good-bye, and Michael stood watching for a while as the canoe pushed on to the westward, Kinochas and Niska both paddling and the baby in the bow. He felt a little pensive, as if something simple and good was passing forever out of his ken. Yet why should he feel troubled about Kinochas? He was happy enough. He had Niska. And Niska had her little papoose, though not the bonnet she had coveted for him.

Michael thought suddenly of Alec, with a pang at his heart. How big was he now? He thought of Fairlie, too. Was she not always in the back of his mind? He was consumed with eagerness to be home. The centre of his existence was there. That was the anchor, the permanence, in his life. Without his home and Fairlie in it, he would be forever bereft.

He pushed on relentlessly. When he met on the watery highways old friends among the Nor’-Westers, he begrudged even the time to stop and talk. And when they told of their troubles with their rivals of the Hudson’s Bay, and how he must join them again for the sharp struggle ahead, he was only eager to be off.

“ ’Ave pity,” cried Paul. “Me—when you go so fas’, my heart jump out of my chest.”

Michael moderated the pace. He must remember that Paul was still a little weak. As for himself, strength seemed to come pouring back into his veins with every mile he put behind him. His eagerness revitalized him. But worry nagged him. Sometimes he saw Fairlie sick, tired, needing money. He was then consumed with remorse. Never again would he leave her, he resolved, and believed it.

Finally there was Ste. Anne’s, where the Ottawa flowed into the blue St. Lawrence, and then LaChine, and then Montreal. It was now October. They

sold their furs. They bought clothes to replace their travel-stained and ragged ones. Paul was immediately in high spirits. The brocaded waist-coat and the fine-fitting trousers restored him.

“You not take time for one small celebration?” he asked plaintively. “My uncle ’ave ready the fatted calf.”

Michael smiled and shook his head. “I’m off home to Glengarry.”

“Eh, bien. Well, some time again we winter in the high country, maybe. Au revoir, my good frien’. To Madame Fairlie give my felicitations. An’ tell her that I keep my promise. I bring you back safe an’ soun’, an’ money—well, some—in your pocket. But there was a time, mon Michael, when I think maybe I’m not going to keep that promise.”



◆ ◆ FIRE ON THE HEARTH ◆ ◆

Chapter XIV

FAIRLIE was making crab-apple jelly. As she swung the pot over the fire, and stood, spoon in hand, to watch it, she thought, "It's just three years now, since I came here, a bride." She remembered the day when they carried her chest over from Ellen's, when she had first seen this honey-coloured log house standing so brave and new in the autumn sunshine. It seemed a long time ago.

It was warm in the kitchen, though yet morning. Fairlie grew tired, but she worked on steadily and deftly, and finally there was a row of jelly-filled glasses on the window-sill, and the light sparkled red and clear through them.

"I'll take some to Ellen," she decided.

She thought of Ellen now by her first name. She seemed, of late, not so much Michael's mother as her own friend. In a way, she felt herself a contemporary both of Nora and of Ellen. In years, of Nora; but in the way she was learning to look calmly at her problems, she was growing like Ellen. Though with more underlying turbulence. Of that she was aware.

As she walked over the lift of the hill, the autumn colours sang about her. The leaves of the basswood trees were thin flanges of gold that rustled silkily as she passed. The wind shook the maples, and a rain of red leaves fell. But the fields were green with after-growth, as green as they had been in May.

Alan lifted a hand to her in greeting from the door of the barn, and from his favourite resting-place on the sunny slope of the root-house Spogan rose stiffly and came to meet her. He was getting old. She rubbed the soft fur on his bony forehead, and felt behind his ears, and he pressed against her gratefully.

Nora opened the door. "I'm so glad you came," she cried. There was Ellen lying on the sofa, looking white and wan. "It's a sprain," continued Nora. "Her ankle."

They had been bathing it.

“Och, it’s nothing,” said Ellen, “I’ll just have to keep off it, that’s all.”

“I should say you will. How did you do it?”

Ellen looked a little abashed. “I was putting some things down cellar. I slipped.”

Fairlie regarded her consideringly. The time was coming, she saw, when Nora would be the woman of the house, able, strong to plan and carry through. And Ellen would be like Colin now was. It was the passing of time, both terrible and blessed, as Ellen had herself said.

She unwrapped the jelly. “You’d think I knew I was coming to call on an invalid.”

Ellen held it up and looked through it. “It’s as clear as glass. The things you’ve learned to do in the last three years!”

A quick glance of humorous affection passed between them. “I’ve still a few to learn,” admitted Fairlie.

“Haven’t we all? I have to learn that I can’t leap about like a young girl. How are the boys?”

“Oh, fine. I’ll bring them over to see you.”

“Do. And when you get home tell Colin about my sprain.”

“Of course.”

“You see, he has a charm for sprains,” explained Ellen. “He might tell it to you someday. It has to pass from man to woman, or the other way round. He thinks a lot of you.” She gave Fairlie a sudden sweet smile that lighted up her pale face. “And so do I. I was just remembering before you came in that you are my first daughter. Nora is my second, and a dear, good girl. But there’s something about the first.”

Fairlie leaned and kissed Her. “I’ll tell Colin.” Her voice was a little husky.

On her way home over the hill she blinked the tears out of her eyes. Ellen’s rare show of affection had broken through the shell in which she had encased her feelings. She felt that she could lie down on this green hill-side, beneath this elm with its leaves of rusty gold, and weep away all the heartbreak and uncertainty of the last year. She had set herself to endure, and she would, but at times loneliness washed over her like water over a stone.

Colin and Alec were busy by the wood-shed as she came in. Alec was picking up chips, bending plumply and putting them in a flat pan, while Colin knelt on one knee and with deft strokes of the axe sliced curly pink shavings from a cedar stick.

Fairlie told him of Ellen's sprain. Immediately his face became solemn and withdrawn. He laid down the axe.

"What do you need?" she asked.

"A cord."

He found one in his pocket, then went into the house. From the kitchen Fairlie could hear his foot-steps on the stair, going up to his own room. In a little while he came down, the knotted string in his hand. Nine knots, evenly spaced.

"I'll slip over to Ellen's," he said quietly.

When he came back, Fairlie asked, "How is she?"

"Och, easier. She said it did her good."

Fairlie was diffident, but curious. "You put the string around her ankle?"

"Aye. But that's not the important part. It's when I'm alone and say the words."

"Strange, isn't it?" mused Fairlie.

"It goes back into the very ancient times. Before Christ even, I think." His face was a little troubled. "But the words are good words. You see, it's the mind that matters. They knew that long ago. They knew a lot."

"Was it as far back as Druid times?"

"Maybe. Of course, when Christianity came to our people, it was good news and they took it to themselves. But why should they throw away something useful and good out of their past? It wouldn't be sense. God wouldn't ask it of them." He paused at the door and looked back at Fairlie. "There are two things about God that it pays a body to remember. One is that He's got good sense. And the other is that He's a gentleman. It saves a lot of worry to keep that in mind. . . . And now, here's my big man, Alec. Are you coming to help me draw in the corn?"

The corn was in the field down by the Beaver. It had been gathered into great stocks and between them pumpkins gleamed goldenly on vines that sprawled through the stubble. It was a fine place to play. Alec toddled about

from stook to stook, peering between the long, upright stalks into the dark hollow centres, or sitting down plumply on a convenient pumpkin, while Bran dashed about the field, investigating sound and smell.

Fairlie stood in the door-way and watched for a little. Janet was gathering the pumpkins into a big pile, tapping each with her knuckles to choose a fine, sound one to take up to the house. And Colin was bringing in his load of corn. There was a certain brittle vigour about him still, as he slapped the reins over the backs of the horses and stepped along beside the stone-boat. A bird swooped low over the field, and Bran raced after it, the fur rippling on his back, and then came panting back and lay down by Alec.

Fairlie went back to her work. Tomorrow Elspeth and John were coming, and she was making a pigeon pot-pie for their dinner. She had a vague memory of another pot-pie she had made at an important time in her life. It was when Alec had been born, she remembered, more than two years ago, when she had been young and carefree and happier than now.

Defly she shaped the pastry and fitted it into the bake-kettle, then laid in the pigeon-breasts and added the butter and seasoning. But even as she was moving about, quickly and carefully, she was conscious of an increasing tension within her. It was as if something were going to happen. Might it be bad news coming? This was, perhaps, the way Ellen felt when she had a premonition. It was not a comfortable way to feel.

She clamped the lid down on the pot and set it to bake. Then she turned to the baby who was sitting quietly in a corner on a quilt. He held in his hands a little wooden lamb that Alan had carved for him, and he turned it over and over and talked softly to it in a small language of his own.

Fairlie broke bread into a bowl and poured milk on it, and took Kenneth on her knee to feed him. He bounced a little in his eagerness, then when the edge was worn off his hunger he sighed deeply and rested his head against her and looked up. For the first time he looked to her like Michael. There was something about the temples and the forehead and the eyes, the wide, gray, black-fringed eyes.

She bent suddenly and laid her cheek against the top of his small dark head. Would Michael ever see this little son of his? Was that what this strange feeling meant, this tapping at the door of her consciousness? She breathed shallowly as in fear. Till Kenneth stirred in protest and gurgled at her importunately. There was more in the bowl.

Janet came in with a pumpkin clasped to her ample front. “Do you want I should butcher it now and put it on to boil?” She reached into the drawer for the long knife, and held the pumpkin firmly on the table.

“Is Alec with his uncle?” asked Fairlie.

Janet laid down the knife. “Losh save us, I forgot him. He’s in the field. I’ll go right down.”

Fairlie followed her. He was not in the field. Was he with Colin? No, Colin had driven the load up to the barn ten minutes ago.

The two women looked with sudden fear into each other’s eyes.

“The creek,” whispered Fairlie.

They walked along it, peering into the water.

“Perhaps he’s hiding behind a stook,” cried Janet hopefully.

Fairlie stopped short. “The boat’s gone. Was it here before?”

Janet thought. “It was,” she admitted heavily. “The rope was thrown over that stake.”

Then they both lifted their heads to listen. From far down the creek came a burst of barking. “Bran,” they exclaimed together.

“You look to Kenneth,” cried Fairlie, and set off along the shore, running. Panic clutched her. She could see Bran bounding along the bank, and barking. Could she overtake him? The current was strong.

Her breathing hurt, and her side pained. “Let it pain,” she thought, and ran on. A sudden turn in the creek, and far ahead she caught a glimpse of a dark boat and a little golden head. She must reach him before the creek flowed into the river. Or, failing that, she must get a boat at Hughie Ban’s. Her mind worked sharply, decisively, while the blood pounded in her ears and her eyes were misty from it.

She was nearer now. She could see Alec plainly, sitting up straight and fearless, his yellow curls shining in the sunlight.

“The little voyageur!” she thought and felt tears in the back of her throat.

The plank bridge at Hughie Ban’s was low, but he went under it without touching.

There was no boat there, she saw in sudden anguish. And just ahead the creek swirled out widely into the river.

Then, around the bend came a light canoe and a man in it. With one twist of the paddle he was beside the boat. He put out a hand and gripped it, and brought it to shore.

“Oh, thank you,” cried Fairlie fervently. Then her knees gave way beneath her, and she sat down on the grass. The man was Michael.

It was the next morning. Fairlie had wakened early, and now lay savouring her happiness, savouring the fact that she had only to turn her head on the pillow and there was Michael. A little thin, a little worn, but her Michael.

The long story of his adventurings and his mishaps she now knew. And all that had happened to her, he knew. Eagerly they had poured it out to each other, as if anxious to blot out the months that had separated them. Though that was not entirely possible. Kenneth and Alec, how much of them he had missed, she thought compassionately.

The sun came in through the ruffled curtains and touched Michael and wakened him. His eyes opened, and when he saw her, a light broke across his face. They looked at each other in a sort of passionate content.

Later he stood and rested his arms on the top of the high bureau. His eyes were speculative. “I’ll not go west again, Fairlie. To do well in furs you need to be with the Company. It is not for me. But lumbering, now—that’s different. I saw some great stands of pine along the Ottawa.”

Fairlie turned and stared at him. And was suddenly assailed by secret laughter. Had she thought she had him safely home, that the farm would now hold him? Comprehension broke over her. He was no husbandman, her Michael. The slow working with the seasons was not for him. He was a rover, an explorer, a dreamer of dreams, a trier-out of new things. That was his essential nature.

“He will leave me again,” she thought. “But if he turns home with eagerness, and we are together at times as we are now, that will be my happiness.”

She kissed him gently, in understanding and acceptance. And he laughed buoyantly and rumbled her hair.

Then he swung wide the south window, and the freshness of the morning streamed in about them. The thorn-apple tree glistened in the sunshine, its fruit bright red among the thorns. A brown bird lighted on it, and lifted its

head and poured out a clear cadence of song. Below lay the smooth green fertile fields.

Michael's arm tightened about Fairlie. "I wonder which of the boys will take to the farm," he mused.

"So long as one does," she said comfortably, and then her eyes widened and grew thoughtful. It was as if she looked down the years to come, and saw her children, and their children, and theirs again. Some would be like herself, biding by their home and cherishing it, and others like Michael, faring far, restless and free. And each would do well, doing what he must.

But this house by the thorn-apple tree would be a focal point, a home to them all. At the end of the day they would return to it, in their hearts if not in actuality. In far corners of the earth they would shut their eyes and see it, standing four-square and solid on this Glengarry hill-side, the trees of the forest behind it, and before it meadow and ploughed land.

The thought gave her a feeling of permanence and peace.

She slipped her arm in Michael's and they came out to the big fire-place. Only a few red embers showed beneath the ashes. But Colin's cedar shavings were at hand.

She knelt and kindled the fire on the hearth.

FINIS



TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Page numbers have been added to the Contents.

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Thorn-Apple Tree* by Grace Maclellan Grant Campbell]