

LOVE OF THE WILD



ARCHIE P. McKISHNIE

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Title: Love of the Wild

Date of first publication: 1910

Author: Archie P. McKishnie

Date first posted: July 28, 2015

Date last updated: July 28, 2015

Faded Page eBook #20150718

This ebook was produced by: Al Haines, Marcia Brooks, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>



“She took the rifle once again, and glanced at the boy.”

Love of the Wild

BY

ARCHIE P. McKISHNIE

M. A. DONOHUE & COMPANY
CHICAGO NEW YORK

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	THE WORLD OF THE UNTAMED	<u>1</u>
II.	GLOW AND GLOSS	<u>10</u>
III.	THE BABES IN THE WOOD	<u>18</u>
IV.	BUSHWHACKERS' PLACE	<u>26</u>
V.	COMRADES OF THE HARDWOODS	<u>35</u>
VI.	THE GO-BETWEEN	<u>44</u>
VII.	WHERE THE BROOK AND RIVER MEET	<u>53</u>
VIII.	THROUGH THE DEEP WOOD	<u>64</u>
IX.	AND THE TWILIGHT	<u>75</u>
X.	COLONEL HALLIBUT	<u>82</u>
XI.	THE WILD OF THE WILD	<u>95</u>
XII.	INJUN NOAH	<u>107</u>
XIII.	ON THE CREEK PATH	<u>115</u>
XIV.	PAISLEY RECONNOITERS	<u>122</u>
XV.	WAR TACTICS	<u>132</u>
XVI.	PREPARING FOR THE LOGGIN'	<u>145</u>
XVII.	THE LOGGIN'-BEE	<u>155</u>
XVIII.	OLD BETSY	<u>170</u>
XIX.	OF THE TRIBE OF BROADCROOK	<u>183</u>
XX.	MR. SMYTHE VISITS THE COLONEL	<u>196</u>
XXI.	WIDOW ROSS BACKSLIDES	<u>209</u>
XXII.	THE SHOT IN THE DARK	<u>222</u>
XXIII.	IN THE FIRE CIRCLE	<u>232</u>
XXIV.	THE NIGHT ATTACK	<u>240</u>
XXV.	AND THE DAY AFTER	<u>254</u>
XXVI.	IN THE MANACLES OF WINTER	<u>267</u>
XXVII.	WHILE THE RAIN FELL	<u>277</u>
XXVIII.	A CLEAR TRAIL	<u>285</u>
XXIX.	BLUE SKIES AND A CLOUD	<u>295</u>

XXX.	THE DAWN OF A NEW DAY	310
XXXI.	A MATING TIME	318

Love of the Wild

CHAPTER I

THE WORLD OF THE UNTAMED

The hazy October sunlight sifted through the trees and lay, here and there, golden bits of carpet on the mossy woodland. A glossy black squirrel paused on one of these splashes of sunlight, and, sitting erect, preened his long fur; then as the harsh scolding of a red squirrel fell on his ears he sank on all fours again, and bounded into the heavy shadows of the wood. A pair of pursuing red squirrels sprang from an opposite grove and with shrill chidings crossed the open to the snake fence. By taking this fence they might intercept the quarry's flight, their object being to make short work of the black, whom they hated with an hereditary hatred harking back to the dim past.

In and out they flashed, their yellow-red bodies painting zigzag streaks of gold upon the forest background of green. Suddenly they halted and with tails slashing angrily poured out a tirade of abuse upon the human frustrator of their designs.

He stood leaning against the fence, his young face moody, his eyes focused somberly on the new schoolhouse with its unpainted boards, hanging to the face of the hill across the creek. He turned now, his tall form erect, accusation in his glance. Nineteen years among the wild of the wild had schooled him in the knowledge of signs such as that which confronted him, and which were forerunners of the tragedies so numerous in the wooded fastness. "So you would, eh?" he grated, "you little murderers, you."

At the sound of his voice the male squirrel, less courageous than his mate, sprang to earth and scurried up a scraggy beech. The female, not to be cheated out of her wicked pleasure, attempted the old ruse of dropping to the bottom rail of the fence and darting past the boy in this

way. But the boy had learned the ways of squirrels as he had learned the ways of all the things of the wild, and as the little animal sprang forward his tall body bent earthward. A muffled squeal came from the buckskin cap he held in his hand, and when he arose his brown fingers nipped the animal securely by the back of its neck.

“So it’s you who’ve been drivin’ the black squirrels out of the bush?” he said. “Well, you won’t drive any more out, I guess. You’ve had your last run except the one me and pup’ll give you, and that won’t be a very long one. Here, Joe,” he called, “come here, old feller; I’ve got something for you.”

From the far end of a long fallow came loping a gaunt Irish setter. He hurled his shaggy form upward, but the boy held the prize out of his reach.

“Come into the clearin’ and we’ll have a chase, pup,” he said. They passed over to an open spot in the wood and the boy turned the captive about so that it faced him.

“Now, Joe,” he said, “I’ll just——” He broke off and stood gazing at the animal which had ceased to struggle and now hung passive, its little heart throbbing under its white breast-fur.

“Joe,” whispered the boy, “she’s got young ’uns somewhere.”

The dog sprawled on the warm moss and rolled over and over.

“I reckon some little codgers’ll be missin’ their mammy, pup.”

Joe cocked his ears and looked up at his master.

“They’ll be lookin’ to see her maybe by now,—but,” savagely, “ain’t never goin’ to see her no more.”

The squirrel twisted and attempted to dig its long yellow teeth into the hand that held it prisoner.

“She’s just like everythin’ else that has babies,” frowned the lad, “savage and foolish. Here, you,” he called to the dog, “where are you goin’, Joe?”

The setter was trotting slowly away.

“What’s got into him, I wonder,” muttered the young man; “never knowed Joe to run away from sport before, unless it was that time the old she-’coon slashed his nose, after we’d cut down her tree and found her babies.”

Once more he turned the animal about and looked into its big soft eyes.

"I'm goin' to give you another chance," he said. "Pup don't seem to hanker for your life, and I guess if a dog thinks that way about it I ought to think the same way. It's a mighty good thing for you that you've got young 'uns. And now, you thievin', murderin' little devil—get."

He tossed the squirrel on the moss. The frantic thing crouched for a second, then sprang away and sought the sheltering branches of a nearby tree. From this secure refuge she cursed the boy viciously in squirrel language. The boy nodded, then scowled.

"You're quite welcome, I'm sure," he said, and cramming his hands deep into the pockets of his buckskin trousers he walked thoughtfully back to his old post.

Slowly he climbed the fence and perched himself on its topmost rail, his knees drawn up, his chin sunk in his hands. Once more he gazed somberly across the stumpy clearing to the new schoolhouse on the hill. He hated it; hated the brazen sound of its bell. Mentally he combated it as he combated other elements of civilization. All the young soul of him rebelled against what he considered the defacing of Nature. Those wide swaths which man had mowed through the forest to him meant no advancement. They were scars made by interlopers upon the face of a great sweet mother. Nature had endowed the boy's spirit with her own moods. His soul held the shadows of her quiet places as it retained the records of her swishing songs of trees and waterfalls. He knew no order save that of the great Brotherhood of the Untamed. His was a broad kingdom. It was being usurped and would soon be a toppling power.

Moody and unmoving he sat until the gold splashes crept from the open spaces of the wood and the patches of the yellow-tops of the slashing turned from yellow to bronze-brown and from bronze-brown to gray. A covey of brown quail scurried from a tangled patch of rag-weed to a dry water-run, to scuttle, a long animated line, to the thicket of sumach. Far down in the corner of the fallow another scattered brood were voicing the shrill, mellow call of retreat, and all throughout the darkening wood there sounded the medley of harmonious voices of wild things in twilight song. Only in the soul of the boy was there a discord

that rose and fell and disturbed an old-time restfulness that had been his for nineteen years. Perhaps the indefinable something that whispered to him pitied him also, for resentment and combativeness sank away from his heart with the hazy glow of day. Like his great Wild that nestled in the peace of twilight, his soul threw off its struggles and seemed to rest. When darkness came he climbed down from the fence. Through the forest-trees murmured the low song of early night-breezes, and to him they voiced a prophecy. Something brushed against him, and the boy bent down and drew the shaggy head of a dog over against his breast.

"Damn 'em," he cried chokingly, and shook a clenched fist toward the swaths of civilization. Then slowly he passed out into the darkness, the dog at his heels.

At the edge of the hill he halted and gazed down the long dark hollow of the creek-bed to where a white splash of water slept beneath the rising moon. All along the wooded vista whip-poor-wills piped their wakeful joy-notes, and the musical whistle of migrating woodcock made a shrill treble note to the harsher wing-song of incoming wild ducks. Dew-mists, laden with the scent of dead leaves and moldy woods, crept to him, and he breathed the sweetness in long, sensuous breaths. But all the while the boy looked toward the bay and the golden trail of moonlight across it, to the uneven, scrag-line of Point aux Pins Forest, and wondered vaguely at the savagery of civilization that sought, as it was seeking, to destroy God's life and beauty.

A pair of woodcock arose from a swale and passed between him and the water. Against the moonlight their bronze breasts flashed out for a second and faded, and their mellow wing-notes reverberated dyingly from the shadow. Right across their track a flock of ducks came speeding, their goal the reedy ponds of Rond Eau Bay.

"Joe," the young man said wistfully, "it's funny, isn't it, now? Some goin' and some comin'. Woodcock flyin' south 'cause they hate the cold; ducks flyin' north 'cause they love it."

They passed on, the dog taking the lead. At the edge of a wide clearing they paused alert. The dim outline of a log-house lay before them. From the windows streamed the glow of candlelight. Across the open from the house a figure was advancing, and to the dog's low growl

the boy chided a whispered, "Be still, Joe." When the figure came close to where they waited the boy stepped out and stood before it. His arms were folded tight across his breast and his mouth narrowed to a thin line.

"Did you tell her?" he questioned quietly. The tall man thus accosted stepped back with a startled exclamation.

"Well, Boy McTavish, is it you?"

Young McTavish half crouched, then quickly drew himself up again.

"Yes, it's me, teacher," he said. "What I want to know is, did you tell her?"

"Yes, I told her."

"All right, get out of my way, then."

"Wait a moment, Boy," returned the man. "You understand, don't you, that it is my duty to report all pupils who do not attend school regularly?"

The boy changed his position so that the moonlight would fall full upon the face of the man before him.

"Do you suppose I care for your reportin' me?"

The tone was wondering, contemptuous.

"Why, teacher, you can't hurt me, and you know it. Do you suppose I was thinkin' of myself when I asked you not to tell her? And do you suppose any *man* would have done what you've done?"

"Hush," warned the other, "I can't let you talk to me in this way, Boy. Remember who I am. I won't have it, I say."

"Well, I can't see how you're goin' to help it. I want to tell you somethin', Mr. Simpson, and you've got to listen. Don't you move or by God I'll sic Joe on to you. I'm goin' to tell you again what I told you before. Ma's sick in bed and maybe she ain't never goin' to get up no more. I told you that, remember?"

"Yes, you told me that—well?"

"Well, she's been thinkin' that I've been to school and you and me know I haven't. I couldn't stay in your school and live, but I was willin' to take the hick'ry or anythin' you said, if you wouldn't tell her."

The teacher was silent.

"Pup," said the boy, "see that he answers up better."

The dog growled, and the man spoke quickly.

"I was only doing my duty."

"And it's your duty to tell a dyin' mother that her boy's goin' to hell—I say goin' to hell, and her so near the other place? Do you call that duty?" demanded the boy bitterly.

The moon floated further into the open, lighting up the two; the boy erect and accusing with the shaggy dog beside him, and the tall man before them in an attitude half defiant, half ashamed.

"I didn't quite understand, Boy," apologized Simpson. "I am sorry; believe me, I am. No, I didn't understand."

"And you never will understand. You're maybe all right in your own world, teacher, but you ain't at home in ours. You don't fit this place, and there ain't no use of your ever tryin' to understand it or us. Teacher, you take my advice—go back to the clearin'."

The boy spoke slowly, weighing each word and closely watching the face upon which the white moonlight fell. It was a young face, not many years older than his own. But it was weak and conceited. It grew sullen now, as the significance of young McTavish's words became apparent.

The man turned toward the path to the creek, and the boy stood tall and straight before him.

"Of course, you understand why us Bushwhackers can't just be friends with you, teacher," said the boy. "It's because you are one of *them*—and they are doin' all they can to break into our little world."

He pointed toward the open.

"Out there is where they belong; them and you. Go back there, teacher, and tell *them* to go. It's best, I tell you—best for everybody."

Away down across the clearing on the far bank of the creek, a burst of yellow-red light fluctuated against the skies, and the metallic ring of a saw twanged out, silencing the whip-poor-will's call. Colonel Hallibut's mill was running overtime. All this stimulated that restlessness that had lately been born in the soul of the young Bushwhacker. He stepped out from the shadow and shook his fist at the red glow.

"Damn 'em," he cried. And paying no heed to the figure which stood, with bowed head, on the path, he stepped away across the clearing toward the pale light streaming from the log-house window.

CHAPTER II

GLOW AND GLOSS

Boy opened the door and passed silently inside. Beside the wide fireplace the long gaunt figure of a man was bent almost double. He had a thick shock of sandy hair tinged with gray. His bewhiskered face was hidden behind tobacco-smoke. A time-stained fiddle lay across his knee, his sock feet rested on the hickory fender, and the ruddy glow of the log fire threw a grotesque shadow of him against the whitewashed wall. A pair of high cowhide boots, newly greased and shiny, rested on his one side, while a piece of white second-growth hickory, crudely shaped to the form of an ax-handle, lay on the other. In one corner of the room a bunch of rusty rat-traps lay, and across deer antlers on the wall hung a long rifle, a short one, and a double-barreled fowling-piece.

The lad simply glanced at the man without speaking, and taking the dipper and wash-basin from the bench, passed outside again. When he re-entered, a girl of about eighteen years of age was pouring tea from a pewter pot into a tin cup. Her face was toward him, and a smile chased the shadow from the lad's face as his eyes rested upon it. He dried his hands on the rough towel hanging on the door, and crossed over to the table. He drew back the stool, hesitated, and asked of the girl in a low tone:

"Is she sleepin', Gloss?"

The girl shook her head. Her hair was chestnut-brown and hung below her waist in a long, thick braid. Her eyes were large, gray, and long-lashed like a fawn's.

"You'd best not go in yet, Boy," she said. "Granny's readin' her the chapter now."

"I'll just go in for a minute, I guess."

He entered the inner room and stood gazing across at the low bed upon which a wasted form rested. An old woman sat beside the bed, a book in her blue-veined hands. When she closed the book, Boy advanced slowly and stood beside the bed.

"Are you feelin' some better, ma?" he inquired gently.

"Yes, Boy, better. I'll soon be well."

He understood, and he held the hot hand, stretched out to him, in both his own.

"You're not nigh as well as you was this mornin'," he said hesitatingly; "I guess I know the reason."

She did not reply, but lay with her eyes closed, and Boy saw tears creep down the white cheeks. He spoke fiercely.

"He threatened as he'd do it, and he did——"

He checked himself, biting the words off with a click of his white teeth.

"I know just what he told you, ma. I know all he told you, and he didn't lie none. I haven't been to his school. I can't go to his school. I've tried my best to stay 'cause I knowed you wanted me to. But I go wild. I can't stay still inside like that and be in prison. It chokes me, I tell you. I don't want more learnin' than I have. I can read and write and figure. You taught me that, and I learned from you 'cause——'cause——"

His voice faltered and feebly the mother drew him down beside her on the bed.

"Poor old Boy," she soothed tenderly, smoothing the dark curls back from his forehead; then sorrowfully, "I wonder why you should hate that for which so many people are striving?"

"Don't, ma—don't speak about it. You know we talked it all over before. You called it enlightenment, you remember? I don't want enlightenment. I hate it. I'll fight it away from me, and I'll have to fight it—and *them*."

He shuddered, and she held him tight in her weak arms.

"Dear Boy," she said, "it will be a useless struggle. You can't hope to hold your little world. Now go, and God bless you. Kiss me good-night, Boy."

He bent and kissed her on the forehead, then springing up crossed the room. At the door he halted.

"Yes, ma," he said gayly, in response to her call.

"Did you meet the teacher?"

One moment he vacillated between love and truth. Once he had lied, uselessly, to save her. But he hated a liar. He went back to the bed

slowly.

“Yes, I met him, and I told him that he best be leavin’ these parts.”

Her eyes rested upon him in mingled love and wonder.

“I don’t like—I don’t trust that man,” said the mother earnestly.

“Now go, Boy, and God bless you.”

When Boy sought the table again the tea and meat were stone cold. He smiled at the girl, who was standing beside the fireplace, and she said teasingly:

“I told you you better not go.”

The man with the fiddle across his knees straightened up at her words, and he looked over at Boy with a puzzled expression on his face.

“Thought maybe you’d joined a flock of woodcock and gone south,” he remarked. “Wonder you can leave the bush long enough to get your meals. Where’ve you been, Boy?”

“Nowhere much,” answered the boy, looking hard at his plate.

“Well, we had that teacher chap over again to-night,” said the father, “—smart feller that.”

Boy glanced up quickly and caught a gleam of humor in the speaker’s blue eyes. Then he looked at the girl. She was laughing quietly.

“The teacher says that you’ve been absentin’ yourself from school,” went on the man. “I asked him if absentin’ was a regular habit in scholars same as swappin’ jack-knives, and you ought to have seen the look he gave me.

“‘It’s a punishable offense,’ says he.

“‘Well, I don’t mind you whalin’ Boy some,’ says I; ‘I’m sure he needs it.’

“‘I won’t whip a big boy like him,’ says he. ‘I don’t have to, and I won’t.’

“‘Well, I don’t know as I blame you for not wantin’ to,’ says I. ‘Boy’s some handy with his fists, bein’ a graduate in boxin’ of long Bill Paisley’s.’”

The big man stood up and stretched his six-foot-two figure with enjoyment. In his huge fist the old fiddle looked like a hand-mirror. He threw back his shaggy head and laughed so loudly that the burning log in

the fireplace broke in twain and threw a shower of red and golden sparks up the wide chimney.

“When we were talkin’ and I was coixin’ the visitor to set up to supper and make himself to home, who should drop in but Bill Paisley himself. Gosh, it was fun to see how he took in the teacher. ‘Nice night, sir,’ says Bill, bowin’ low and liftin’ off his cap. I shook my head at him, but he didn’t pay any attention, so I went on eatin’ and let ’em alone. Bill got out his pipe and felt in all his pockets, keepin’ his eyes right on the teacher and grinnin’ so foolish that I nearly choked on a pork-rind.

“‘Would you mind obligin’ me with a pipeful of Canada-Green?’ he asks; ‘I suppose you have a plug of twist in your pocket, sir?’

“The teacher frowned at him. ‘I don’t smoke Canada-Green,’ says he, short and crisp-like.

“‘Chaw, maybe?’ grinned Bill, puttin’ his pipe away and lickin’ his lips expectant.

“‘No, nor chaw—as you call it.’

“‘Dear me,’ sighed Bill, and after while he says, ‘dear me’ again.

“By and by Paisley limbered up and told the teacher he was right down glad to meet a man fearless enough to come to this wild place in the cause of learnin’.

“‘You’re a martyr, sir,’ says Bill, ‘a brave man, to come where so many dangers beset the paths. Swamp fevers that wither you up and ague that shakes your front teeth back where your back teeth are now and your back teeth where your front ones should be. There are black-snakes in these parts,’ says Bill, ‘that have got so used to bitin’ Injuns they never miss a stroke, and they’ll travel miles to get a whack at a white man, particularly a stranger,’ says he. ‘Then there be wolves here big as two-year-old steers, and they do get hungry when the winter sets in.’

“The teacher squirmed. ‘I’ll get used to all that,’ says he.

“‘Sure,’ agreed Bill, ‘but just the same it’s a good thing you’re a brave and a husky chap. Met any of our Injuns yet?’

“‘A few,’ said the young feller, lookin’ scared.

“‘Injuns are mighty queer reptiles,’ says Bill, ‘but you’ll get along with ’em all right if you humor ’em with presents and attend their pow-

wows. Might be a good idea to let on there's Injun blood in you. But whatever you do, if you should happen to have a little nigger blood in you, don't tell 'em. Injuns naturally hate niggers.'

"Bill got up and went in to say 'howdy' to ma. 'She wants to see you, mister,' he says to the teacher, when he came out. 'I suppose you've learned, among other things, that there's such a thing as talkin' too much, so be careful.'

"When Bill went away Gloss and me sat down and listened to what Simpson and your ma had to say to each other. He told her all about you stayin' away from school and a lot of things that seemed to worry her. I thought it queer, 'cause ever since he has been comin' across here we've tried to make him feel at home. But I just put it down that he had it in for you, Boy, on some account or other."

Boy glanced at the girl and her eyes fell.

"If it hadn't been our own house I would have throwed him out," McTavish declared.

"I met him down by the creek as I was comin' home," said Boy absently. "I told him he'd best be leavin' these parts."

The girl came over and leaned across the table toward him.

"Boy," she said, "do you think he will go?"

"Would you rather he'd stay?" he asked quickly.

"No."

"Then he'll go."

She passed from the room, and Boy sat huddled before the table, his head in his hands, his eyes fastened upon the guns hanging on the wall. From the shadows Big McTavish's fiddle was wailing "Ye Banks and Braes." The fire died and the long-armed shadows reached and groped about the room, touching the dried venison strips and the hams and bacon hanging from the ceiling, glancing from the oily green hides stretched for curing on the walls, hovering above the bundles of pelts and piles of traps in the corners of the room. But Boy's mind was not on the trapping activities that soon would bestir the times once more. In his soul he was pondering over the question of his new unrest: a question which must be answered sooner or later by somebody.

CHAPTER III

THE BABES IN THE WOOD

The father arose and hung the fiddle on its nail.

"Best go to bed, Boy," he yawned, picking up the huge clasp-knife with which he had been shaping the ax-handle and putting it in his pocket. When he withdrew his hand it held a letter.

"Well, now, if I didn't forget all about this here epistle," he exclaimed, frowning. "Jim Peeler gave it to me this afternoon. That man Watson, the land-agent at Bridgetown, gave it to Jim to give me. You read it, Boy, and see what he wants."

Boy took the letter and broke it open with nervous fingers.

"Watson says he's comin' over here to see you to-morrow, dad. Seems like he wants to get hold of this place."

He threw the letter from him and walked over to the window.

"By hickory!" expostulated the father, "what do you think of that?"

"What do I think? It's just what I expected, that's all."

Boy lifted the window and leaned out. The moon was flooding the outer world with a soft radiance. The bark of a wolf came faintly to his ears from the back ridges. Old Joe lay stretched in the moonlight beside the ash-leach. As Boy watched him the dog arose, shook himself happily, turned three times around, and lay down again. An owl hooted mournful maledictions from a neighboring thicket, and in the nearby coop the fowl stirred and nestled down again, heads beneath wings. Boy came back and stood beside his father.

"I guess maybe I'm selfish, dad," he said slowly. "It isn't for me to say what I think, although it's mighty good of you to ask. This place ain't mine; it's yours. You've worked hard and long to clear what you've cleared here, and that's a great deal more than any of the other Bushwhackers have done. I haven't been anythin' of a help to you much. 'Course I could be from now on. I'm a man growed, nearly, and as soon as the trappin' is over I might pitch in and help you with the loggin'."

The father laid his pipe down on the table and combed his long beard with his fingers.

"Boy," he said, "every hanged stick of timber and every foot of this four hundred acres of bushland is as much yours as mine, and you know it. I ain't wantin' to clear the land any more than the rest of the Bushwhackers are. What do I want with cleared land? Gosh sakes alive, I'd be so lonesome for the woods that I couldn't live. I can't sleep now if I don't hear the trees swishin' and the twigs poundin' the roof nights. And ain't we tolerably happy, all of us together here, even if the little ma is purty sick and it's mighty hard not to be able to help her? And ain't we hopin' and prayin' that she'll get to be her old self once more, here where the woods breathes its own medicine? And don't we know them prayers'll be answered?"

He bent over and laid his big hand on the lad's shoulder.

"Then we'll naturally put in some great nights, crackin' hickory-nuts by the fire and playin' the fiddle. Why, I wouldn't part with one acre of this piece of bush for all the cleared land in western Ontario."

Boy stooped and picked up the letter.

"Watson writes that he has a cultivated farm near Clearview that he'll swap for this of ours," he said. "Where's Clearview, dad?"

"Why, it's a strip of sandy loam between Bridgetown and Lake Erie. It's too light even to grow Canada-thistles. Well, I guess maybe Watson *would* be willin' to swap that sand for our place. I don't like that man Watson. I can't say why, unless it's on account of some things I've heard of him and that other feller, Smythe, who's a partner of his in some way."

"You mean the Smythe who keeps the store at Bridgetown?"

"The same. You know him pretty well, I guess. He cheated you out of a dozen mink-hides, didn't he?"

"He tried to," answered Boy with a smile.

"Mr. Watson'll find that we're not wantin' to trade farms," affirmed the father.

"There's Gloss," suggested Boy. "If she was where there was a good school——" He hesitated and looked at Big McTavish.

The man laughed.

"Why, bless your heart," he cried, "you couldn't drag the girl away from this bush. She loves it—loves every nook and corner of it."

Boy sighed.

"She sure does," he agreed. "She sure does."

The father brought a pine board from the wood-box and began to whittle off the shavings for the morning fire-making. This done, he gathered them together with a stockinged foot, glancing now and then at the boy, who had resumed his old attitude.

"Watson and Smythe want to get hold of our property for some reason," said the father, "and I reckon it's pretty easy to guess who they're trying to get it for. It's that big landowner, Colonel Hallibut, who has his mill on Lee Creek. I hear that Colonel Hallibut swears he'll own every stick of timber in Bushwhackers' Place."

"That's what troubles me," returned Boy quickly. "You know what them rich Englishmen are like, dad. They have always got hold of everythin' they wanted, and now this one is goin' to try and get our place. But we ain't goin' to let him," he cried, springing up. "We'll fight him, dad; we'll fight him off, and if he tries to take it we'll——"

"Hush, Boy; there's no reason to take on that way. What makes you think he'll try to drive us?"

Big McTavish stood up straight. Something of the boy's spirit had entered into him for an instant.

"You see, dad, we're poor. That is, we have no ready money, though we have everythin' we need for comfort. Then we're lackin' in that somethin' called sharpness among businessmen. We've never learned it. We are like the other wild things that creep farther back into the woods before what they can't understand. We don't know their ways. I tell you, Hallibut would steal this bushland from us, and he's goin' to try. It's valuable. There's enough walnut and oak and the highest class of timber on this place to make us rich—rich, d'ye know that, dad? And ain't Hallibut and his agents tryin' to get every other Bushwhacker under their thumbs same as they're tryin' to get us? But, dad, listen—they won't get us, by God; they won't get us."

The lad was trembling and his face was white and perspiring.

"Boy," chided the father sternly, "you mustn't swear. Watson nor Hallibut nor any other man is that bad. You've let the woods get into you until you're fanciful. Read your Bible, and pray more."

"I didn't mean to swear, dad. I've swore more to-day than I have for years. I can't stand to think that them men will steal this beautiful spot that is ours now, and cut and cripple it and drive its wild things away."

"Hallibut's sawmill is runnin' nights," said the father thoughtfully. "He made French Joe an offer for his timber through Watson the other day, but I guess it wasn't much. Joe owed him money."

"Well, us Bushwhackers are goin' to hang together," said Boy. "We own over two thousand acres of the best timber in Ontario. We can keep it by fightin'. If we don't fight——"

He turned and walked toward the door.

"Boy," warned the elder man, "don't you do anythin' you'll be sorry for. Just forget all about Watson and Hallibut for a time, 'cause I want to tell how we all come to be in this place we love so much.

"Before you were born, Boy, I lived in the States; ranched it in Arizona. And there was a man down there who as much as stole everythin' I had in the world. It was because of a woman that he lived to enjoy it all for a time. That woman was his wife, your ma's more'n friend, little Glossie's mother."

Boy looked up quickly, then dropped his head again.

"That woman was a lot to me and your mother. She was a lady, every inch of her, and educated, too. She taught your ma to be the scholar she is, and she was the kindest-hearted, sweetest woman that could be found in the world. Seems as she run off from a fine home and rich people to marry that man. He was a bad 'un, her man; bad in every way a man can be bad, I guess. He drank and he abused her——"

Big McTavish caught his breath hard.

"'Course," he went on, "we might have killed him—lots of us there would have done more'n that for his wife. But you see that woman stuck to him in spite of all he did to make her life hell; so we let him alone. Your ma worshiped her, or as near it as mortal can worship mortal, and they were a lot together. Women are not very plentiful on the Plains, Boy. When I lost everythin' to her husband, through his cheatin' me on a deal, and made up my mind to quit ranchin' and strike for some new country, she promised us that after her baby was born she'd come to us, no matter where we might be. You see it had come to such a pass

that she simply couldn't live with that man no longer."

The big man paused to light his pipe, and Boy asked:

"Did she come?"

"No. We came direct here to Ontario and settled in this hardwood, me an' your ma and Granny McTavish. All we had in the world was the clothes we wore and three hundred dollars in money. I took up as much land as the money would buy from the Canadian Government and started in to cut out a home. You was born soon after we'd settled here. Peeler came and he settled alongside us and soon after that Declute came.

"We wrote to the poor little woman out West and told her the latch-string was out for her whenever she could come. You see I'd built this house by then, and we all felt tolerably happy and well-to-do. We never got an answer to our letter, and the followin' spring I left you and your ma and Granny with the neighbors and struck the back trail for Arizona. I found that her man had been killed in a quarrel with a Mexican, but nobody seemed to know where she and her baby had gone. I hunted high and low for them, but at last had to give it up. I thought maybe she had gone back to the home of her people, 'cause I learned that her husband had left some money behind him. When I got back here I found two babies where I'd left but one. You had a little girl companion sleepin' in your hammock beside you, Boy. Your ma picked her up and put her in my arms and she cried a good deal, your ma did, and by and by she showed me a little gold locket that she had found tied about the baby's neck. I opened one of the doors and a tiny picture lay there. Then I knowed at once whose baby it was that God had sent to us, and I knowed, too, that the baby's mother would never come now. An old Injun was there, and he told me how a man in Sandwich had given him money to tote the baby down to us. He couldn't tell us much about the man. We called the youngster Gloss, 'cause that was the name the old Injun gave her."

McTavish arose and knocked the ashes from his pipe.

"Now you know how we all come to be here, Boy," he said gently, "and you know why old Injun Noah seems so near to us all. He was the man who brought our girl to us."

Boy did not speak, and the father quietly left the room. At the door he turned and looked back. The boy was sitting with his chin in his hands. Outside, the moon was trailing low above the tree-tops, and the owl's hoot sounded far-off and muffled.

CHAPTER IV

BUSHWACKERS' PLACE

On that triangular forestland of extreme south-western Ontario there was a block of hardwood timber, consisting of something over two thousand acres. This was known as Bushwhackers' Place. On its left lay a beautiful body of water called Rond Eau, and so close to this natural harbor grew the walnut trees that when the night was old the moon cast their shadows far out across the tranquil waters. From the edge of the bay northward and westward the forest swept in valleys and ridges until the lower lands were reached. Then the hard timber gave way to the rugged softwoods of the swales, where the giant basswood, elms, and ash trees gripped the damp earth with tenacious fingers that ran far underground, forming a network of fiber, which to this day wears down the plow-points of the tillers of the soil.

Why this upland was called Bushwhackers' Place, or why the people who held possession there were called Bushwhackers, has never been explained. In fact, those simple people were not bushwhackers, but hunters, trappers, and fishermen. True, each landowner had cleared a little land, quite sufficient to raise the vegetables necessary for his table and fodder for his sheep, oxen, and pigs, during the winter months; but the common tendency among the Bushwhackers seemed to be to let the timber stand until it was required for firewood.

All buildings in Bushwhackers' Place were constructed of logs mortised at the ends. The beams, rafters, and floors of the homes were split or hewn from the finest grained timber procurable. When the walls were raised to a sufficient height doors and windows were cut in them, the rafters of the roof were laid, and the wide slabs, split from straight-grained ash blocks, were placed on the roof, overlapping one another so as to shed the rain. Blue clay was dug from the earth to fill in the chinks between the logs. The Bushwhacker's home was roomy, warm, and comfortable.

Nineteen years ago Daniel McTavish, or Big McTavish, as he was commonly called on account of his great size, had settled in this spot

with the determination of making it a home for himself and wife. The shadowy bushland appealed to him. He set to work with an ax and built a home. Shortly after it was finished a little McTavish was ushered into the world. Meanwhile, two other families had taken up claims near by. These were Jim Peeler and Ander Declute, and they with their wives came over to help name the baby.

Naming a baby in those old days was just as hard as it is in these. Each person had a particular name to fasten upon the new arrival. Peeler wanted to name him Wolfe, after a famous general he had heard of, but his wife protested on the grounds that the Government was offering a bounty for wolves and somebody might get mixed up and "kill him off."

Mrs. Declute wanted to call the boy after some Bible hero. Moses, she thought, would be a good name. He looked just like Moses must have looked at his age, she said.

"I'll tell you how we'll decide," said Ander Declute, after the debate had lasted some three hours. "We all of us have a different name we want to hitch to the youngster. I move that we let Mac here write out them names on a piece of paper and we'll pin it to a tree and let the little chap decide for himself."

"How?" asked the others.

"Well, after we've tacked up the paper somebody'll hold a rifle and we'll let the baby pull the trigger. The name the ball comes nearest to we'll choose. What do you say?"

Everybody thought it a capital plan. The names were written on the sheet of paper and it was pinned to a tree. The baby's mother held the light rifle and pressed the baby's finger on the trigger. The little Bushwhacker did not so much as blink at the report.

The bullet bored one of the names through the letter O, and the name was B-O-Y.

"That's the one I picked on," grinned Declute, "an' it's a good one."

So the baby was called Boy.

Others came to Bushwhackers' Place and took up homesteads.

One, Bill Paisley, drifted in, from nobody knew where, and started "clearin'" near to Declute's place. He was a tall, angular young man, with blue eyes which laughed all the time, and a firm jaw with muscles

that had been toughened by tobacco-chewing. His hair was long and inclined to curl, and altogether he was a hearty, fresh, big piece of manhood. He could swing an ax with any man on Bushwhackers' Place, and cut a turkey's comb clean at eighty yards with his smooth-bore. He needed no other recommendations. The neighbors had a "bee" and helped Paisley up with his house. The Bushwhackers loved bees and "changin' works," for it brought them together. And although on account of much talking, one man could have accomplished more alone than three could at a bee, there was no hurry, and, as Peeler said, "a good visit beat work all hollow anyway." Whiskey was plentiful and a jug of it could always be seen adorning a stump when a bee or "raisin'" was in progress. But because it was good, cheap, and as welcome as the flowers of the woodland, nobody drank very much of it. Maybe it would be a "horn all 'way 'round" after work was done, or a "night-cap" after the evening dance was over; for, be it known, no bee or raising was considered complete without a dance in the evening. Every Bushwhacker's home had a jug of whiskey in it—usually under the bed,—a dog on the doorstep, and sheep, pigs, and cattle in the barnyard. These barnyards had tall rail-fences around them. In the winter months the wolves sometimes tried to scale the fences, and bears tried to dig beneath them. Then the dog would bark and the man would come out with his long brown rifle, and besides bear-steak for breakfast next morning there would be a pelt for the Bushwhacker.

And so the years passed, and the Bushwhackers lived their simple, happy lives and found life good. Little Bushwhackers were born, named, and set free to roam and enjoy the Wild as they wished. Sometimes one of them might stray away too far into the big forest, and then there would be a hunt and the little strayaway would be brought safely back.

When the youngsters were old enough to be taught reading and writing, their mothers washed their faces with soft home-made soap and sent them over to "Big Mac's" for their lessons.

Mrs. McTavish—a self-educated woman—found great pleasure in teaching these children. They were quick to learn and slow to lose what they were taught. As Peeler put it, "every child should know how t' read and write and do sums," so the children of the bush were not allowed to

grow up in ignorance.

Bill Paisley, also, took a hand in instructing the youngsters of Bushwhackers' Place. He taught the boys how to shoot and handle a rifle. It was quite necessary for one who shot to shoot well, as ball and powder were costly commodities. He took the lads on long tramps through the woods when the autumn glow was on the trees. He showed them how to watch a deer-run and taught them how to imitate the wild turkey call.

Boy McTavish was his constant companion, and as a result Boy came to know the wild things of bush and water well. He knew the haunts of the brown and black bears, the gray wolves, and the wary deer. He knew just what part of the clear, deep creek the gamey bass or great maskilonge would be lying in wait for some unsuspecting minnow, and he could land the biggest and gamest of them, too. Many a glorious summer morning's sport did he have drifting down the creek in his canoe and out on the white bosom of Rond Eau Bay, trolling for bass. Boy loved those beautiful mornings of the summer season when the air was all alive with birds and their voices. Through the mist arising from the face of the water he would watch the great bass leap, here and there, a flash of green and gray high in air, and tumble back to glide and sight and dart upon the shiners—wee innocent minnow-fish these, swimming happily upstream like little children just out of school. There would be a shower of little silvery bodies as the minnows in sheer terror leaped from the water before the greedy cannibal's rush, and Boy's hook, with a shiner impaled upon it, would alight amid the commotion, and there would come a tug at his line that made the strong sapling rod bend and dip.

Many a string of great, beautiful bass did he catch on this creek close beside his home, sometimes with Paisley, sometimes with Gloss, sometimes alone.

Boy loved those early mornings of his dominion of marsh and wood; for Rond Eau was very beautiful with morning tints upon her face, as up above the pine-studded Point the lights of dawn came bounding. With that dawn, swift-winged almost as its arrows of crimson, the wild, harsh-voiced ducks came dipping and swerving, to settle and feed in the rich

rice-beds of the bay.

Along the marshes, blue-winged teal would hiss and whistle in their irregular flight. Earliest of all the wild-ducks, they came when the time was between darkness and daylight. Next came the blacks and grays, quacking their way noisily along the shores. High above them a long, dark line would whistle into view and pass onward with the speed of a cloud-shadow. These were red-heads, newly arrived from the south. Still swift of wing, though weary, they would follow on until their leader called a halt. Now lost against the slate sky, now sweeping into view against a splash of crimson, they would turn and flash along the farther shore, sinking lower with diminished speed as they passed an outstretching point of land. A number of their kind, arrived the night before, would be feeding and resting there. Onward the line would pass, and then turning drop down slowly and the ducks would settle among their fellows with muffled spats and heads facing the wind.

Far over the pines of the Point another dark bunch would grow into space, and, turning, throw a gleam of white upon the watcher's sight. These were blue-bills, hardiest of all wild-ducks. They were tired and unafraid and ready to make friends with any water-fowl, whether they were of their own kind or a flock of despised coot. Great flocks of peerless canvasbacks, their wings dipping in unison, their white backs gleaming in the morning light, would grow up and fade and grow to life again. They would sweep around and around the bay, craning their long necks suspiciously, settling ever lower, and passing many a flock of dozing ruddy ducks, that were resting, having fed long before the dawn of day.

Boy would watch these wild, free things with all the joy of a wild thing in sympathy with them. As far as the eye could reach were ducks, and beyond the bay was the wild Point, and above all the wild sky with angry darts of light like ragged knives, slashing its breast here and there.

Naturally Boy resented the advance of anything that tended to destroy the pictures of his world.

A big man from Civilization, who owned the strip of timber across the creek, had built a mill thereon, and all day long, now, that mill sang its song of derision, and the swaths in the wood were growing wider. It

was his own timber the man was cutting—nobody could gainsay that fact; but he was destroying, each day, the creek, that silver thread that had been for so long a home for duck and mink and water-rat. He was destroying beauty and crippling the usefulness of the best trapping and fishing ground of the Bushwhackers. A discord had been set vibrating throughout that wooded fastness. The sibilant song of Hallibut's mill was driving the fur-bearing animals to seek more secluded haunts. The wood-ducks that had nested close in along the wooded shore drifted far back to another creek, and the black ducks did not flutter lazily along the marsh throughout the breeding season now, but high in air and remote from the noise and smoke and jar that was a new and fearful thing to them.

Boy McTavish hated that mill; and that schoolhouse of white boards clinging to the hill he hated, too. Hatred was a strange element with him. It sickened his soul, crushed him, and robbed him of all his old-time restfulness of spirit. The discord could not pass him by.

CHAPTER V

COMRADES OF THE HARDWOODS

Even in this golden, hazy dawn it was with him, as he stood gazing across the creek. The crimson sun warmed his cheeks and the heavy scent of over-ripe woods-plants stole to his senses like a soothing balm. But that scar upon which his eyes rested had reached his inmost soul, and for him the old gladness of sweet, dewy mornings must hereafter be tempered with a new and strange bitterness.

From the tall smokestack of Hallibut's mill a thin wreath of blue smoke ascending cut a spiral figure against the fleecy clouds.

Boy turned and walked up the path, his head bowed and his hands deep in his pockets. Behind him trailed the setter, looking neither to the right nor to the left. His moods were always suited to his master's. For some reason Boy was sad. Therefore, Joe was sad.

Where the path forked Boy turned and, catching sight of the dog's wistful face, he threw back his head and laughed. Then he turned and, bending, caught the setter about the neck with strong arms.

"Joe," he whispered, "you're an old fool."

The dog submitted to the caress gravely and sat down, looking up into his master's face with deep sympathetic eyes.

Adown through the woods came a voice in rollicking song:

*"Massar gone away, de darkey say 'Ho! ho!'
Mus' be now dat de kingdom's comin'
I' de year ob jubiloo."*

"That's Bill, pup," laughed Boy. "He always sings when he's washin' his breakfast dishes. Come on, let's go over and borrow his pitch-fork. You and me have got to dig taters to-day."

A few hundred yards further on they found the singer. He was clad in Bushwhacker buckskins from head to foot.

"Hello, Boy, how's your ma?" he called as he caught sight of the visitors.

"Just about the same, I guess," Boy answered. "Nobody up when I left, so I can't just say how ma spent the night. Want to borrow your

fork, Bill.”

“Take it and anythin’ else you see as you’d like. Say, won’t you step in the house and have a cup of tea?”

“I ain’t much on tea drinkin’, as you know, Bill, and I must be hittin’ the back trail soon, ’cause we want to get the taters dug before night.”

“All right, as soon as I put these dishes away I’ll get you the fork.”

Boy’s eyes followed his friend sympathetically, and when Paisley rejoined him he asked hesitatingly:

“Say, Bill, why do you live alone here like you do? Ain’t it lonesome for you?”

“Some.” Paisley dried his hands on a towel and sat down on a stump. “It’s some lonesome; yes. But I’ve sort of got used to it, you see.”

Boy seated himself on a log and leaned back, nursing his knee in his hands.

“How about Mary Ann?” he asked.

Bill shook his head.

“Too good and too young for me, Boy. She don’t just think me her style, I guess. That young teacher chap, now, he is just about Mary Ann’s style.”

Boy’s eyes narrowed.

“He’s just about Gloss’s style, too,” he said slowly. “He’s some different from us bush-fellers, is Mr. Simpson.”

“I don’t take to him very well myself,” said Paisley, looking away, “but, of course, Mary Ann’s bound to see him a lot, him boardin’ at her mother’s, and maybe he’ll see as he can’t afford to miss gettin’ a girl like Mary Ann, pervidin’ she’s willin’.”

“How many times have you asked her, Bill?”

“Twice a year—every spring and fall, for the last three years.”

Paisley laughed queerly and stooped down to pat the setter’s shaggy sides.

“Boy,” he said, “don’t ever get carin’ for a woman; it’s some hell.”

Boy leaned back with a deep breath. His eyes were on a tiny wreath of smoke drifting between the tree-tops and the sky.

“I ask her twice a year regular,” went on Paisley. “It’s got to be a

custom now. It'll soon be time to ask her again."

A yellow-hammer swooped across the open and, alighting on a decayed stub, began to grub out a breakfast. He was a gay, mottled-breasted chap, with a dash of crimson on his head. The drab-colored thrush that had been preening himself on a branch of a nearby tree ruffled his feathers and flew further back into the bush. Boy frowned at the intruder and arose slowly from his log. He glanced up, to find Paisley looking at him.

"Somethin's wrong with you, Boy," said the man, "what is it?"

"I was watchin' them birds," Boy answered. "You saw what the big greedy chap did to the thrush—he drove him away; and it made me think of what Hallibut and his agents are tryin' to do with us Bushwhackers."

"They can't do it," cried Paisley. "Just let 'em try it on."

"Hallibut threatens that he'll own all this part of the country. He's too much of a coward to come over and try to get it himself, but he's tryin' to get it through others, as you know."

"Watson?" questioned Paisley.

Boy nodded.

"Watson's likely comin' over to-day. Dad got a letter from him."

Paisley crammed his hands in his pockets and shrugged his shoulders.

"I scented trouble when the Colonel built that mill over on Totherside," he declared, "but there was no way of stoppin' him. It was his own land he built on; it's his own timber he's been sawin'. I understand he's layin' plans to get our timberland, and there ain't no tellin' just what a man like him will do to gain his ends. But, Boy, we're here first—don't you forget that."

"I'm not forgettin' it," returned Boy grimly.

"Say," said Bill, abruptly changing the conversation, "when is Gloss's birthday?"

The shadow left Boy's face and he looked up with a smile.

"Why, it'll soon be now," he answered; "she's nineteen next month."

"I didn't figger on lettin' you in on this," grinned Paisley, "but I reckon you need cheerin' up. You know them silver-fox furs that

Smythe offered me my own price for? Well, I'm not goin' to sell 'em to Smythe nor anybody else. They're for Gloss."

"For Gloss?" repeated Boy, "—for Gloss? Say, Bill, you can't afford to give them furs away—not even to Gloss."

"Me and Injun Noah are makin' her coat," chuckled the man. "Such a coat, Boy! No lady in this land has ever had such a coat before; never will have such a coat again. Silver-fox pelts at three hundred dollars apiece. Think of it, Boy! And there's six of 'em—four grays and two blacks. And the coat's to be lined with mink-skin, too—think of that!"

He took his friend by the arm and led him into the house. Boy liked Paisley's home; it was always so bright, so tidy, and so cheerful. The wide table of heavy oak with solid legs artistically carved, standing in the center of the main room, the carved high-backed chairs fashioned by a master hand, the crude charcoal sketch of marsh and wood and water scenes on the whitewashed walls, gave him a sense of restfulness.

A great iron tea-kettle suspended over the fire of hickory logs was disgorging a cloud of steam that drifted to the rafters. Paisley came forth from an inner room carrying a huge platter piled high with fowl.

"Never seen the pa'tridge in better condition," he avowed. "I shot six last night and I've been feastin' ever since. Just pull up and devour, Boy, while I give old Joe some of his choice bones. I've been savin' 'em up for him. I'll get you some of my special brew of tea soon's I wipe the reproach out of that setter's brown eyes."

Boy drew up to the table and fell to with an appetite such as only men of the woods possess.

Having attended to Joe's wants, Paisley placed a pot of fragrant tea at his guest's elbow, and, leaning back in his chair with a smile of content, lit his well-seasoned clay pipe and smoked.

His eyes followed those of Boy, who was gazing on the smaller of two rifles hanging above the fireplace.

"You've often wondered why I never use that little gun," he remarked, drawing his chair forward and leaning upon the table, "and I've never told you. I'm goin' to tell you now. I won that rifle from a man down near Sandwich. He was a bad man all round, and up until I met him just about made the laws of his community. I happened along

there one night, and bein' in no hurry, made up my mind to stay around for a time. The feller I speak of owned that rifle. He was a big chap, about five years older than me, and was supposed to be a fisherman. In reality he was a smuggler, and he was a slick one, and no mistake. When he wasn't smugglin' he was gamblin' with the sailors and passengers of the lake boats. A poor little hunchbacked sister kept house for him, and he used to ill-treat her. Once I happened along and stopped him from strikin' her with a whip. Of course, he always hated me after that. One afternoon there was a shootin'-match in the neighborhood, and he beat me shootin'."

Paisley sat back and smiled.

"Yes, he beat me shootin', Boy. Then he got boastin'; but I didn't say a word. He finally offered to bet his rifle against mine that he could beat me again. I didn't want more hard feelin's; but I simply had to be game. A man couldn't just take a dare in that wild country, so we had the match right there, and I won his rifle. He didn't say anythin', but he looked murder. I left the place soon after that, and about a year later I came along that way again. I heard then that the fisherman chap had cleared out to no one knew where, and left his sister sick and in want.

"I went over to their shanty and found the little woman dyin'. She knew me, and she seemed to want to tell me somethin'. But the end came before she could say it."

Paisley nodded toward the rifle.

"I've never shot that gun since, and I won't. I'd be ashamed to shoot a gun that belonged to a man who'd leave his crippled sister to starve."

"Did the sister know where her brother had gone?" asked Boy.

"No; or if she did she couldn't tell me."

Boy pushed back his chair and arose from the table.

"I don't understand how any man could do such a thing, Bill. What was the feller's name?"

"His name was Watts, Jim Watts," answered Paisley, swinging the kettle off the fire. "I ain't thinkin' as I would know him again, now, even if I happened to run across him. This all happened sixteen years ago."

He followed Boy outside and the two walked over to an out-house standing in a grove of beeches.

"I haven't had much use for this fork since the wolves got poor old Mooley last winter," said Paisley. "Guess I'll be gettin' another milk-cow soon, 'cause it's quite a bother havin' to go to Peeler's for my butter."

"I was goin' to ask you about Peeler," said Boy. "I wish, Bill, you'd see him and persuade him not to sell one stick of his timber to Hallibut or his agents. Jim's an easygoin' sort, who might be led off quite easy, and it's up to us to see that he isn't."

"I'll see him—leave that to me," Paisley replied. "And I'll see the rest of the Bushwhackers, even old man Broadcrook and his sons, who haven't any particular use for me, somehow."

"I guess what the Broadcrooks do won't matter much," laughed Boy. "They hate everybody and everything it seems. I don't know why."

He picked up the fork and turned toward the path. A west wind had piled up a bank of long drab clouds above the wood. The wind was damp, and from the distance came the dull boom of the waters beating upon the mucky shore of the bay.

A few yards down the path Boy halted.

"Say, Bill, dad was tellin' me about the talk you had with the teacher. I wish you'd get better acquainted with him and make him see that his place isn't here."

"If he was half as smart as he thinks he'd see that it isn't," replied Paisley.

"And, Bill," called Boy from the edge of the wood, "I guess Mary Ann knows a real man when she sees one. Keep askin' her till she says 'yes,' Bill."

As Boy found the creek path a gust of wind, damp with the spray of Rond Eau, smote against his face with biting force.

From across the creek came the jarring notes of the school bell.

Then the wind fell, and the clouds parted to let a misty web of warm sunlight through to the world.

CHAPTER VI

THE GO-BETWEEN

A big man, past middle age, and seated astride a small white horse, came picking his way between the huge beech and maple trees, down through the quiet morning of the woods. He had shaggy red brows and a big mouth that drooped at the corners. The little eyes, flashing sideways in search of the blaze on the trees, were sharp and calculating. Where the ridge sloped to the valley he reined up.

“Must be somewhere about here,” he mused aloud. “Don’t know how I can miss seeing McTavish if he happens to be outside—land knows he’s big enough to see.—Hello, who are you?”

Something animated in the shape of a boy had stirred from a log directly in the path. Leaping out it stood before the rider—a boy with long yellow curls and big brown eyes. The old white horse shied, and the boy rocked backward and forward on the path, voicing low, plaintive sounds. As the rider watched him a small animal crept from the thicket and climbed upon the lad’s shoulder. The horse reared, and the boy, lifting his brown arms, began to wave them to and fro. At the same time he broke into a wild, tuneless chant, the words of which were unintelligible to the wondering observer. It was a shrill, weird note, fluted and varying like the call of a panther. Suddenly boy and animal vanished as though the Wild had reached forward and gathered them into its arms.

“Heavens!” shuddered the man, and struck the horse sharply with his spurs. Where the trail curved off abruptly to the valley he reined up once more, and, turning about, looked back.

“Well, I’ll be shot!” he soliloquized. “No matter where you find the Creator’s handiwork and beauty you’ll find His imperfections, too. Ugh! how those big eyes did probe me! It’s enough to make a saint shiver, let alone a chap who has climbed up as I have—not caring who I have tramped on.”

He shivered again, and felt in his pocket for his pipe. His hand brought forth a leather wallet. A hard smile warped his mouth as he

opened the wallet and drew out a small photograph. It was the likeness of a young woman with sweet face and great eyes. He tapped the likeness and a lock of brown hair leaped out like a snake and twined about his finger. He brushed it back with a shudder, and, snapping the case, put it back in his pocket.

"I'll find that Big McTavish and get this deal closed," he mused as he rode along.

The horse stumbled and a grouse whizzed along the trail, passing close to the man's head, with a thundering, nerve-wracking sound. He sat erect and sank his spurs into the old gray's heaving flank.

"Get epp, you lazy old bag of bones," he commanded. "Let's find that big innocent and get hold of his deed. We'll give him a dollar or so to see us back along that lonesome trail. I wouldn't go back along that spooky path for all old Hallibut's money. I've seen enough snakes and wolves and bears since two o'clock this morning to last me a lifetime. And that last animal—that crazy boy!—ugh!"

He slashed the old mare into a faster walk and sat huddled up and pondering until a twist in the path brought an open glade into view. The buzz of a saw and the pant of a weary engine came to his ears like welcome music.

"Totherside," he chuckled. "Let's see, Bushwhackers' Place lies just across from it. But there's the creek. Guess I'll have to ride down to the narrows."

Finally, with much grumbling, he reached the farther side of the creek, and, pulling in his horse, he gazed about him.

"Ha, look at that for timber!" he exulted. "And to think that Smythe and I will have control——"

He did not finish the sentence aloud, but sat nodding his head up and down. Very soon he drew up before the long log-house. Big McTavish stepped out and pointed to a log-building in a grove of butternuts.

"Put your horse in there," he invited.

"I will, and more," agreed the arrival. "I'll enjoy a bite of bread and a slice of dried venison or anything else your larder affords. I'm hungry as old Nick."

"You're welcome to the best we have," replied McTavish. "You're

Mr. Watson, I suppose. Am I right?"

"Watson I am—Robert W. O. Watson, that's me. I'm pretty well known through these parts; that is to say, better maybe a little east of here. This place is kind of off the map, you know. Just give the lazy skate anything that's handy," he growled, referring to the patient steed that stood with drooping head and sanctimonious air, "but you needn't be in any hurry to feed her. She's Smythe's horse and used to waiting."

"I always see that my oxen get their meals same as I do," said Big McTavish. "I wouldn't feel just like eatin' unless they had their fodder, too. We'll step inside and I'll have Gloss fix you up a meal. She's down at the spring now gettin' the cream ready for the churnin', but she'll be back direct."

As they crossed from the stable a small form flitted by them and vanished among the trees. Watson gasped and he clutched McTavish's arm.

"That's him," he cried; "that's the crazy boy I met a couple of miles away. How did he get here this soon, do you suppose?"

"Oh, that's Daft Davie," smiled McTavish. "Nobody knows exactly when he'll turn up. He runs like a deer and is as shy as the wild things he plays among."

"Plays among?" repeated the other. He followed McTavish into the house and sat down heavily on a stool. "What do you mean by 'plays among'?"

"I mean that he moves among the wild things and they are not scared of him same as they are of you and me or anybody else. They do say that he can fondle the cubs of bears, and wolf-kittens. I've seen him playin' with a big snake, myself,—not a poisonous one, of course. Seems as though Davie can pick out the things that are harmful quick enough. Nobody pays any attention to him much in Bushwhackers' Place, but leaves him to himself, knowin' that God'll protect the soul He didn't give over-much reasonin' power to."

"Humph," grunted the other, "I see you're a pious man, McTavish—pious, God-fearing, and honest. Good plan to work along that line. Had a good bringing up myself. Mother's prayers, early teaching, and that sort of thing have a lot to do with making a big man. My mother is

largely—I should say was largely—responsible for my success. She’s dead now, poor old lady. Of course, a fellow who climbs has a right to some credit himself, I suppose. Made up your mind, I can see, to swap this forsaken wilderness for a piece of cultivated land,” he said, abruptly opening the subject nearest his heart and fixing on the big man his little pig-eyes.

“Aha, I thought you would, McTavish. Says I to Smythe this morning: ‘Smythe, it doesn’t seem to me that this is a very good piece of business judgment on our part; but,’ says I, ‘Smythe, we must consider others rather than ourselves in this matter. McTavish now,’ says I, ‘he has a couple of youngsters growing up, and they should secure an education such as the Clearview school can give them, and if that’s the case, we can’t blind our eyes to our duty as Christian men.’ Smythe is a good Christian man and just that soft-hearted that it’s no wonder my words affected him. He says: ‘Mr. Watson, money is not everything. Go forth on an errand of mercy, and offer Mr. McTavish of Bushwhackers’ Place one bright and fertile hundred acres of loam in Clearview in exchange for his bit of wilderness.’—His very words, McTavish. So I wrote you briefly in order to break the good news gently, and now I am before you to perform an act which, believe me, gives me as much pleasure, in a sense, as it does you. I have all the necessary papers, and although the journey has been a trying one, I will not complain. I have been five hours in the saddle and have endured a cowardly nigger as guide as far as the Triple Elms. Seems like, between loneliness and mosquitoes, I’m just about fagged out. They are a d—I mean they are a hanged nuisance, mosquitoes.”

While his guest unburdened himself, Big McTavish steeped strong tea, and fried strips of bacon. Gloss had not yet returned from the spring. The savory smell of the frying meat whetted Watson’s appetite, and he needed no second invitation to “set up and eat hearty.” He ate wolfishly, his little eyes darting from his food to the face of McTavish, his heavy jaws working, and the muscles of his throat contracting with boa-like elasticity, as he gulped down huge mouthfuls of meat and bread. At last he pushed his chair back from the table and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

"Now, Mac," he said affably, "we'll just have you sign those papers, and I'll turn you over this deed I hold here in exchange for the one you now have. Says I to Smythe this morning: 'Smythe, it's a nice sort of glow a fellow feels after doing a worthy act, anyway. Think what this will mean to the McTavishes.' And do you know he was that soft-hearted he couldn't answer me, and stood there swallowing with tears in his eyes."

"I'm thinkin' that we won't make any swap," said Big McTavish quietly. "Neither me nor Boy nor any of us care to leave this big woods. We've been here so long we've grown into it somehow. You see we're not hankerin' to leave."

Watson sat up with a jerk, and the pipe he was filling fell to the floor and broke into a dozen pieces.

"What!" he cried, "do you mean to say, McTavish, that you won't deal?"

"That's what I mean," nodded the big man.

"And you won't exchange this block of tangled brush for one hundred acres of good, cultivated land?" Mr. Watson leaned forward. "Are you sure you realize what you are missing?" he asked impressively.

"All I know is, we're thankful to God for what we have now," said Big McTavish fervently. "We don't feel like insultin' Him by tradin' what He's given us, sight and unseen."

"Oh, come now, McTavish," blustered Watson, "you must be crazy. Why, man, you will never get another chance such as the one we offer you. Besides, you can't stay here very much longer, anyway. Of course, you've heard what Colonel Hallibut intends to do with you Bushwhackers?"

A deep line appeared between Big McTavish's eyes.

"We don't want any trouble with Colonel Hallibut," he said. "We hear that he has his eyes on our timber. When he comes after it he'll find us here. As for you, Mr. Watson, I wouldn't take your sand farm as a gift, thankin' you just the same."

"Then why in hell have you been letting me waste my breath on you for the last hour?" snarled Watson, his face purple.

McTavish stood up.

"That'll do now," he warned. "There's Gloss comin' up the path, and swearin' is somethin' she has never heard in this house, and before I'll have her hear you usin' cuss-words I'll cram this down your throat, and don't you forget it."

He lifted a hairy fist, then sat down and resumed his smoking.

Gloss entered the room, singing blithely. Her shapely arms were bare to the elbows. Her big gray eyes, dancing with life and health, swept the room and rested wonderingly on Watson. He in turn gazed at the girl, and an ashy whiteness wiped out the mottled color of his cheeks. He drew back whispering something under his breath.

"This is Mr. Watson, Gloss," said Big McTavish.

"Good-morning, sir," saluted the girl. "I didn't know that we had a visitor. I see uncle has got you your breakfast, but surely you'll enjoy a glass of fresh buttermilk. I'll fetch it."

She slipped from the room, and Watson looked across at Big McTavish.

"That girl," he asked quickly, "is she your own child?"

The big man looked up, astonishment written on his face.

"No," he answered, "but she's just as dear as though she was our own. Her dyin' mother sent her to us. Why do you ask that?"

Watson was reaching for his cap and rifle. Perhaps he did not hear the question. At any rate he did not reply.

Fifteen minutes later he mounted the weary gray horse and without so much as a word of adieu rode away through the timber.

McTavish stood on the edge of the clearing, his long arms folded, and watched his visitor disappear. Turning, he found the daft child beside him.

"Well, Davie," he said kindly, "hadn't you best run home now, lad? You're all wet with the dew."

The boy waved his arms above his head and imitated an eagle's scream. Then he pointed to the white patch that marked the first blaze of the long trail.

"You mean the man on the white horse, Davie?" asked McTavish, smiling. "Yes, lad, I know."

The boy gazed about him with wide and expressive eyes. Then once more he waved his arms like an ascending eagle, gave a wild call of victory and defiance, and, bending, sped swiftly away and was lost in the heavy shadow.

CHAPTER VII

WHERE THE BROOK AND RIVER MEET

Big McTavish walked slowly back to the house. In the doorway stood Gloss awaiting him.

"Is he gone?" she asked.

"Yes, Glossie, he's gone."

McTavish picked up the ax which was leaning against the ash-block and turned toward the bush.

"You might just keep your eyes on the soap-fire, Gloss. I'm goin' down to the swale to cut some sassafras for the yearlin's—they seem ailin'. While I'm down there I might as well mark some basswood saplin's that'll make good sap-troughs. Promised myself last sugar-makin' that I'd have new troughs before another syrup-boilin'."

"The potatoes must be about ready to dig," said the girl.

"Yes, Boy's over to Paisley's after a fork, and when he gets back we're goin' to start in on 'em. There's this satisfaction about raisin' taters," he laughed, "—the squirrels and crows don't molest the crop any like they do the corn. It does seem we can't keep them out of the corn, though."

"It looks fine since you've got it cut and shocked up," declared the girl; "and it does seem so good that we're gettin' such a nice piece of land cleared. Granny was tellin' me what that man who just left wanted you to do, and I had to laugh when I thought how he could be so foolish as to think we'd be willin' to leave Bushwhackers' Place. 'Why, Granny,' says I, 'what do we want of a farm in Clearview when we've got one right here?'"

The big man's face lit up.

"You're sure good medicine, Gloss," he said. "Yes, we are gettin' quite a nice plot of ground cleared, and I look for quite a nice yield this year, both in corn and taters. Trappin' don't seem to promise much for this winter, though. The noise and clatter of Hallibut's mill seems to be drivin' the mink and rats across the bay."

"Can't we make him take the mill away from Lee Creek?" asked the

girl. "I hate the sound of it. Its noise drowns the song of the birds and its smoke hides the blue of the sky between the trees. What right had he to put that mill there, uncle?"

"Well, he owns a strip of bush on Totherside," explained McTavish. "It comes right up to Lee Creek. So you see the mill is on Hallibut's own property."

"Oh, look, uncle," cried the girl, "there's some black squirrels crossing the corn-stubble now—five of them. I do believe aunty would relish a bit of stewed squirrel. I meant to tell Boy to shoot one or two for her this mornin', but he was gone before I was up."

Joe, the setter, broke from the thicket and loped across the cornfield. All summer he had acted as custodian of the field, and even now the squirrels stood in mortal terror of him, and the crows cursed him in guttural croaks from the tops of tall trees beyond the danger-line.

As the squirrels took to a lone hickory in the center of the field, Boy McTavish came quickly around the corner of the house. He stood the clumsy hand-made fork he carried up against the lean-to, and mopped his face with his sleeve.

"Whew!" he whistled, "but it's turned out a fine day after all. Never knowed Injun summer to hang on so long. Hope it keeps up, dad, and we'll get the corn all husked yet before trappin'-time. Suppose we have a bee and a dance at night, same as we did at the wood-bee? Declute is goin' to have a loggin'-bee soon.

"Hello, Gloss," he called, catching sight of the girl, "how's ma this mornin'?"

"Better, and hungry for squirrel," she answered, her eyes on the treed blacks.

She ran into the house and returned with a rifle. She handed Big McTavish the powder-horn and, bracing her feet, cocked the gun.

"How far?" she asked, throwing it to her shoulder with a practiced hand.

"Sixty yards, anyway," answered Big McTavish.

"Nigher eighty," asserted Boy. "Too far, Gloss; you'll miss sure."

A gleam of mischief shone in the gray eye sighting along the brown barrel. Then the rifle cracked, and a black ball detached itself from the

hickory and went swinging down to earth in tiny circles. The dog gave a low whine and came bounding forward, the squirrel in his mouth, and allowed Boy to take it from him.

“Right between the eyes,” said Boy proudly.

Big McTavish reloaded the rifle and handed it back to Gloss. His face was wrinkled in a grin of mingled surprise and admiration.

“Neither you nor me could do any better, Boy,” he said hesitatingly by way of admission.

“The one on the left next,” motioned the girl, and the rifle spoke once more.

“Missed,” gasped the man. “Can’t always make a bull’s-eye, Glossie.”

“Missed nuthin’,” cried Boy; “there he comes now.”

The second squirrel spun about on the limb a couple of times, then went crashing through the branches.

“As Bill Paisley would say, ‘that’s remarkable shootin’,’” chuckled McTavish. “That distance is well over eighty yards, else I don’t know distance.”

“Nearer a hundred, I should judge,” contended Boy. “She’s got all the rest of the McTavishes beat, dad.”

“Try another, Gloss,” suggested McTavish, placing the cap on the nipple of the rifle with clumsy fingers.

“I thought maybe two would be enough,” said the girl.

She took the rifle once again and glanced at Boy.

“Oh, go on, Gloss,” he encouraged, “only one more. Fact is I’m a bit hungry for corn-fed squirrel myself.”

“And I’m thinkin’ I wouldn’t turn up my nose at a plateful of stewed squirrel either,” seconded the father.

“All right, just one shot more, then, hit or miss,” laughed Gloss. “See that chap’s two ears and part of his head stickin’ up above the knot? I’ll take him this time, I guess, though it’s no easy shot.”

She fired, and the squirrel dropped from the limb. Another whine from Joe proclaimed it a clean kill.

Big McTavish, without so much as a word, took the gun inside. Boy held the animals up by their bushy tails and the girl who was watching

him said:

“You ain’t carin’ much to see the blacks killed ever since the time you had Tommy for a pet, are you, Boy?”

“Well, I don’t know as I’m carin’ much either one way or t’other,” he answered slowly. “Tommy was a cute little beggar, but he wasn’t really a black. He was a gray squirrel. Grays are gentler and make better pets than blacks. Tom Peeler one time had a black for a pet, and used him mighty good for two years. But one day that black pretended he wanted Tom to play with him and tickle him as he was used to doing, and it gave him a bad bite. No, the blacks are too cross for pets.”

“Boy,” said the girl suddenly, “I meant to tell you before—old Injun Noah was tellin’ me yesterday that there’s a big gray fox who makes his home on the Point. Noah says he’s the biggest silver-gray he ever saw. Says he’s as big as a timber-wolf. But he is so cunnin’ nobody can get a shot at him.”

“Well,” smiled the boy, “I guess we needn’t go after that feller, and you needn’t worry about one little silver-gray. Just you wait a while and you’ll know what I mean.”

He winked mysteriously, and Gloss laughed. Then her face grew grave.

“That man Watson was over here this mornin’, Boy,” she said. “You know what he wanted and you know how he’d get it. Well, I guess him and uncle had words. I was hidin’ in a bunch of willows at the spring when he was goin’ back, and when he passed me he was swearin’ awful.”

“Was he ridin’ toward the trail or goin’ toward Totherside?” asked Boy, his face darkening.

“I watched him cross th’ creek, and when he got across he rode toward the schoolhouse.”

Boy turned away. Then he paused and looked at the girl.

“Boy,” she said wistfully, “I wish we didn’t have no school in this place. I wish Simpson would go away.”

“Why?” he asked quickly.

Slowly her eyes sank and her bosom heaved as her breath came in quick gasps.

He reached out and caught her, and for the first time in their young lives the girl struggled in his arms. He let her go and stood back, wondering. She looked at him and smiled. Her face was pale, and her long lashes did not conceal a look of dumb entreaty.

“Gloss——” he commenced.

“Boy,” she whispered, “we’re built for chums, and chums we’ll always be. But the old rompin’ days are over now. Boy, you mustn’t take me—you mustn’t hold me like that again. We ain’t boy and girl no more.”

He bent and picked up the squirrels. When he stood up again she had gone.

“‘We ain’t boy and girl no more,’ ” he repeated.

He walked to the spring repeating the words over and over—“‘no more.—Boy and girl no more!’ ”

From Totherside came the clang of the school bell.

“I wonder what she meant. I wonder why she wished that school—I wonder why she wishes Simpson——”

Suddenly he flung the squirrels from him, and, bending forward, gazed with hard eyes toward the white schoolhouse clinging to the hill.

“If he thinks harm to her, then God curse him,” he breathed, “and help me to kill him.”

A wee hedge-sparrow, drunk with the hazy Indian summer sunshine, perched itself on a branch above his head and poured out the simple little song that he had always loved above all other songs of wood-birds, because it was always the first song in new spring; the last in dreary fall. The little singer was about to leave the wood wherein he had nested and enjoyed a season’s happiness. He was about to fly far south, and was trilling a promise to Boy to come back again another springtime. And Boy listened to the simple song and wondered at the gladness in it. Nothing of the deep unrest of his own soul was there,—only the gladness of a heart brimful of God’s deep joy. Boy sat down on a log and watched the bird.

“Little chap,” he murmured, “you’ve got a long ways to fly. I guess I know you about as well as anybody could know you, unless it’s Daft Davie, who’s wild like yourself, and I can’t understand why you should

be glad when you're leavin' all this——”

He looked about him. “—All this big nestin'-place. The great woods has been mighty good to you, little feller—mighty good. There's a nest you built here, and you've got to leave it behind.”

A shadow floated across the hazy sunlight and a cold wind swept in from the bay. With a last sweet note of good-by the bird sprang to wing, and beating skyward high above the trees, faded, a little darting speck in the somber clouds rolling up in the south. Boy watched it until its tiny gray body was lost against the sky's gray fringe. Then he sighed, picked up the squirrels, and proceeded to strip them, deftly, of their glossy coats. This done, he washed them carefully and carried them to the house. Gloss was standing by the table in the kitchen and spoke to him as he entered.

He answered her almost rudely and strode outside. The hazy light of morning had vanished. The skies had darkened, and a low wind was shaking the dead leaves from the trees. Boy plunged down the path and into the wood. A shaggy dog, snoozing beside the ash-leach, watched him furtively from half-closed eyes. When Boy's figure disappeared behind the slope the dog arose, shook himself, and with stiffened muscles trailed his master stealthily.

Deep into the woods, Boy paused before a small grove of baby maples. Beneath their spreading branches stood a playhouse built of rough bark and twigs. He and Gloss had built this house; she, girl-like, to play at mimic life therein; he, boy-like, that she might own her little joy. There stood the table, a basswood block, set for a feast, with broken bits of crockery and glass for dishes. It seemed but yesterday that he and Gloss had sat before that table and eaten an imaginary repast of earth's luxuries from those broken dishes. It all seemed so poor, so lonely, and deserted now.

In the twig high-chair slept Peggy, the rag doll, her arms dangling, her whole attitude one of peaceful repose.

Boy crept in and shamefacedly swept the cob-webs from her poor little face. Then he sat down on the stump-chair, and, laying his arms on the table, rested his head upon them.

In the open the clouds scudded low above the trees, and it began to

snow. Boy arose and walked about the little house, his eyes searching it for the small trinkets the girl had treasured there. A bunch of dead flowers rustled in the cracked cup on the bark shelf. They were tied with a gorgeous bit of red flannel, which, he remembered, Gloss had been careful to explain was watered silk. Boy smiled and pressed the knot between his fingers.

On the floor lay a home-woven straw hat. Its decorations, too, were of woodland flowers faded to ashes and scentless. Boy caught it up and held it at arm's length; then he threw it from him and sprang out into the darkening wood again.

He hurried on, passing the tree-swing where he and the girl had played so many summers. He passed through the hickory grove where they had garnered the nuts for the winter's cracking; through this and into the heavier timber and deeper shadow where the light was very dim and forest whispers stirred and vibrated. A fox glided across his path, switching into a clump of hazel-bushes. A cock grouse, drumming upon a decayed log, arose on thundering wing to dip into a clump of trees far to the left. Farther into the wood the cluck of a wild turkey sounded. Boy heeded none of these things. On and on he strode,—his an aimless goal; his one desire, to come up with that something urging and elusive,—something he feared though treasured and could not understand.

Later, he stood in the low-lying wilderness of the Elm Swamp. And there, perhaps, his great Mother pityingly solved for him the problem of a new unrest. There where day's light wavered faintly like foggy starlight, his soul shook off its brooding, and the old glad fearless light came back to his eyes.

"No, we ain't girl and boy no more," he whispered; and lifting his arms high he laughed.

What he had received from the forest soothed his spirit as the starry snowflakes, falling on his upturned face, soothed his burning flesh.

At mid-day the setter crept back to his old place by the ash-leach and lay down. A little later Boy came up the path. He stooped down and patted the dog's head, and noting his tangled hair, laughed softly.

"Joe, old pup, I thought it was me who had to roam among the briers and the burrs, but I see you've been there, too."

And Joe looked up and yawned sleepily, just as if he had been awakened from his forenoon's nap.

Boy ate his dinner in silence. When he arose he glanced at Gloss. She was standing before the window, and Boy saw her perfect face, crowned by a mass of heavy chestnut hair, clear-lined against the light of an outer world. Her great eyes were looking into space: she was dreaming. The young man sought the open with surging pulse. The whistle of Hallibut's mill sounded its challenge, and, squaring his broad shoulders, he laughed. Something new had come to him. Not strength; though strength was of it. Not defiance; though it held the power to defy. Boy did not attempt to define that new thing: it was enough for him to know that he possessed it.

CHAPTER VIII

THROUGH THE DEEP WOOD

Gloss, standing in the kitchen doorway, gazed outward across the bronze-tipped trees to the drab-colored sky resting above Rond Eau.

There was a smile on her lips and her eyes were alive with the light of genuine girlish happiness. She did not know why she should be so glad; but to-day she felt like singing; like racing out into the hardwoods and tramping the long leaf-carpeted aisles. She wanted to be out in the open. A flock of wild geese wedged their way between two tiny strips of blue sky and were lost in a heavy snow-cloud above the Point. The girl clapped her hands joyfully and, springing backward like a young gazelle, she snatched her cap from a peg and tiptoed into the inner room.

Granny McTavish looked up from her knitting, a smile on her wrinkled face.

"Lass," she said softly, "but ye are gettin' mair like your dear mither every day. And she was bonnie, aye, she was bonnie, lassie."

The girl sank on her knees and took the old hands in hers.

"Am I like my mother, Granny?" she asked eagerly. "Very like her?"

"Aye, dearie, ye have her eyes and ye have her beautiful hair; ye have her face and ye have her smile. Ye tak me awa back to the time I first saw your mither, Gloss. Ye will na gangin' oot i' th' snaw, pet," noting with concern that Gloss had on her cap and coat. "I ne'er lak ta see ye ramblin' about i' th' woods after th' snaw falls on account o' th' wolves, cheeld."

"And she was beautiful, and I am like her," said the girl softly. "Oh, Granny, I'm beginnin' to miss my mother!"

"Cheeld, cheeld," said the old woman, drawing the girl over to her bosom. "It's ever the way. The mither is missed always, but the cheeld canna miss her lak the woman. And ye are growin' into a woman, Gloss; ye are growin' into a woman fast, lassie."

She picked up her knitting and rocked to and fro, crooning to herself. The girl arose and, bending, kissed her softly on the smooth white hair. Then she crossed the kitchen and peeped into the larger of

the bedrooms.

"She's sleepin', lass; best slip awa' and no disturb her," whispered Granny. "She'll no last much langer, dearie; she'll no last much langer, I fear."

A look of sorrow came into the girl's eyes and her mouth trembled.

"God won't let her die, Granny," she said chokingly; "He knows we need her so much."

"Maybe He needs her th' mair, lassie."

"No, no, He can't. And, Granny, she wouldn't—she wouldn't be happy away from Boy and—and us."

"Ye dinna ken, lassie, ye dinna ken; it's a braw warld and your mither has been lookin' for her comin' full lang, I ha' noo doot. They were greet friends. They looded ain anither reet weel."

"But mother would not mind waitin' some longer, Granny. I know she would rather let auntie live a while longer for our sakes. She has got used to waitin'."

"Lass, you mus'na cry," said the old woman gently. "If she gangs awa' it will be God's good pleasure. If she bides 'twull be His mercy. We will hope and pray for the best, Glossie."

When Gloss sought the wood a white, sweet-scented mist was rising from the leafy carpet where a thin veil of snow had rested. The low calls of the feathered denizens of the Wild sounded mellow and indistinct from the soft-wood swales, for the sky was changing to the slate-blue of eventide. Down in the stumpy potato-patch Boy and Big McTavish were busily engaged in turning the snowy tubers out of the black soil.

Gloss skirted the patch, keeping a thicket between her and the workers, and passed on southward until she reached a wide ridge of giant beech trees, whose long outstretched arms were fruited with the toothsome nuts which the first frost of autumn would send in a shower to the earth.

Black and red squirrels were busy among the trees, garnering their winter's food. They worked noisily, chattering and scolding. They were a busy little body of workers, and they could not afford to pay much attention to the wood-nymph whom they had become accustomed to see

in their kingdom. The old-time restfulness and happiness had stolen back to the heart of the girl. Her great eyes were alive with life and joy, and she passed on, humming a merry tune to herself, drinking in the golden beauty, the songs, and the scents of nature.

Beyond a tangled clump of trees Gloss came unexpectedly upon another creature of the wood. A young doe was browsing among the tender shoots of the brush-pile, and at the girl's soft footsteps it lifted its shapely head and stood quivering, its nostrils dilated and its sides heaving. And so the two animals of the Wild gazed at each other with a deep and growing wonder.

Nature had built those two after the same fashion. Both were slender and graceful; both were alert and watchful; both possessed long-lashed eyes; both were wild, free, and beautiful.

The doe stood with her slender muzzle lifted, her sensitive lips a-tremble, her humid eyes fastened upon the girl of the forest, who, instinctively, she felt, would do her no harm.

For a moment the two creatures stood gazing at each other. The doe reached forward timidly and plucked another mouthful of the juicy twigs, then with a sudden start leaped into the thicket on the right.

Gloss turned quickly. A little man with a small face fringed with whiskers, and light-blue eyes blinking from beneath a coon-skin cap, stepped out from behind a tree and lowered the hammer of his long rifle.

"Jinks and ironwood!" he ejaculated; "you stud right in my way, Glossie. I'd o' had that doe sure pop if I hadn't been a trifle timid about hittin' you."

"Did—did you want to shoot that pretty little thing, Ander?" asked Gloss, her cheeks aflame.

"Wall, I don't know," laughed the little man, coming forward. "I tell you that war as fine a doe as I've seen this season, girl."

"Poor thing," sighed Gloss; then hotly, "I'm glad she got away; I'm glad she got away."

"Somebody else'll get her," said the man. "She's pretty tame and she'll get shot sooner or later."

The girl stood looking away through the wood.

"Ander," she said, "I know you are a pretty good man. I want you to

promise me that you won't shoot things—things like her. It's terrible. Why, they are so young they don't know any danger. You'll give them all a chance, won't you?"

Declute looked puzzled. He scratched his head and grinned; then he looked down.

"Why, I don't mind promisin' that," he stammered. "I ain't carin' much to shoot—any deer without givin' it somethin' of a chance. And I will say that to shoot 'em *without* goes somethin' again' my grain. All right, Gloss, old Ander'll promise not to shoot that doe or any other like her. Dang me, but you and her seemed a lot, a lot alike to me somehow. I reckon I'm good enough of a shot to have got by you, girl; but somethin' kept my rifle down. I see you two lookin' at each other—her eyes, your eyes—wall, I can't say what makes me think you two are alike, but you are. No, siree, Ander won't shoot any more does—at least, not this season. Now, Gloss, I want you t' come along over to my place and see my missus. She's bound to have a loggin'-bee right soon, and she wants you to help her lay out the eatin' line. I can't say much—you know what Rachel's like. When she takes a notion to do a thing I might as well give in right on the start and save trouble. I don't know why we wanter log, but that don't matter—we're goin' to log 'cause Rachel says so. Come along over and sorter give th' old woman a tip or two about what she should get together for the table. I'll see you back through th' bush, 'cause I wanter see Boy about some traps."

They started out, the man keeping up a running fire of conversation, his short legs taking two steps to the tall girl's one, and his little eyes, by force of habit, shooting here and there through the bush.

As they approached Declute's home, a house of logs close to the shore of Rond Eau, a couple of wire-haired mongrel curs came yelping out to meet them.

"There's David and Goliath," said Ander. "Rachel named them dogs. She's great on Bible names, is Rachel—too danged great," he finished in a lower key.

Gloss opened the door and stepped inside. Mrs. Declute turned slowly from the table and a smile spread across her flour-streaked face.

"Oh, you dear," she said, pounding forward and implanting a

resounding smack on the girl's rosy cheek. "You little dear, to come just now of all times, when I most wanted to see you."

Mrs. Declute smiled again and a bit of powder fell from her face. It was a big matronly face, with big-heartedness written clean across it, and real kindness gleaming in its large black eyes. She was a big woman, "nigh two hundred and thirty," as Ander put it.

"Where are the babies?" asked Gloss, sitting down on a stool and glancing about the small room.

"Sleepin' like angels, th' troublesome little good-fer-nothin's," smiled the woman fondly. "Moses is just that troublesome I think sometimes I'll have to tie him up. Only this mornin' he upsot the cradle and spilt little Martha out on the floor ker-bump. Give my life if I wasn't so provoked I could have beeched him if he hadn't been just gettin' over th' jaundice."

"Ander tells me that you are thinkin' of havin' a loggin'," said Gloss. "Is there anythin' I could help you to do, Mrs. Declute?"

"Just what I was wantin' to see you about," cried the beaming woman, sitting down and wiping her face with her apron. "Thought first as I'd run across to Totherside and ask widder Ross to come over. Then I thought about her havin' that teacher boardin' there, and I didn't want to put her out any. Fine cook is the widder, but somehow I can't think as anybody can cook meats and sarve 'em up quite like you, Glossie. I'm fixin' up some dried-apple pies. Sent over to Bridgetown this mornin' by Jim Peeler for the dried-apples. Guess he'll be along soon."

"He's comin' right now," called Declute from the door. "I'll go along and give him a hand, I guess. He's got some tobaccer for me—leastways I hope he has; I sent for some."

"Ain't that a man for you?" winked Mrs. Declute. "Ain't that a man, though? Glossie, my dear, don't you ever marry a man; don't you ever do it. You'll be sorry all the days of your life if you do. Even I am almost sorry sometimes, an' Ander's an exception of a man. There ain't no other like him. And sakes alive, he's bad enough, dear knows."

Ander and a short, heavy-set man entered, and the latter laid a number of parcels on the table. He had a jolly round red face with crow's-feet about the corners of brown eyes, stamped there by much

smiling. It was said of Jim Peeler that he had never been known to lose his temper. He stood a short rifle in a corner and sat down near the table. Mrs. Declute arose and brought a steaming teapot from the hearth, also a plate of bread and cold meat.

After disposing of a goodly portion of the victuals before him, Jim turned to Gloss with the question:

“How’s the sick?”

“No better,” answered Gloss, her face growing grave.

“Dear me, how thinkless I am!” exclaimed Mrs. Declute. “I knowed there was somethin’ I wanted to ask you, Gloss. That’s it. How’s th’ dear little woman?”

Ander was cutting off a piece of black chewing-tobacco from a big slab.

“Why don’t you tell old Betsy ’bout her, Glossie?” he asked.

“Shet up, Ander,” flashed his wife. “Be you a Christian, or be you a heathen as believe in witches?”

“There, there,” laughed Peeler soothingly, “I guess Ander is a good Christian. But I was talkin’ to a *real* Christian to-day; a real pious, right-down good man.”

“Smythe?” questioned Declute, the piece of tobacco poised half-way to its expectant goal.

“The same,” answered Peeler. “And, by the way, I met that man Watson as I was comin’ home. He must have been over here, eh?”

“He was here this mornin’,” said Gloss. “He was tryin’ to—to buy our place.”

“Oh, was he?”

Peeler’s face lost its smile and his bushy eyebrows met in a scowl. “How about you, Ander?”

Declute squirmed.

“Oh, I ain’t thinkin’ much about it, Jim. I ain’t worryin’ none.”

His wife gazed at him contemptuously.

“You ain’t brains enough to worry about anythin’,” she exclaimed. “Was Watson ridin’ alone, Jim?”

“Well, no, he wasn’t. That teacher chap was with him. He was ridin’ the bay belongin’ to Hallibut’s engineer.”

Gloss looked up, her eyes wide.

"Then they were together?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Peeler. "I suppose the teacher was seein' him through part of the bush. I was talkin' to Blake, the sawyer, over at the mill a while ago, and he tells me Colonel Hallibut has hired Smythe and Watson to help get our timberland."

"Where'bouts on the trail did you meet 'em?" asked Declute.

"Why, they had only got nicely started, I guess. It wasn't more than two or three miles out at most."

"Where has Watson been all day, I wonder?" cried Gloss. "He was at our place shortly after sun-up."

From the next room came a commotion, and three round-eyed youngsters, between the ages of three and six, protruded their heads from beneath the buckskin door-curtain.

"Get back in thar, Moses and Zaccheus," commanded the mother; "you ain't had half enough sleep yet."

"Oh, let me hug them, Mrs. Declute," pleaded Gloss.

She ran across and gathered the babies up, all together, in her arms. They twined their chubby arms about her neck and rubbed their sleepy eyes against her face. They were sweet, wholesome youngsters, and the girl loved them. She kissed them all, three times around, then set them down.

"Guess we'd better be goin', Ander," she said, "that is, if you *have* to come. But I'm not the least timid about goin' alone."

"Course he'll go," declared Mrs. Declute, "and you, too, Jim Peeler, 'cause I've got to get on with them pies. Tell Libby the bee's next Thursday, and I'll want her to help with the table. Much 'bliged for your kindness, Jim. Good-night, Glossie."

CHAPTER IX

AND THE TWILIGHT

"Guess I'll step through the oak ridge here and look in on Bill Paisley for a minute or so," said Jim Peeler, as the three found the path leading to the creek.

"He's singin' his old pet song," smiled Gloss. "Hark, can't you hear him?"

Upon the tree-fringe of Rond Eau a red disk of a sun was dripping gold and amethyst glory and all the wild-wood was full of life and harmony. From the thickets the hardiest of the song-birds were bidding good-by to the wood. It was their last night in the old nesting-place.

Mingled with the symphony came Paisley's voice, trilling happily:

*"Massar's gone away, de darkey say, 'Ho, ho!'
Mus' be now dat de kingdom's comin'
I' de year ob jubiloo."*

"He's a happy beggar," chuckled Declute. "He's a happy beggar, is Bill, and the biggest-hearted, softest-hearted baby of a man as ever lived."

"God built some big things," said Peeler: "that," waving a hand toward the mellow glory above; "this," looking about him; "an' Bill. Yes, He built Bill, and nobody has ever spoiled His work."

"And nobody can spoil His work," said Gloss gently, "dear old Bill."

"Run along, children," laughed Peeler, "I've got my pockets full of things that Paisley sent to town for. Silk thread, silk cloth—three dollars a yard; look here." He tapped one of his large, bulging pockets. "Bill's gone into the dressmakin' business, it seems."

Gloss clasped her brown hands and her eyes danced.

"Oh," she begged, "won't you let me come too? I want to see all those things. I surely do."

"Tut, tut," scolded Peeler, screwing up his face, "that wouldn't do at all. I'm tellin' too much. I'm a poor hand at keepin' secrets."

He plunged among the trees, his face frowning and his eyes laughing,

and when he had put one of the wide ridges between himself and Gloss he clapped his hands and laughed like a boy.

"She don't know that Bill is gettin' all this costly finery for her. Bless her," he murmured, wiping his eyes, "she don't suspect a thing—not a thing. God bless her dear heart. Ah, but all the silver-fox hides in all this big woods couldn't make a coat good enough for our girl, let alone six as Bill has. But it's Bill's little wish," he added; "it's just Bill's little wish. And Bill's one of God's big men."

Bill scarcely looked his part on this particular evening. Peeler found him sitting just outside his home, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and his sinewy arms shining with bear-oil. Across his seamed face were a number of greasy smears, left there by brushing away a troublesome mosquito. Between his teeth he gripped a short clay pipe. At his feet lay a pile of traps, tangled together and red with rust.

"Got back, eh?" he grinned as Peeler approached. "Get them things, Jim?"

"Sure, Bill," and Peeler commenced emptying his pockets.

"Jim," said Paisley, "I guess I'd best have your good wife help me out on this coat. I thought maybe she'd do the linin'. Suppose she would?"

"Do I suppose? Wall, I do better," answered Peeler, "I *know* she will."

"Then don't empty out till you get home. I'll drop over to-morrow night. I've got to get these traps in shape if I'm goin' to do any trappin' this season. Who'd you see over at Bridgetown, Jim?"

"Just a few that Declute wants over to his loggin'," answered Peeler, seating himself on a bench, "an' that man Smythe who keeps the store."

"What do you think o' that feller?"

Paisley made a dip for the pan of bear-oil and started scrubbing another trap.

"Well, I don't just think I'm takin' to him much," replied Peeler. "I don't like the way he has of shiftin' his eyes, and he always seems to be expectin' somebody. He sort of makes me nervous. He tried to find out all about every person that lives here, but I wasn't sayin' much. Somehow I wish Tom Gray hadn't sold out his store to this feller, Bill. I

don't know why, but I can't take to him."

"Pshaw," grunted Paisley, "I guess we're all too quick at takin' dislikes. I'll own I feel purty much the same as you. Did he tell you that he was hand in hand with Watson? I haven't ever seen Watson yet, but I'm anxious to meet him."

"He was askin' me about widder Ross," said Peeler. "Wanted to know how much property she owned, and all that. Said that he liked her—what he had seen of her."

Paisley dropped his trap and stared through the twilight at his friend.

"By gum!" he exclaimed, "what *do* you think of that?"

"He told me quite a lot of things about Colonel Hallibut," said Peeler, coming over and seating himself close beside Paisley. "Bill, it looks as if Hallibut was bound to scoop us off this place. Smythe says as he is a bad man to hinder, once he has made up his mind. He says as both him and Watson is in sympathy with us, and if we'll only let on we're agreeable to leave, that him and Watson'll see he don't get hold of the leases."

Paisley took his pipe from his mouth and laid it on a nearby block.

"Jim," he said, "I don't know Smythe very well, but you can bet on this—the man's a liar. Him and Watson are hand in hand with old Hallibut, and it's my impression they're all a pack of rascals. Hallibut threatens to drive us into the bay if we refuse to be reasonable—as he calls it. I was talkin' to one of the fellers who runs that mill of his, this afternoon, and he says Hallibut rides over to Bridgetown most every day and lays plans with Smythe and Watson. He said as to-day Hallibut intended goin' over there. Didn't see him, I suppose?"

Peeler shook his head.

"No, but I met Watson to-night—him and Simpson."

"There you are," cried Paisley; "there you are. Watson intended to come here to-day, and you can bet that old reprobate Hallibut has a hand in anything Watson does."

"Then you think them fellers are goin' to try some funny work, do you, Bill?"

"Jim," answered Paisley, "it's my opinion that there's goin' to be trouble here soon. Them people have laid plans to get our woods, and

of course we'll naturally see that they don't. But what I'm afraid of is that Boy McTavish is goin' to kill somebody sure. You know what he's like, Jim, so I want to ask you to do this: no matter what you see or hear, don't tell Boy. I've just about raised him, you might say, and I know his moods. There's enough trouble over there at Big Mac's now. If we just keep cool everythin' 'll come out all right. We'll keep our eyes and ears open, and whatever we see and hear we'll try to meet without Boy knowin' anythin' about it. What d'ye say, Jim?"

"Sure," answered Peeler. "I think same's you, Bill. It won't do to be too hasty if things come to the worst, which I hope they won't."

"Amen to that," said Paisley fervently. "I trust there'll be no trouble, Jim. Old Injun Noah was here to-day, and I could see that somethin' was worryin' him. You know he won't talk—only to Gloss; so I couldn't get anythin' out of him."

"When old Noah worries there's somethin' in the wind all right," said Peeler. "Good old Noah!"

"He stayed here with me quite a time," said Paisley, "and he never said a word till he was leavin'. Then he said:

"'Bushwhacker no shoot, no kill big man. That mean bad, bad for Bushwhacker. Bushwhacker wait—wait and see.' And before I could ask him anythin' he was gone."

"He comes mysterious and he goes mysterious," said Peeler slowly, "but I reckon he knows even more than we do about old Hallibut and his gang."

He arose and walked toward the path.

"Will you come over to Big Mac's, Bill?" he asked.

"Sure, I will."

Paisley dived into the house, washed his hands and face, threw on a jacket, and came forth a bright and smiling six feet of manhood.

"I'm wantin' some to see the little sick woman," said Peeler, "and hear Big Mac's fiddle again."

"Boy was here this mornin'," said Bill as the two struck off down the path, "and he says the ma is awful sick. I guess she won't be stayin' long."

When the men reached the McTavish home night had fallen, and a

big moon was lifting her face from the forest far eastward.

A damp wind off the bay bore on its wings the scent of bog and marsh, and from high overhead came the wing-songs of inflying wild ducks. From inside came the music of the fiddle playing “Ye Banks and Braes.”

CHAPTER X

COLONEL HALLIBUT

“Jno. T. Smythe; Seller of guns, ammunition, and provisions; Buyer of furs and game.”

This sign creaked and complained against a dingy little building of unplanned boards. It was gray and forsaken-looking, being one of about two hundred others just like it, of gloomy and sullen aspect. This was Bridgetown. On its one side, stretching eastward, lay a drab-gray fallow of partly cleared land. Here and there stood a clump of trees; here and there a solitary stub, ax-scarred or fire-blackened. In these, Nature seemed to be voicing her resentment of the ravishes of man. In this, the close of an October day, the little town seemed as dead as the slain beauties that had once reigned in her place. Westward, beginning with a stubble of second-growth beeches and maples, the land rolled and undulated, at each step southward and westward taking on a more picturesque appearance of natural grandeur. For ten miles inland lay the scars that civilization had left upon the forest. Then the marks were seen no more. A yellow ridge of golden-oak marked the boundary-line, and behind this line lay Bushwhackers' Place.

Mr. Smythe, the storekeeper, stood gazing out from the dirty pane at the dreary panorama, occasionally lifting his shifting light-blue eyes heavenward. A big storm-cloud was rolling in above the forest from the west.

“Watson ought to be back by now,” he mused for the twentieth time in half an hour. “God forgive me if I did wrong in letting him take gray Fan. He's three stone too heavy for the mare.” He turned from the window and glanced toward the door. A heavy step was approaching. From without came a sonorous voice calling and scolding a pack of hounds that now came scrambling and barking up the deserted street.

“It's Colonel Hallibut,” whispered Smythe in dismay. “Why does he want to show up just at this time of all times? Watson might have known that he would put in his appearance just when he wasn't wanted. All right, sir. Yes, sir, I'll open for you, Colonel. Come in, sir; come in.”

A big form filled the doorway and a big voice spoke.

"Nice storekeeper you are, Smythe, to have your door locked this way. What's the matter with you, anyway? Let the dogs come in; poor chaps, they're tired."

"They don't take to me, your hounds don't, Colonel," ventured the storekeeper. "That brindle fellow took hold of my leg the last time I let 'em in. However, there you are. Nice doggies, come in and make yourselves to home."

"Finest pack in Ontario; finest pack in the whole Dominion, I say—those fellows," laughed Hallibut, jolting, in the semi-darkness, against a pile of furs and toppling it over on the floor.

Immediately three of the tired dogs stretched themselves out on the soft bed, as though it had been arranged for them, and went to sleep. Hallibut threw himself into a chair by the fireplace and laughed at the other's dismay.

"Better not try to disturb 'em, Smythe," he cautioned. "They're ugly, I tell you. Get them something to eat, will you? And say, Smythe, just have that nigger of yours get me up a snack, too, like a good fellow; I've been riding since morning."

"St. Thomas?" asked Mr. Smythe, shifting his light eyes to the Colonel's face and patting his thin hair with his long fingers.

"It doesn't matter," returned the other. "Where is Watson?"

"I'm sorry to say," commenced Smythe; but the Colonel turned upon him, his black brows knit in a frown.

"You needn't finish. I know."

He arose stiffly and walked around behind the counter.

"Give me the key, Smythe," he demanded, holding out his hand.

The Colonel took the key and unlocked a small oak cupboard, extracting from it a bottle of red liquor.

"I'm afraid if Watson persists in drinking I'll have to find a new agent," he said, walking to the door and throwing the bottle across the street.

"Seems he can't resist the drink, Colonel," stammered the groceryman.

His long face had turned to a yellow-white, though, it was hid by the

advancing night-shadows from the black orbs of the ponderous man before him.

"I'll go and have you a meal prepared. Make yourself comfortable, Colonel Hallibut."

Not until the door of the inner room closed upon him did the soul of Smythe vent itself in whispered imprecations. He clenched his claw-like fists and shook them fiercely. He let forth a tirade of murmured oaths that would have made a Newfoundland fisherman gasp in wonder. Finally, he turned and, prying through the gloom, sought out the recumbent figure of his colored man-of-all-work, who was peacefully sleeping on a cot of willow-boughs. Smythe crept forward and bent above the sleeper. A prolonged snore met him. He reached forward and, feeling down the wide bridge of the negro's nose until he got the desired hold, he deliberately gave that member such a violent twist that Sam came out of Magnolia-land to this trying sphere with a suppressed snort.

"Yes, massar," he cried, struggling up.

"Light the candles and put some bacon to fry," commanded Smythe. "Colonel Hallibut is here."

"Lawd save us!" groaned the colored man. "Where am dem candles at, I wonder? Hab he got de dorgs, sah?" shading a match with his hands so that its flickering light showed the apprehension in his white eyeballs.

"Some of them, yes. Don't stand there shaking. Get his supper ready, then go down to the Triple Elms and wait for Watson. They mus'n't meet until I've seen Watson. You tell him the Colonel is here and to lie low until he leaves."

Sam had lit the candles and now stood tongueing his thick lips.

"It's gwine to be a bad night, sah, an' dey do say a-pack of wolves
_____"

Smythe lifted his hand.

"Hurry up—I hear him tramping out there. What did I tell you?"

The heavy voice of the Colonel was heard requesting that lights be brought and the fire be made more cheerful.

"You'd better take a rifle with you," said the storekeeper, turning to the negro, his hand on the latch.

Sam waited until the door had closed behind his master. Then he

gave way to silent mirth.

“Massar Smiff don’ want Watson t’ meet de Kennel. An’ de Kennel a-waitin’ out dar fer Massar Watson ter pop in any time. He! ho! he! ho!”

He quickly prepared the visitor’s meal, and, lifting the rifle from its pegs, slipped out by the back door.

After he had eaten his supper Hallibut pushed his chair back from the table and felt for his pipe.

“When was Watson over to Bushwhackers’ Place last?” he asked, his eyes on Smythe’s face.

“Let me see—why, I think it was on Tuesday, sir. He said you asked him to use his influence with those misguided people who prefer savagery to civilization.”

“Your friend has a vivid imagination,” remarked Hallibut. “He came to see me and told me a lot of nice things the Bushwhackers intended doing to me if I didn’t mind my own business. Knowing Watson to be even a bigger prevaricator than you are, I believed half what he said and let the rest go by me. However, I know the Bushwhackers haven’t any use for me. I don’t know why. Guess they think I’d do anything to gain what I’d set out to,—and they’re not far wrong. He suggested that I let you and him handle this deal for me, and after consideration I thought maybe I had better. I’m too short-tempered to ever use diplomacy, and as I’m no hypocrite I couldn’t soft-soap the Bushwhackers into coming to my way of thinking. I’m willing to pay them whatever the timber is worth. It ought to be a good thing for them, and I’m inclined to think they’ll be sensible and sell the timber. I only want the biggest of the hard stuff.”

“They’re a bunch of bad ones,” declared Smythe; “a regular band of cut-throats. They know no law and they hold life as cheap as water. Big McTavish has incited the others against you. They swear they will kill you if you set foot on Bushwhackers’ Place.”

“I’m not anxious to set foot on Bushwhackers’ Place, providing I can secure the timber through an agent. But the timber I must have. I gave Watson money with which to start the ball rolling. Maybe I’ll see that money again and maybe I won’t. As I said before, I don’t trust either you or Watson very far. But both of you know me.”

"We will do our very utmost to get the timber," said Smythe; and as the Colonel turned toward him he added, "for *you*."

"It might be a good idea," said Hallibut. "As for those Bushwhackers, I'm not caring a cent what they think of me. I tried to show them that I was interested in their welfare by building that schoolhouse, that they might educate their children, and by giving it to them—it and the land it stands on. I've hired young Simpson to teach the school, or you did with my money, which amounts to the same, and after all this you say the Bushwhackers want to kill me. Grateful, aren't they?"

"If you hadn't built that mill until after you had got possession of the timber——" faltered Smythe; but the Colonel interrupted him.

"See here, I built that mill on my own land, didn't I? Surely I don't have to ask permission from anybody else when I want to do anything with my own."

"I was merely going to say that the mill has driven the fur-bearing animals out of the creek," smiled Smythe. "The Bushwhackers say you have spoiled the best trapping, sir."

"Well, I'm sorry for that; but my intentions were good. I looked upon those people as a simple-hearted lot of men and women whose friendship was worth the winning. It's funny—me wanting friends at my age. But I'm getting old and fanciful, I guess."

Smythe scratched his chin and squinted along his beak-like nose as though he were aiming the remark at a crack in the floor, as he said:

"They're not particular about having the trees cut down. They live mostly by shooting and trapping. But I do know that two thousand acres of walnut, beech, and hickory is worth a fortune to somebody."

"Humph! And how long have you known that? Seems queer to me that you and Watson haven't tried to corner this timber for yourselves."

The storekeeper lifted his hands.

"Surely you know us better than that," he protested.

"I know dogs better than I do men," said Hallibut, "and I can trust dogs. I've never seen many men that I could trust. It was a man stole the best thing I ever had in life."

"Ah," Mr. Smythe rubbed his hands together and smiled, "a

woman?”

Hallibut looked at him, an expression of disgust on his face.

“Yes, but not the kind of woman you know. This one was my sister.”

“Just so,” smirked the grocer; and then he whispered again, “just so.”

“Did you or Watson tell the Bushwhackers what I intend to do with the boat?” asked Hallibut after a little time had elapsed.

“Yes, and they say that as soon as you try and put your schooner up Lee Creek there will be trouble. They told Watson to tell you so,” said Smythe.

“So they warn me, eh?”

Hallibut left his chair and paced up and down the floor.

Smythe sat with a smile of satisfaction on his weasel-like face.

“Of course, they can’t stop you from entering the harbor and sailing across Rond Eau; neither can they prevent you from sailing up the creek. But,” he added impressively, “they can burn your boat.”

“Don’t talk foolishness,” cried Hallibut. “They aren’t quite crazy. If they tried anything like that on with me, I’d wipe ’em out; you hear me—wipe the whole bunch of ’em out.”

“I think Mr. Watson and I may make some amicable arrangements with the misguided people,” said Smythe.

“Well, see that you do. Neither of you are honest, and you should make a success of any job that requires underhand work. But this is a straight, fair, and square offer. See that you make the Bushwhackers understand that I want to treat them squarely.”

He sat down and gazed across at Smythe. Slowly the purple died in his face, and he relighted his pipe and smoked it thoughtfully.

“It’s hard to understand some men,” he said, “—mighty hard. But then it’s mighty hard to understand some dogs, too. I’ve seen dogs, and owned ’em, intelligent enough to understand most everything I said to them. But somehow I never got to know their language. Still I’m called a dog’s superior. Strange, isn’t it? Now, your friend Watson reminds me of a dog that would wag and fawn all he could out of you.”

He nodded his great head slowly and sent a cloud of smoke ceilingward.

“As the case stands, I’ve trusted him with my money. The question is, will he play square?”

Mr. Smythe opened his milk-blue eyes wide.

“Oh, you may trust him, my dear Colonel,” he said earnestly. “Mr. Watson, sir, is an honest servant; a faithful Christian.”

“Humph, think so? Well, maybe you’re right. I’m not feeling exactly like myself to-night, Smythe, and I’m fanciful, I guess. The fellow who’s rigging my schooner told me a story this morning—not a nice story, either—and I’ve been thinking ever since about a poor little woman who died with not a single friend near her. Here’s the sailor’s story:

“A man by the name of Watts, who was supposed to be a ferryman, lived on the Detroit River somewhere near Sandwich. A crippled sister kept house for him, and he, according to report, was a bad one all round. One night he brought across from the American side a woman and her baby. They had come a long distance, it seems, and the woman was sick—in fact, she was dying. This Watts saw she had money, and he took her to his home, where she died that very night. Before the end came she consigned the baby to the care of Watts and obtained a promise from him that he would try and find a man—the sailor couldn’t remember the name—and place the baby, along with a certain parcel she was carrying, with him.”

Smythe laughed uneasily.

“That was a pretty big contract for Watts to take on.”

“Of course, he never intended to keep it,” said Hallibut. “She gave him money with which to seek out her friends. The sailor says he put it in his pocket and let the County bury the poor woman.”

“And the baby?” queried Smythe, his face twitching.

“I’m coming to that. It seems this Watts’ hunchback sister was a good woman at heart. She wanted to keep the baby. But he sent the child away into the forest with an Indian on a wild-goose chase and kept the parcel.”

Smythe made five dots on the paper before him.

“What was in the parcel?” he asked, wiping his eyes.

“The sailor didn’t know, but it was reported to be money. You’ll make me wish I hadn’t told you this harrowing story, Smythe.”

"Poor mother; poor little orphan," sighed the storekeeper.

The Colonel stared at him.

"Did I say that the baby's father had died?" he asked. "You're right though, its father was dead. The woman told Watts as much."

Hallibut arose and stretched his long arms. He was a man far past middle age, with iron-gray hair, a large face, and deep, kindly eyes. He stood over six-foot-two, was broad of shoulder, and straight as an arrow.

"That's the story the sailor told me," he said grimly. "I've been thinking of that poor woman all day. Poor little thing—sick and dying amongst strangers. And that man—think of what he did, Smythe. Could you imagine any man being so inhuman?"

Smythe sat huddled up on his chair.

"How long ago did this thing happen?" he asked.

"It was nineteen years ago; maybe twenty. There's no doubt about the baby being dead long ago. Of course, the Indian would reason that it was less trouble to let the baby die than it was to keep it alive."

The Colonel locked his hands behind him and paced up and down the room. He paused before Smythe at last and looked down upon him with misty eyes.

"I guess I'm not very well," he said with a short laugh, "—why, this thing happened twenty years ago; and maybe after all the sailor was lying."

Mr. Smythe raised his head.

"Sailors have a habit of lying," he agreed.

The door opened and Sambo burst into the room.

"I put de hoss inter de stable, Massar Smiff," he cried.

"Why, who had your horse, Smythe?" asked Hallibut.

Smythe's weasel eyes shifted from the big man to Sambo.

"I loaned her to—to Alexander Wilson this morning," he faltered.

"That's funny," returned the Colonel. "I met Wilson driving a span of oxen as I was coming here. Say, Sambo, feed my dogs, like a good fellow; I want to push on."

Half an hour after the hoof-beats of Hallibut's horse had died away Watson crept into the room. He was breathing heavily and his swarthy face was drawn and haggard. Mr. Smythe wisely asked no questions.

The agent sank into a seat before the fire. He sat fumbling in his pocket and from it finally drew out a leather wallet. He opened it and extracted from it a photograph. He held it out in a shaking hand and looked at Smythe.

“I’ve hung on to this,” he faltered, “because you thought we ought to keep it—because you thought if the baby was alive we might know it from this likeness.”

Smythe nodded, and Watson leaned forward and put the photograph in the red coals.

“You were right,” he shivered. “I found it. I found it to-day, and I knew it by that likeness of its mother. Yes, I found the girl, Smythe.”

Smythe glanced fearfully at the snoring Sambo in the corner.

“Where was she?” he asked in an awed whisper.

Watson did not reply. He picked up the poker and bent above the fire. The cardboard he had tossed in the coals lay there charred and curled. As he gazed upon it, fascinated, a little baby flame sprang out and kissed it to glowing life so that from it a face flashed out, sweet, glad, and triumphant. Then a breeze from the Wild swooped down the wide chimney and carried it away.

CHAPTER XI

THE WILD OF THE WILD

Colonel Hallibut rode the lone trail, his hounds at his heels. A spent moon draggled across a spiteful, crumpled sky, low down above the fringe of ravished forest. The wind had died, and the night was still, except for the calls of the forest things that voice their woes and joys at night. There were the low “whoo-hoos” of the owls, the “perru-perrs” of the night-hawks, and away far down toward the westward came, now and again, a fluted call dying in a wail that bespoke the lynx’s unsuccessful stalking. Deeper down in the forest a stray timber-wolf called hopelessly to a wandering pack. Anon the call was answered faintly, but clearly, far above; then a new note came into the strayer’s voice, and the yelp was sharper, clearer than before.

Colonel Hallibut rode on, his head low and his rifle thrown across his saddle-pommel. Occasionally his lips moved and he sat erect with a jerk.

“Hate me, do they?” he mused. “I wonder why? And I wonder why I should care? I am growing old and fanciful, I guess. Thank God I have my dogs—and a dog is a true friend.”

The thin moon dropped down behind the heavy fringe and the night blackened as the trail narrowed.

“I don’t know but I’ve made a mistake in making Watson and Smythe my agents,” thought the man. “I can’t trust either of them, and _____”

From far ahead there came again the long, low cry of a wolf; not the undulating cry; but the long-drawn, unvarying note that bespoke the rejoining of the pack. Hallibut lifted his head and half-reined in his horse.

“Howl, you devils,” he cried. Then he slapped the horse’s neck with the rein. “If it were mid-winter now,” he soliloquized, shrugging his shoulders, “I wouldn’t just feel safe in this place.”

Miles of the trail still lay before him—miles of lonely land. But the man was inured to the Wild; he had ridden the night trail many, many

times. Still the life had taught him caution. He knew that in mid-winter, when the food was scarce, the timber-wolves grew fearless and were bad company. In winter he would not have thought of journeying on this trail alone. But it was barely autumn now, and he gave himself not the slightest thought of danger, but rode boldly on.

The Colonel was the big man of his particular day. The village of St. Thomas, miles onward, he practically owned, as well as the greater portion of the partly cleared land surrounding it. St. Thomas was simply a drab-colored blotch on the Wild as yet, but the lake lay close to it and its natural resources promised to make of the half-cleared country about it a great land some day not far future. Hallibut owned the grand home of the country-side; a big, rambling house of planed boards, with wide rooms and oiled hardwood floors. It sat on the crest of a hill among a grove of butternuts, and near it stood the stables and kennels, famous far and near.

Horses were a rarity in those old days, but in Colonel Hallibut's stables were some of the best blood-horses of the time. He loved riding and he loved the chase. Being of English birth he had adopted the customs of his homeland and carried them to the limit. His cellar contained bitter ale, beer, and choice wines. He loved to sit beside his wide fireplace with his long pipe alight, a mug at his elbow, and hounds snoozing about him, and there dream, with his pets, of the events of the day's chase. He was a power in his land. No man dared to gainsay his command. He held more than money-power; he represented the law as well. He was a monopolist. He had secured land for the asking; land for a pittance; land for an hour or two of patient head-work. He owned thousands of acres. The scarcity of hard timber, occasioned by heavy northern forest fires, had recently enhanced its price so materially that one thousand acres of prime hardwood was worth a small fortune, provided there were facilities for shipping the timber. Hallibut owned the facilities in the shape of a trim schooner, which he now felt he could use to advantage; for he had long realized the wealth resident in those beautifully timbered ridges of the Bushwhackers. Having seen the great maple and beech, the magnificent walnut and the yellow and black and white oak, now worth many dollars a thousand, Hallibut was willing to

pay a good price for the timber. He had purchased a strip of timber along Lee Creek across from the Bushwhackers, and erected a portable mill there.

In order to show the Bushwhackers that he wished to be neighborly, the big man had built them a schoolhouse and supplied a teacher for it, in doing which he felt that he had been actuated by pure magnanimity, without thought of gain.

But the Colonel was finding out that the Bushwhackers resented his advances of friendship, and he wondered why. Now they were threatening him, and they must learn that he did not fear them.

The Colonel had never married, but kept as his housekeeper an old-country woman of advanced years. Her name was Davis, and her grown-up son, Dick, lived with them and looked after the kennels and stables.

Austere as he appeared to be to the people in village and countryside, Colonel Hallibut was in reality a man of great and generous impulses. He was a man of reserve, for in his heart rested a pitiful little story—pitiful because so simple.

Years ago, on a fine estate in England, he had possessed a little sister who was all the kin he could claim in the world. He more than loved the girl—he worshiped her as few men have been known to do. She could not make a wish he would not gratify. And the girl—she loved the big brother better than anything in the world, until that other love awakened within her. One day she forsook the brother, leaving a brief note behind. She had married a man who was beneath her station in life, and fled with him across the ocean. Hallibut faced his grief and went the way alone. From that day his world had been a lonely world. Change of scenes, excitement, or even the chase could never make him forget. The sister's face was always there. He sold the estate and sought forgetfulness in travel. Then he did what he should have done at first—he sought the girl. But he found her not. He joined the army, but even the thrill of the fight gave him no respite from sad memories. At last he turned for solace to the Wild; and in the big house, with one old family servant, he had lived for years now. Out in the open all day long, and at night by his fireplace with a picture in the glowing coals and a portrait looking from the wall—this was the man's life as it was lived.

As the horseman penetrated deeply into the forest gloom and the heavy shadows settled more closely about him, making the trail hard to keep in its blackness, he began to wish he had asked Dick to come out and meet him, as he sometimes did when forced to return after night. The woods had a way of playing pranks upon him. He was not bred for the bush, and therefore there were things about it that he could never hope to learn at his age. Still he knew the trail he was on well enough to have followed it blindfolded, had it been necessary. He settled lower in the saddle, and with his mind on Smythe and Watson and the Bushwhackers, he passed down the trail.

He had been perhaps two hours in the saddle, and was nearing what was known as the Fire-Lick, a low, charred scar of territory that had been swept by fire years ago, when he was aroused from his meditations by the growls of his hounds. The dogs were acting in a most peculiar manner, running ahead for a few feet and then retreating almost beneath the horse's heels. The horse, too, seemed to catch their spirit, for he reared once or twice, and would have thrown the rider had he been other than Hallibut himself.

"What the devil!" cried the man, striking the horse with the quirt and whistling to the hounds.

"What's the matter with you all, anyway?"

The horse leaped forward so suddenly that an overhanging branch caught the rider's cap and swept it from his head. With a promise that he would teach the animal to act differently, the Colonel slid down from his saddle and with the bridle-rein over his arm stooped to feel in the darkness for his cap. A hound almost beneath the horse lifted its head and howled, and the frightened beast with a snort reared and, jerking away from the man, sprang down the trail in the direction from which he had come.

Hallibut arose and fumbled the hammer of his rifle. He had his hands full with the dogs, for they crowded around him whining and growling and in every way manifesting fear of the unseen enemy. He did not understand it. It was a pretty predicament for him to be in, surely. It meant ten miles of a walk, and he was tired. He stepped out and, followed by the dogs, made to cross the Fire-Lick that stretched like a

black lake before him. At its border a circle of gleaming eyes met him.

"Wolves!" he shuddered, and throwing forward the rifle he drew a bead on those shifting balls of fire and pulled the trigger. The hammer fell dead. No explosion followed, and the circle narrowed toward man and dogs. Hallibut sprang for a nearby tree and drew himself up into its branches.

As he swung aloft a dark shape hurled itself into the air, and he heard the wolf's teeth snap within a few inches of his pendant legs.

"They'll get my hounds," thought the man. "Back, Pinch; back, Gabe; Nell, you fool, get back there," he cried excitedly.

But the fighting blood was up in the dogs. In numbers they were inferior to the foe, but in fighting tactics they were superior. The master knew each dog by its voice. And now it was Pinch gurgled a challenge, and the whimper of Nell bespoke her eagerness to back him. Gabe, the heaviest of the hounds, had closed on the wolf which had first sprung. Hallibut heard the snapping of bones—then a number of other wolves hurled themselves forward. He could hear the dogs snarling as they fought, and he lent his voice to their encouragement.

"Easy, Gabe," he shouted; "Nell, girl, easy now. Lead 'em into the open. Don't let 'em get you in the thick timber."

Hallibut had placed another cap on the nipple of his rifle, and as the struggling mass surged back into the charred space he fired into it point-blank. A wild howl told that a wolf had been hit.

"That's all I can do, poor chaps," he called.

His powder and ball were in the saddle-bags.

"They'll kill them all," cried the man. "They'll kill my dogs. Ha, if Dick only knew and would loose the big 'uns."

The "big 'uns" were a pack of wolf-hounds which on account of their vicious natures Hallibut kept in confinement.

Even as he spoke upon his ear fell the sharp crack of a rifle far eastward on the trail, and as its echo died there arose the deep musical bay of the wolf-hounds. Hallibut scrambled upright on a limb and probed the darkness with his eyes. Those gallant hounds beneath had heard the baying, too, and they were fighting as they never had fought before. One of the dogs retreated backward, fighting feebly with two

gaunt shapes that strove to bear it to earth. Hallibut, with a cry that was half a sob, forgot all caution in the animal love he bore his best and dearest companions.

"They'd do it for me," he cried; and clubbing his rifle he leaped to the ground. He was barely in time to save the brave Nell, who with torn sides and lolling tongue had fallen at last, fighting still and snapping with all her remaining force. Just as one of the wolves sprang, Hallibut brought the heavy rifle-barrel down upon its head, crushing the skull as though it had been an egg-shell. The dog scrambled up and met the other wolf as it sprang toward her master. Then a cyclone of panting, bounding bodies swept in and there was grand play in the Fire-Lick for a brief space of time.

"Oh, Colonel!" cried a voice.

"This way, Dick, lad, and be quick," the man responded breathlessly.

Dick found his master leaning weakly against a tree.

"Are you 'urt, sir?" he asked, dismounting.

"No. See if they've killed Gabe and Pinch, Dick. Lord! but how those little hounds did fight!"

Dick returned in a short time.

"I found two dead wolves, and I can't find any of the dogs, sir," he said. "Listen!—they're givin' of 'em 'ell, sir, an' no mistake."

Hallibut sat down on a log and drew the maimed dog over against his knee.

"Nell, old girl," he said chokingly, stroking her long ears, "you're a tartar, Nell."

The dog whined and licked his hand.

"Pinch, sir," cried Dick, "'e be limpin', but he be none the worse beyond bein' sore as anythink, sir."

In half an hour the rest of the pack had returned and were gamboling and leaping about Hallibut. Great, deep-chested, throaty dogs those wolf-hounds were. Their one consuming desire being to tear down and kill, they felt for the man before them only the blind devotion of dog for master. Hallibut had given them more blows than pats, but he knew how to command respect among dogs.

"How many was in the pack, sir?" asked Dick. He had drawn two dead wolves into the open and was now dragging a third.

"Somewhere about ten, I should judge," replied the Colonel. "But I can't understand why they should be on the rampage at this time of year."

"Look at this one, sir," cried Dick. "'E's so thin that 'e must 'ave nigh starved to death. All of 'em are thin. There's only one reason as I can think of that would make 'em vicious, sir: they're starvin'—that's why."

"Nonsense," cried Hallibut. "Why, the heavy timber is alive with food."

"Yes, sir, I know that. But you see, sir, these wolves can't get into th' 'eavy timber; at least they won't go. They won't go through a peopled settlement, an' they can't pass back into the woods by the way they came, sir."

"And why can't they?"

"Well, sir, I think it's 'cause you've put that mill on the creek. You see they must 'ave come by way of the lower swale—hit's the only way they could come. An' when you built th' mill the saws frightened 'em back further so that they've been all through th' second-growth and they've naturally been starvin' slow, an' it's come to such a pass as they've growed desperate, sir."

"By George, Dick, I believe you're right," cried Hallibut.

He arose stiffly and looked about him.

"Well, my putting that mill there might have been the death of me all right," he said. "But, lad, you haven't told me why you came to meet me with the hounds."

"Yes, sir; it was this way. A man from the village was chased by this 'ere pack last night. 'E was over at the stables to-night an' 'e told me. I came out a ways and listened for a time, an' when I 'eard 'em 'owl I let the big 'uns loose, thinkin' as you 'ud not mind my doin' it under th' circumstances, sir."

"You did just right, lad," said Hallibut. "But did you bring their leashes, Dick?"

"Right 'ere in my saddle-bag, sir."

“Well, you’d better tie ’em up before they happen on an Indian. This country is getting so’s Indians are becoming more valuable every day.”

Dick chuckled.

“They do ’ate Injuns an’ niggers, sir; an’, sir, that reminds me, there’s an old Injun from the Point by the name of Noah Sturgeon waitin’ up at th’ place to see you, sir.”

The Colonel knit his brows.

“Sturgeon,” he repeated; “Noah Sturgeon,—don’t think I ever heard of him——”

“Your ’orse, sir?” questioned Dick, looking about him.

“Never mind about my horse—I’m going to ride yours. You follow up and keep a tight grip on the hounds. I don’t want that old Indian to get eaten up.”

They passed on down the black trail, and the spot that had witnessed the struggle between the “big ’uns” and the starving things of the Wild grew silent again with a great and oppressive silence. Only the tiny bare branches of the trees clicked under the restless wind that slumbered fitfully when the night grew old. The clouds crept from the sky away down and below the forest-fringe; then the white stars came out and rested, looking down on the Fire-Lick. Their soft light swept the open and fell across the crumpled forms of the dead things that had roamed the forest-Wild. They lay pitifully silent and huddled, their red tongues lolling; their starving days at an end. Further into the second-growth bushland there were others of them, lying cold, beyond all life of the Wild. They had been cut off from their own; they had starved and fought and died. But they were only wolves after all.

CHAPTER XII

INJUN NOAH

The cold dawn was stealing across the lake when Colonel Hallibut rode into his yard and, dismounting, turned the horse over to Dick. The hounds leaped and fawned upon him and he sternly commanded them to keep down. He led them through the door into the great kennel-yards and there arose a bedlam of glad yelps and growls of rage, as some favorite was petted or felt the fangs of jealousy of a stronger fellow. The master played the whip among them, laughing and shouting.

“Oh, you beauties!—Black Dan, you fire-eater. Down, Gabe, you branch of the devil. Poor old Jep; come on, pup, and let me pat your old sides; poor old Jep, noble old Jep. Weren’t in the fight last night, were you? Too old, boy; too old and stiff. Every dog has his day, Jep, and every man, too. Egad, boy, I thought for a while last night that mine was over!”

The old hound laid his wrinkled chin in his master’s hand and gazed up at him with age-weakened eyes. Some of the younger dogs of the pack retreated snarling, with bristles erect, and lying down a short distance away, licked the wounds received in the night’s encounter. Hallibut walked across to a wide, low building and unlocked the door.

“In there, all of you,” he shouted; and the dogs sprang toward the door.

Old Jep came last, limping painfully, his whole attitude one of protest.

“Not you, old fellow,” said the man; “you can stay out, and you’d best hang close to me.”

He shrugged his broad shoulders, and with the old favorite following, crossed the yard and entered the stables. Dick was cleaning out the fetlocks of the horse the Colonel had just ridden in. He looked up as his master entered, then went on with his work.

“Where’s Fury?” asked Hallibut, peering into an empty stall.

“Turned ’im hout in th’ yard, sir,” stammered Dick. “’E was kicked in the night some’ow, sir. I’m sorry, but hit couldn’t be ’elped; ’e broke

'is 'alter, sir."

"That flame of Hades is always breaking his halter," cried Hallibut. "Well, of course that wasn't any fault of yours. Here's ten dollars—buy a halter he can't break, and keep what's over to get yourself a new jacket. I see this one you're wearing has been played with recently, eh?"

"Why, sir, that's so," laughed Dick. "It do seem, sir, as I can't keep anythink whole any, more, that stud Dobo is that playful, sir."

"Well, you best look out that Dobo don't get your head some time. And now when you've eaten and rested a bit I want you to put the saddle on Bay Tom and ride some of the kicks out of him. Go after the mare that turned traitor last night and fetch the wolf-pelts back with you. They'll make the hounds a nice warm bed for the winter, and I guess they belong to the hounds all right. Don't know but what I owe those dogs something myself."

"I don't think, sir, as Bay Tom'll take like t' carryin' raw furs. 'E do seem t' 'ate th' scent of blood. 'E'll like raise the mischief, sir, 'e will, and maybe kill me, sir."

"Well, if he kills you," said Hallibut dryly, "I won't ever ask you to ride him again. Now, you understand. And, Dick, I want that horse put through his paces. Use quirt and spur, and lather him till he weakens. I'd do it myself only I've got to get the schooner stocked for a cruise."

"Very well, sir. And sir, the old Injun, 'e be waitin' to speak with you."

"By George! I had forgotten. Yes, I'll go in and see him now."

The Colonel's housekeeper met him at the kitchen door.

"Oh, sir," she cried, raising her hands, "I'm so glad you've returned. Hall night hi've been scared most to death, sir. 'E's in there yet, sir, sittin' by the fireplace. 'E's hawful to look hat, sir."

Hallibut chuckled and laid his hand on the old lady's shoulder.

"You mean the old Indian, Nancy? Bless your heart, woman, he's harmless as a baby most likely. Bet a dollar he's been at my decanters. I'll go in and see him. Just lay the table for two of us. Like as not, being an Indian, he can eat whether he's hungry or no."

"But, sir," protested the old woman, "you'll not 'ave 'im sit with you, sir?"

"My dear Nancy, after what I've been through I'd welcome the company of a snake, providing it was a real snake and was clean. You'll please see that two plates are laid."

The big man stalked forward and opened the door into the wide sitting-room. Before the log fire was bent a slight figure clad in buckskin. The Colonel saw an old withered man, his thin face seamed with wrinkles, his black eyes peering from deep hollows that age had sunk there. His hair was crow-black and long, falling about his narrow shoulders. He arose with a lithe motion as the Colonel entered.

"How?" he said in good English.

"How?" returned the master of the house, holding out his hand.

The old Indian looked at it, but made no motion toward taking it. He raised his arm and pointed about the room.

"Good," he said; "much good."

"Sit down," invited the Colonel. "Now tell me what brings you here. You live on 'Point Aux,' I understand. It's a long way to the Point."

The Indian's eyes were fastened upon the portrait hanging on the wall. They did not leave it as he spoke.

"Much," he said; "very much. Noah wish to speak of Bushwhacker. You leave Bushwhacker there; no touch. You know Bushwhacker girl—Gloss—you know; good."

He pointed toward the portrait. It was that of a young girl with glorious long-lashed eyes and smiling lips. Hallibut followed his gaze, frowned, then going over to the sideboard glanced along the array of bottles there. He picked up a glass and sniffed it.

"Have you been sampling of any of these bottles?" he asked sternly.

"Noah no drink until he speak. Noah know her," pointing to the portrait. "Noah tote her, wee papoose, many day journey. White man pay Noah money and Noah lay papoose in Big Chief wigwam. You know Big Chief Bushwhacker. Ugh, you know her,—Gloss!"

He stretched a claw-like finger toward the portrait.

"You know white girl; good. You no touch Bushwhacker."

Hallibut stood frowning upon the old Indian.

"Listen," he said, sitting down beside the old man, "you must understand that the portrait you see on the wall is not of a Bushwhacker

girl or of anyone else you know. That's the likeness of a sister I had and lost years and years ago. It was painted in England, a land across the Great Waters, Noah."

"No, no," cried the Indian. "Noah have good eyes. He can see and understand. Big man need not lie—white girl Noah' good friend."

Hallibut arose and wiped his streaming brow. Then he sank into a chair and ran his fingers through his gray hair.

"I'm hanged if I know what he's driving at," he mused. "Apparently he thinks I want to wipe the Bushwhackers off the map." Aloud he said: "Who sent you here, my good man?"

Noah did not answer. He was looking into the coals.

"Bushwhacker know big man would steal bush," he said at length. "They no want big man there. Noah no want see big man steal good friend' home. Big man no come; no send other man. Gloss big man' friend."

Once more Colonel Hallibut looked puzzled. "I'm hanged if I understand what he means," he muttered.

"Big man no send vessel," went on the Indian. "Bushwhacker no want 'um. Scare duck plenty bad. Noah come tell big man no send."

"Ah," exclaimed Hallibut, "I'm beginning to see light. They sent you over to tell me I mus'n't send my schooner up the creek, eh?"

"No one send; Noah come himself. Noah know Bushwhacker shoot when big man come take timber. Big man no come—no send agent again."

The Colonel arose and paced up and down the room.

"Well, of all things!" he exclaimed. "What do you think of all this, Phoebe, girl——" turning to the picture, "what do you think of those impudent Bushwhackers?"

The aged Indian had risen and was wrapping his blanket about him.

"Noah," said Hallibut, "the Bushwhackers haven't any particular use for me, I understand. It's pretty near war between us. But I'm going to send my vessel up that creek just the same. I'm willing to promise you that I won't do the Bushwhackers any harm until they try to do me harm. They threaten to burn my schooner, and maybe they will—we'll see. I'll tell you what I am going to do. I'm going to send that schooner around

the Point and into the bay soon. I want you to meet her at the narrows and act as watchman aboard her. If you don't want the Bushwhackers to come to any harm, you must see that my vessel is not burned. I believe you are honest, and I will pay you well. What do you say, Noah?"

Noah pointed once more to the portrait.

"You do much for her?" he asked simply.

The big man started. Then he smiled and said gently:

"Old man, God only knows how much I would do—if I could."

"Noah will meet big man's vessel," said the Indian, holding out his hand.

After the strange messenger had eaten and gone, Hallibut paced to and fro across the wide room, pondering deeply upon what he had learned. He stopped at last before the portrait on the wall.

"I wonder why the poor old chap should think he knows you, Phoebe?" he said, addressing the girl in the frame.

It was a custom of his to speak all his inner thoughts to the picture. One may lose summer forever; but he can treasure a dead flower, because its perfume clings to it and never quite dies.

"I like the old man because he thinks he knows you," he murmured, "—just because he *thinks* he knows you, Phoebe."

His head dropped and he strode toward the door.

"I don't know why I should not teach those Bushwhackers a lesson!" he ejaculated.

He turned and let his frowning eyes rest on the painting, and as he gazed his face softened. The big eyes seemed to be pleading with him.

"Maybe there really is a girl who looks like you, Phoebe," he said gently; "a little girl of the Wild that looks like you."

And the face smiled on him as he passed out through the doorway.

CHAPTER XIII

ON THE CREEK PATH

It was early twilight when the old Indian once again reached Bushwhackers' Place. All day he had kept to the trail, jogging along without a mouthful to eat, simply tightening his belt when hunger gnawed at his stomach. It was a long journey from Rond Eau Point to St. Thomas, and over rough ground—a very long journey for a man of Noah's age to attempt. But he was an Indian and his years did not weigh him down. His sinews were tough like the seasoned hickory fiber, and his spirit was young like the spirit of the great shadowed woodland. Age counted for naught where life derived its strength from its environment.

To the old man Gloss was a star that had loosened itself from some strange firmament and strayed into the green uplands. He had watched her grow from a slender girl into a graceful creature with beauty that nothing of the woodland could match. One with eyes that held all the lights that ever shone on lake or wood, and life that bubbled and laughed and defied.

For her and her protectors Noah had undertaken the trying mission of visiting the rich man Hallibut, and advising him to leave the men of the hardwoods alone.

He had taken the portrait on the lonely man's walls for that of Gloss, but this was not strange. The old man's eyes were growing dim and they sometimes played pranks on him. But the incident was sufficient to bind his loyalty to the man who threatened the Bushwhackers.

Noah was willing to act as watchman aboard the schooner. He had lost all the impetuosity of youth. He was old and wise, and he would watch and wait—and act, if necessary, when the time came.

Gloss, coming up from the spring with a pail of foaming milk, newly strained and ready for "setting," caught sight of her old friend and gave a call like the trill of a marsh-lark. The Indian, without speaking, overtook her and reached for the pail, which he carried to the house and set on the block outside the cellar door.

Big McTavish was chopping logs for the evening fire, and caught

sight of Noah as he came around the corner of the house.

"Well, well, Chief," he cried, "thought maybe you was on the warpath. Ain't seen you here for days. Come along in and get some supper."

"Good," grunted the old man, and followed McTavish into the kitchen. Gloss laid the cloth for the visitor's supper. Her eyes brightened and her red lips smiled when the old man turned his wrinkled face toward her.

"Noah," she said, "you mus'n't stay away from Gloss so long again. It's heap lonely without you here."

Noah's eyes flashed at the words, and he spoke, using only the mellowest words of the English tongue, as was his custom.

"Wild-bird no lonely where wild world be. Gloss speak to make Injun heart glad: now Injun speak to make wild-bird sing. Big water," pointing southward, "big forest," sweeping his arm about, "all stay same. No change. Good, much good. Noah, he know."

Granny McTavish, coming from the bedroom, caught the words of the Indian.

"Reet, Noah," she smiled, "there'll be na' change teel God wulls, and may He na' wull it frae lang."

"Ugh, you tell Boy," said Noah, "tell 'um Noah say it."

The old lady held up her hands.

"There's na' tellin' him at all whatever," she sighed. "He's muckle disturbed and he'll na' listen to reason. He's oot there noo trudgin' the wet woods, but he'll noo get comfort there, mon; he maun seek it i' the guid Book. I've told him o' it, aye, I've told him o' it aften enoo. God forgive him for th' wild creature he is—and he's a guid lad at heart enoo, a guid lad at heart——"

"Tush, Granny," chided Big McTavish. "Boy's not worryin' over anythin'. He's a bit unsettled, that's all. He's out in the woods 'cause he loves th' woods. See, you've spoiled Noah's supper for him. He's thinkin' Boy's a bit crazy, maybe."

Noah pushed back his chair from the table and arose.

"You're not going so soon, surely, Noah?" cried Gloss.

"Noah must go to Point," answered the Indian. "Canoe down on Eau

shore.”

Gloss snatched up her cap.

“I’ll go down to th’ shore with you,” she cried. “Maybe I’ll meet Boy.”

“No,” said Noah, “Gloss no come.”

“But I say yes,” replied Gloss, dancing nimbly in front of the old man. “Remember, I haven’t seen you for ages, and I must go. Come along.”

She took his hand and they passed out together. They walked along, Gloss taking the lead, and neither speaking a word. They understood each other well, and something unbreakable bound them together while life should last.

When they reached the canoe, hidden in thick rushes on the edge of the bay, the girl patted the old Indian’s wrinkled cheek gently and bade him good-by.

When the black rushes of the moon-lit Eau hid his craft, the girl turned homeward on the path again. A tender smile was on her face, and the red blood was dancing in her veins. Her whole young being was alive and calling—calling for—she wondered what!

Where the woodland trail met the creek path a wide sheet of moonlight lay shrouding the dead leaves. When she reached this spot she clasped her hands and raised them to the deep chaotic arch of the skies.

“Boy,” she breathed chokingly, “oh, Boy——” Then the long lashes hid her eyes and something splashed upon the dead sheeted leaves. “—Oh God, I mean,” she whispered, “take care of him; take care of Boy.”

Far down in the dark swales a panther wailed and a loon sent its weird call from the marshlands. A fleeting cloud drifted across the moon and the path darkened. The girl quickened her pace into a run. As she rounded a curve in the path she gave a little cry.

Standing directly in the path was a man.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said, “it’s only me.”

“You?” she repeated. “Oh, yes, it’s Mr. Simpson. I must hurry on—I must——”

He did not attempt to move aside, and the girl’s head went back and

her eyes flashed.

"Please let me past," she said imperiously.

Simpson laughed.

"All in good time. But I want to say something first. Won't you listen, Gloss?"

"If it's what you said before, I don't want to hear it," she answered.

"You—you mus'n't keep me here; it's dangerous—dangerous for you."

"Or you?" he laughed.

He came toward her and she recoiled.

"You held me once—in your arms," she panted, "and against my will. You mus'n't hold me so again. If you do—I'll kill you."

"I'll take the chance," he said hoarsely; "it's worth dying for."

She stood tall and white before him, her great eyes fastened to his, and looking deep into the craven soul of him. He reached for her hands—then something, a new and strange helplessness, overpowered him, and he sank trembling on the moss.

"Mr. Simpson," said the girl quietly, "you must go—for your own sake. You must go now."

"Gloss, oh Gloss!" he murmured brokenly, "how I love you, girl! You cannot know how much. I was mad—mad. Can you forgive me, Gloss?"

"No, I can't forgive you. I have no power to forgive you. It wasn't me you hurt once—it's not me you would hurt again."

"Don't say that," he cried. "I merely held you in my arms, and kissed you. Yes, I held you in my arms—I kissed you——"

He struggled to his feet, trembling, his hair matted to his brow with perspiration.

"I did kiss you once," he repeated, "and I would give my life either to undo it or to do it again."

"You haven't the power to do either," she said earnestly; "believe me, you have not."

"You are right," he sighed. "Oh, yes, you are right. That other night when I met you on the path I was actuated by a passing fancy—just a passing fancy. I took you in my arms. You struggled. I kissed you. I looked into your soul—I looked into your soul, and saw what I must

forever be banished from, Gloss. Am I not punished! Do you think I can ever forget?"

"I—I don't know. Now, I must go."

He stood aside and let her pass.

"Will you forgive?" he asked.

"Will you be strong?"

He shivered, but his moving lips gave out no sound.

When the moon trailed down below the tree-fringe of the Point he was still standing where the girl had left him. The panther's howl was still, but away down in the mucky marshlands the loon sent his weird cry to the cold stars.

CHAPTER XIV

PAISLEY RECONNOITERS

The early autumn twilight had fallen when Bill Paisley stepped from the wood into the fallow. He dropped the long muzzle-loading rifle into the hollow of his arm and peered down through the gathering dusk toward Totherside.

“Why, there sure is a light at widder Ross’s,” soliloquized the man. “Now, it might be that I’d find out some things we should know if I’d just drop over there casual-like. What I’ve heard concernin’ Watson, and Peeler seein’ him and the teacher on the trail together, has roused my suspicions to the boilin’ point. I hope he’s at the widder’s to-night; I want to ‘get to know him better,’ as Boy put it.”

Paisley leaned against a tree and laughed silently.

“He don’t like me very much. I could see that the other night. And I suppose it’s natural that I shouldn’t think much of him.”

He walked on, his feet making not the slightest sound upon the sward that now gleamed gold-brown beneath the moonlight. At the edge of the creek he stepped into a skiff and with one movement of the paddle sent it sweeping into the rushes on the farther shore.

Widow Ross’s home was built much after the style of the homes in Bushwhackers’ Place. It was long and low and constructed of logs. The chinks between the logs were filled with yellow-blue clay. Paisley approached the place cautiously, once or twice hesitating as if he would draw back. He opened the door gently in response to a loud “come in,” and peered about the room as though in search of somebody. A tall, angular woman, dressed in native homespun, and working a huge spinning-wheel, turned as he entered, and, without taking her pipe from her mouth, said shortly:

“Shut that door, Bill Paisley. And you, Tom Ross, stop terrifyin’ that cat.”

A freckle-faced lad of about nine arose from a corner and, administering a last wholesome kick to a sickly looking pussie, came shuffling forward.

"Hello, Bill," he said, "what's new! I heard that you and the rest of the Bushwhackers was actin' balky with Colonel Hallibut for wantin' to buy your timber. What's the matter!"

"Want to keep our timber to make bows and arrows with," answered Paisley dryly. "How's things at the mill, Tom? Runnin' overtime, I see."

"We're expectin' old Hallibut down soon," said Tom. "I heard the boss sayin' that the Colonel was comin' in with a boat. Says he's goin' to have all your timber before the bay freezes over."

"Yes?—He'll get it when Hell freezes over."

"Bill Paisley," frowned the woman, taking her pipe from her mouth, "no swearin'—not here, if you please, sir."

"Excuse me, Mrs. Ross," said Bill from behind his hat.

Tom kicked the visitor gently with his bare foot, and Mrs. Ross, resuming her smoke, went on:

"We are feelin' the influence of education and refinement since Mr. Simpson has been boardin' here. No home that contains a teacher is a place for perfanity. Mr. Simpson says: 'Perfanity,' says he, 'is the most useless sin of all sins. No gentleman swears.'"

Mrs. Ross snorted and turned her swarthy face toward her visitor.

"Livin' in daily intercourse with an educated young man has its advantages. Look what Mr. Simpson has done for our Tom. Look at him, Bill Paisley, and tell me, don't you see a difference in that boy?"

"I do," said Bill slowly; "I sure do, widder, now you speak about it."

"That young man of education did it," said the widow. "The teacher did it all."

"Great Christopher Columbus! but he's smarter than I thought him," grinned Paisley. "Wonder if he'd cut mine?"

The widow turned her black eyes upon him.

"Cut *yours*?" she repeated. "What be you talkin' about?"

"Why, my hair," said Bill. "I said I wonder if he'd cut mine, seein' he's made such a good job of Tom's."

Tom tittered and the woman turned her back on the two.

"Swine," she muttered; "bushwhacker swine."

"Where's the teacher to-night?" asked Bill blithely.

"Him and Mary Ann——" commenced Tom.

But his mother, turning, quickly advanced upon him, and catching him by the collar with one powerful hand, administered with the other such a cuff that young Tom went spinning to his corner. The mangy cat sneaked over and crept under Paisley's chair.

"And how *is* Mary Ann?" asked Bill after a time. "Ain't seen her but once or twice for the last month. I suppose she often speaks of me, Mrs. Ross?"

"Indeed she doesn't, then, so you needn't flatter yourself. Mary Ann's got no use for a Bushwhacker, let alone a worthless one who would make a joke at his own mother's funeral. So, there."

"If I ever made a joke at my mother's funeral it was 'cause I was too young to know better," said Paisley pensively. "My little ma died when I was born. I ought to be worth a whole heap, marm—I was bought at a big price."

He picked up the cat and smoothed her crumpled fur with his big hand.

"That was nigh on to forty year ago," he said, "and I've been wanderin' about the bush ever since, exceptin' a few years I was down in the Southern States, ranchin' it. I picked up a lot down there, but nothin' worth keepin', I guess. What I was goin' to say was, I never see a mother and her boy together without a big somethin' I can't name standin' right out before me, and that somethin' is what I've missed by not havin' a mother."

Widow Ross laid her pipe on the table.

"Tommy," she commanded, "you go right down to the spring and bring up that bucket of milk, and don't you spill it, or I'll pull every one of them red hairs out of your head. I don't suppose you've lost your appetite none lately, Bill?"

"Periodically only, marm. I ain't got over my likin' for brick-cooked bread and milk, particularly the bread of a lady I know to be the best cook on Totherside."

Mrs. Ross showed two rows of white teeth in a pleased smile. Then her face grew stern again.

"Totherside," she flashed, "why, I don't take that as much of a compliment, Bill Paisley. Ain't I the only woman on Totherside?"

"Beggin' your pardon, I mean on the whole country-side—Bridgetown included," retrieved Bill gallantly.

"What be you all goin' to do about Hallibut?" asked the woman, sitting down at the spinning-wheel.

Bill shook his long hair and chuckled.

"I got scolded once for sayin' what I thought about sellin' our timber, so don't ask me."

The widow's heavy brows met in a frown.

"Here you are forty years old, and that's old enough for you to have some sense if you're goin' to have any. And I must say I don't think you nor Big McTavish nor any of you Bushwhackers have an ounce of sense among you. Here you are fightin' off a fortune, or at least keepin' money, which you might have, out of your pockets. Bosh! I believe that Boy McTavish has got you all under a spell."

"Boy is sure the strongest and bitterest fighter amongst us," agreed Bill, "but we're all of one opinion. We like the woods, and I guess we have reason to. It has give us all a mighty good livin', and somehow wood-life has somethin' about it that cleared land ain't got—smells and sounds and silence and I'll be——"

"Be careful now, you nigh swore again," admonished the woman. "There you, Tom, set the pail down on the table; then go to the out-house and bring in the bread, the brick-baked loaf."

"Mrs. Ross," said Paisley, "you're not only a good-lookin' woman, but you're a good-hearted woman. Once I hoped I might be your son-in-law and have all the brick-baked bread I wanted, and the corncake which only you can bake. But Mary Ann she seems to think different, and I'm thinkin', after all, she had some reason, seein' she is only somethin' about twenty-two years old and me nearly twice that."

The widow put her finger on her lip and glanced fearfully toward the door. Then she looked with commiseration at Paisley, and approaching him in a crouching attitude, whispered:

"Mary Ann is goin' to marry the teacher."

Bill's stool, poised on two legs, came to the floor with a thump.

"Marry the teacher!" he repeated; "marry the teacher! Well now, I'll be turkey-trapped. I didn't think he was brave enough to ask her."

"I ain't sayin' that he *has* asked her, am I?" cried the widow. "But I've got two eyes to see with, haven't I, Bill Paisley?"

"Aye, marm, to do whatever you like with," answered Bill pleasantly, his own eyes on the loaf of bread which Tom had just brought in. Then noting the widow's ruffled dignity, he smoothed it with: "I'd know who baked that bread by the appetizin' smell of it. Says I to Big McTavish just yesterday, 'There are some good bread-makers in this here place, but none of 'em quite like widder Ross.'"

"Time Big McTavish had his last loggin'-bee he sent for me to come and help with the cookin'," said the widow, as she poured the foaming milk from the pail into the big earthen bowls. "I made a custard in the dishpan. There was forty-two eggs in it, and it was good, if I do say it myself. Not one man in the lot of 'em that set down to the table but asked for a second helpin'. Big Mac he told 'em all who made it, and since that I've liked him better than ever. I'm makin' another just like it for Mrs. Declute, and if you're at Declute's loggin'-bee next Thursday you'll be able to sample it. Big McTavish says that Ander's loggin' 'll be a good 'un, all right, if I make a custard for it."

"He's one man in five hundred, marm, is Big Mac," answered Bill. "Why, Mrs. Ross, there's not an Injun in the bush, no, or on the Point either, who wouldn't fight tooth-and-nail for him. He's been mighty good to the Injuns, has Mac. Any time they want anythin' he has, they go to him and get it. And Gloss, why she can simply tie them Injuns about her little finger. They all think the world of her."

"I'd like to know who don't think the world of Gloss. She's a dear girl—bless her sweet face."

Bill with a spoonful of milk-soaked bread well on the way to its destination, suspended operations for a moment.

"Widder Ross," he said, "God never made a better girl, nor a better lookin' one, unless it was your Mary Ann."

His repast finished, he reached for his rifle.

"Must be goin'," he said in answer to the widow's invitation to 'set longer.' "I'll call in on you again soon, widder. Good-night."

"Good-night," responded the woman.

She was lighting her clay pipe and did not so much as turn as Bill

walked out.

Paisley skirted the scrubby walk and passed along the edge of the butternut grove toward the path across the fallow. A whip-poor-will was voicing its joys from the limb of a dead ash. The moon had sunk above the bay, and its wide splash of light lay across the fallow, a blanket of milky haze. Bill lifted his head and breathed in the clear wood-scented air. From the valley came the monotonous buzz of a saw. Suddenly Paisley dived into the hazel thicket. He had heard footsteps approaching, and rightly divined that it was the teacher and Mary Ann.

Not until the young people had passed through the grove and emerged into the interval beyond did Paisley step out from his hiding-place. Then he looked toward the sinking moon and sighed.

"She's not for the likes of you, Bill," he murmured as he turned to the path again.

Tommy stood before him.

"Bill," he said excitedly, "I want to tell you somethin'. I've got to tell you, Bill, or I'll bust."

"Why, Tommy," said Bill, "thought you'd gone to bed."

"No, I slipped out and follered you, but I saw them comin' too, and I ducked same as you did. Say, Bill, you don't think much of Mr. Simpson, do you?"

Paisley laughed queerly.

"Well, Tommy, and what if I don't?"

"Well, I overheard him and that Watson man plannin' some things together the other day. I thought I wouldn't tell anybody, but I can't keep it any longer."

He stood on tiptoe and whispered something in the man's ear. Paisley gripped the lad's arm.

"You're dreamin'," he cried.

"No, Bill, I heard 'em make it up between 'em," gasped Tom. "An' what I want to know is, what's going to be done about it?"

"I don't know," answered Paisley dazedly. "I don't know—I'll have to study this thing out."

His square jaw was set and he toyed with the lock of his rifle.

"You haven't told anyone else, Tommy?" he asked.

“Nary a soul.”

“Then don’t. I’ll see you in a night or two. Keep your eyes on the teacher. Remember, if Big McTavish or Boy hear what you’ve told me they’ll kill him sure. You know what that will mean.”

“I won’t tell anybody, cross my heart,” promised the lad, and then darted away.

CHAPTER XV

WAR TACTICS

Paisley paddled slowly across the creek, drew his skiff into the willow bushes, and picking up his rifle, walked along the edge of the creek until he reached the bay. It slept gray and cold beneath the moon, and all about its tranquil waters a ragged tree-frame stood spiral-like and shadowy—a disheveled cloud in an open blotch of sky. Paisley gazed across the bay, his face fixed and his whole attitude one of protest.

“They want to take this away from us,” he mused,—all this. And the d—— villains want to steal *her* away from all this. Well, let them try.”

He turned, lifting his head to catch the low night-calls that floated from the far-away corridors of the deep wood. The forest was breathing its nocturnal song—a hushed chant, interspersed with the notes of the wild things that roamed and fed and voiced their gladness after the manner of their kind. The shrill bark of a fox sounded from nether swales, and away beyond a lynx wailed sadly like a lost child. A little way into the thicket a brood of partridges huddled, peeping with plaintive voices.

“I guess they can’t understand very well what all this means to us.”

Paisley turned and strode on through the scanty wood-fringe along the Eau shore until he came to an open spot of nearly two acres. A dim light twinkled from the window of a log-house, and a couple of dogs came forward with fierce yappings which changed to whines of welcome as they recognized the visitor. The door of the house flew open, and a woman, whose frame filled the doorway completely, sent a scolding command out to the dogs.

“David and Goliath,” she commanded, “come in here t’ once er I’ll break your no-account backs with this poker.”

“Night, Mrs. Declute,” called Paisley. “Ander in?”

“Ander,” rasped the woman, “be you hum? ’Cause if you be, Bill Paisley wants t’ know it.”

The huge form was nudged aside and Declute's grinning face peered out into the night.

"Come right on in, Bill," invited the lord and master. An ironwood pole leaned against the house, and on it hung a splendid specimen of buck newly killed. On the floor of the house lay a smaller deer already skinned, and now being dissected by the trapper. Three children of various sizes sat about the carcass, each munching a piece of corncake from a chubby fist.

"How's the babies, marm?" asked Paisley, carefully stepping through and over the wide-eyed little Declutes and sitting down on a stool near the fireplace. "Ander, two deer in an afternoon ain't such bad luck, eh?"

"I hit another," cried Ander, "bigger'n th' one outside. Shot about an inch too high, though. But I trailed him down an' I'll get him in th' mornin'. Might have killed a doe, too. Had a good chance, but I didn't take it."

"Zaccheus has got a tetch of p'isin-ivy," said the woman. "That's what makes him squirm so uneasy like. I'm treatin' it with sassafras 'ile an' potash. How've you been yourself, Bill?"

"Feedin' and sleepin' like a babe, thankee," replied Paisley. "What I dropped round for was to find out just what you folks think of the way them town-fellers are actin'. Did Hallibut or Watson make you any offer for your timber?"

"Wall, yes, they did," answered Ander slowly. "Offered me three hundred dollars for the big stuff on my place only a day or two ago. Said that you and McTavish and Peeler and most of the others had taken an offer they made you for yours, and I said t' the feller, 'If th' other chaps see it that way I guess I'll see it that way, too.' I'm to take my deed t' Bridgetown when I tote these furs over next Saturday, an' they're goin' to give me another deed and the money."

"Who did you see?" asked Paisley.

"That storekeeper Smythe. He says, says he, 'The money'll be ready fer you when you come, an',' says he, 'don't tell any o' your neebors, 'cause we're payin' you more'n we are them, an' they won't like it.' "

"I don't take t' this way they have of wantin' Ander t' keep dark," said the woman. "I ain't takin' kind like t' lettin' the timber go anyway. We don't really need that money. Ander he makes enough outin trappin' and shootin' fer our wants, and if they come in here what are they goin' t' do t' our property? That's what I want to know."

Paisley bit off a piece of tobacco and shrugged his shoulders.

"Ander," he asked, watching the trapper roll up the green hide, "how much did you make in furs and deer-meat last fall and winter?"

"He made four hundred and three dollars," answered the wife proudly.

"Well, then, let me tell you somethin'." Paisley tapped the stalk of his rifle impressively with his knuckles. "Just as soon as you take Smythe's money your trappin' days and all other days are over here, for all time. They'll have you just where they've been tryin' to get the rest of us. Once they get hold of your deed you can whistle. This land is worth thousands more'n they offer you, and they know it. What has Hallibut's mill done for the ma'sh-trappin'? I guess you know. They'll drive the furs off and they'll drive you'n me off, and they want to do just that, too."

Declute arose from the floor.

"If I thort that——" he commenced; but his wife broke in:

"If you thort! Just as if you could thunk, you thick-head you. Didn't I tell you that I suspicioned them fellers, and don't Bill Paisley here know? Don't he allars know? Shet right up, Ander, an' don't you try an' think. You had no right to act without seein' Bill here an' Big Mac, anyway."

"But I wasn't goin' to, Rachel," drawled Declute. "I war goin' over to Big Mac's this very night, lookin' in on Bill on the way over. Don't you get too danged crusty, wife."

The ponderous woman waved a hand toward the progeny on the floor.

"You, David an' Moses an' Zaccheus," she commanded, "scramble out o' th' road instantly, I'm wantin' to get over t' th' cupboard."

There was a hurried scramble out of the way, and the mother rolled across the room and secured a paper from an inner recess of the home-

built cupboard.

“Bill Paisley,” she said, passing the paper over to the visitor, “you be goin’ to keep this here deed for me an’ Ander—ain’t I right, Ander?” she nodded, the corner of her mouth drawn down warningly.

“If you say so, ma—in course,” consented Ander.

“Good idea,” grinned Paisley, folding the paper and placing it in his pocket. “Now, Ander, after you’ve finished cuttin’ up that carcass, suppose you come along with me and we’ll look in on the rest of the Bushwhackers and see if we can’t get their deeds, too.”

Declute glanced at his spouse. She nodded, and with much alacrity the little man arose.

“Don’t know as I’ll be much of a help to you, Bill,” he laughed, “but I’ll go along anyway.”

It was midnight when Paisley opened the door of the McTavish home and with a voiceless laugh waved the bundle of deeds above his head. The candle was burning dimly; the fire in the wide fireplace was almost dead. Boy sat before it alone, looking thoughtfully into its depths. Paisley crossed over to him and placed the deeds in his hand.

“They can’t get the timber without the deeds,” he chuckled, “and to get the deeds I guess they’ll have to get us, eh?”

Boy caught his friend’s hand and pressed it. He tried to speak, and, noting his feelings, Paisley drew forth his pipe and filled it as he gave, in an undertone, an account of his great night’s work.

“I guess all the Bushwhackers’ll have reason to thank you, Bill,” said Boy. “I ain’t sure that they all feel like I do about holdin’ this,” he swept his arm about him and a glow came into his eyes. “It’s been a lot to me—a lot. Nobody can guess what it would mean to me to see this woods crippled. Somehow I haven’t been just myself since they started it over there. I can’t sleep like I used to. I know it’s foolish, but that saw gets buzzin’ in my dreams and I’m fightin’, fightin’ all night long for *this*, Bill, this woods and all it holds. I was thinkin’ that I’d come over and see you, when you stepped in. Bill, we don’t ever say much, us Bushwhackers; but to-night I couldn’t help but be glad me and you have always been what we have to each other. Some things come over me lately that grip tight hold of me and hold me without hurtin’, and I seem

to like the feelin', too. It's like frost that kills without hurtin'. If I wasn't strong I'd think I was gettin' sick."

There came from the inner room a voice mumbling in troubled sleep. Boy lifted his head and smiled.

"It was your name she called, Boy," whispered Paisley wonderingly.

"Ma says she often calls out that way," said Boy. "Sometimes it's my name and sometimes it's dad's. Gloss dreams a lot, I guess."

Paisley noted the smile that drifted across his friend's face, and he nodded his head up and down slowly.

"Guess I'll be hittin' the back trail," he said rising, "and you best go to bed, Boy. I'll come over to-morrow as we arranged and help you set your traps in the runs. It's goin' to freeze right soon, and trappin' is on from now. Declute got a couple of deer this afternoon, so we'll just take a whack at 'em ourselves toward night to-morrow."

"You'd better stay and sleep with me, Bill," said Boy. "Somehow I'd like to have you, and we could make an early start in the mornin'."

"Oh, I'll hoof it along back, I guess," laughed Paisley.

He was wondering whether he ought to tell Boy what he had learned concerning Watson and Simpson. He glanced at Boy and his lips closed tight.

"He'd kill 'em both," he thought, "—I'll watch them fellers myself."

With his hands on the latch of the door he glanced back. Boy was seated before the dead fire, his chin on his hand and the bundle of deeds pressed against his cheek. Paisley leaned his rifle against the wall and unstrapped his powder-horn. Then he came back and put his hands on Boy's shoulders.

"I'd best stay, I guess," he grinned, "and show you how a real Bushwhacker should sleep. It strikes me, Boy, that you're lookin' some lonesome and need company. Glad Ander Declute's goin' to have a loggin'-bee. It'll stir us all up."

He sat down on a stool and started to unlace his moccasins, whistling an old tune beneath his breath. Boy arose and, walking to the window, gazed out across his kingdom. An owl was hooting from a distant thicket. Down in the deep shadow a fox called, and from the sheep-corral came the soft bleating of a late lamb. The chickens in the

coop stirred and voiced their uneasiness. Outside on a well-worn spot a dog stretched himself, arose and sniffed the breeze, then assumed his former position.

Boy turned to the long cupboard near the hearth.

"Seems I can't be myself these days," he said. "I forgot that you might be hungry after your tramp about to-night. Set up, Bill, and have a bit of turkey."

He placed the carcass of a cold fowl on the table, and from the milk-house outside fetched bread and butter. Paisley drew his stool up to the table.

"Ain't you eatin'?" he asked.

"Not hungry," answered Boy. "Seems I ain't like anythin' I used to be any more. All day long I've been thinkin' about a lot of no-count things that happened years ago. Little things I've done and seen here in the bush. How I tramped with Davie 'cross the ridges and down through the wild blackberry patches. Why, Bill, it seems, some nights, when I'm lyin' awake, that I can see everythin' just as plain as I saw it then. Last night I was listenin' to the rushes sweepin' against my skiff. My oar was poked in a bog and my boat-painter was tied to it. I was trollin' with a live minnie, and the creek was a clear bottle-green. The pond-lily roots lay there six feet below me, and the bass swam in and out—you know how they did before the mill was up, Bill?"

Paisley nodded and looked back over his shoulder. His mouth was full of turkey and bread.

"And as they'll do again," he asserted in muffled tones of conviction.

"I was gettin' strikes and playin' bass," smiled Boy; "playin' and landin' 'em and enjoyin' it all. Davie was there, and Gloss was there. We all talked and laughed together. It was real, I tell you, Bill. It wasn't a dream, 'cause my eyes was wide open. That sort of thing scares me. I don't understand it."

Paisley put his hand on Boy's knee.

"I know what's doin' it all," he said. "I know just what's doin' it all. You're worryin'. That's what you're doin'. You shouldn't, 'cause Hallibut and his gang ain't goin' to get this bush, not by a danged sight.

You're thinkin' that you won't fish no more like you used to; that you and Davie won't tramp together no more in your own little world. But you will. You'll always own it, Boy. You take old Bill's word for it, you ain't got nothin' to worry yourself sick about."

"Somehow I feel sort of helpless," sighed Boy. "Maybe I'm a coward, 'cause I feel like hidin'; only the fight in me makes me keep to the open. You've seen a young partridge when you walked upon him unexpected-like. The little beggar just grabs a leaf and turns over on his back, holdin' the leaf over him. You and me know where he is, because we see that leaf movin' after a time; but nobody who ain't a Bushwhacker could find him, Bill."

"And like him, you naturally want to lay low, eh, Boy?"

"Yes, as though I want to cover up; not because I'm scared, but 'cause it seems the natural thing to do. Then I get over that feelin', and the next thing I know I'm carryin' my rifle at full cock and keepin' a lookout. I don't know how this is goin' to end, Bill, I sure don't."

Paisley stood up.

"Boy," he said earnestly, "you'd best be careful what you do. Don't you fire first. I ain't advisin' you to leave your rifle on the rack, but you know that us Bushwhackers don't shoot to scare. Ammunition's too scarce for that. If you was to kill one of Hallibut's gang now, it would make things bad for us all."

"The traps ain't set and the rats have left their houses," said Boy drearily. "All along the creek are dead runs, and there's no use trappin' there. The ducks have left our shores and they've gone to the Point grounds. There's nothin' here, Bill, but the clash and buzz and whistle of that mill. The turkeys don't come on the ridges like they used to; the deer stay back in the swamplands; and all through this woods them sounds are chasin' the fur and game farther back. And now he is goin' to send his schooner in here. Think of it, Bill. He's goin' to sail across the bay and up Lee Creek for his lumber. Old Noah was here this mornin' and he told me. He's goin' to work for Hallibut, too, and I can't understand that."

"What's the old Injun goin' to do!" grinned Paisley. "He can't work—he's too old."

“He’s goin’ to watch the boat. It looks as if Hallibut’s afraid we’ll burn her. I don’t know why he should think that, but Noah says it’s better for him to be on the boat than anybody else. And he’s right. He didn’t tell me much—you know what a silent old feller he is. But I know he’s been over to see Hallibut. Noah isn’t against us: he thinks too much of Gloss for that, but there’s somethin’ he knows that we don’t know. I see him watchin’ Gloss a lot. I’d give a good deal to know just what’s in his mind, Bill.”

“Why, there’s nothin’ in his mind. Hallibut said, ‘Old Injun, do you want a job standin’ watch on my boat when I send her down among the Bushwhackers!’ and Noah he says, ‘Much good.’ Noah knows that he can watch Hallibut that way better than we can watch him. Of course, I don’t mean to say Noah would be traitor to any man he worked for—we both know he wouldn’t. But he’s there to watch things for us as well as Hallibut, Boy.”

“Colonel Hallibut’s comin’ for more than his own,” said Boy gloomily.

Paisley stretched his long arms.

“Well,” he laughed, “I’ve picked posies when bees have been workin’ among ’em. They didn’t molest me any—not then. Once, though, I dusted a little chap with flour and traileed him down to his tree. I was hungry for honey and wanted to hog it. When I started to cut down that bee-tree I found Mr. Bee, who was quite a good feller among the posies, somethin’ of a hell-terror when it come to protectin’ his own. It learned me a lesson. Now, when I hanker for honey, I get a piece of maple-sugar and eat that. We can’t stop Hallibut from comin’ up Lee Creek, but we can stop him from hoggin’ our homesteads out of us; so we won’t worry no more. Come on to bed, Boy. Mornin’ will come right soon, and we’ve a lot of traps to set.”

Boy picked up the candle and led the way to the loft.

“My, but it’s a grand place to stretch yourself out and enjoy rest, this,” said Paisley, stooping low to keep from bumping his head on the roof. “You should sleep like a baby up here, Boy. You sure should.”

“I used to,” said Boy. “Maybe I’ll be able to again. It’s restful all right, Bill, to lie here and listen to the rain patterin’ on the roof. And in

the summer the leaves play little tunes on the thatches. Once Joe chased a wild-cat across the open and he treed up here. I tried to scare him away, but every time I struck the roof on the inside he would spit and snarl out there on the outside. I had to get up and shoot him at last.”

“Sure,” said Bill dreamily.

He had stretched himself out on the willow bed, and already healthy sleep was wooing him and leading him from the late day into strange by-paths of dreams which he never remembered.

CHAPTER XVI

PREPARING FOR THE LOGGIN'

Next morning at break of day Paisley and Boy, laden with rat-traps, struck out toward the creek. Big McTavish accompanied them as far as the stable and gave them a parting send-off.

"If I had the chores done I'd go along and show you fellers how a real trapper sets a trap," he said banteringly, "but I hear old Buck and Bright askin' for their breakfast, so I can't go. I want that pair of oxen to be the best at Declute's loggin'. They have a reputation to keep up."

"Don't think you can drive oxen any better than you can set rat-traps," returned Paisley. "Jim Peeler says his oxen can out-haul Buck and Bright any day."

"And Declute says he never caught a single rat in the traps you set for him," scoffed Boy.

"Get along with you, you scamps," laughed the big man.

He passed into the stable and, slapping the hungry and expectant oxen lovingly, spoke to them as was his habit.

"Buck, you moon-eyed old beggar, I want you to pull to-morrow like you never pulled before. You heard what Bill said about Peeler's oxen? Well, Peeler can't out-pull us. I guess not." He reached across the stall and patted Bright's broad shoulder.

"As for you," he said, "course you'll do your best. If you don't, Brighty, I won't feed you any corn for a whole day."

He filled the mangers with fragrant fodder and passed outside. The glorious morning was shooting up above the fringe of Point Aux Pins. From the pine woods a billion dull-red arrows of light were glancing, and, striking the bosom of Rond Eau, darting upward again toward a sullen arch of cloud where they clung and mingling with it painted a glorious border of orange and crimson. A rooster, high on a stack of cornstalks, flapped his wings and proclaimed his gladness. Down in the second-growth beeches a brood of feeding quail were whistling, and out above the creek a blue king-fisher stood poised, then dived, a streak of turquoise on the air, for the fish his bright eyes had sighted.

McTavish looked about him, smiling and whispering to himself. At the dog-kennel he paused and accosted the setter.

“So you’re tied up, eh? Wanted to follow the boys, did you, Joe? Well, we’ll let you free now to go where you please.”

He unsnapped the dog’s chain and Joe sprang up and left a wet caress on the man’s cheek. Then with a low whine of welcome he bounded away.

“Get down, Joe, you good-for-nothin’ dog, get down,” commanded a voice, and McTavish turned to see Mrs. Ross and Mary Ann coming up the path.

“Good-mornin’, good-mornin’,” he shouted. “Well, well now, but you two are early visitors. Isn’t it a grand mornin’? Come up to the house—the little ma’ll be glad to see you both.”

“How is she to-day?” Mrs. Ross, rather out of breath from fighting off Joe, set her basket down on the grass and leaned against a tree.

“I can’t say as she’s any stronger, widder.”

“Verily, ‘all flesh is as grass,’” sighed the good woman, shaking her head dolefully.

The man glanced up quizzically.

“Ma is quoting scripture,” explained Mary Ann. “She says we all should work according to some text in the Bible.”

“That godly man, Mr. Smythe, has taught me much, Daniel,” proclaimed the widow, stooping for her basket, “not sayin’ but what I was disbelievin’ that flesh was anythin’ like grass till Mr. Smythe pointed out them very words in Lukeronomy, 8th verse. My, but it’s wonderful things the good Book teaches us.”

McTavish looked at Mary Ann. The girl was smiling and her black eyes were dancing with more than the zest of life. He took the basket from the woman’s hand and they passed up the path toward the house.

“I can’t just understand what’s wrong with ma,” said McTavish. “She don’t seem to suffer any, just grows weaker day by day. She’s too weak to be carried a long distance to see a doctor, and it’s too far here for a doctor to come. I wish I knowed what to do.”

Mary Ann laid her hand on his arm.

“Why not get old Betsy to come and see her?” she suggested.

“Mary Ann!” The widow stood still on the path and eyed her daughter sternly. “Are we cannibals of the disenlightened ages to allow superstitious rubbage to mold our ways? What does the good Book say about witchcraft but that it’s ’red in the cup and stingeth like a snake in the grass’?”

“You’re thinkin’ of the verse as cautions man against strong drink, widder,” corrected McTavish kindly: “‘look not upon the wine when it is red.’ Do you know,” he went on slowly, “I’ve been thinkin’ as maybe Betsy can cure people. We know she cured some of our people right here in Bushwhackers’ Place.”

“Yes,” nodded the woman, “she did, and it do seem strange that witchcraft could do anythin’ as is real good, don’t it?”

Gloss met the visitors at the door and clapped her hands with delight.

“Oh,” she cried, “we were all wishin’ you would both come over this mornin’. What d’ye suppose we are doin’, Mary Ann?”

“That’s easy to tell,” returned the widow, sniffing the appetizing atmosphere. “If them ain’t cookies you are bakin’ I don’t know cookies or bakin’. Dear heart, if there ain’t the sweet little woman herself!”

She crossed the room and bent over the willow couch.

“And so you got up early, too, deary,” she said, taking the thin hand lying on the coverlet in hers, and patting it caressingly. “Goin’ to help with the bakin’, eh?”

“My, if you’d only heard her bossin’ Granny and me around you’d think she was takin’ a hand all right,” cried Gloss, “and she’s that wasteful, Mrs. Ross; bound to use twice as many eggs as are needed, and she won’t let us use pork-fryin’s for short’nin’. We got to use pure lard, think of that!”

“They are contrary,” charged the invalid, her eyes resting tenderly on the tall girl who, with sleeves tucked up above the elbows, was cutting disks of dough with a can-top, “but I make them obey, Mrs. Ross—don’t I, Granny?”

“Aye, Mary, that you do,” smiled the old lady, placing a basket of newly gathered eggs on the table, “but we’ll na stand it fra lang, for in a wee bit you’ll be up an’ aroon an’ doin’ the cookin’ yoursel’. An’ then

we'll do the bossin', won't we, Bonnie?"

"We will," cried Gloss, "we'll make her do all the bakin', Granny."

McTavish entered, carrying a big golden pumpkin in either hand.

"Declute says he wants these punkin'-pies made accordin' to ma's orders," he grinned. "Boy and me raised these punkins just so's we could have a feed on ma's pies, and Declute has been bangin' around our cornfield all fall hintin' mighty broad that we send him a pie when ma makes 'em. I guess three or four won't come amiss at the bee, eh, Mary Ann?"

He piled the pumpkins in the girl's lap and pinched her red cheek.

"Somehow I wish there was goin' to be a weddin' as well as a loggin'," he teased. "Haven't had a chance to play 'Old Zip Coon' weddin' march since Peeler's big Jake married French Joe's little Marie a year ago. The old fiddle'll begin to think this big bush place is gettin' behind the times."

"Mr. Simpson don't take to fiddle-music," observed Mrs. Ross with a sigh.

Gloss glanced quickly at Mary Ann, and the eyes of the bush-girls met in a look of mutual understanding.

"Bill Paisley loves fiddle-music," cried Gloss, dropping the long pan of brown fragrant cookies on the table and reaching for the old violin. She placed it in McTavish's hands and, catching up Mary Ann from her chair, wound her long arms about the girl.

"Play," she commanded, and Big McTavish, sitting on a corner of the table, struck up the old tune of "Turkey in the Straw."

In and out, up and down the room the girls flashed, every movement one of grace. The warm blood showed in their cheeks, the wild life in their eyes. Not many could gallop to the quick music of that old tune, but Gloss and Mary Ann had learned how.

Granny McTavish, in her corner, peeled the potatoes with quick, uncertain slashes, her head moving up and down to the inspiring strains of the fiddle. Widow Ross arose, clapping her hands in time with the music, her matronly face agleam with something akin to youth, her foot stamping the floor in regular thumps twice to each measure. As the music waxed faster Granny McTavish arose and with trembling hands

removed her glasses. Big Mac, his face hugging the old fiddle, smiled as he noted the action, and nodding to widow Ross he changed abruptly to an old Scottish air. The sick woman had struggled up on the couch and tears of laughter were streaming down her face.

“Dance a Scotch four for me,” she begged, and Granny and widow Ross faced the two girls on the wide floor.

Oh, such a dance as that was! The young girls could dance, and no mistake. But they could teach the older ones nothing when it came to executing that old Scotch dance. In and out they darted, faster and faster, their feet moving in perfect time to the exhilarating bars of the music until Big McTavish, unable to contain his joy longer, leaned back on the table and laughed until the very rafters shook and threatened to bring smoked hams and dried venison strips down upon the heads of the merry-makers. Then Granny, her wrinkled face working, slipped back to her pan of potatoes and widow Ross sank into a chair and reached for her basket.

“Sakes alive, dearest,” she panted, “I’m too fleshy to stand it any more.”

“Oh, it has made me feel so much better,” declared the sick woman. “I do love the fiddle, and it does seem so good to think that dear Granny has not forgotten the olden days.”

“When the little ma is well, which please God ’ll soon be,” said McTavish, “we’ll have a real old-fashioned dance here, with all the old boys and girls and all the young boys and girls right here together. And then, ladies, ma and me’ll show you how the minuet should be danced. We’ll have French Joe over to play. He’s a good fiddler, is Joe, almost as good as anybody I know.”

He hung the instrument up on its nail and, passing on to the couch, sank on his knee before it.

“Ma,” he said softly, stroking the heavy brown hair away from the little woman’s forehead, “there’s only one real shadder in all this big bright bush-world of ours, and God ain’t goin’ to let that rest there long. I’ve watched shadders long enough to know that they don’t last. When this one passes there’ll be happy times. You maybe can guess how much I miss you up and around, ma, so won’t you try and get better for

my sake, and all our sakes?"

She caught the rough, strong hand in hers and held it against her face.

"Mac," she whispered, "I'll try even harder than I have been doing."

He patted her cheek and made to rise, but she held him.

"And Mac," she said, a catch in her voice, "you mus'n't worry about me, or about anything, and you must show Boy that it is useless to worry about losing this bushland. Nobody can steal it, Mac, believe me; I know."

"O' course you know, ma." He arose and hastily left the house.

Widow Ross, in white apron and bare arms, was dissecting one of the golden pumpkins on a block of wood outside.

"Ander'll likely have a fine day for his loggin' to-morrow," she remarked as McTavish passed.

"There'll be quite a crowd there, I bet," returned the man. "I've sort of led 'em all to expect a good feed of custard, widder."

"Oh, you go along, you blarney," cried Mrs. Ross. But she cut into the pumpkin with renewed vigor and started to sing:

*"Oh, we'll cross the river of Jordan,
Happy, happy, happy, happy,
Cross the river of Jordan,
Happy in the Lord."*

McTavish listened in wonderment, then with a chuckle made to pass on. The woman bade him stay a moment.

"I'm not just sure I done right in dancin' in that Scotch four," she faltered. "Mr. Smythe seems to think dancin' wrong, same's smokin' and such."

"Humph, well now, it seems as Smythe's been preachin' quite a lot to you, widder. See him often?"

"Pretty often," answered the widow slowly. "He's been over to my place some three or four times during the last few days. He's a very nice man, and a good livin' one."

McTavish scratched his head and frowned.

"Humph," he nodded, "quite so, widder."

"Mr. Smythe is great at 'leadin' people to the light,' as he puts it,"

smiled the woman, wiping the pumpkin seeds off her hands against the side of the pan. "He's converted me to true Christianity. He learnt me that hymn, 'Cross the River of Jordan,' that I've just sung."

"Well, well," grinned Big Mac.

"And I've give up smokin', too," confessed the widow. "It's been awful hard to do it, but Mr. Smythe says it's wrong for people, specially women, to smoke. I haven't had a smoke for several days, Daniel."

"God bless us," murmured McTavish, "is that so?"

He picked up a sliver and broke it into small bits.

"You get quite a lot of comfort out of tobaccor, I suppose?"

"No one knows how much," she sighed.

"Well, missus, maybe I'm wrong," declared McTavish, "but I tell you what I think. I don't believe I'd care to give up anythin' I had, and was sure of, for a chance of gettin' what a man like Smythe gave me his word I'd get in exchange."

He laughed, and strode away across the cornfield. Widow Ross followed him with staring eyes.

"I wonder just what he means," she muttered. "My, but I wish I could have a little smoke right now."

CHAPTER XVII

THE LOGGIN'-BEE

Logging-bees were not uncommon events among the Bushwhackers. But usually logging-bees were held after the winter snows had fallen, when with oxen and sleds the men moved the great logs to where they were wanted.

But, as Mrs. Declute explained it, this was "a sorter unusual loggin'," it was "more of a raisin' than a loggin',"—all of which was quite true. Mrs. Declute had set her mind upon having a new cow-stable erected, one that would be tight and warm, "with no chinks to let in death to the poor dumb critters." Ander, at first adverse to the idea, had reluctantly given in to having a bee, and bee it was to be.

Thursday morning dawned clear and bright, and with it came all the Bushwhackers, big and little, in Bushwhackers' Place.

Buck and Bright, the champion ox-team, bedecked with a new yoke of white elm in honor of the occasion, were driven forth to the contest by their proud master, who cracked his whip in time to the rattle of the long chains, and commanded, "gee there, Buck; haw, Bright," in a voice that Mrs. Ross declared could be heard "quite plain on the Point." Peeler with his span of oxen was already on the ground, and by the time he and Big McTavish had got through chaffing each other on the respective deficiencies of each other's team, three more span with their owners had arrived on the scene.

An hour later all throughout the nearby wood could be heard the "k-whack" of axes, and every now and again a great tree would fall with a swish and a crash that seemed to jar the earth.

While the young men chopped down and trimmed the trees, the older ones laid out the foundation of the new building. So thoroughly was this done that Declute avowed in the hearing of his good wife, who naturally was close at hand to admonish and advise the architects, that he wouldn't be surprised but that he'd desert the house and live in the new cow-stable himself. Whereupon that good woman flashed a look of scorn upon him and jeeringly remarked: "A cow-stable is too good for a

man what allars smells o' rat-musk an' can't take a skunk outin a trap without scentin' up th' whole neighborhood." The little man hid his discomfiture by suggesting that the men who claimed their oxen could haul two tons of green timber "at a wallop" come along and prove it. Laughing, the men sought their patient cattle and proceeded with a chorus of "gees" and "haws" to haul the trimmed tree-trunks up to the clearing.

It was a great trial of strength and patience and endurance on the part of both team and driver, the hauling of those heavy logs across rough ground to the wide square marked off in the clearing. The young men left off trimming trees to watch the oxen pull. There was much excitement while the rival teams pitted their muscle against one another. The spans were very evenly matched, and it is likely the friendly contest would have ended in a draw had not a circumstance arisen to put McTavish's Buck and Bright away to the fore.

A great basswood log had nosed itself deep into a bank of moss, where, held securely by root-tendrils, it refused to budge to the repeated tugs of Peeler's red oxen. Two other teams tried to break it out without success, and then Big McTavish, smiling broadly, declared that he would show them what a real span of oxen could do when they wanted to. Sure enough, Buck and Bright after tremendous exertion did break the log out, and lowering their broad, burly heads, and snorting and puffing, haul the timber up to the clearing. Peeler declared that McTavish had been "feedin' up for this tug-o'-war for a month," and Big Mac contended that he had "been starvin' the poor oxen for weeks just so's they wouldn't beat the other spans too bad."

Oh, they were a happy crowd, these young boys and old boys; happy in the hauling up, the mortising of the timber, and the laying "true" of the first logs for the building. They one and all forgot, for the time being, that new apprehension which had crept among them and stayed, and worked them up to disquietude. The bush-world was theirs still, and it was a very beautiful world with its autumn scents and sounds and colors.

High above, through the tree-tops, was the yellow-gold of the sky; on the tree-tops the old-gold of late fall; on the forest aisles an amber-

gold commingled with the green moss that glowed through the yellow leaf-carpet.

By noon the mortised logs had been gathered into a great pile, ready to be thrown up into a roomy building, and the men went in to dinner. Dinner was usually a hurried meal, supper being the main "feedin' event," as Paisley termed it.

There were twenty-three men at the logging: Jim Peeler and his two sons, almost men grown; Big McTavish with his "body guard," as the six Indians present from Point Aux Pins were called; Alex Lapier, a French trapper from Indian Creek, and his two swarthy sons; Injun Noah; four men from Bridgetown; Boy McTavish; and the Broadcrook family. The Broadcrooks were not popular. In fact, they were not liked any too well by their honest bush-neighbors. They bore evil reputations, and they were a sullen, ill-conditioned lot. But on account of their size, and from the fact that peace amounted to something, they were always invited to an affair of this kind. Broadcrook, senior, was a tall, lean, white-haired old man, with hawk-like eyes and hatchet face. He was surly and quarrelsome, and he never attempted to do anything much save scoff at the efforts of others. Three of his strapping sons were present with him, and the old man leeringly assured Declute that Amos, the fourth and worst of the gang, would be "along in time fer supper."

"It's to be hoped he won't strain hisself none gittin' here," returned that gentleman; "howsomever, he'll be welcome."

The captains having chosen their men, the word was given, and the boys attacked the pile of logs with cant-hooks and hand-spikes. "He-o-heave!" roared the captains, and in an incredibly short space of time the cow-stable began to grow and take on the shape of a building. By three o'clock in the afternoon the four sides of the building were nearly laid, and now began the finish for first laurels. The side that was first able to lay its upper plates and rafters would win the day. Men ran nimbly along the slippery logs shouting orders and handing long, slender pipe-poles below.

"Now, lads, up with her, all together.—He-o-heave!" rang the cry, and the boys responded with a will. It was a close race, and excitement ran high.

All the ladies of Bushwhackers' Place had gathered outside to witness the finish. Mrs. Declute had her hands full admonishing the little Declutes to keep from under the great plates that were being raised. Mrs. Ross and several other women kept clapping their hands and cheering the workers on.

Gloss McTavish and Mary Ann Ross stood some distance apart from the older women, and more than one of those sweating, striving workers threw a glance in the direction of the two girls.

"Our side is goin' to win, after all," laughed Gloss, clapping her hands. "Oh, look, Mary Ann, do look at Boy running along that slippery plate. It makes me shudder."

"And look at Bill Paisley liftin' that heavy log," returned her friend. "My, but he *must* be strong, Gloss!"

"You young ladies are taking a personal interest in the raising, I see."

Simpson, the teacher, had come up in time to hear the remarks of the girls, and his face, in spite of the smile it wore, showed anything but pleasure.

"I let my pupils go at three o'clock," explained the man. "I wanted to see what a Bushwhackers' bee was like."

"Better look more and talk less, then," counseled Mary Ann, turning her back on him. She moved slowly away, and Simpson spoke in low tones to Gloss.

"Did you think I would come?"

His voice was not quite steady and he swayed slightly as he spoke. A look of abhorrence swept across the girl's face and her big gray eyes were ominous as she answered:

"I wasn't givin' any thought to you at all, Mr. Simpson."

"But you will," he almost threatened; "you must, Gloss. Do you suppose I would come here among these—these people, if it weren't just to catch a glimpse of you?"

"Please go away," she pleaded.

"No, I'm going to stay by you."

"Then I will go."

She turned toward the house and he turned and walked beside her.

“You can’t help my seeing you, you can’t help my loving you, you can’t help my winning you,” he whispered fiercely.

She paused and faced him.

“You will make me hate you,” she said quietly; “please go away.”

They were in the shadow of the milk-house and the building hid them from the others.

“I ask you to marry me, will you?”

“No.”

He caught his breath.

“I come of good family. I will take you to a big city. I will give you a fine home,” he urged.

The girl recoiled from him. He reached out for her, but she sprang aside, and bracing her feet, she struck out with all her young strength. She was no weak lady, reared in an artificial atmosphere. She was a woman of the Wild, strong and supple and courageous. It never occurred to her to call out. She obeyed the law she knew: she struck out.

Simpson caught the full force of her blow on his face and, already unsteady from the effects of drink, he staggered back and would have fallen had not the building supported him. He struggled up, sobered materially by surprise and pain.

She stood before him tall and straight, her eyes blazing, her face set like marble, her fine nostrils dilated.

From across the clearing came the cheering voices of the winners of the day.

Once in the low-lying bushlands Simpson had seen a doe brought to bay by a timber-wolf. He remembered the picture now.

“Why did you do it?” he asked.

“What else could I do?” she answered.

She pulled down a branch of a maple and leaned her head against it. The rough bark caressed her hot cheek and the sweet sappy aroma entered her soul and soothed it.

“Why did you not call out or scream like other girls would have done?”

She lifted her head and looked at him with compassion almost.

His eyes fell.

"I understand," he murmured.

From the newly raised structure came renewed cheering.

"If they knew—if Boy knew——" she commenced, then checked herself.

He started, and the perspiration broke out on his forehead.

"That would mean hanging for him," he laughed uneasily.

"That's why I didn't call out like other girls would have done," she returned quietly.

His hands clenched and the blood mounted to his cheeks.

"Then I count for nothing," he said bitterly.

"I can't understand why you will take risks," she said, ignoring his last utterance. "The folks of the woods have learned a lot from the wild things here. Nothin' in all this wide woods ever goes where it's dangerous to go, if they know it. You had better go back to the clearin', teacher. I don't want to see you hurt. I don't seem to want anythin' hurt. You had better go back to the clearin'."

"Boy McTavish advised me to do that in those very words," he sneered. "But listen, I'm neither a fool nor a coward. I have made up my mind to have you, Gloss, and have you I will—remember that."

He turned away into the timber.

Gloss entered the house and lit the candles. Twilight had swept down, a twilight fresh with wood-scented dew and fragrant with smoke of the clearing-fires. On the floor beside the fireplace sprawled the form of Daft Davie. He was fast asleep, and Pepper, the 'coon, lay coiled up close beside him. One of the lad's arms encircled the pet and the little animal's pointed nose was hidden among the long golden curls. Gloss bent and stroked those curls softly and something warm and wet splashed down and awoke the Nature child.

He scrambled up, his great eyes blinking at the light; then, bending, the boy raised Pepper and placed him in Gloss's arms.

She sat down on a stool before the fire and gathered the little bush-children close to her. The raccoon sniffed her red cheeks and nosed her soft throat caressingly, and Davie, clinging to her hands, poured forth the story of his day's adventures. The girl listened, now and then smiling, understanding, as she did so well, those little pictures that the daft child

was painting for her. She saw the gray tangle of marsh with the great dead elm lying across it; saw the ragged home of the mink and the tall elm where his enemy, the bald-headed eagle, sat poised and watchful.

When, at last, happy voices were heard coming down the path, she arose with all the old-time gladness astir in her heart. No new and strange shadow could linger for long where the joy-songs of many glad days could be brought to life by memory. And hugging the tiny daft boy close to her she whispered:

“What could I do without you, Davie?”

“Well, I do declare,” cried Mrs. Declute, as she came panting in, “if here she ain’t, right here, and that blessed boy Davie with her, too. Give my life if it don’t beat all, Mrs. Ross.”

“Bless her,” exclaimed the widow, “and to think that we’ve been wonderin’ where she had slipped off to. I’ll just swing the kettle on, Mrs. Declute, so’s we needn’t keep them hungry men waitin’. My, but I do expect they’ll enjoy that custard.”

“Leave us alone for that,” laughed Peeler, who had entered and was drying his face on the long towel hanging behind the door.

Declute came forward, followed by a tall, broad-shouldered man dressed in red flannel shirt and buckskins.

“Here’s Amos Broadcreek,” grinned the master of the house, “an’ he declares he’s fearful hungry.”

“You’re right welcome, Amos,” cried Mrs. Declute, pushing her progeny into a neat pile in one corner of the room, “but I’m sorry to see you’ve been drinkin’ again.”

“Goin’ to quit now,” pledged Broadcreek, seating himself on a stool.

His head was small and bullet-shaped, his neck thick, and his hair a light-red. His heavy face was coarse and made further unbeautiful from the fact that he had but one eye, having had the other knocked out by an arrow in early youth while playing buffalo-hunt with his brothers. Having spoken, he relapsed into sullen silence, and glowered about him occasionally, venturing no remark and making no move until supper was announced. Then he sprang up and was one of the first to seat himself at the long table in the inner room.

Watching him, Mrs. Ross sighed and shook her head so forcefully

that the tea she was pouring from the great tin pot missed the cup and splashed down on the upturned nose of Goliath, thereby changing that agreeable canine into a yelping bunch of legs and fur that speedily made its way out through the open door.

"Poor thing," sympathized Mrs. Ross.

"Pshaw, he ain't hurt any. It serves him right. He's allars snoopin' 'round where he ain't wanted, anyway," cried Mrs. Declute, placing a dripping roast of venison on a big platter.

"I ain't talkin' about the dog. I mean Amos Broadcrook," said the widow. "Ain't it too bad he drinks so hard and is so shiftless?"

"I'll tell you somethin' that is no secret," whispered the hostess. "Thar ain't no Broadcrook alive that's wuth anythin', an' if thar's any of 'em dead as is, then only old Nick hisself knows it."

Mrs. Peeler, a little, small-faced woman with mild eyes, looked up from her potato-mashing with a start.

"My, my," she sighed, "are they that bad, Mrs. Declute?"

That lady nodded grimly.

"While they be eatin' in my hum I will say no more than what I have concernin' them," she affirmed, "as that wouldn't be hospitable o' me. But after they've et an' gone——" she compressed her lips and frowned severely, "then I'll tell you more about them outlaws."

"Dear me," sighed Mrs. Peeler again. Then she glanced around. "Where is Mary Ann and Gloss gone?" she asked.

"Oh, they slipped over t' Mac's to see how the little mother was restin'," answered Mrs. Ross. "The poor woman took a bad turn last night, you know. They'll be comin' back soon. Libby, dear, just help me dish out this custard, will you? They are callin' for it in there, don't you hear 'em?"

"I hear your Tom's voice," laughed Mrs. Peeler.

"And your boy, Ed. Do you know what that boy said to me when I was in givin' a second helpin' of tea just now? He said, 'Missus Ross,' says he, 'I haven't et anythin' worth while as yet, 'cause I've been waitin' for that custard.' The sly rascal!"

Mrs. Peeler's blue eyes danced with pride.

"Ed is awful lively," she smiled. "There's no keepin' him quiet."

"Mr. Simpson says he's a smart boy," said Mrs. Ross; "says he takes to book larnin' like a squirrel t' a nut."

"Oh, and how do you like the teacher, widder?"

"I like him first-rate."

"And Mary Ann?"

Mrs. Ross glanced about her. Then she bent over and whispered in the other woman's ear.

"No!" exclaimed that little lady; "you don't say so!"

"Judgin' from appearances, it looks that way, dear," smiled the widow. "But not a word to anyone else, Libby. I haven't told a single soul but you."

"It don't seem to me that Mary Ann would take to a man like him," said Mrs. Peeler. "He don't seem to fit her somehow. I always thought and hoped that Bill Paisley would meet her favor, widder."

Mrs. Ross opened her mouth as if to speak, then closed it again on second thought.

"My, I must get in with th' custard," she cried, and hurried away.

Gloss and Mary Ann entered the kitchen with Daft Davie between them.

"Oh, you've come back, my dears, have you!" smiled Mrs. Peeler. "I'm glad you got back so soon. How's she now, Glossie?"

"Awful bad," answered Gloss. "I'm goin' right back, and will you tell uncle to come soon? Don't say anythin' to Boy, but just whisper to uncle to come as soon's he can. She misses him so much. Now, I must go. You explain to 'em all how it is, Mrs. Peeler, will you?"

"You're not goin' back alone," protested Mary Ann. "Just wait, we'll send——"

Gloss put her hand on her friend's arm.

"I don't want anyone to know just how bad she is—not to-night. It would only spoil the evenin's fun for them, and I'm not scared—why, I have little Davie."

She put her arm about the boy's shoulders. "You don't know what company Davie is, and it's scarcely dark yet. No, I don't want anybody else. Good-night."

She slipped out, her arm still around the daft boy, and the two

passed down the path that stretched like a thread of silver in the moonlight. The lad talked to her in his strange language and she let him go on without paying much attention to him, for her heart was heavy with a great fear. They reached the creek path where the gray rushes stood and the deep creek slept beneath the moon. The lad laughed and swept his arms about, as the shrill wing-whistles of a migrating flock of pin-tails sang out and died away high above them. They turned up the path, and a whip-poor-will woke up and uttered his plaintive call from a nearby copse. Davie imitated the call, and then all about them the night-birds awoke and made the world alive with sound.

Further on the lad hooted like an owl and from the swales the feathered prowlers of the night answered him. He clapped his hands in glee, and Gloss's arm tightened about him.

"Oh, Davie," she whispered, "you are just like the birds—glad and free. Are you just what God intended us all to be, I wonder? Are you, Davie?"

He stroked her hand, and Pepper climbed from his shoulder over to hers.

"Do you know we are goin' to lose her—do you?" said the girl chokingly. "Yes, you both know."

When they reached the fork in the path Gloss put the little animal in the boy's arms. Then she bent and kissed him.

"Davie must run along to Granny, now," she said, "and he can come over to see Boy to-morrow."

Davie put his hands to his lips and gave a low call, then bent his head to listen. From a far-off swale there came the answering cry of a lynx, and the boy with a happy laugh flung his arms in the air and darted away through the grove. Gloss, standing with the moonlight lavishing her face, sweet to-night with a new pathos, prayed:

"Oh, God, who looks after Davie, look after the little ma. Don't take her from us, God." Then, leaning her face against the rough bark of a beech tree, she sobbed:

"Mother, let her stay with us a little longer—just a little longer."

CHAPTER XVIII

OLD BETSY

Daft Davie lived with an aged grandmother in a small hut close to the edge of the bay. She was a very old woman. Her features were rugged and piercing; and she hated everything in the world, except, indeed, it were Davie, and on him she lavished very little love. It was thought among the Bushwhackers that she sometimes beat the daft child. Nobody knew for certain. The old woman gave little attention to his going or his coming. The death of her daughter and only child had crippled her reason. There was a path worn between the hut and the knoll beneath the walnut. Old Betsy's life was linked to a tragedy just as her home was linked to an old, old grave by the path that was kept trodden both winter and summer.

The people feared Betsy, and respected her. It was said that she was versed in witchcraft and was in league with the devil. The Bushwhackers brought her meat and roots and such other necessities as she required, but she never thanked them. Perhaps they were doing it all for the child. In their rough way they pitied the boy; some of them even showed him a sort of animal affection. Old Betsy spoke to no one, unless it was to curse them, and she went abroad only when the sun was hidden, to gather the herbs she brewed into nauseous evil-smelling decoctions. Twice, only, in nine years, had she visited the homes of those who were kind to her.

Once Peeler lay yellow and swollen, dying from the bite of a snake. Betsy had hobbled into the house, her iron-gray hair hanging about her shoulders, wet with the falling rain. Without so much as a word she had forced a black liquid between the trapper's set teeth and had gone before Bill Paisley or Big McTavish, who were with the dying man, could recover from their surprise. Peeler got well, and the Bushwhackers whispered among themselves in superstitious awe. They laid the miracle to old Betsy's witchcraft. One other time a child lay ill with a high fever. Old Betsy visited the home of the child and all night long sat beside the little sufferer. The child grew well and strong.

“Witchcraft,” whispered the Bushwhackers.

If Betsy was aware that she was looked upon as being in league with the Evil One, she gave no sign: it bothered her none whatever. She stayed within the dark confines of her hut, smoked Canada-Green tobacco in a clay pipe, and blasphemed to her heart’s content.

To Daft Davie she paid not the slightest attention. But often when the child lay sleeping she would bend over him, holding the feeble rush-light close to his face to scan it with knotted brows working, as she poured maledictions upon the cause of the ushering into this world of a crippled soul that had never quite learned rest. If she thought the power the child exercised over the birds and animals of the wood strange, she gave no evidence of it. She had become inured to having the squirrels and birds frisk and flutter about in the open spot before her door, playing fantastic games with the wee yellow-haired child, who rolled about upon the greensward and gibbered to them.

Once in the dusk, along the path to the grave, old Betsy found a ruffed grouse lying drunk and helpless. He had eaten too freely of the purple poke-berry. She picked the bird up and carried him to her hut, and there held him until he slept off his intoxication. He fought frantically to get away until Davie came in and, taking the grouse from her, talked to it in his own way, and it settled on his shoulder and hid its head beneath his long curls. From that time the old woman realised that the daft child was also one of the wild things of the wood.

The powdery white-frost lay like a blanket upon the unprotected glades of the wood and the yellow-drab leaves were being shaken and wafted earthward in the first swaying gust of morning wind, when Boy McTavish emerged from the timber and stood gazing toward the lone hut against the tangle of brown sumach. The setter shook himself and looked up into his master’s face.

“Joe,” said the boy in a whisper, “you stay here. I’m goin’ up, witch or no witch. It’s got to be done.”

The dog squatted down among the frost-blackened ferns, and Boy slowly crossed the open and knocked at the door. It opened quickly, and there stood the gaunt, bent woman, her gray hair falling down about her shoulders, her black eyes blazing with a fury.

"Betsy," said Boy chokingly, "ma's awful sick. We think she won't live till noon. I just thought I'd tell you."

He turned away as the door slammed with a bang, and with a sigh plunged into the hard timber. He walked quickly across two ridges, then, turning, followed a third down to the edge of the creek. There he halted.

"I can't just make up my mind to do anythin', Joe," he said, bending and patting the dog. "I ought to build a turkey-trap or two, 'cause it's the beech-nut season now, and the turkeys'll be here in a day or so. But it does seem as though I ought to be home with her."

He shouldered his rifle and moved slowly along. Where the ridge met the margin of the creek Boy paused again and glanced about him with narrowed eyes.

"Hah, this is a good place for a trap, Joe," he said. "We'll build one or two anyway. Then we'll get back."

He stood his rifle up against a tree and unbuckled his belt. Then he stopped and gazed at the dog blankly.

"Well, now, if we didn't forget the ax," he exclaimed. "Can't build a turkey-trap without an ax, pup."

"Here, I'll lend you mine, Boy."

Bill Paisley, a gun on his shoulder and a wild gobbler hanging from one hand, threw his ax down on the moss and grunted:

"Hickory, but I'm some tired. Had quite a job of it, I can tell you. Built four traps myself this mornin'. Better get yours all up to-day, Boy, 'cause the turkeys are takin' to the hardwood fast. Seen eight big flock this mornin'. Only got one crack, though, 'cause I wanted to get my traps up. Why, what's the matter, Boy, you look sort of used up?"

Boy looked away.

"You know the mornin' after the bee, Bill, how when we got back home we found that ma had been took bad; and you know what we've been kind of expectin' since?" he said catchingly. "Well, we think it'll happen right soon."

Paisley dropped his gun and tackled a dead tree with the ax.

"I made my logs about ten foot long," he said; "reckon you'd best make yours same length."

"Ten by six ought to be about right," answered Boy.

Paisley chopped the tree through and paced off ten feet. He raised his ax, then let it gently down again.

“Boy,” he said, “it’s a hard thing. How soon?”

“We reckon sometime to-day.”

Paisley spit on his hands and resumed work.

“I’m goin’ to put up four pens for you, and what you better do is get back home. Don’t say anythin’ to me or I’ll knock your head off. Now, you strike the back trail and when I get the traps up I’ll be with you. Here, take this turkey.”

Boy picked up the turkey, then stood awkwardly brushing his face with his doeskin sleeve.

“Bill, I’m much obliged.”

Paisley snorted.

“I’m goin’ to put your mark on these pens—two narrow notches an’ one wide one, ain’t it?”

Boy nodded.

“Well, get along then and don’t stand there botherin’ me. I’m goin’ to build one up in—but never mind now. I’ll come back with you and show you. Get along.”

For an hour and a half after Boy had gone Paisley worked fast and furious. Building a turkey-trap was no easy job for one man, for a turkey-trap was practically a diminutive log-house with a narrow ground-door and a well-built roof of tough, heavy timbers, strong enough to hold a horse from within or a turkey-loving brown bear from without. When pen number one was finished, Paisley stood back and grinned commendingly.

“Purty good trap, that,” he said, speaking aloud, as was the habit of most Bushwhackers. “Don’t it beat all how foolish a turkey is, now! Just think of ’em follerin’ up a trail of beech-nuts or chaff and enterin’ that little log-house with their heads down and findin’ they’re inside, not seein’ the door they went in by at all.”

He laughed quietly and felt for his pipe.

“Just as soon as they find they’re trapped, up goes their heads and they never see nothin’ but the roof after that. The scarer a turkey is, the higher up goes its head. I’ll bet my winter’s tobaccer that this trap is

good for five at least.”

He sat down on a log and lit his pipe.

“Well, well,” he sighed, “what’ll Boy and Big Mac do without that little mother? What’ll they do?”

He pulled viciously at his short pipe and then sprang up and gripped his ax again. Then he stood still, looking away through the woods with unseeing eyes.

“That’s it,” he said huskily. “What’ll *she* do?—that’s it.”

He tramped slowly onward and found another slope on a narrow ridge.

“I’ll build the other three; close in here,” he told himself, and started to work.

It was past noon before the traps were finished. Then Paisley, wiping his streaming brow with his hand, tramped slowly across toward McTavish’s. Above him was the old-gold of late autumn. Around him rang the cheerful voices of jay, high-holder, and cock-of-the-woods. Here and there a yellow splash of sunshine fell through the trees and painted golden patches upon the dead leaves. But Paisley saw or heard none of this. He kept repeating in his mind the question:

“What’ll she do?—what’ll little Gloss do?”

As Paisley was about to leave the timber for the path along the creek his acute ear caught the sound of a paddle dipping the water lightly, and peering-through the trees he saw two men in a skiff strike the near shore and glance stealthily about them.

Paisley’s eyes narrowed and his heavy jaw set.

“Teacher’s spendin’ his Saturday hollerday, I suppose,” he muttered. “Well, I’m waitin’ here to see just what he’s goin’ to do, and learn who that big man is with him.”

The men in the skiff stood up and, stepping ashore, pulled the boat up after them.

Bill Paisley’s muscles began to bunch beneath his deerskin jacket. It was with the greatest difficulty that he restrained himself from launching forth and giving the visitors a lesson. But he held himself in check, feeling that he might learn something of far more benefit to his friends and himself than this gratification of desire would prove.

The men were speaking in hushed accents, but the bushman's ear caught every word. As he listened his big hands clenched and his blue eyes darkened.

"It won't do to go up too close, I tell you, Watson," Simpson was saying. "They've got a dog that would like to tear me to pieces; and as for that Boy, I'd rather face a nest of rattlesnakes any time than him."

"Bah!" jeered the other; "scared, eh? You've got a lot of yellow in you, Simpson."

"You needn't talk," said the school-teacher reddening. "It was worse than mere cowardice that got you into this pickle I'm trying to get you out of. And see here, I don't want any more of your gibes or I'll let you go to thunder and get out of the thing the best way you can."

"Oh, say, now," said the other with a forced laugh, "this won't do, my boy. We mus'n't quarrel, you and I. Remember, the Colonel is to give you your price if we can grab her to-night. We'll have the horses across in Twin Elm swale yonder, and get her away before these idiots surmise anything."

Simpson shuddered.

"See here, Watson," he said, "I guess you understand I'm not doing this for money; all I want is the girl. If we pull this thing off to-night, I'm away and she goes with me."

Watson laughed discomfitingly.

"Well, I don't blame you for not wanting to stay here. It's not very healthy for you. All we want you to do before you go is to help us get hold of the girl, and of course it's understood she's yours."

The two turned up the path, and Paisley lay low and let them pass. Then he plunged into the wood. As the plotters warily turned the bend in the path they came unexpectedly upon Paisley, aimlessly sauntering in the opposite direction.

"You gents got a pass?" he asked, laying his rifle on the ground.

"No, sir," replied Watson, "and what's more, we don't need one."

"Oh, you don't eh?—well, then, you had better both get."

He pointed across the creek and Watson's purple face flushed a deeper shade.

"Look here," he commanded, "we're your friends. We want to do

you Bushwhackers a favor. Is this any way to treat us, sir?"

"We're not needin' friends," returned Paisley. "Now, you chaps get while you're able to walk."

"We'll go when we're ready, not before," growled the agent, putting himself on the defensive.

Paisley's long right arm shot forward and Watson's burly form executed a half somersault on the moss. Simpson sprang in, but Paisley's hand gripped him by the windpipe.

"So you must learn your lesson, too, eh?" he said grimly, and sent the teacher to earth with a straight left from the shoulder.

Watson struggled erect with a groan.

"You've broken my arm," he moaned. "You'll pay for this. Nobody can assault Thomas W. O. Watson with impunity, sir. When Colonel Hallibut has you Bushwhackers cornered you will need me, and what if I should remember this—this assault, then?"

"We're not afraid of Colonel Hallibut," said Paisley quietly. "If Hallibut corners us we'll be willin' to stay in the corner. I say, when he corners us we'll be willin'—understand? Now, you fellers better be gettin' across to your own territory, 'cause I feel my muscle swellin' again."

Simpson struggled painfully from the ground and, followed by the bruised Watson, lost no time in obeying the order. Paisley watched them until the rushes on the farther, shore hid them from sight, then he picked up his rifle and walked on.

"The fools!" he muttered, "they don't know that I'm on to their game. The fools! to think they could ever steal Gloss away like that. I've seen that Watson feller's face before somewhere, but I can't just say where. I reckon he won't ever forget old Bill Paisley, though. No, I mus'n't say nothin' to Boy; not yet. Guess he's most too hot-headed to meet them devils at their own game."

As he rounded the bend in the path there came the shuffle of a footstep to his ear, and the bent form of an old woman passed him. Her hair was flying in the breeze, her pitted face worked, and her black orbs gleamed.

"Old Betsy, as sure as I'm born!" exclaimed Paisley. "It's the first

time I ever seen her out durin' daylight. She sure come from Mac's way, too. Wonder what's up. Guess I'll go and see."

Half an hour later he entered McTavish's door. Boy was seated by the table, and he leaped up when Bill entered.

"She's better, a lot better, Bill," he cried in answer to the big man's look. "Old Betsy was here, Bill, and she gave ma something to drink, and——"

His voice faltered, and he turned toward Gloss, who had come from the bedroom.

"You tell Bill all about it," he said, and walked out.

Paisley looked at the girl and mentally formed the same words that Boy had spoken not so long ago:

"She ain't a girl no more; she's a woman now."

Gloss was dressed in a homespun skirt and a jacket of raw deerskin, but it was the wild beauty of her face with its glorious coloring and great fawn-like eyes that Paisley saw. Remembering what he had so lately heard, a great anger swept through the man. The girl noticed his working face, and she came over to him.

"Bill," she said, "I've known you ever since I can remember, and I never saw your eyes look like they do now. Are you sick, Bill?"

"Glossie," said Paisley, "I want to tell you somethin'. You're not to go outside this here house until I say you can. You know old Bill, and he knows somethin' you don't know. You promise me right now that you won't go out, Glossie."

The girl looked at him quickly, then slowly removed her cap.

"Bill," said she, "I sure will do whatever you say, and ask no questions. I know you so well, Bill—and I won't go out until you say. I—I—am some scared——"

She caught her breath and clinched her slender hands, her color rising.

"Girl," said Bill slowly, "you ain't got nothin' to be scared over; but don't you forget you've promised me. Now, Glossie, tell me about the ma."

"Why, Bill," cried the girl, "it was all so unexpected. Auntie was awful sick. We all thought she was—was——"

“I know; Boy told me.”

“And this mornin’, just when I was clearin’ the breakfast dishes, who should walk in but old Betsy. She didn’t look at me, but went right on in where Granny and auntie were. Granny says she kept mutterin’, and she heard her say somethin’ about Boy findin’ Daft Davie one time when he was lost and bringin’ him home. And all the time she was pourin’ some stuff from a bottle into a cup. Granny says it was the spell she was sayin’. Anyway, she made auntie take some of the stuff, and, Bill, she has been asleep and restin’ fine ever since.”

Paisley got up from his chair and took the girl’s face between his hands.

“Glossie,” he said, patting her cheeks, “your auntie is goin’ to get well. I ain’t carin’ a darn whether it is witchcraft or no witchcraft. Guess I better go outside and hunt up Boy and Mac, ’cause I’m goin’ to holler some soon. Now, don’t you forget your promise, Gloss.”

Paisley stepped out into the lengthening shadows of the late afternoon. Down in the far end of the potato-patch he saw Big McTavish and Boy working. Beside them stood Daft Davie, his inseparable companion, the coon, in his arms. As he watched them he saw the big man bend and pat the child’s yellow hair, then point toward the house. But Davie shook his head and pointed eastward.

“He’s tellin’ Mac in his way what maybe I ought to tell him in mine,” thought Paisley. “But I won’t; anyway, not yet a while.”

CHAPTER XIX

OF THE TRIBE OF BROADCROOK

Mr. Smythe stood with, his back to the fireplace, his long arms behind his back, with sharp elbows almost touching, and claw-like hands clasped together. The evenings were getting chill. Already the first snows had come. The trees were bare and creaked in the wind, and the skies were lead-colored and cold. In the early dusk the two-dozen gray shacks of Bridgetown looked grayer and lonelier than ever. Mr. Smythe glanced at the long clock near the door and then out of the smoky window, his pointed nose fairly sniffing the wind and his big ears fairly pointed forward in a listening attitude. The long figure of a man, half reclining on a pile of furs at the end of the counter, stirred, and the substance of a quid of black tobacco hissed into the hickory coals, passing perilously close to the clasped hands of Bridgetown's general merchant. Mr. Smythe smiled with his thin lips and looked murder with his little weak eyes. Then he coughed.

"If you wish to make Bushwhackers' Place to-night," he said, addressing his tardy visitor, "you'd better be starting out on your way."

No response from the man on the furs, except another hiss in the coals.

"Looks as though we'd have a big snowstorm," suggested Smythe.

"Snow or rain, light'in' or pitch dark, who's carin'?" retorted the other.

"It's not a nice sort of trip you have before you, that's all."

"It's me as has to take it, I guess, and I'm not goin' to move an inch till you give me an extra pound of powder and enough lead for a hundred bullets. You hear me?"

"I have paid you all your furs are worth; you know I have."

"Aye, and made me pay ten times too much for what I got here durin' the summer. Come now, Smythe, wrap up the powder and give me the package of lead-leaf, and I'll be makin' tracks."

Broadcrook arose and slouched forward. He was dressed in a heavy shirt of red wool and homespun trousers of gray. One ponderous hand

held a long rifle and a coat of wolf-skin was slung across a muscular arm. Smythe eyed him speculatively.

“Broadcrook,” he said suavely, “you shall have it. I wouldn’t do it for anybody else.”

Broadcrook scratched his short-cropped head perplexedly. Acuteness was not one of his characteristics. He laid Smythe’s eagerness to oblige him to fear, and Broadcrook was not so many generations removed from the Cave Dwellers that he could not understand how this might well be. By nature he was a bully, one of a large family of bullies, whose forefathers had been bullies. Accordingly he stretched his person about four inches higher and expectorated on a pair of beaded moccasins hanging from the counter.

“Make it two pound o’ powder an’ two sheafs o’ lead,” he demanded.

Smythe, who had taken the powder-can from the shelf, put it back in its place. Then he leaned over the counter and gazed at the Bushwhacker through the twilight gloom.

“I guess I’ve changed my mind. I won’t give you an ounce of either,” he said. “And I’m going to charge you up with those moccasins. You’ve spoiled them. You can’t bluff me, Broadcrook—you, nor any of your six-foot brothers, nor your old sinner of a father. You’re all a bad lot. Now, you get out of my store.”

Broadcrook’s six-foot-two went down to five-foot-ten at a jump, and his jaw dropped as though he had been struck.

“I didn’t mean to sp’ile nothin’,” he grumbled. “I’m willin’ to take what you agreed to give.”

Smythe deliberately lit a couple of candles, one of which he took over and placed in the window. Then he came from around the counter and stood in his former attitude, his nose pointing forward and his ears cocked for an expected sound. After a while he turned toward the trapper.

“Broadcrook,” he said, “I’ve been pretty decent with you and your family, and all the thanks I ever got for it was in being dumped out of my skiff last fall by one of your murderous tribe. It wasn’t his fault that I wasn’t drowned.”

Broadcrook seated himself on a keg.

"That war Hank," he nodded. "Me an' Hank hasn't spoke for nigh eight year."

"Humph, you don't say! Well, Hank, as you call him, wants to keep out of my way. I've got a good Christian spirit, Broadcrook, but a nasty disposition at times. The next time Hank tries to mix in with me it's going to be right here."

"Thar's not much size to you to be callin' my draw the way you've been doin'," murmured Broadcrook. "I reckoned as you'd a gun—one o' them pistol kind—in your fist when you was tellin' it to me a time ago. I reckon I was right, too."

"Dear friend," smirked Smythe, "this is a wild country, and it behooves us all to protect our fragile and oft too-erring bodies from coming into violent contact with some more solid substance; but I held no gun, no pistol in my hand when I told you about yourself and relatives just now. The fact is, I fear firearms; I hate guns. I never fired off a gun in my life. Nevertheless, I will not say that I was wholly unprepared, should you have shown a tendency to repudiate my statements. I'll show you what I mean. Sambo!" he called softly, "open the door, please."

The door of the inner room opened, and there stood Sam, the darkey, with a cocked rifle in his hands.

"My faithful servitor and aide-de-camp, Mr. Broadcrook," bowed Smythe.

"Did you have me covered a while ago?" asked Broadcrook sheepishly, addressing the negro.

"This here," nodded Sambo, tapping the brass sight of the gun, "was sure right on a line wif dat bone button on your shirt."

"I guess I'll be goin'," said Broadcrook hurriedly.

"Wait a minute," advised Smythe. "Now, Broadcrook, I'm willing to play very decent by you providing you will answer me a few questions and answer them truthfully. All sin is contamination in my eyes; but lying," Mr. Smythe raised his long hands piously, "—I do detest a liar."

"Do you mean as you'll gimme th' powder an' th' lead, providin' I answer you them questions?" asked Broadcrook eagerly.

"Yes, I will do that," replied Smythe. "What I am anxious to secure is some information of the people among whom you live. Number of families in that lawless section, and all about the bunch. One or two I know already. I know your family some—that Hank fellow and the one you call Abe. Any more? What's your first name—Joseph, ain't it?"

"Not much, it ain't. It's Amos. Then I've got three more brothers. Tom, meanest skunk in the woods, Tom is. Hank he's not much better'n Tom. And Alex, who claims as he'll do fer me some day."

"Nice loving sort of family, eh, Sambo?" sneered Smythe. "How about the old man, the father?"

"Dad's all right in some ways, but I ain't got no sort o' use for him either," answered Broadcrook. "Fact is, none of us has much use for the others. We ain't built that way. Hank shot my eye out with a bow an' arrer when we was kids and playin' bear hunt, and we treed Alex and cut the tree down and broke both his legs once. Jest in fun, o' course; but he's had it in for us ever since, jest for that."

"And what did you do to Tom? Surely he has not escaped unscathed, has he?"

"Wall, hardly. Tom he got drowned once by bein' pushed off a log inter the creek. If that fool of a Declute hadn't o' happened along Tom would o' stayed drowned, too."

"Know a man by the name of McTavish down there, I suppose?"

"Sure, I know him, and I know that boy o' his, too. I hate him, and he keeps out of my way, 'cause he's scared of me."

"Liar," breathed Smythe.

He stood gazing into the fire for some time. At last he turned and fixed his eyes on Broadcrook's face.

"Never heard tell of an Indian down in that place by the name of Noah Sturgeon, did you?" he asked.

"Sure, I know him," answered the other.

"Know him?" Mr. Smythe's words were like a pistol shot. "*Knew* him, you mean," he cried, leaning forward.

"I say I *knows* him, and I guess I understand what I'm talkin' about."

"But the Noah Sturgeon I mean can't be alive now. He was an old man twenty years ago. Must be a son of his you know, Amos."

“Son nothin’. I tells you, mister, it’s old Noah hisself as I knows. O’ course he’s old—must be nigh a hundred. But he’s spry yet. Often comes over to Big McTavish’s, he does. Lives on the P’int ’cross the bay.”

Smythe drew forward a stool and sat down with his chin in his hands. He was disturbed in his meditations by Broadcrook’s standing up.

“Guess I’d better be trampin’,” said that gentleman.

“Wait a moment,” said Smythe, “I’m going to give you two pounds of good powder and a couple of sheafs of lead. If you will come back here, say, next Saturday, I’ll give you more—much more. But you must do something for me, will you?”

“Name it, and I’ll do it,” promised the delighted trapper.

Smythe glanced fearfully toward the door, and, tiptoeing across to it, shut Sambo in the other room, then bending he whispered something in Broadcrook’s ear. Whatever it was it seemed to astound and not altogether displease the burly fellow. His red face screwed itself up in a horrible grimace and he guffawed loudly.

“Course, if y’ gimme the three hundred, I’ll send old Noah somewheres,” he wheezed.

“Broadcrook,” said Smythe sternly, “don’t mistake my meaning. I know there is danger of accident to the aged and frail, and that life’s ruddy current flows but sluggishly in the veins of old men; but, my dear Broadcrook, no violence—no violence, remember. However, when I am sure, without a doubt, that Noah has departed—ahem!—to some remote country for good, why, the money is yours. You see he won’t let the other Indians sell me their furs, but makes them carry them to St. Thomas.”

Broadcrook chuckled and poked Mr. Smythe in the short ribs so forcefully and playfully that the storekeeper’s light eyes filled with tears and his breath came and went in gasps.

“Oh, but you’re a cracker,” cried the Bushwhacker, “a reg’lar right-down smart ’un. No wonder widder Ross o’ Totherside thinks you the best man as ever lived.”

Mr. Smythe raised his eyebrows, not sure whether to receive this

remark as a compliment or otherwise. Being a keen businessman, however, he allowed it to go on the credit side of his conceit account, and proved that he appreciated the other's cunning of conception by reaching a black bottle across the counter.

Amos laid his rifle down, and with a leer proceeded to take a long pull at the bottle, after which he corked it and put it in his pocket.

Mr. Smythe watched him speculatively. He was quite willing that Broadcrook should have the bottle, under the circumstances.

"I hates all them Bushwhackers, I do," grated Broadcrook. "I be one of 'em myself, but I hates 'em jest the same. I hates Big McTavish, 'cause he threatened to break my back one time for mistakin' some of his traps for mine. I hates Declute 'cause he gets the biggest bucks every season. And I hates Paisley 'cause he hangs around that Boy McTavish so much. They be allars together, and they're a hard pair to handle, I can tell you, specially Paisley."

"Do you know Colonel Hallibut?" asked Smythe. He was looking out of the dingy window again, and his ears were cocked.

"Yes, I know him, an' I'm goin' to get even with him, too. He let his dogs tree me on the P'int last fall. They kept me there all night. Some day I'll show him that Amos Broadcrook kin remember."

Smythe turned quickly.

"His schooner is going to be in the bay very soon," he said softly, "and if that schooner should happen to burn," he suggested, speaking as though to himself, "it would make Hallibut sure of one thing—that the Bushwhackers had fired the boat to get even with him for spoiling their trapping on Lee Creek."

Amos was tipsy, but not so tipsy that he could not catch a hidden meaning in the words. He turned on Smythe.

"Now," he snarled, "if you want the boat burned and you want me to do it, how much'll you pay for *that* job? Quick, answer up."

Mr. Smythe raised his thin hands.

"My dear Broadcrook," he smiled, "you talk like a crazy man. Colonel Hallibut is a friend of mine; a fast friend. I advised him not to send his schooner into Lee Creek. He laughed at me and offered to wager me three hundred dollars that no harm could possibly come to his

boat. In a moment of indiscretion I took his wager.”

Mr. Smythe rubbed his hands softly together and raised his eyes ceilingward.

“I know I did wrong,” he went on; “I know a Christian man should not bet. But I wished Colonel Hallibut to know that I was greatly concerned in the welfare of him and his.”

He sighed, and glanced at Amos.

“I would not touch money won in a wager; no, sir. And to prove it to you, Amos, my friend, I will pay you over the money, providing my prophecy be fulfilled,—which, let us hope, it may not,” he added devoutly.

Broadcrook lurched, and fixed his good eye on Smythe’s pensive face, then, after another drink from the bottle, he picked up his rifle and made for the door. With his hand on the latch he turned.

“You’ll be expectin’ news, then?”

“Exactly,” smiled the storekeeper.

“And you’ll be on the lookout for smoke?”

“I’ll not be surprised to see smoke,” returned Smythe.

Broadcrook passed outside, and when his uncertain steps had died in the night Smythe leaned against a pile of furs and laughed voicelessly.

A little later his pricked-up ears caught the sound he was expecting. He tongued his lips and rubbed his hands delightedly. The door opened and Watson pounded in. A light cloak of snow covered him from head to foot.

“Who was that man I just met?” were his first words.

“That, my dear Watson, is the very man we’ve been looking for,” smiled Smythe.

“For heaven’s sake, drop that hypocritical manner of yours and be yourself,” growled Watson, throwing off his wraps and sinking into a chair. “You sicken me, Smythe; absolutely sicken me.”

Watson readjusted the bandage across his eye and stirred in his seat with a groan. Smythe came forward with a bottle and a glass.

“Take that stuff away,” cried Watson. “Look here, Smythe, we’re up against a piece of work that requires cool heads. No more whiskey for

me. If I hadn't been half drunk the other day, you can gamble we wouldn't have made a mess of things and got half killed by that big Bushwhacker the way we did. And to think," he groaned, "that all the while you were sitting by the fire with widow Ross eating nuts, roasting your shins, and talking religion. You've a good deal to answer for. Between the din of Hallibut's mill and the widow's psalm-singing, the noise down there is awful. Well, I've found out this much from the people on Totherside. Jake, the engineer, tells me that the Bushwhackers are getting bitter towards Hallibut. The fools think he wants to drive them off their property. He tells me, also, that the Colonel intends sending his schooner around in the Eau for his lumber. I guess we're left all way round."

Smythe set the bottle on the counter and nodded.

"Yes," he said dryly.

"Yes," mimicked the other with an oath. "Is that all you have to say about it, then? What am I to tell Hallibut, supposing he demands his money back?"

"My dear Watson," smirked Smythe, "don't worry about it. I have—hem! something to say."

"Well, what is it? Does it amount to anything? Don't shake your harpy head off. What is it?"

"Not much, my dear Watson; not much. Simply this: Hallibut's schooner might burn, old Injun Noah might go away to the States, and while the Bushwhackers and Hallibut engage in a fight, somebody else might get possession of the timber. Don't you see that they will be so frightened of his taking their deeds from them by force that they will be glad to place those papers in our hands for safe-keeping?"

"I hope so, Smythe, I hope so," said the other man; "but something tells me we'll get what's coming to us yet."

"Dear Watson, you are weary and fanciful," smiled Smythe. "Religion would make your conscience more easy. It must be a terrible thing to have a conscience such as yours, my friend."

Smythe meant that, every word of it.

Watson looked at him, then reached for the bottle.

"I've changed my mind," he laughed. "I don't want to drink, but I

have to in order to forget—not my sins, but the sight of your hypocritical face.”

“Remember there is business to talk over after supper,” warned Smythe, “and there is our report to Colonel Hallibut to frame up, which I, as the surviving party, must reluctantly present in person.”

He reached over with a claw and gripped the bottle.

“After we have arranged a certain campaign of action,” he smirked, “you may get as drunk as you please. Until then, my dear Watson, you must stay on the anxious seat.”

And leaving the agent huddled before the fireplace he passed into the other room to awaken the sleeping Sambo.

CHAPTER XX

MR. SMYTHE VISITS THE COLONEL

Next morning, before daybreak, Mr. Smythe started for St. Thomas. He reached the settlement just as Colonel Hallibut, with brows puckered into a scowl, came riding slowly up the brown path through the scattered timber of the broken land. The Colonel had faced the north winds from the lake and the veins in his face lay blue beneath his cheeks like tiny frozen water-runs. As he turned to the right of the path toward his home Smythe's white horse rounded a distant copse. The rider was humming a hymn and his head was bent piously on his breast. The Colonel reined up and waited for him, quite aware that Smythe's hawk-like eyes had caught sight of him fully as soon as he had caught sight of Smythe.

"Humph," mused Hallibut, "what's in the wind now, I wonder? Nothing good brings that man here this day."

"Well, Smythe," he called, "it's easy to see that you couldn't hire the old mare this morning, otherwise you'd have walked over. What's up?"

"Why, bless my soul!" exclaimed the dealer, sitting erect in his saddle with a start, "if it isn't the dear Colonel himself. Good-morning, sir," he smiled, lifting his old coon-skin cap.

Hallibut grinned broadly.

"Where's Watson?" he asked.

Smythe rolled his light eyes sorrowfully.

"He patiently awaits his reward, sir. He has been down trying to whack some sense into those ungodly Bushwhackers, Colonel, and now lies at the point of death in my house."

"Dick," cried Hallibut, "take these horses, and see that Smythe's mare gets all the oats she can eat. Lord knows, she looks as though she could stand a good feed."

He took Smythe by the narrow shoulders and pushed him into the house.

"You look rather done up," he said, "sit up to the table and I'll have Rachel get you up a snack. Will you have a drink of anything?"

"I have a slight cold that might be remedied by a touch of brandy,"

returned Smythe. "This is the first time I have had the honor of being in your pleasant and magnificent home, my dear Colonel."

He held the glass his host handed him to his nose and glanced about the room furtively.

"There's nothing here for you to look frightened about," laughed the Colonel. "Hang it all, Smythe, can't you ever look pleasant? Your eyes have a cast like a nesting grebe's. What's the matter?"

Smythe gave a little shiver and drank his brandy at a gulp. The Colonel, watching him speculatively, shoved the bottle across the table with: "Help yourself when you want more."

"Thanks," replied his visitor, stretching out his long blue hands toward the glowing fire.

Hallibut lit a pipe and smoked silently. At last he turned impatiently toward Smythe.

"Well, what's it all about?" he inquired.

"I'm sorry to be the bearer of grievous and disappointing news to you, sir," sighed Smythe. "Esau refuses to sell his birthright."

"What the——" commenced the Colonel, and Smythe started as though he expected something stronger than an expletive.

"I mean, sir, the lawless Bushwhackers refuse to sell their timber," he explained quickly. "They nearly killed Mr. Watson the other night for merely venturing on their property. In fact, a man assaulted him and Simpson, the school-teacher, so brutally, that it is only a matter of days, sir, before Watson receives the final summons, I fear."

Mr. Smythe glanced at his listener and fortified his pious soul against the abuse he expected to hear poured out upon the Bushwhackers by taking another drink. To his surprise and no small disappointment the Colonel smoked on without a word.

A snaky gleam stole into the dealer's little eyes and he sat huddled up, waiting for the big man to say something. The Colonel turned slowly and leaned across the arm of his chair toward his visitor.

"What was Watson doing on Bushwhackers' Place at night? And what was that school-teacher doing with him? And how does it come about that one man is able to brutally assault two good-sized men like those two, eh?" he asked, his bushy brows meeting in a scowl.

“They were simply following the directions laid out by yourself, sir,” explained Smythe, inclining his head. “The Bushwhacker struck them from behind with a heavy club. He was not alone, sir. Four other men, including that Hercules of a Big McTavish, helped him, I understand.”

“Watson says that, does he?”

“He does, and a man by the name of Broadcrook, who was an eyewitness to the attempted murder, tells the same story, sir.”

“Don’t seem at all reasonable to me that those Bushwhackers would half do anything, even a murder, if they set about it,” mused the Colonel. “You say Watson was over trying to get them to come to terms about the timber, and they clubbed him over the head?”

“Precisely, both him and Mr. Simpson.”

“It’s almost too bad they didn’t finish them,” said Hallibut. “Something tells me that Watson has given us only his side of this story. Guess I’d better get the other side from the Bushwhackers.”

Smythe raised his skeleton hands.

“My dear Colonel, it’s as much as your life’s worth to set foot on their property,” he warned. “They swear they’ll shoot you on sight, sir.”

“What?” Colonel Hallibut sprang up and strode across to where Smythe sat cowering. “Who told you that?” he shouted.

“Why—why——” commenced Smythe, then he wriggled upright and tongued his dry lips. “—Broadcrook told me for one,” he finished.

Hallibut paced to and fro across the wide room. The veins in his neck were throbbing, and Smythe could see his fingers twitching. Finally, the big man stopped directly in front of his visitor.

“If you heard that,” he said quietly, “and you’ve come over here to warn me, it’s mighty good of you, Smythe. I’m sorry if I can’t only just about half believe you—but that’s your fault. I can’t help knowing you’re a liar, Smythe, any more than you can help being one. Still, I’m inclined to believe that those Bushwhackers would put me away if they got the chance. They’ve got a law of their own, I know, and I also know that they don’t like me any too well. I don’t know why; I never did them any harm. I wanted that timber, of course, and would have paid them well for it. I’ve learned, though, that they all have enough natural poetry

in their souls to make them sentimental fanatics as far as their bushland is concerned, and I'd made up my mind to let them and their timber go to thunder. Now, after what they've lately said, I guess I'll show them a thing or two."

"But you won't take your life in your hands by going among those murderous men, sir?" asked Smythe fearfully.

"Well, now, I'm not saying just *what* I'll do. One thing is sure, I'm too much of an Englishman to be scared out by a Bushwhacker, and I do like a mix-up, I'll confess. Besides, Smythe, it won't do to let them think I'm scared. My life would always be in jeopardy if they thought that."

"If you'll only be patient, sir, we'll get that timber for you yet," promised Smythe.

"No," returned Hallibut, "I've given up the idea of ever securing the timber. Come to think of it, I was a hog to ever want to put my finger in their pie. I like those wild devils a lot better since I've found they have the sand to stand up for their own. If your village of Bridgetown had some of the Bushwhacker manhood you'd have a city there some day, Smythe."

"God forbid," breathed Mr. Smythe devoutly.

"And where did you say Watson was now?" asked the Colonel abruptly.

"He is now at my poor abode," answered Mr. Smythe plaintively. "He is in pretty bad shape. They must have beaten him unmercifully. He begged that I give you this note, sir."

Mr. Smythe drew from his pocket a square piece of paper and handed it to the Colonel. The big man placed his glasses on his nose and read the note aloud.

"COLONEL HALLIBUT,

Respected Sir: I may never see you in life again. Mr. Smythe will explain. I am willing to die in fulfilling my duty to you, but, sir, I beg that you will not venture among the Bushwhackers. They have sworn to shoot you on sight and to burn your schooner if you sail her into the bay. The six hundred dollars you gave me toward leasing the timber was taken from me as I lay helpless among the ruffians who tried

to kill me. It proved my salvation, for, as they fought among themselves for the money, I managed to crawl away. Good-by, sir, and if we never meet again on earth—but I cannot finish.

Yours,

An erring one

who has been led to the light,

THOMAS WATSON."

The Colonel folded up the letter, pitched it into the coals, and sat down. He refilled his pipe, a half smile on his face. Then he turned to Smythe, whose features were working, and who was vainly trying to force a tear down his cheek.

"So you managed to convert poor dying Watson?" he observed. "You've led an erring one to the light, have you?"

"In my poor way, sir," nodded Smythe, "I have."

"Where does Watson want to be buried?" asked the Colonel gravely.

The other started.

"Buried!" he gasped. "What do you mean, Colonel!"

"Why, judging from his letter, he expects to die very soon, and sometimes people are fanciful about where they are laid to rest——"

He paused, and his lips met in a thin line.

"Smythe," he said, holding the visitor with his eyes, "you and Watson are both danged humbugs. Watson didn't write that letter: you wrote it. Watson may be a villain, but there's not hypocrite enough about him to dictate a letter like that I just read. I'm not sparing him. He was quite willing for you to work this game for him. So my money was taken from him, was it? Well, I suppose it's just as well to lose it one way as another. But I want you to confess that you wrote that letter. Did you?"

"I did," answered Smythe fearfully. "Watson's arm was too sore. He asked me to write it. I didn't mean anything wrong, sir."

"Of course not," agreed Hallibut dryly.

"What do you mean by saying those Bushwhackers will burn my vessel?"

"I mean that they intend to do it," asserted Smythe. "If you doubt me, sir, you may anchor off Lee Point and convince yourself that I speak

the truth.”

“Humph!” grunted Hallibut. “Well, let me tell you something. When the Bushwhackers burn my schooner, I’ll believe they’re ready to shoot me on sight; not before. I sent word to them that I would ship a cargo of lumber—my own lumber—from Lee Creek before the Eau froze over, and I’ll do it.”

He frowned down on Smythe and nodded his shaggy head.

“I’ve just come from seeing that same schooner start on her trip to Rond Eau Bay,” he said, “and heaven help the Bushwhacker that meddles with it or any other property of Colonel Hallibut’s.”

“Perhaps some day you’ll know that Mr. Watson and myself have done our best for you, Colonel,” said Smythe reproachfully. “I know we’ve erred in some respects; but over-zealousness is perhaps the cause of failure. You will pardon my suggesting that you have maybe been unduly influenced against Mr. Watson on account of his not, as yet, having been able to convince the Bushwhackers of your good intentions.”

“Perhaps you are right,” returned Hallibut coolly.

Smythe reached for the bottle and poured some brandy into his glass with a hand that shook. His face, always pinched and gray-white, was grayer and more sunken as he arose to go.

“Have you any word to send to Mr. Watson, sir?” he asked.

“Only that I hope to see him again before he makes up his mind to die,” smiled the Colonel.

Hallibut called to the housekeeper from the dining-room:

“Rachel, get this pale rider something to eat, will you, while I have Dick get out his horse?”

He slapped the drooping Smythe between the shoulders and, laughing loudly, stamped out of the room.

As Smythe viciously attacked the cold meat and bread set before him, a long, weird howl came floating and trembling on the air. He dropped his fork and sat erect, fear written in his shifting eyes. Once again came the cry, and Smythe arose and went to the window. Through the narrow oaken slabs of the kennel-fence, he caught sight of four heavy-chested, yellow-white dogs. They were creeping slowly across

the inclosure with heavy jaws half open and saliva dripping from their red tongues. As the watching man gazed, fascinated, one of them lifted its head and sent a heart-chilling cry upward. Then, chancing to catch sight of the fear-stricken man at the window, the huge dog hurled itself against the solid bars of its prison, only to fall back on its haunches. But it placed its deeply-cloven muzzle against the narrow opening and drew in its breath with a whistling, sobbing sound that sent a shiver to the watcher's heart, for the dog's red eyes were fastened hungrily upon him. Colonel Hallibut, entering, noted Smythe's look, and followed up the impression the dog had made.

"I wouldn't give a penny for your chance if Trailer there caught you in the open, Smythe," he said soberly. "Better not watch him if you care to sleep to-night. Guess I'd better get rid of that Trailer. He scares me, and I'm used to him."

"What do you keep those awful animals for?" asked Smythe with a husky voice.

"Smythe," said Hallibut, "I've kept those dogs—well, because they've been good friends to me, and I can't make up my mind to kill them."

Smythe shuddered and reached for his cap. He walked slowly from the room and climbed into his saddle. The Colonel watched him take the trail, then, his duty as a host done, he turned into the house with an expression of disgust.

Once Smythe had rounded the clump of bushes, he slashed the sleepy, over-fed mare into a gallop, which was not slackened until he was many miles down the trail. Then he dipped into a hollow, reined up, and whistled softly. Watson came from among the trees leading a bay horse by the bridle-rein. He glanced at Smythe's face and his own darkened.

"I told you he wouldn't believe you," he flashed. "What did he say?"

Smythe leaned forward in the saddle.

"My friend," he answered, "tell Watson I hope to see him before he dies." "

Watson did not reply. He sprang into the saddle and the two rode for

a mile or two in silence. Then Smythe remarked:

"Hallibut's schooner left for Rond Eau to-day, and I think Amos Broadcrook will not allow me to lose the wager he believes I made with the dear Colonel. He is waiting for the vessel to drop anchor."

"Then you think the schooner will burn?"

"If I read Amos aright—well, yes, I do. Although, let us hope not; let us hope not."

"Then, when will we kidnap the wood-nymph?" asked Watson. "She must be got rid of, for Simpson threatens to undo our little plans if we fail him, you know."

"Yes, I know," answered Smythe. "Well, we'll not disappoint Simpson. Three people there are who must become American citizens soon, and stay American citizens: Old Noah, Simpson, and——"

He clicked his tongue and Watson looked with some sort of admiration at his friend.

"Smythe, you're a great man," he asserted.

Smythe raised his weak eyes toward the lowering skies.

"God knows," he sighed. "God knows best, my friend. I try to do my little part well. 'Tis all that I can do."

A little further on Watson broke the oppressive silence again. "When will we do it, then?"

"Say Saturday night," directed Smythe quietly. "Poor little girl!—But it must be; it has to be, my friend."

"You are a great man," flattered Watson. "You deserve success, Smythe. I hope you win widow Ross and her snug bit of land. And I hope after the Bushwhackers are convinced that Hallibut would kidnap their queen as a hostage, they will realize that they need you and me as custodians of their deeds."

He laughed over his shoulder, and Smythe, digging his spurs into his old white mare, trotted up alongside him.

"Courting was always an unsatisfactory game with me," he said, "and in the case of widow Ross it has been no exception. I find she is a selfish woman. I found her a heathen and I showed her the light——"

"And she showed you the door, eh?"

"Not so fast, my friend," smiled Smythe, "she did not. It was that

boy of hers who spoiled my visits. That boy played a nasty trick upon me the last time I visited the widow. I have not been back since.”

“Tell me about it,” said Watson.

“Not now.” Smythe shook his head. “Later, perhaps, but not now. Let us each earnestly review our plans for Saturday night, my friend, and for our own personal safety, as well as for business motives, think out a line of action.”

Watson shuddered back into his saddle.

“I wish to God it was over,” he muttered.

He struck his horse with the quirt and it bounded forward, leaving Bridgetown’s general merchant far in the rear.

It was quite agreeable to that gentleman to be left to himself. When he reached the edge of the town he reined up and gazed southward through the hazy twilight.

Miles away sounded the deep note of a steam whistle.

“Hallibut’s mill on Totherside,” mused Smythe. “I wonder if the widow is waiting and watching for me? I wonder what she is doing now?”

CHAPTER XXI

WIDOW ROSS BACKSLIDES

Just at that particular moment the widow was frying the potatoes for supper. She was singing, and snapped the words out as though determined to do what was right under any circumstances. The mangy cat crouched beneath the stove, its lanky body sunk between its shoulder blades, its big yellow inquiring eyes staring out at Tommy, who was molding bullets over in a corner of the room. He looked back at the cat and shook his head.

*"Cross the river of Jordan,
Happy, happy, happy, happy,
Oh, we'll cross the river of Jordan,
Happy in the Lord."*

Widow Ross persisted in the task and the cat crept across and talked close range to Tommy.

"I tell you I don't know," whispered the youngster shrilly, making a kick at the cat. "Get out, you moon-eyed old beggar—you want to know all about everythin'."

The woman gave the browning potatoes a stir with the knife and glared over her shoulder. She had just finished the verse for the fiftieth time, and she had sufficient breath left to say:

"You'll get licked yet before you get into bed. What's the matter with you now? Who are you talkin' to, Tom Ross?"

"Cat," answered Tom shortly.

"What are you sayin' to her?"

"She wants to know what's the matter with you, ma."

"What's the matter with me? Why, there's nothin' the matter with me. Can't one be a Christian woman and sing hymns without you and Mary Ann and the cat even taking objections? Where is that cat?"

Mrs. Ross left the potatoes and seized hold of the broom. The cat sprang on Tommy's neck, and, assisted by the claw-hold it found there, bounded to the rafters of the ceiling. Widow Ross made a sweep at it, but failed to reach it. Tommy grinned.

"Here you, climb up there and throw her down," commanded the woman. "I'll show her."

That was just what Tommy wanted to see.

"I'll get the old beggar down in a jiffy, ma," he chuckled.

He pulled forth a chest and with much grunting turned it on end. Then he climbed up on it and reached for pussy. "Nice kitty," he said, trying to get hold of the elusive feline. Kitty's tail swelled and she reached down and left three little pink scratches on Tommy's wrist.

"Gol darn," whispered Tommy.

"Come down here to once," ordered his mother.

Tom climbed down and stood sheepishly sucking his wrist.

"You said 'gol darn,'—I heard you," cried the widow.

"She scratched," whimpered Tommy.

Mrs. Boss lifted the frying-pan from the fire and laid hold of a long stick of white hickory.

"Since Mr. Smythe's been here and talked so nice to me about Christianity, I've been mendin' my ways a lot," she sighed, "but with a trial of a boy like you it's most useless to try and keep good for long. You've broke up my hymn-singin' and now you've gone and swore. Think what that God-fearin' man, Mr. Smythe, would think of me if he knowed I let you go on in your wicked ways. I must lick you, and I'm goin' to do it."

She made a slash at the lad and he ducked. Out of four sweeps Tommy received one, and it was not a very hard one. He cried with his dirty face and laughed in his young heart. He wondered if ever a boy had an easier ma than he had. The cat in the meantime had taken advantage of the "whipping" to make herself scarce. Widow Boss went on with her singing as she set the supper table. Occasionally a smile would cross her face and she would sigh. Tommy wondered if Christianity made all people act funny. When Mary Ann came in with a big basket of hickory-nuts gathered from the ridges, her mother glanced at her and frowned. She watched the girl swing the heavy basket to a shelf on the wall, and a gleam of motherly pride lit up her face. Tommy, the fire-poker concealed beneath his homespun jacket, edged toward the door.

"See the cat as you was comin' in, Mary Ann?" he asked carelessly. His sister laughed and grabbed him.

"No, you don't, sonny," she said. "I know what you want to do with Sarah. My, but you're a wicked imp, Tommy."

"Imp is a swear-word," charged the widow. "I'm surprised at you usin' it, Mary Ann."

"Why, ma," exclaimed the girl, "you're gettin' awful pious, ain't you?"

"Mr. Smythe would say that 'imp' is a swear-word," said Mrs. Ross, "and Mr. Smythe is the best Christian in Bridgetown."

"Did he tell you he was?" asked the girl.

"He did. Says he, 'Mrs. Ross, I'm a godly man. I try to do right, and I love my neighbor.'"

"Maybe you'd like to move to Bridgetown, ma," laughed Mary Ann.

"I know what you mean," returned Mrs. Ross, "but I ain't hankerin' for Mr. Smythe's love exactly. You believe he is a good man, don't you?" she asked, fastening her black eyes on her daughter's face.

"It don't matter what I believe," said Mary Ann.

"Well, Mr. Smythe has been a Christian for a long time. He ought to know swear-words from ordinary ones. He says, 'Mrs. Ross, I would like to see the hypocrites in this world taken out of it. It would be a fine world then,' says he."

"He wouldn't be here to see how fine, though," smiled the girl.

"Then you don't believe what he says?"

"I don't believe what he says, and I don't believe what that Watson man, who comes here with him, says. They're both liars, and Mr. Simpson is as bad as they are."

Widow Boss dropped a dish on the floor.

"Why, what are you talkin' about?" she cried. "You must be crazy, Mary Ann. What if the teacher should hear you?"

"Well, it wouldn't hurt him to hear it again. I've told it to him once already."

Widow Boss stood speechless.

"Well, I never!" she said with amazement, when she could find words.

Mary Ann drew her tall figure up and her big eyes flashed.

"The other day when Mr. Simpson and Mr. Watson came home here half killed from what they said was a fallin' tree you believed them, and I didn't open my mouth," said the girl.

"And why shouldn't I believe them?" snorted the widow. "Why shouldn't I? Didn't poor Mr. Watson have an arm in a sling and wasn't he that bruised he couldn't move without groanin'? And Mr. Simpson, poor man, didn't he have the awfulest pair of eyes you ever did see in a head? Didn't that godly man, Mr. Smythe, who was here with me all afternoon, believe 'em?"

"Fallin' trees don't use people up just that way," said Mary Ann slowly. "No, ma, I'll tell you just what kind of a tree fell on them fellers. It was Bill Paisley. They thought they would try some sharp wort on the Bushwhackers, and Bill——" The girl's face flushed and her bosom heaved. "—Bill was there and, of course, could whip a dozen excuses like those two. And he did do it, too."

The widow sat down on a stool, her swarthy face a picture.

"And do you mean to say that them two men went over there to make trouble?" she asked blankly.

Mary Ann nodded.

"What for?"

"I don't know—yet."

"Do you mean you're goin' to know?"

"Yes, and for that reason Mr. Simpson mus'n't know that we've learned anythin'."

Mrs. Ross went outside to call Tommy to supper. When she returned she shook her head once or twice and muttered to herself. "The teacher's gone to Bridgetown to-night," she said after a time.

Mary Ann sat down to the table.

"Mary Ann," asked the woman gently, "ain't you carin' for him none?"

"No, ma."

"And if he'd ask you, you'd say——?"

"No, ma."

The widow poured out the tea and dished up the potatoes. She

slopped the tea and spilled the potatoes and then she sat down and, stretching over her arm, patted her daughter's brown hand.

"You're the right kind of girl for a widder to own," she said, her eyes humid with feeling; "just the right sort." She sat erect and slapped the table so hard that the dishes clattered. "But that Bill Paisley is a ruffin—a no-count ruffin, Mary Ann."

The daughter did not reply. She began her supper with a zest born of open air and sunshine. Tommy was stowing away ham and hashed potatoes, and spoke with his mouth full.

"Mill ain't goin' to run to-morrow," he said. "I was over to Hallibut's shanty just after quittin' time and Jim Dox says there's somethin' wrong with the boiler."

"I wish the old b'iler would bust," exclaimed widow Boss. "Course I'd want all the men to be in the shanty at the time. But I'm tired of that noise. I hate that saw and I hate that whistle. This place ain't seemed the same nohow since the Colonel built that mill."

"I think the whistle is just bully," grinned Tommy. "Wish I could blow it all day, I'd do it."

"A whistle is all you need to make you perfect," said Mary Ann. "What's the matter with the boiler, Tommy?"

"Why, there ain't nuthin' wrong with it," laughed the boy. "Fact is, the mill-boys want to go out on a hunt. Seems that Boy McTavish, Jim Peeler, and Ander Declute are goin' over to the Point to hunt a big silver-gray fox. They say he's as big as a cow, but I ain't believin' that. Anyhow, Peeler is goin' and take his hound Brindle. He's as good as any of Colonel Hallibut's hounds," Jim says, "and he's a tartar after fox."

"And them men is lettin' on that the machinery is broke!" gasped the widow. "What would Mr. Smythe think of such deceit as that now, I wonder?"

Here Tommy took a convulsion and it was some time before he got his breath back. His mother gazed at him sternly until the paroxysm had passed.

"Now, maybe you'll explain this un-Christian conduct, sir," she said.

"I suppose even Christians laugh sometimes," gurgled Tommy, as he wiped his eyes. "I was just thinkin' of the last time Mr. Smythe was

here, ma. You remember Daft Davie came over that same afternoon, and how he scared Mr. Smythe by lookin' at him. Well, I'll tell you somethin' you don't know.

"Davie had a pair of little green grass-snakes in his pocket that he'd found in the lowlands and was takin' home to his collection. When you and Mr. Smythe was talkin' religion me and Davie went outside for him to show me his new tumble he'd learned. You know, Mary Ann," turning to the girl, "how Davie can turn handsprings? Well, Davie wanted me to hold the snakes, and I said I would, only I don't like snakes like he does, so I put 'em in Mr. Smythe's overcoat pocket. His coat was hangin' up outside the door. We both forgot all about 'em then, and when Mr. Smythe come out to get his old gray mare he put his hand in his pocket after his mits, and——"

Tommy laid back and roared again, and Mary Ann joined him. The widow sat stern and accusing. "Go on," she commanded.

"Smythe was tryin' to convert me, I guess," said Tommy. "'Young man,' says he, 'beware of sin. It's a bad habit. It lies in wait in quiet places. It's a snake in the grass,' says he; and just then he pulled out one of the green snakes and howled. Oh, how he did howl and prance about! 'Take him off, take him off,' he hollered. He dropped the snake and Davie picked it up and put it in his blouse. Mr. Smythe he stood there shiverin', and by and by put his hand creepy like into his pocket again. The other snake twisted around his wrist and he fell down and rolled over and over. Davie got the snake and I helped the storekeeper up."

"'Did you see 'em?' he yells; 'did you see them snakes?'

"'Why, no, sir,' I says, 'what snakes?'

"'Great big snakes,' he hollers. And then he swore; cross my heart, ma, that good Christian man swore somethin' awful."

"My gracious," sighed the good woman, surprise wiping maternal sternness from her face. "Are you *sure* he *swore*, Tommy?"

"No one of the Broadcrook boys could swear worse or longer," asserted Tommy.

"And what did he do then?" laughed Mary Ann, tears running down her cheek.

"Why, then Mr. Smythe turned to Davie and asked him if he'd seen

any snakes, and you know what Davie'd do. He just looked at the storekeeper out o' them big eyes o' his and didn't say a word. I was dyin' to laugh, but dasn't. Just then along comes Jim Dox from Hallibut's shanty.

"Mr. Smythe was settin' down on a stump lookin' mighty used up.

"'Sick?' asked Jim. 'Come over to the shanty and I'll give you some whiskey.'

"At the word 'whiskey' Mr. Smythe jumped up and pranced about like a wild man.

"'I've drunk too much whiskey,' he yells, 'I've drunk too much of the stuff that stingeth like an adder.'

"'You act as though you had 'em,' said Jim.

"'I have got 'em,' yelled the storekeeper. 'I've seen snakes, all kinds, breeds, and colors of snakes. I'm a sick man. I want to get home where I can pray and pour all my whiskey through a knot-hole in the wall. I'll never drink it again, so help me, I won't.'

"Dox he looked at me and winked and I didn't say nothin'. After the storekeeper left I told Jim all about the little grass-snakes, and I ast him what Mr. Smythe meant when he said he had 'em, and then Jim tried to get a joke on me about men who drink whiskey seein' things as are not pleasant to look at. He didn't do it, though."

"I'm mighty surprised, surprised and disturbed," said the widow. "I thought Mr. Smythe was everythin' a man should be. Ain't it funny how one can be fooled by a man?"

Mary Ann looked up.

"Somehow Mr. Smythe didn't fool me," she said. "I knew he drank whiskey, because he smelled of it. I knew he swore by the way his tongue and eyes fought with each other. I knew he lied because he said he loved all men. There's nobody alive and natural built that way."

The girl sat looking steadily across at her mother. Finally she leaned forward and asked:

"What did Smythe ask you to do, ma?"

"Did I say he asked me to do anythin'?" flared the widow with a start.

"No, but I know he did. What was it?"

The mother's eyes blazed indignantly.

"I wasn't goin' to speak about it," she said, "'cause Mr. Smythe said it was the duty of a Christian not to let his right hand know what anyone else's was doin', or somethin' like that, meanin' that whatever I did in the cause of Christianity should be kept to myself. He preached me a sermon here and he said that the Bushwhackers was a poor lot of misguided men who needed enlightenment. He said they was in danger of havin' their property-deeds took from them by force, and they was in need of the help of a good Christian man. He said my duty was to go over there and reason with 'em and, suggest to 'em that they give over their deeds to him for safe-keepin'. I said I would, and was goin' over to McTavish's to-morrow to try and get 'em to let Mr. Smythe take care of their deeds for 'em. I'm not goin' now," finished the woman; "no, not a step."

Mary Ann made as if to speak, then looked at her mother.

"I see the cat out on the shed, Tommy," she said.

The boy jumped, and when he had vanished, with the poker, through the doorway, Mary Ann said hesitatingly:

"If Bill Paisley ever asks you if I'm engaged to the—teacher, you know what to tell him, ma."

The widow nodded. There was a yearning in her heart to take the wild wood-girl to her bosom and confess that she had already told Bill Paisley too much. But mothers are peculiar creatures. She stifled the impulse and simply said:

"I know what to tell that no-count Bushwhacker, Mary Ann."

Mary Ann arose and, taking the milk-pails from the shelf, went out to the cow-stable to milk the three spotted cows. Widow Ross got up from the table and looked through the little window across toward Bushwhackers' Place.

"I don't blame 'em," she whispered. "I don't blame Boy nor Mac nor Paisley nor Declute. I don't blame any of 'em for not trustin' them men."

She turned and went over to the fireplace. On the shelf above it lay her long clay pipe. She picked it up as tenderly as she would a pet.

"He said it was wicked in a woman and mother to smoke. Smythe

said that, and I believed him. I've been a fool and a ninny—not only for believin' him, but for denyin' myself tobaccer all these long days an' nights. I'll light up and smoke a while."

Half an hour later Tommy and Mary Ann came into the house with two pails of foaming milk. Their mother was seated before the blazing log puffing clouds of blue smoke ceilingward. There was an atmosphere of homely tranquillity about the place. Tommy sniffed the air. He had missed the scent of tobacco. Through the open door came draggling a lazy day-breeze from off the Eau. It was sweet and soft with the smell of ripened water-plants.

"Can I go to the Point with 'em to-morrow, ma?" asked the boy.

He had divined that the proper moment for making an exceptional request was now.

"You kin," answered the mother.

The lean, yellow-eyed cat looked in at the door, and Tommy patted his patched trouser leg. She came over to him trustingly, and the boy lifted her up and stroked her scanty fur.

Outside, the whip-poor-will was alive, for the song of the mill was dead.

CHAPTER XXII

THE SHOT IN THE DARK

For the first night since the long nights had come Big McTavish's fiddle was silent. It hung on the wall and the man sat before the fire, his chin in his hands. Mrs. McTavish reclined on a couch of willows beside him, and her eyes rested on her husband's face sympathetically.

"You mus'n't worry about it, Mac," she said. "They can't take our place from us, I know."

"It's not that, Mary," replied the husband. "It's the thoughts of what might happen if they should try. They don't know the men here in Bushwhackers' Place. They don't know 'em like I know 'em. You know what the law of the wood is, Mary. Please God, they don't try to drive our boys any. I shudder to think of what might happen if they tried that. I fear trouble now that Hallibut has sent his schooner around."

Boy entered the house as the father was speaking. He carried a double-barreled fowling-piece and across his back hung a string of wild ducks. Gloss, who sat beside the table knitting, glanced up as he entered, and a soft gleam stole into her eyes. Then, noting the haggard lines in Boy's face, she approached him with outstretched hands. He smiled, and, putting the gun on its rack, let his game fall to the floor. Then he took the girl's hands in his and stroked them caressingly.

"Wild duck, Gloss," he laughed; "big dinner to-morrow, girl."

She gazed at him with wide eyes, her hands unconsciously tightening on his. Boy glanced toward the woman on the couch. Gloss turned to her work, and he went and sat beside his mother.

"Was it rough, Boy?" she asked fondly, putting her arm about his neck.

"Aye, ma, it was; and the white-caps were dancing all afternoon. Wind blowin' from the east and the ducks crazy with not knowin' where to light. Never saw such decoyin' in all my life, although Hallibut's schooner lay there in the open water."

"Were you out on the bay, Boy?"

"No, I was decoyin' off Lee Point. I got somethin' like fifty red-head

and blue-bill. They always decoy well when it looks like snow. I left a bunch of 'em at old Betsy's."

Big McTavish raised his head.

"And did she speak cross at you, lad?" he asked with a smile.

"No, sir, she didn't. She's changin' wonderful for some reason. I'll always like Betsy after what she's done for us."

"Amen to that," said McTavish fervently. "She has been good to us all."

"Auntie," said Gloss, "you are tired. Hadn't you better go to bed now? We want you to be hungry for the duck dinner to-morrow. We'll have Mary Ann Ross and Bill Paisley over, won't we, Granny?"

The old lady looked up from her knitting and smiled.

"Aye, lassie, we'll invite Bill and Mary Ann t' dinner," she agreed.

Boy bent and kissed his mother gently on the cheek, and when she and Big McTavish had gone from the room Gloss came over and stood before the young man.

"Tell me," she whispered, her cheeks flaming.

"Tell you?" he exclaimed. "Tell you what, Gloss?"

"Tell me what happened."

"Why, nothin', Glossie; nothin'," said Boy, looking up.

"You are troubled about somethin'," she persisted. "Won't you tell me?"

He shook his head.

"Don't worry about me, little girl," he smiled, "there ain't really anythin' the matter."

A slight tremor went through the girl's form and the long lashes fell and hid her eyes. She turned slowly and walked toward the door. On its threshold Boy caught her, and then as quickly let his arms fall.

She leaned against the wall, her eyes still closed. The color had left her cheeks and her lips trembled. When she opened her eyes Boy was sitting before the fire, his head drooping.

"Good-night," she called softly, and passed into her room.

He looked up slowly. "Good-night," he whispered.

He drew his chair over to the table, which was spread with his evening meal. He was hungry, and still he could not eat. He arose and,

catching up his cap, opened the door and passed out into the autumn night.

It was late when he returned. As he drew near to the house he noted that the candles were still burning in the big room. Through the window he saw three neighbor men sitting beside his father at the table. They seemed to be conversing earnestly. When he entered the house they all looked up, and Bill Paisley put his finger on his lips.

"I suppose," he said dryly, when Boy was seated beside them, "I suppose you just naturally want that head of yours shot off clean, don't you? Else why would you be wanderin' around this night the way you've been, Boy?"

Boy reached over for a slice of cornbread. His walk in the wood had soothed the new tempest that had lately come to sway his soul.

"Boy," said Big McTavish, "you didn't tell us that you'd been fired on to-day."

Boy dropped his corncake and looked about him quickly.

"Well, I didn't tell anybody, for the matter o' that. How did you know I was shot at, dad?"

"I told him," declared Declute.

"Well, who told you?" asked the boy.

"Never mind that now. We all know as you was fired on and that Hallibut and his gang is responsible."

"Tell us, lad," urged the father; "why do they want to kill you?"

Boy shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe it's because they don't want to be killed themselves, dad," he answered.

Paisley chuckled.

"That's the way to talk, by gosh," he said, bringing his fist down. "There's goin' to be fightin'—there can't help but be fightin'. It's gotter be first drop and make every shot count from this time forward."

"I don't like it; no, I don't like it," sighed Big McTavish. "Why do people want to come here and molest us? Why do they want to shoot my boy down? Ain't we humans, I wonder?"

Boy sprang up and climbed the attic ladder in search of dry clothes.

"Listen, Mac," said Paisley, hitching his chair forward and pinching

off a pipeful of Canada-Green, “there are two reasons why they want to kill us off. They want to own this little world of ours, and they hope to drive us back into the bush like they are drivin’ the deer and turkeys. They ain’t thinkin’ a Bushwhacker’s life is worth a great deal. I’ve studied this thing out purty well, and I’ve concluded that we’ve got to stand up for our own. Jim and Ander here think the same. You might as well fall in with our views, Mac, and if they want fightin’, give it to ’em.”

McTavish shook his head.

“It’s a terrible thing to take life,” he declared, “an awful thing. I’d give in first and be driven into the lake before I’d shoot a man down. No, Bill, I can’t take up a gun again’ a human nohow.”

Jim Peeler attempted to speak and Paisley lifted his hand.

“There’s another reason,” he whispered, peering at the dark attic door. “I’m goin’ to tell you the reason now, Mac, although I had hoped it wouldn’t be necessary.” He drew the big man into a corner and spoke to him in an undertone.

“What!” Big McTavish sprang erect, his beard fairly bristling. “What do they want to do that for?”

He gazed about him with flashing eyes, and Paisley laid a restraining hand on his arm.

“Boy mus’n’t know—remember,” he cautioned.

“Bill,” said McTavish hoarsely, “if that’s what Hallibut would do, why of course I’ll fight him.”

“That’s the talk,” nodded Paisley. “But, of course, it may be all a scare game, and maybe they shot at Boy just ’cause they thought they’d scare us into sellin’ our timber to ’em for a mere nothin’. I don’t think there’s an ounce of sand in the whole parcel of ’em myself.”

“Who told you I was shot at, Ander?” said Boy, rejoining the men. “I didn’t intend to worry anybody by tellin’ about it. There wasn’t anybody near. It was down on Oak Ridge. I was comin’ in from the bay that way to have a look at my turkey-traps. It was near the middle trap that this thing happened. There wasn’t anybody near, except the one that did the shootin’—that I know of.”

Declute expectorated on the coals and scratched his head.

"You stopped at old Betsy's on your way home, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yes, I did—why?"

"Wall, I ain't sayin' as she knowed somethin' might happen you, this bein' Friday an' an unlucky day, ner I ain't sayin' as she prevented that bullet from gettin' you. I ain't superstitious at all, although my wife, Rachel, declares I be. Neither am I sayin' as old Betsy's a witch, as she's commonly called. But, Boy, she follered you an' she heard the shot. It was too dark fer her t' see the shooter, but we all know he wasn't a Bushwhacker. Betsy stopped in to see th' wife an' she ups an' tells about th' shootin'. When I gets home Rachel tells me. I goes over an' tells Bill, an' me an' him picks up Jim thar on our way down here. That's all."

Boy glanced toward his father and a spasm of pain crossed his face.

"Suppose we change the subject," he suggested. "Bill, somebody has been meddlin' with my turkey-traps."

"And mine, too," complained Paisley. "Some thief is takin' the turkeys out of my traps. I'm goin' to find out who's doin' it, right soon."

"That big Amos Broadcrook, I met him t'other day when I was landin' at Mud Pond after bein' out on the bay, an' he told me as he's seen Tom Dodge, from th' P'int, carryin' turkeys along the Eau shore two er three times," observed Declute.

"Well, I wouldn't believe one of them Broadcrooks on oath," said Peeler. "They're all thieves themselves. Not a man among us here but has lost traps, and who stole 'em, I ask? Why, Broadcrooks, for sure."

Big McTavish looked up.

"Tom Dodge wouldn't steal nothin'," he said. "He's too honest for that. I don't want to hear anybody say anythin' against any of the Injuns. And if any Broadcrook tries to fasten turkey stealin' on to them innocent fellers, I'm goin' to break him in two. Remember that, and tell 'em so."

Paisley punched Boy.

"Fightin' spirit stirrin' already," he whispered. "Well, fellers," he said aloud, "suppose we be hittin' the back trail—it's gettin' late."

The other men arose.

"Things are just at this point," said Bill, as he opened the door, "we

can expect somethin' startlin' right soon. Keep your peepers open, Mac, and you, too, Boy, and if anybody does shootin' you see that yours is done first. And, Mac," he whispered in McTavish's ear, "don't you let Gloss outside this house very far—certain not into the woods."

When the men had gone Big McTavish arose and, taking the pine board from behind the door, whittled the shavings off for the morning's fire. Then he stretched his long arms and looked at Boy with deep, awakened eyes.

"Bumpy," he said, letting his big hand rest on Boy's shoulders.

Bumpy was an old baby name. He had not used it for years, but tonight he used it—he couldn't have explained why.

"Bumpy," he repeated, "don't you let 'em get you." At his bedroom door he looked back and said earnestly: "Even if you have to fire first, don't you let 'em, Bumpy."

As Boy arose to seek his bed in the attic the outer door opened and Bill Paisley stealthily entered. He made a sign for silence, and, taking Boy by the arm, drew him outside. There he spoke to him in low tones.

"Well, now," said Boy, after Paisley had concluded, "we ought to catch the turkey-thief that way all right, Bill."

"It just popped into my mind after I left Peeler and Declute at the Forks," explained Bill. "I know some fellers who tried it in the Michigan woods, and it worked fine. And, Boy," he added, "if the thief is who we expect it is, won't we give him a scare? Now then, remember, to-morrow night we'll try it. You drop in on me early."

He pushed Boy into the house and softly closed the door. Boy removed his moccasins and as he placed them before the fireplace he turned quickly. The swish of a dress had caught his ears. Before him stood Gloss, her long hair down about her waist, her cheeks wet and burning. As he gazed upon her wonderingly, her lips trembled.

"I heard you all talkin'," she confessed. "I didn't mean to listen, but Bill speaks so loud I couldn't help hearin'. You were shot at, and, oh, Boy, you didn't tell me!"

Boy's pulses were throbbing.

"Why, Gloss," he stammered, "it wasn't really anythin'."

She raised her head and looked at him then.

“Yes, it was,” she said earnestly: “it was everythin’. Promise me you’ll be careful, Boy.”

He took a step toward her, drawn by the tempestuous soul of her. But she stepped back, her lips parted, her great eyes humid and compelling, her hand raised warningly.

“We ain’t boy and girl any more,” she said softly.

Then once again she was gone, and the great gaunt shadows flickered on the wall against which the old violin hung pitifully alone and soundless. And not until the shadows had crept away and the room was dark and cold did Boy climb the ladder to his rush bed.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN THE FIRE CIRCLE

White splashes of foam clipped and swayed on the slate-blue waters. A hundred yards out from the rushes a clay-hued slash across the turmoiled face of the bay marked the yellow sand-bar beneath. Between the sand-bar and the rushes lay the wild celery bed. Here, shoots succulent and tender, sweetest of morsels to the man-hunted, fear-haunted fowl of the Wild, gripped the oozy muck below. With the lowering of the late afternoon skies a pair of canvasbacks came skimming on strong, swift wings high over the sunken bog and tangled marshland toward the white beaten water of the open. Weary from the flight of leagues, nervous with the dread of hidden dangers, and hungry from long fasting, their glistening wings beat the buffeting west wind a little more quickly at sight of the long dark streak of their kind far in the center of the bay. There, at last, was rest; food, too, perhaps. So, curving high over the marsh, the noble pair flashed, now gray against the snowy cloud-crest, now white against a crumpled sky of slate, wedging the wind with a new strength, necks outstretched, the drake leading and muttering now and again to his mate a low croak of cheer.

The wind awoke to greater force, throwing the foam and spray high in air. Shoreward it bore an empty bottle that had been thrown from the schooner anchored half a mile eastward, and which had drifted out into the open water. There it bobbed and glittered, a black dot on the slate-blue, drifting finally across the yellow shallow of the bar into the calmer waters in lee of the long point. The rough waves had overturned it and it rested bottom up in the wild celery bed.

The same winds that had wafted it hither had carried to those frantic sky-voyagers beating bayward the scent of the wild water-plant they loved, and with drooping wings and joyful, low-voiced quacks they curved downward. Inward they sped so as to skirt the shore and alight in the haven against the wind. But just outside of what they had learned was the danger-line, the drake's sharp eye caught the gleam of the glass bottle, and at his shrill command the pair swerved outward once more

on whistling white-crested wings. To live, the water-wild must learn. The early night-shadows had crept down and across the waters before the weary pair settled for rest in the center of the bay. Round and round the flock they flew, now lost in the darkness, now, gleaming white against it, swooping ever lower, with bright eyes alert for danger signals such as a compact bunch of reeds or a tangled spot in the rush-beds. And, by and by, just as day faded, they sank against the dying wind among an animated company of their kind.

Not until then did a tall figure arise from the reeds on the shore of the wild celery bed, and with an imprecation, glance toward the schooner at anchor, and lower the hammer of his muzzle-loading fowling-piece. It was Amos Broadcrook. He stood looking across the water until darkness shut out the tossing schooner from his vision. Then he turned and sought the wood.

He skirted the open and passed along the thicket toward the lower ridges. With the coming of night the wind had died away and the bush-world was very still. It was snowing now; the man could feel the cold, clinging flakes on his face and hands. As he slunk unerringly through the heavy darkness there came to his ears a low, wailing cry. He stopped short and the hand carrying the gun crept to its hammer.

"If it's a lynx, let it come; if it's a man, let him come. But if it's that old witch Betsy on a ha'nt——"

He stood trembling and listening until the long hair across his forehead was wet with the sweat of fear. Then he crept forward again. The cry was not repeated. The man advanced by short steps, his great form crouched, his head thrust forward. By and by he crept from the heavy timber of the swale and sought the ridge. After following it for half a mile he paused abruptly, and, reaching out into the darkness, felt through it with his hand. Instinct had guided the bushman aright. He had found a pile of logs—Paisley's turkey-trap number one. He moved about the trap until he found the ground floor. Taking the ramrod from his gun he inserted it through the door and moved it about.

"Empty," he growled. "Jest your luck, Amos."

He got up and moved forward cautiously. Lower down was trap number two, and as he approached it his sharp, ear caught the

unmistakable sound of a turkey in distress. It was a wild, penetrating note which he and all the Bushwhackers had learned to imitate by sucking wind through a straw. The man chuckled with delight and drew a sack from under his coat.

Arrived at the trap, he walked around it until he found the door. It was not necessary for him to feel inside for the game he was sure was there. After listening intently Amos stood his gun up against a tree and, dropping on all fours, crawled into the trap. As he drew his feet in from the doorway a heavy log dropped from without and closed it effectually. With a growl like a trapped beast the man sprang erect and dashed his heavy form against the logs of his prison. But his efforts to throw down those walls were vain. They were too strongly built to topple, even before his prodigious strength. Then he poured forth a torrent of incoherent profanity, cursing his trappers. Without, all was silent as the grave. Suddenly the turkey-thief began to tremble.

"Outside thar," he called, "for God's sake, if you be human, speak to me."

A low wail came from the heavy timber and grew into a shrill scream, drawing nearer to the man crouching now on the inside of his prison.

"Witches!" he gasped, and groveled among the leaves.

"Amos Broadcreek," spoke a voice, seemingly close beside him, "your hour has come—prepare."

"Let me out," begged Amos, "oh, let me out o' here."

"Amos," again came the voice, "we see it's useless to give you time to repent. The devil has sent us for you. We must hurry away. Which will you have, Amos, rifle-ball or fire? Speak quick."

"Gimme time," groaned the distracted Broadcreek, "only gimme time."

Something like a laugh came from the darkness outside, but it was so closely followed by another long-drawn wail that Amos hid his face among the leaves again.

"You have been stealin' turkeys out of these traps," accused the voice. "Answer, haven't you, Amos?"

"Yes, I have."

“When was you here last?”

“Thursday night.”

“Then it was you fired on Boy McTavish when he surprised you?”

“No, I swear I didn’t.”

“You’re lyin’. Mates, get the fire ready.”

“Hol’ on, devils. I’m speakin’ the truth. I didn’t fire on Boy. I was scared and my rifle went off by accident. It wasn’t p’inted his way at all—I swar it.”

The yellow glow of fire came flickering through the chinks in the logs.

“What air you doin’?” cried the wretch in the trap in agonizing voice.

“We’re goin’ to apply the fire. You are goin’ to be rewarded for stealin’, Amos.”

“Oh, don’t—don’t,” pleaded Amos. “I won’t steal any more if you’ll only let me off this time, good witches.”

Slowly the log fell away from the opening and a voice said:

“Come out here, Broadcrook.”

The man needed no second invitation. He scrambled out and made a dash for the heavy timber. But Boy McTavish tripped him up and Paisley gripped his windpipe. He was dragged back into the light of the fire and Boy picked up his gun.

“Get up,” commanded Bill. “Now, you thief, what have you got to say for yourself?”

Broadcrook commended Paisley to the lower regions.

“I’m not goin’ to say a word,” he snarled, “an’ you can’t make me, either.”

He struggled and Paisley’s knee gripped more deeply into his neck.

“Think you’re a mighty strong ’un, don’t you?” growled Amos. “Think you’ve done somethin’, I suppose, in trippin’ me up an’ hold-in’ me down. Any boy could do as much as that. You was scart t’ give me half a chance, you was.”

“What do you mean by chance, Amos?” asked Paisley, the corners of his mouth twitching. “You don’t mean to say that you’d fight, do you? Why, man alive, you can’t fight—you’re too big a coward.”

"If I was on my feet I'd make you eat them words," spat Broadcrook.

"If I really thought there was any spunk in you I'd let you try," grinned Paisley. "By gosh, I'll do it, but listen, Amos, if you make any break for the woods, Boy there will sure plug you."

"Don't let him go, Bill," warned Boy. "If he gets away now there's no tellin' what he'll do. He's just wantin' to get a chance to get in the timber. You know, and I know, he won't fight. He's too much of a sneakin' coward."

Broadcrook turned his malignant face toward Boy. In the yellow light it looked fearful. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could frame the words he would say a small disheveled form came bounding and panting into their midst.

It was Daft Davie, his face gnashed and bleeding from scratches of low-lying twigs. He sank on his knees before the fire and poured forth some words in his strange gibberish. Boy, quick to understand the daft child, gave a low cry. Paisley spoke sharply.

"What is he sayin', Boy?" he asked.

"He says that there are five men tryin' to get into our house," gasped Boy. "Bill, I don't understand this, but there's no time to lose. Let Broadcrook alone till another time. I'll take his gun. For gawd sake, let's hurry."

Broadcrook crept toward the thicket and Paisley's heavy boot hurried his movements materially.

"Nurse that, you skunk, till we meet again," he cried.

Then he turned quickly and followed Boy. Daft Davie had already vanished in the darkness.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE NIGHT ATTACK

The men plunged through the timber toward the settlement. The ground was soft with snow now and the darkness was so dense that only their unerring sense of directions made progress at all possible.

"Bill," panted Boy, "it's likely Hallibut and his gang."

"Likely. But they'll reckon with us now," fumed Paisley; "that is, if we're not too late," he added in his throat.

A rifle shot rang out on the night and the men quickened their pace.

"That's at our place, all right," groaned Boy.

Paisley did not reply. In his heart was a great fear that they would be too late to lend succor to the man and helpless women in the McTavish home. At their fastest they could but make slow progress through the thick timber, and several times were they brought up short and breathless by coming in violent contact with trees. It was an agonizing half-hour to both, this frenzied rush through a forest in pitch darkness. When the timber grew sparser and the footing better they bounded on, crashing through thick second-growth groves and leaping white patches of open, their goal the log-house where danger menaced loved ones. As they emerged into the wide clearing the clouds above them parted and the starlight showed a number of forms creeping toward the cover of the wood.

"Come," whispered Boy. But Paisley, sinking on one knee behind him, leveled his long rifle.

"May this bullet go true to the leader of the dogs," he muttered.

Then slowly the rifle was lowered, and Paisley arose.

"No, I can't shoot until I am sure," he said, "—but if they've harmed little Gloss——"

He hurried forward. At the edge of the garden-patch his foot came into contact with a yielding body. The clouds had covered the stars again, but Paisley with a low word of distress bent and lifted Joe, the Irish setter, in his arms. The dog was dead. His head sagged over against the man's shoulder, as tenderly Paisley carried him forward and

laid him just outside the door.

"It's Bill," he called, and the door was opened. On a chair beside the window lay two rifles and in one corner of the room knelt Big McTavish, his wife, and Granny, beside the still form of a girl lying in Boy's arms. The big man looked up at Paisley appealingly, and the tears streamed down his seamed face as he said brokenly:

"They tried to steal our little Gloss, Bill, and she's fainted from fright."

Paisley, his temples throbbing and his soul sick, came forward and, bending, looked into the white face of the girl. Her eyes were closed and her bosom rose and fell. Her arms were about Boy's neck and her lips moved in meaningless words. Bill sank on a stool and took one of the girl's limp hands in his own.

"Missus," he said, addressing Mrs. McTavish, "we'll find out who it was tried to do this thing. Will you take care of little Gloss, marm?—I want to talk things over with Mac and Boy."

"Let me take her, Boy," said Mrs. McTavish. "Gloss, dear, do you feel better now?"

Gradually the great eyes opened and a smile fluttered on the girl's lips.

"I'm all right now," she answered weakly, "only those rough men frightened me so much I feel like bein' babied, auntie. Take me like you used to when I was a little girl and hold me tight. It seems I want you so much—so much——"

She broke off and her arms tightened about Boy's neck. Then quickly they unclasped and she arose, staggering, a flush wiping the pallor from her face.

"I guess I wasn't just myself, Boy," she stammered.

And leaning on the older woman's arm she passed slowly from the room.

Big McTavish, who was replacing his rifle in the rack, turned.

"Will they come back, d'ye think?" he asked.

"Most likely," Paisley answered; "but not again to-night, though. They're some anxious to live, I suppose. Now," he cried sharply, "why were they here, and what do they mean by tryin' to break into your

house and kidnap little Gloss?”

Big Mac shook his head.

“I was playin’ the fiddle here by the fire, and Gloss, ma, and Granny was busy in there with the spinnin’ when Davie opened the window there behind you and dropped in. I could see he was awful excited, so I called Gloss out. She can understand his language better’n I can, and when she told me what Davie had seen I scarcely knowed what to do. When I was gettin’ down the guns and Gloss was lockin’ the door Davie crawled outside again. I wouldn’t have let him go, but he slipped away. I heard ’em shoot, but I’m prayin’ God they didn’t hit the lad.”

“Davie’s all right,” cried Paisley. “He came for me and Boy. What next?”

“I’m awful glad he wasn’t hit,” said the big man. “Well, about ten minutes before I heard the shot, old Joe, who’d been tuggin’ at his leash, broke loose, and I heard him mixin’ things with ’em outside. I heard somebody yellin’ that the dog was killin’ him. Then the shot was fired and——”

Paisley turned quickly and looked at Boy. His head was bowed upon his breast and his hands were clenched.

“And,” continued McTavish, “I didn’t hear poor old Joe after that.”

“Poor old Joe,” said Boy; “poor old pup.”

Then, lifting his head, he looked out of the window at the silver-crested sky-clouds with smarting eyes.

“He always liked these dark, quiet nights,” he said, as if to himself, “and when the starlight slipped through like it’s doin’ now, no matter if it was only early or midnight, he would get up and wag his tail just out o’ happiness—pure happiness. And now he’s dead, and they killed him—damn ’em.”

“I found him just in the edge of the garden,” said Paisley. “Yes, Boy, poor old Joe is dead, and he died fightin’ for you; he sure died fightin’ for you.”

Boy nodded and looked at his father.

“Go on, dad, let’s hear the rest of it.”

“After that they came up and pounded on the door. They demanded that I let ’em in. ‘What do you want?’ I asked. ‘You’ll find that out soon

enough,' they answered. 'You're all alone and there's four of us,' they said. 'If you don't open the door we'll break it down.' "

Big McTavish paused, a catch in his voice.

"I reckon the old devil has a purty good mortgage on my soul yet," he went on, his voice husky. "I know there'd have been killin' done right then if it hadn't been for ma and Gloss and Granny. They wouldn't let me shoot. They begged for me not to shoot. I heard some of the gang say: 'We've got to get that girl, boys.' I scarcely knowed what they meant—not then. There was a pot o' boilin' pitch on the crane there that I was gettin' ready for boat calkin', and just as they banged the door open I hurled that pitch plumb into them. I reckon it found 'em all right, 'cause they scampered back purty quick, and when I peaked through the crack I could see them runnin' for the timber. 'Back everybody, there's somebody comin',' I heard someone shout. That's all I know now. But I wish I knowed why they wanted to steal little Gloss."

"I reckon we're goin' to know why right soon," mumbled Paisley.

He stood by the open door and the cold night was aglow with big early winter stars hanging above the tree-fringe. In their light, beside his old resting-place, the ash-gum, lay old Joe. An owl hooted from a nearby thicket and the chickens in the coop stirred and voiced their alarm in shrill peepings and squawks. But old Joe did not awaken and turn three times around. No more would he arise in the golden or silvery night and stretch and yawn his thanks for life to the deep skies.

Suddenly, bayward, a streak of crimson darted aloft and licked the heavens. Paisley started, and pointed toward it. Boy and his father followed Bill's gaze.

"It's Hallibut's schooner," exclaimed Boy; "she's on fire."

As they watched, a sheet of orange-yellow flame drifted up and the pointed tree-tops of the forest stood out, a broad expanse of fiery spikes, fluctuating and drifting between earth and heaven. In silence they watched the wild lights until they crept down from the skies and the owl's low hoot sounded again from the shadow. Then the men looked at one another.

"Surely hell is awake this night," said Paisley, wiping his face on his buckskin, sleeve. "Thank God it'll soon be daylight."

Boy picked up his rifle.

"I'm goin' to look for Davie," he said.

"In a little while, Boy, in a little while," soothed Paisley. "It'll be light then, and you can see. No use to go yet, lad. See, it's comin' dawn now, and it'll be safer for you then."

"Aye, lad," spoke McTavish firmly, "we must make no false moves now. The fight's on and our new law must be lived up to. If we sin in killin' them who wish to kill us, why, sin we must. The only brother I had in the world was massacred because he found killin' a red snake hard. We'll show no mercy to devils that would try to steal our little girl."

Boy had drawn the dead dog into the room and was stroking its long red hair with his hand.

"It's not in reason to think Hallibut 'ud get in his work here and turn back and set fire to his own schooner," said Paisley. "He's done it, though, to make a case against us. We can't deny sayin' that we'd stand up for our own. They thought if they could get hold of Gloss that we'd give up the deeds to our properties to get her back."

"Who was in the gang?" asked Boy.

"I only saw two of them when I opened the door," replied McTavish. "I saw the agent Watson, and I saw Simpson the teacher—he was with 'em."

He broke off, his jaw dropping. Boy sprang to his feet, his face twitching in a fury of hate. His strong teeth had bitten blood from his tightened lips. He gazed across toward the approaching dawn to where the scar of civilization lay upon the Wild. The two older men glanced at each other and the father shook his head. The question asked in Paisley's glance was beyond all answering from him.

Not until the red sun had cut a disk in the misty eastern skies did Boy turn and sit down weakly on a stool. Then Paisley was the first to break the gloomy silence.

"Boy," he said, putting his hands on the shoulders of that drooping form, "me'n you have been through close shaves together; have chopped logs again the two next best choppers in Bushwhackers' Place; have hunted and fished together. And I reckon we're pals now if we're ever

goin' to be. It's 'cause I've been through purty much the same thing as you're goin' through now that I want to speak a word. You've made up your mind to get even with the teacher. Boy, don't you do it—not until you're sure o' what you may only fancy now. Why, you'd about finish him if you ever got started. Let me help you untangle this riddle, and let me give Simpson his deserts like a good old pal ought to do.”

Boy shook his head.

“Bill,” he said in hard, even tones, “you’ve a mighty big claim on me. I know that better’n you do. You know that I’d follow any advice of yours in reason, same’s I’ve always done. I’ll promise to do this much. I’ll let you find for sure that he was with the gang before I do it; but it’s got to be done by me, Bill.”

He wrung Paisley’s hand, smiling bravely, then passed into the next room.

Paisley felt in his pocket and brought forth a smoke-grimed pipe. He twisted off a piece of Canada-Green tobacco the size of a walnut, crammed it into the spacious bowl, and, applying a coal from the fire, smoked as though his life depended upon his filling the room with blue smoke in a specified time. Next, he turned to Big McTavish, who sat bent before the fire.

“It’s funny, ain’t it?” he whispered, nodding toward the other room.

McTavish drew himself up slowly.

“What’s funny, Bill?”

Paisley carried his stool over close to that of the father. His face was working and the blue clouds of raw tobacco-smoke floated from his lips in mountains. He placed the stool down and, sitting on it, peered into the older man’s troubled face.

“Mac,” he said gently, “there ain’t the likes of that boy of yours anywhere on this continent. He’s got a heart that’s open to everythin’ that needs sympathy, and he’s got a heart that’s hell when it gets sot on a thing. It’s sot on Gloss, and I reckon no earthly power is goin’ to keep them two from makin’ a clean job of it. But, Mac, Boy’s heart don’t stop there, by a long ways. It’s got a hatin’ side to it, and a regular Injun-hatin’ side it is, too. I’d naturally want to know that I had a clean slate with the white punter before I tried interferin’ with anythin’ Boy called

his.” Paisley jerked his head sideways. “And I reckon Gloss is his, ’cause they are just made for each other. Well, now, this teacher chap he seems to think different—or else why should he be interested in havin’ Gloss kidnapped away? He’s just about let himself commit suicide with his conceit. He’s a bad one, and maybe deserves all he’d get; but you and me mus’n’t let Boy at him. Now, it’s for you to save Boy from himself. I’m goin’ over and have it out with Simpson now, and then I’m goin’ to warn him what he’s in for if he keeps on hangin’ around these parts. Boy’ll never forgive me for warnin’ him, but I can’t help that. I’m goin’ now,” he concluded, rising, “and you see that you don’t let Boy out of your sight till I’m back.”

Paisley reached for his cap and gun and stole from the house. It had frozen during the night, and an open slash across the face of the creek showed where a skiff had crossed not many hours before. Reaching the clump of willows where his own canoe lay hidden, Paisley pulled it forth and crossed the creek, breaking the thin ice with his paddle. At Ross’s landing he found a three-seated skiff. There were two empty bottles on its bottom and a crumpled handkerchief beneath one of the seats. Paisley picked up the handkerchief. It was of linen and of a kind not used by the people of the bush. He put it in his pocket and walked slowly toward widow Ross’s home. On the threshold he was met by Mary Ann. There were dark shadows beneath her eyes and her lips trembled when she spoke his name.

“Bill Paisley,” she whispered, and, closing the door behind her, she motioned him into the open lean-to. “Hallibut’s boat was burned last night. I suppose you know it?”

“Yes, I know it, Mary Ann,” he answered.

“Did you see Mr. Simpson last night, Bill?” she asked.

“No.”

“Well, he went deer-shootin’ by starlight with some men from Bridgetown, and he was hurt in some way. I heard them come back here three hours ago, and they were talkin’ about it. They had a couple of extra horses with them. They took him away with them.”

“A couple of extra horses?” mused Bill. Aloud he asked:

“Is he comin’ back here any more, Mary Ann?”

"I don't know," she replied. "I hope not."

"You hope not?" he said quickly. "Are you sure? They do say you and him are——"

"I can't help what they say," she said wearily. "I'm glad he's gone, Bill."

Paisley stood his rifle against a tree. His face was aglow with hope.

"Mary Ann," he said gently, "you've known me a long time, and you know just why I ask this question. Has he been square with you?"

She gazed at him in wonderment.

"Square with me?" she exclaimed, and laughed. "Well, you better believe he has been."

Paisley caught the girl's hands and held them tight.

"And didn't you care for him a lot?" he asked huskily.

"No," she answered, her face averted, "I didn't care for him at all. He wasn't my style, Bill."

"Mary Ann," said the Bushwhacker, "so long's I thought you liked Simpson better'n me I kept away. Now, if I could learn somehow that you cared more for me than you do for anybody else, 'give my life,' as Mrs. Declute says, if I wouldn't ask you right out to be Mrs. Paisley. I've got a nice home all to myself and three old socks crammed with greenbacks made out of pelts, hid away again' a weddin'-day with you. You see, Mary Ann," he said wistfully, "I somehow knowed, or thought I knowed, you didn't mean right down business with the teacher. Now, girl, am I to be your old man or am I not?"

"You are, Bill," she whispered, hiding her face on his shoulder.

Widow Ross, coming out hurriedly from the house with a steaming pot of potatoes in her hand, saw something that almost made her drop her burden. There stood long Bill Paisley with his arms about her Mary Ann's waist.

"Bill Paisley," gasped the widow, advancing, "you get right away from Mary Ann. Ain't you ashamed of yourself! You're old enough to know better. Now, you get right away from my girl or I'll scald you with this hot potater water."

"She ain't your girl no more, widder," grinned Paisley. "She's mine now."

“Mary Ann,” commanded her mother sternly, “answer me—be you?”

“Yes, ma,” answered Mary Ann, and she snuggled down again.

“Well,” flared the widow, “if it’s so, it’s so. Bill Paisley,” she cried, “you get off my property and don’t you come back here no more. You kin steal a poor widder’s only daughter,” she sobbed, dropping the kettle and covering her face with her apron, “but you can’t come here and do it. You’d better get off my place.”

Paisley patted the girl’s hair and picked up his rifle.

“I’m sorry you take it that way, widder,” he stammered. “I hate to go, and now I smell that bacon you’ve been cookin’ I just naturally hate to go more’n ever. I always said that widder Ross could fry bacon like no other woman this side of the creek——”

“Me’n Mary Ann be the only women on this side,” snorted the widow, dropping her apron.

“I mean anywhere in Bushwhackers’ Place, marm,” bowed Bill. “I always remember them pies you made for Mac’s loggin’-bee, and the puddin’ for Declute’s, too.”

“I suppose there’s no hurry for your goin’,” sighed Mrs. Boss, “and I’ll own I did cook more’n enough meat this mornin’; for why, I don’t know. So if you want to, you kin come in and eat breakfast. But,” she added, “you’ll sure have to get off my property after you’ve et.”

The good lady picked up her kettle and whisked into the house. Paisley smiled at Mary Ann.

“You always have such a way of gettin’ round ma,” laughed the girl.

“Mary Ann, you’ve got a proper good ma,” said Bill earnestly.

As they entered the house young Tom came running up the path.

“Isn’t it awful?” he cried. “They think poor old Noah was burnt with the schooner. They found his skiff floatin’ near the middle grounds.”

CHAPTER XXV

AND THE DAY AFTER

It was nearly mid-day when Paisley sought his skiff once more and made to cross to Bushwhackers' Place. It had turned bitterly cold within the last couple of hours and the ice upon the surface of the creek was almost too thick to break with a paddle. Out across Rond Eau black wisps of duck were rising from the water and fluttering upward like smoke puffs, melting in a broken line into the hanging snow-clouds. Declute was standing on the opposite shore. He spoke as Paisley's boat parted the sere rushes.

"They'll all go to-day, Bill. By night thar won't be a duck on the bay."

"Been over to Mac's?" asked Paisley. His eyes were on the low-lying hulk of the charred schooner and his shaggy brows were puckered in a scowl.

"Just come from there," answered the other. "Seems like old Nick has been loose amongst us las' night, it does."

"Then you've heard?" Bill nodded toward the black patch on the white waves.

"It was me seen it first," replied Declute. "I seen her burnin' near mornin'. Man, but it was a wild sight! Red sky above her and red water all about her. Arter daylight come I gets in my boat and goes over to the hull. Injun Noah's skiff was thar floatin' bottom up near the middle ground."

Declute felt for his pipe, lit it, and threw the charred match down with a shudder.

Paisley stepped from the boat and brushed past him up the path.

"You told Mac, I suppose?"

"Yep, they know it, and Gloss she is takin' on some. I guess she thought a lot of poor old Noah."

"I reckon she did," agreed Paisley; "he brought her here nigh twenty years ago."

They found Big McTavish carrying fodder from the corn-stalk stack

into the log-stable. From the chinks of the barn between the logs came the white breath of the oxen, and the chickens released from their coop ran in and out of its open door.

"Bill," said the big man, his blue eyes humid with feeling, "it looks as though poor old Noah went with the schooner."

"It does," nodded Paisley. "Mac, we all know who it was burned the boat, and bad as we know Hallibut to be, it's awful to think he would sacrifice that old man so's there wouldn't be a witness against him when he tries to prove we did it. It's awful!"

Boy came up, his face worn and his eyes heavy. He placed the spade he carried inside the stable door and turned away up the path.

Paisley stepped forward and threw his arm about Boy's shoulders.

"You're shakin'," he said; "you ain't just yourself. You mus'n't take on hard like you're doin', Boy. I guess maybe Joe had more soul in his poor dog's body than all them cut-throats had among the lot of 'em, but Joe is done with this life. Boy, don't you take it hard."

He drew the young man towards the house, and half-way across the yard Boy stopped and hurled a look down across the valley.

"Bill," he cried, "I told you I would wait till you came back, and now you're back I'm goin'."

"Boy," said Paisley, "*he* ain't there."

"Where's he gone?"

"He got away last night," said Paisley. "He was hurt bad. I guess old Joe did it. They carried him off, and he won't ever come back here again, Boy."

"Let me go," cried the young man, shaking himself free. "I don't care where he's gone, Bill, I'll follow him—and——"

He snatched up the rifle leaning against the ash-leach and dashed across toward the creek. Paisley followed more slowly. He came up as Boy was pushing his canoe into the ice-coated creek.

"The ducks are leavin' to-day, Boy," he said, "look at 'em. They've had a glad time here this season, I guess, take it all round. Look at 'em, Boy,—they don't seem to want to go very much, do they?"

Boy glanced up, then he stood erect in the boat and watched the detached flocks of frantic water-fowl swerve and pitch and at last

mingle in the greater flocks, fading south. Sweetly and shrilly their strong wings beat the frosty air, the sound of their pinions now rising, now fading, and at last thundering as the great flocks dropped low as though to bid the old marsh feeding-ground a last good-by.

"They're goin' away, Bill," he remarked absently. "Even the little teal that were hatched right here in this ma'sh are goin'. Seems odd, don't it? I guess they know it's come winter."

"Seems like they know it has," answered Paisley, "and I'm thinkin' they're sorter promisin' this old dead ma'sh they'll come back when it's spring and nest again. 'Member the old gray duck's nest me and you found down near the otter-run, Boy? Gosh, I'd never believed an old ma duck could take on like that one did. Kept flyin' right in my face, and there her little ducklin's, just hatched, kept divin' in the water and pointin' their heads sideways like they were sickin' her on to me and enjoyin' seeing me get a whalin'. By gum, my face was sore for more'n a week where her wings brushed it. And you—why, you just stood there laughin' at me gettin' the whippin'."

Boy was smiling now, his head lagging on his breast, his hands blue with the cold, clasping and unclasping the paddle.

"The little devils," he said softly, "the little devils. I don't suppose there is anythin' cuter than the little wild things of the ma'sh, Bill. I've been out springs with Davie, and you know how he can handle birds and things. I've seen baby snipe, baby rats, baby rails, and all the little babies of the ma'sh. They're all like them ducklin's. There's none of 'em scared and all of 'em sassy."

Paisley bent and pulled the skiff high up on the bank. He took Boy's arm in his and they went back along the walk together. And as they turned, the skies darkened and the snow began to fall in zigzag sheets that hid the flocks of migrating wild ducks, and the low song of their beating wings grew more muffled and at last died away altogether.

"There's somethin' I want to tell you, Boy," said Paisley softly, when at last the companions sought the path to the house. "Me and Mary Ann is goin' to be married in the spring. I reckon you'll be glad to know it."

Boy did not lift his eyes from the ground.

"I sort o' knowed all along you and Mary Ann would marry some

day,” he said. “And, Bill, I am glad—glad as I can be to-day.”

The inner door of the McTavish home had been taken from its leather hinges to make an additional table for the guests assembled. Seated about that table were most of the fathers and mothers of Bushwhackers’ Place. Fat, tousle-headed children ran and toddled and crept about the wide floor. The table was laden with all of the good things that the Bushwhackers were accustomed to partake of. A couple of fragrant boiled hams, a great deal of cornbread, dried venison, fresh venison, cucumber pickles, boiled rice, a deep custard made in a milk-pan by the deft hands of widow Ross, who now sat at the head of the table and dished it out proudly; strong tea, and cream and maple-sugar to make the rice palatable. In addition to these delicacies Peeler had brought along some smoked fish of his own special brand. Widow Ross had brought coffee—a rarity in those old days, and each of the Bushwhackers had, as was their custom, brought something eatable to swell the good cheer. It was a big spread, and the men and women there assembled were doing justice to it. If there was gloom the good people were doing their best to dispel it. A lull fell on the assembly as Boy and Paisley entered and took their places at the table. Big McTavish helped them to meat and potatoes and then he began:

“We’ve been goin’ on and summin’ up. Seems likely to us that Hallibut’s gang will come back here right soon again, and we’ve been talkin’ over what we’d better do. Hallibut’s likely goin’ to bring a bigger force next time, we think. From what the widder tells us, there’s no doubt that he burned his own boat. She says they woke her up about three in the mornin’, and they were in a big hurry. She wanted to get up and dress Simpson’s wounds, but they told her to mind her own business. She tried to see who was in the gang, but they kept in the dark. About half an hour after they had gone she seen the schooner burnin’. Now, it’s just this way. Hallibut has an excuse to push us off of here, as he wants to do, for, of course, he’ll say we burned his boat and poor old Noah. And we, on the other hand, have an excuse to shoot Hallibut. But we mus’n’t do anythin’ rash, boys. We must be careful.”

Boy looked about the room in search of Gloss. He did not see her and rightly divined that she was grieving, in some hidden place, over the

death of her old friend.

He arose and passed unnoticed from the room. The sky was dark with storm-clouds and the snow was falling. He took the path toward the grove and as he passed the leach no dog lifted his head and watched him. He entered the bush, but no dog followed him. That part lay behind. In the old playhouse, cold and dreary and dark, Boy found the girl.

"Gloss," he said, and she answered without lifting her head.

"I couldn't help it, Boy; I had to come. I know I did wrong, and after what happened last night I know I should be careful. But, oh, Boy, I can't bear to think of it all. It's terrible!"

Boy went over and sat on a corner of the stump table. He did not attempt to pacify her. He did not know how. He felt his impotency, and it made him miserable.

"Nobody will know, can know, how good Noah has been to me," sobbed Gloss. "Oh, Boy, I don't know how I'll get along without him. I shut my eyes and I can see him there, and then I see him on that burnin' boat, and I see the fire all about him, reachin' its red fingers for him. Oh," she gasped, "I can't bear it, Boy; I can't, I can't!"

He lifted her up and bore her out to the snow-carpeted open. She had not mentioned Simpson's name. He was thankful for that. She clung to him, her warm breath biting his cheek and her hot tears eating his soul. And so he half carried, half led her back to the house.

"Go in and lie down," he said gently.

She loosened her arms slowly, looking into his eyes, and when she had gone he leaned weakly against the wall.

The guests had finished dinner and Mrs. Declute was blocking the space between the table and the fireplace with her matronly figure and discoursing on the probabilities of a hard, long winter.

"As I was tellin' Ander on our way over, just exactly four years ago to-day, Moses and Zaccheus was down with chicken-pox and David and leetle Rebecca war gettin' the symptoms of it when it sot in dark and snowy like it is to-day. Winter took a tight hold for nigh three months. Why, you'll remember there wa'nt no loggin' done that winter, and the wolves starved to death in the timber. Deer, too, and turkey, and I guess

thar wa'nt no visitin' done much either, and give my life if thar was one dance in the whole Bushwhackers' Place. Why, it got cold and stayed cold, and Joseph, our cat, friz stiff on the ladder when he was climbin' to the loft of the barn. And every sign p'int's to jest sech another winter comin'."

"It looks as though winter was here to stay, all right," observed Peeler, "and we're like to have a hard one, too. The rats are buildin' deep and strong."

"My boy, Tom, he cut down a squirrel tree yesterday," declared Mrs. Boss, "and that squirrel had stored up feed for a long winter. Hope, though, we don't have one like that one o' four years ago. I had both ears and one toe friz that winter."

"Guess we'd all better get home," laughed Declute, "else we'll have to build some snowshoes t' travel on."

"Yes," said Mrs. Peeler, "and I guess the cattle and sheep won't care about standin' out in this storm."

Gloss came out and sat at the table. Mary Ann Ross sat down near her, and Bill Paisley, stepping carefully through the babies, drew close enough to the girls to say:

"Didn't know that you intended to come over, Mary Ann."

"Ma thought we ought to come," said the girl.

"Did you hear them prophesyin' a long winter?" asked Paisley.

Mary Ann looked up and smiled.

"It can't be too long to suit me," she retorted.

"I wish it was spring right now," sighed Bill.

Gloss raised her head and looked inquiringly at the two.

"Ask Mary Ann," said Paisley solemnly.

"Tell Gloss yourself, if you want to, baby," flashed Mary Ann, hiding her face.

"Mary Ann is to be Mrs. William Paisley next spring," grinned Bill.

Gloss drew the blushing head over to her bosom.

"I'm glad," she said simply.

The babies were being bundled up and there was the commotion that comes of lingering leave-taking among good neighbors. It had been settled among the Bushwhackers as to what they should do when the

inevitable should happen. Now they were going to their separate homes, each satisfied and determined. They would have been glad, even, had not the gloom of Injun Noah's death still hung across their simple hearts. Just as Declute reached for the latch the door opened and Daft Davie sprang into the room, a spray of powdery snow following him as though he had been shot down from the scurrying clouds. He stood looking about him.

"Right here, Davie," cried Boy. "What is it, lad?"

Davie spoke a few low words, then darted under Declute's arm and out into the darkening day.

The Bushwhackers looked at one another.

"What does the lad say?" asked Big McTavish.

Boy snatched up his cap.

"I'll see," he cried. "Wait here, everybody."

He glanced at Gloss, then sped out after Davie. For half an hour after the boys had gone there was almost absolute silence among those gathered there.

"I've been wonderin' all day where Davie was," Paisley said at length. "You didn't see him when you was over?" turning to Peeler.

"When you said I better go and see if he had got home safe, I went over there to Betsy's place," explained Peeler. "The old Granny came to the door, and when I asked if Davie had got home she said 'yes,' and slammed the door in my face. That's all I know, Bill."

"Boy is comin' now, and he's runnin'," cried Gloss from the window.

She sprang out and ran down the path through the deep snow to meet him.

"Oh, Boy," she called, "is there anythin' worth tellin'?"

He caught her in his arms and his voice was husky as he said:

"Noah is alive and well, Gloss. He's over at old Betsy's."

In a flash the good news passed to those waiting inside; and after the preliminary excitement had subsided they crowded about the bearer of the good news for his story.

"Noah was asleep in the hold of the schooner," explained Boy, "and when he fought his way up through the smoke, the deck and masts were all afire. He made a run for it and jumped into the water, and when he

swam around to where his skiff was hid he found the painter had been burned through and the boat gone. He give up, then, but naturally he swam, and as good luck would have it, he found a piece of driftwood and hung to it until he reached shore. Old Betsy found him there just at daybreak, and she and Davie between 'em managed to get him over to her house. She give him some stuff that made him sleep, and he only woke up about an hour ago. Old Noah had an awful close shave, and Betsy won't let him come over here yet awhile, but he's all right, people, and I guess we're all mighty glad."

Peeler stood forth and gave vent to his feelings in this wise:

"There's some among us here, good folks, haven't give old Betsy her just dues. We've believed she was a witch and we was all scared of her. Now, neighbors, Betsy has done a mighty lot for us in one way and another, and I move that to show how much we appreciate all this we build her a bran' new house next spring. That is," he ended with a grin, "pervided Hallibut don't push us all off the earth before then."

"Hear, hear!" cried everybody; and it was decided there and then that Betsy should have one of the finest houses in Bushwhackers' Place.

And so each of the Bushwhacker neighbors left the McTavish domicile happy and determined. The day shortened, the skies grew darker, and the snow came down in vast white walls. The remnants of the feast lay upon the long table. Old Granny sat quietly beside the fire, her wrinkled face sweet with the peace that comes only to the very young or very old, her worn Bible clasped in her blue-veined hands. Mrs. McTavish sat close beside her, and Gloss stood in her old place at the window. Big McTavish, his face caressing the old fiddle, was playing his favorite tune, and Boy, his head bowed before the fire, was listening to the music and wondering. And so they waited until the dusk of early night came down and the chickens crept to their coop and the owl began his mournful hoot in the tangled copse down near the swale. All was alike, tranquilly sweet and peaceful, after a night and day of storm: only old Joe was not in his accustomed place.

He had left his bed beside the ash-gum for one in the hazel-copse.

CHAPTER XXVI

IN THE MANACLES OF WINTER

That night winter came and gripped the bush-world, and now as far as the eye could span distance she held the Wild in her white embrace, and all the life of nature's wood, marsh, and water seemed chilled to deep mysterious silence.

Between the scrag-line of Point Aux Pins forest and the hardwood of the mainland, Rond Eau Bay lay patched with shingly ice-scale and frozen snow-drifts. Here and there a strip of white-blue gleamed from her dead bosom like a smear of slate on white, and sheets of powdery snow whirled and scudded before the fierce winds that swept her. Along the forest aisles the snow lay deep—deeper than any of the things of the Wild had ever before seen it.

Winter had swept down almost without warning, gripping the waters in its clutch and breathing into the very marrow of the trees, numbing them to drowsy forgetfulness. They stood in the blue-cold winter morning with still arms uplifted toward the chill skies, great, silent, unprotesting. And with each shortening day the frost bit deeper and their sleep became heavier. Sometimes a dream of golden summer came to bestir the soul of giant beech or tall maple, and its heart, waking to life, would shiver its icy manacles with a mighty crash, only to leave it wounded and shivering, a maimed thing into which spring would breathe her healing balm after a little while. From the dead face of the bay the creek twisted, a blue vein betwixt gray lifeless rushes, and all of nature's great playground rested lonely and forsaken. On Totherside, Hallibut's mill squatted, a white mound upon white, and the schoolhouse against the hill—its bell always silent now—seemed to sink toward the valley as though longing to snuggle down and rest in the soft blanket that lay below it.

Adown the cloaked vista of Bushwhackers' Place drab smoke-spirals, like inverted tree-shadows, twisted above the forest. But there were no sounds—not even the chug of axes biting into the wood. The fiercest winter this new country had ever experienced had been reigning

for three long months. The snows lay waist-deep throughout the forest, and through the long nights the wolf-packs howled and protested hungrily to the cold, low-hanging stars. In the log-stables of the woodmen the cattle munched their fodder and rested. There was no work for them with the snows choking the trails and the frost menacing life, neither was there necessity for the easygoing Bushwhackers to risk life in the wintry frost. They had plenty of fuel at their command; also meat in plenty. There was not even an occasion for them to kill the animals and game-birds that had sought the protection of man when Nature seemed to have forgotten them in sleep. Food for the Wild in the deep swales and low-timbers was scarce and growing scarcer. The deer, accustomed to browse on the low-hanging branches, found it difficult to secure sufficient sustenance to keep their blood warm, and they crept nearer and nearer to the little settlement of man. One morning a Bushwhacker surprised two of them, a buck and a doe, ravenously devouring the dry cornstalks that had been cast from the cattle-stalls into the yard. Broods of quail crept from the thickets across to the fodder-stacks. Hunger-fearless and defiant, they took up their homes about the out-buildings, mingling with the tame fowl and roosting in huddling bunches beneath the warm, protecting stacks at night. Nor were they molested. The Bushwhackers scattered corn among the straw so that the birds might understand that a truce was established, and not until the amber fall dawned again would they have cause for alarm. But the gray timber-wolves neither asked nor sought favors from man. They held aloof from him, hating him and suspicious of him. Born to starve, their vitality outlasted that of the other forest wild things, and they trailed, tore down, and devoured. For three months of unprecedented winter no trapping had been done; no more loggin'-bees had been arranged. But the Bushwhackers had managed to get together by chiseling paths through the drifts between their homes. However, of their more remote neighbors, such as the Broadcrooks, who lived some miles west of Lee Creek, the French trapper, and the Indians on Point Aux Pins, they had seen or heard nothing for many weeks. It was a risk to go even a short distance in the benumbing frost. No man could hope to break his way through the frozen drifts of snow piled mountain-high.

Oftentimes the Bushwhackers met together at the home of a neighbor, and perhaps Big McTavish would have his old fiddle along, and there would be long talks over the cracking of hickory-nuts and walnuts, and as the evening progressed "Mac" would strike up some of the old jig-tunes, and if the party was a particularly jovial one, there would be a clog-dance or two.

The deadly winter had put a stop to further encroachment of their enemies, but of course the one general query among the bushmen was: "How long before they will come again?" There was something pathetic in the question these simple-hearted men asked among themselves, as, in their evening talks together, they discussed how best to meet the big man with the great power. Directly they connected Colonel Hallibut with the attempt to kidnap Gloss from her home, and they debated how best to act when the man capable of planning such a dastardly deed should come again.

So the Bushwhackers talked and waited, and the long, cold weeks dragged onward, and it began to look as though the fierce cold would never moderate. After half the winter had passed without a single thaw they knew that the impregnable barriers of snow would hold their enemy in leash until spring had cleared the trail.

But by and by the deadly cold relaxed its grip and for the first time during Winter's reign her orange sun dipped through the frost-mist and, touching the drooping snow-clad trees, painted a picture of a still bush-world sleeping beneath a blanket of blue-white diamond dust.

"The cold snap's over," said Declute, late one night as he sat with Jim Peeler, Boy McTavish, and Bill Paisley before the great fireplace in the McTavish home. "Never see it fail yet but when we've had three days sun and no snow the mild weather stays."

"Purty near time we was havin' moderate weather," replied Peeler. "Never saw such a winter as this one's been. Think o' poor Injun Noah bein' holed up for six weeks like he's been. No wonder Gloss is some lonesome for the old man; he's never had to stay away from the little girl so long before. And the old man has never seen her in that silver-fox coat you and him made her, Bill. I'll bet he'd like to be here."

"It sure is a beautiful coat," said Boy, "and Gloss is mighty proud of

it. She speaks about Noah every day. 'Wonder if he's warm and has enough to eat,' she'll say, and, 'Do you think Noah'll be very lonesome over on the Point?' My, but she does think a lot o' him, boys."

"Sure she does," cried Declute. "Bless her, she couldn't think more of him if he was her own granddaddy, could she now?"

"Bein' Gloss, she naturally loves everythin'," nodded Paisley, "—everythin' that moves and flies and crawls; everythin' that's alive, she loves."

"When she's sayin' good-night to me," said Boy softly, "she always says good-night to all of us, you know——"

"Same's she does her prayers," murmured Paisley; "yes?"

"She spoke about the Broadcrooks. Wondered if they were wantin' for anythin', and said she wished she knew."

"Ain't that like her?" laughed Declute, "—worryin' about them no-count Broadcrooks? Ain't that like our Gloss, though?"

"Asked me if I'd seen anythin' of Amos," continued Boy, "and that made me think I hadn't seen him or any of 'em since the first blizzard came."

"Of course they're all right," said Paisley. "I know they had plenty wood up an' lots o' meat strung. Still it does seem funny that old Amos hasn't burrowed his way through the drifts somehow. It ain't very comfortable for him at home, I guess."

"It ain't likely he's forgiven you fellers for catchin' him in the turkey-trap," said Peeler; "at least, not yet. He'll dig his way out now, though, since the weather's eased up.—See if he don't."

There was a crunching outside on the frozen snow and somebody knocked on the door.

"Hick'ry and hemlock," whispered Paisley, "visitors at this time of night. Will I open the door, Boy?"

Boy glanced at the rifle leaning against the wall, and nodded. Paisley threw open the door and a tall figure, muffled in furs from tip to toe, staggered in and sank on a stool.

"I'm high played out," gasped the visitor.

"Why, it's Hank Broadcreek," cried Declute. "Get the jug, Boy, he's just about tuckered."

"I've been since mornin' beatin' my way over," panted the man. "I've tried to get here afore, but couldn't."

"What's the matter?" asked Peeler. "Anythin' wrong at home?"

Broadcrook took the mug of whiskey Boy handed him and gulped it down.

"Amos," he answered, "is he here?"

The friends exchanged glances.

"I see he isn't," groaned the man.

"How long has he been missin'?" questioned Paisley.

"Two days afore this awful winter sot in he left hum," replied the brother, "an' none of us has seen him since. He's allars been a lot o' worry to us. It's like him to hole up and freeze like a silly rabbit, and I guess he's done it."

"Maybe he's on the Point," suggested Declute hopefully. "Maybe he's winterin' with the Injuns, Hank."

Hank turned his heavy eyes on the speaker.

"He's made even the Injuns hate him," he murmured. "No, he's not there."

He arose, threw off his furs, and sat down to the bread and cold meat Boy had placed on the table. After he had eaten he sat back, lit his pipe, and gazed into the fire.

"Boys," he said, clenching his hands, "flesh is flesh an' blood is blood when it comes to—to a time like this. Amos has allars been a lot o' trouble to us, an' I—I've quarreled with him and fought with him an' thort I hated him; but, boys, I guess I was wrong. I'm huntin' for him now. Dad an' th' other boys is huntin' for him too. Why? I'll tell you why—it's 'cause flesh is flesh an' blood is blood when it comes to a time like this."

"Oh, he's likely all safe and sound somewheres," encouraged Declute. "Old Amos knows the weather too well to be caught in a blizzard."

The brother shook his head.

"Amos was gettin' whiskey somewheres," he said. "It's likely the sleep come on him—he's out thar, I tell you," pointing out at the cold, moon-kissed wood, "unless the wolves——"

He broke off with a shudder and, springing up, reached for his furs.

"You're not goin' out again to-night," insisted Boy. "See here, Hank, you mus'n't. Stay with me, like a good feller, and I'll help you look for Amos to-morrow."

Broadcrook turned and looked at Boy. His face was twitching and his voice was not quite steady when he said:

"You and Big Mac and all have been mighty good to us all clean through everythin', an' when I guess we didn't deserve it. It's like you to wanter help us now, but you can't do nuthin', Boy; you can't do nuthin' any more than I kin. But I've gotter keep huntin', huntin'. It's hell t' be like this, but blood's blood, an' Amos is out thar somewheres——"

He shook off Boy's hand and passed out. Paisley snatched his coat and rifle from the hooks.

"He mus'n't strike the back trail fagged like he is," he said. "Come on, Jim and Ander; we'll coax him over to my place and put him to bed."

"Yes, make him stay with you, Bill," said Boy. "I guess there's somethin' in what he said about flesh bein' flesh at a time like this."

He stood in the open doorway until he saw Paisley, Declute, and Peeler overtake Broadcrook far down the snow-packed path. Then he turned into the house, blew out the candle, and sat down before the fire. By and by dreams came to him: they always came to him when the night was late and he was alone by the dying fire. Sweet and restful dreams they were, too, at times, when they were of the wide wood playground of used-to-be; and he roamed its forest aisles with Gloss, and they were just "boy and girl," and the world was theirs. But there were other dreams—dreams that brought a shadow to his eyes as unreadable and ununderstandable as the shadow that sometimes dipped across the ridges, whose spirit he had caught and held.

To-night the shadow was there, and the dream was not of the water, marsh, or woodland, nor of the wild things, nor of Davie. But the girl was there—she was always there, growing up out of the dead used-to-be in spite of bitter thoughts and gnawing pain. And Boy saw her face to-night, gloriously glad and strong and beautiful.

His love was a bound prisoner, and only the spirit of worship,

sublime and beautiful, enshrined his world, and the girl's, with its sanctity. He did not realize what he was holding bound; he realized only that he was but a thing of the Wild, whose heart had caught aflame at a low word; whose soul had surged at the touch of a warm breath. He did not know that Gloss loved him. He did not realize his power. He was one of God's strong men.

Then the dream became of the marsh and water, and there was not a single cloud in the world of the Wild, and in the deep quiet of his peace Boy slept before the whitening coals.

When he awoke the gray dawn was peering into the room and he was alone beside the dying embers. But he saw her face in the coals, and it was his nature to be content with little. After all, there would always be something left of which no earthly power could deprive him.

CHAPTER XXVII

WHILE THE RAIN FELL

Watson, his feet on the table and his pipe alight, glanced across at Smythe, who was standing before the window. It was evening, and the falling rain made soothing, swishing music against the pane and upon the low roof of the Bridgetown store. Watson watched the storekeeper speculatively. At last he spoke.

"I told you we were playing a losing game," he growled, "and here we are waiting like a pair of trapped fox for the end. A mighty shrewd pair we've been, to be sure. This double game don't go, Smythe. I've played it all my life—and what have I got by it? Nothing—absolutely nothing."

Mr. Smythe smiled a faint smile and smoothed his hair with a thin hand.

"I will admit it looks as though we have been a little indiscreet," he returned. "That last move of ours was foolish—very foolish; but, Thomas, we had to protect ourselves, and—ahem! we had to do what Simpson wished. Otherwise——"

"Do you think I would have let that cur lay a finger on that little girl?" cried Watson. "Look here, Smythe, I may be a cheat and a villain, but I tell you I'm not all bad. Simpson's threat that he would tell Hallibut everything didn't frighten me. But, drunken fool I was—and you were too—to think that those Bushwhackers could be forced into yielding up their rights through fear for the safety of the girl. Bah! it makes me sick to think of what a fool I've been."

"And I," murmured Smythe; "I too, Thomas."

Watson made a gesture of disgust.

"Yes, you, too. Well, what are we going to do about it? Of course, the Colonel will go over to Bushwhackers' Place, now the trail is clear."

"He will likely go as soon as he can," said Smythe in a low voice. "If the weather hadn't stopped him from going before now——"

"But there's nothing to stop him now," broke in Watson. "The trail's clear, as you know, and winter is about spent. Cursed one it has been,

too,” he added with a shiver.

Smythe came over and sat on the edge of the table. He picked up a fork and toyed with it thoughtfully. At length, his light eyes shifting about the room, and his voice softened almost to a whisper, he said:

“The dear Colonel is taking a big chance in visiting Bushwhackers’ Place now. It’s almost suicide for him to attempt it.”

Watson glanced at the speaker and wiped his face on his hand.

“I wish there was some way to prevent his going,” he returned, “—if only for a day or two. We’ve got to get out of here—that’s all.”

Smythe crept over to the window and pulled down the blind. The rain was falling heavily now and the wind had risen to a roar that shook the solid structure.

“My friend,” he smiled, “kindly invite our guest up to the council-chamber.”

Watson bent and lifted a heavy trap-door in the floor.

“Come up, Satan,” he commanded.

In another instant a man’s head and shoulders were thrust through the opening and Amos Broadcrook swung himself up into the room. He stood squinting his good eye at the candlelight and rolling a quid of tobacco from one side of his cadaverous mouth to the other. The man’s cheeks were sunken and his whole attitude was one of abject fear.

“They ain’t comin’, be they?” he asked with a shudder. “You ain’t givin’ me up t’ them, men, be you?”

“Amos,” spoke Smythe, “playing ground-hog for over three months has used you up. I guess a glass of whiskey wouldn’t come amiss, would it?”

“Whiskey,” whispered the wretched man; “be I goin’ t’ get whiskey? I need it now if I ever did. What noise be that?” he asked, gripping Watson’s arm with trembling hand.

Watson shook off the hand and said something in an undertone. Broadcrook drank the whiskey which Smythe brought him and sank upon a stool.

“When are you goin’ t’ let me go?” he asked eagerly. “It’s rainin’ now, and the snow’ll be gone by mornin’. Oh, men, let me go t’-night,” he begged cringingly.

Mr. Smythe raised him gently and patted his shoulder in a fatherly way.

“Amos,” he chided, “you must be a man. You must bear up, my poor fellow. Aye, truly but ‘conscience doth make cowards of us all.’ You should strive to bear up under the burden, Amos.”

Broadcrook rolled his eyes about the room.

“I ain’t sayin’ as I’m sorry fer anythin’,” he growled, “an’ I ain’t sayin’ as I wouldn’t like t’ do more ner I have fer some o’ them Bushwhackers neither. It’s ’cause I’m scared Hallibut ’ll get me that I’m shaky, and besides, old Noah’s ghost has been ha’ntin’ me again. Gimme more whiskey an’ I’ll be all right.”

Watson poured out more of the spirits, and Amos drank greedily.

Watson’s eyes sought Smythe’s.

“They will be hunting you soon, Amos,” he said. “Colonel Hallibut has sworn to run you down. He says he will put his dogs on your track.”

“Lor’,” shuddered Amos, taking his head in his hands.

Smythe edged closer and whispered:

“We have ascertained that he will go to Bushwhackers’ Place before putting the dogs on you. Perhaps he wants something of yours to give the dogs a scent.”

Broadcrook lifted his haggard face.

“An’ he’s goin’ t’ Bushwhackers’ Place?”

He sat nodding his big head up and down, evolving some wicked plan in his slow-working brain.

“If I start away to-night I kin get across th’ border afore he kin let th’ dogs out,” he said eagerly.

Watson shook his head.

“You couldn’t make it in four days, not in this weather,” he asserted. “Besides, you’d leave a track that anybody could follow. Those dogs are swift and they would have you in two days if you tried that way.”

“When d’ye think Hallibut’ll be goin’ over?” asked Amos, standing up. The liquor had steadied his nerves and he spoke in his old voice.

Smythe shrugged his shoulders.

“A man from St. Thomas was in to-night,” he said slowly. “He says the trail was pretty well blocked yesterday. We know Hallibut will go as

soon as it is possible for him to do so, and we know this rain means a clear trail to-morrow. Also,” he added sinisterly, “we know that Hallibut will surely call here on his way over, and that he is taking his life in his hands by going at all.”

“Do you think he’ll get shot?” asked Amos.

“No danger,” said Watson. “You know what the Bushwhackers are like, Broadcrook. It was over three months ago they made that threat. They will never fire on the Colonel now.”

Smythe was walking to and fro, his hands in his pockets, his slippered feet padding the floor with a soft tread like that of an animal.

“Of course,” he explained, his face smiling and his eyes on the floor, “Mr. Watson and I both know that the Bushwhackers threatened to kill Colonel Hallibut. But,” lifting his head and clasping his claw-like hands together, “let us hope that a Higher Power will guide his footsteps aright, even though his action in visiting those people is suicidal to a degree.”

Watson made a wry face and relit his pipe.

Smythe continued to pace up and down, his lips moving as though in prayer. Broadcrook sat huddled up in his chair, his great hands gripping each other.

“I orter go back home jest for some things I left as I should have,” he said craftily. He flashed a look from one to the other of the men, then his gaze fell. “I’d sorter like company on account o’ the wolves. I ain’t sayin’ as I’d go along with Hallibut, ’cause I know too much fer that. But I could foller him like an’ keep close an’ he’d be company fer me without knowin’ it.”

He settled lower in his chair, and Watson spoke.

“You will make tracks as fast as God’ll let you out of this country, and if you get away safe it’s more than you deserve. A pretty pickle you’ve put us in! Now, then, swear you’ll get for the States and never show your face in these parts again, or down there in that hole you stay until you can’t tell anything you know. See?”

Watson took a roll of greenbacks from his pocket and held it up.

“When you’re ready to swear that you never heard Smythe here suggest anything, and that you will go where we want you to go—it’s yours.”

Amos glared up and opened his mouth as though to voice a protest, but at sight of the money settled back trembling.

"Be you goin' t' give me the money as you promised?" he asked, looking at Smythe and pointing to the bills.

"As soon as you confess that you were lying when you said I hinted anything to you."

"Course I was lyin'," said Amos with a leer. "You never told me t' do nuthin'. You hear me, Watson," he cried, "Smythe thar never told me what I said he did; I were lyin'."

"Heaven forgive you, as I do," murmured Smythe.

"Gimme the money," cried Amos. "I promise to get across the border right smart."

"I think," said Smythe, taking the greenbacks from Watson's hand and counting them slowly, "I think we had better give you the money, Amos—all but the sixty dollars coming to me for three months' board, and allow you to go in hiding in the cellar again. When the dear Colonel comes, which I am sure he will very soon now, you will wait until he has left for Bushwhackers' Place, then you will bid good-by to this place forever. No one will miss you, Amos, because you have no friends—but that is your own fault. You will always have a troubled conscience for a companion, but that is also your own fault. Remember, if you are caught——"

Mr. Smythe slipped his long fingers about his thin neck and winked his watery eyes.

"If you are caught, it's all up with you, Amos."

Broadcrook arose, his gaunt face twitching.

"Gimme another drink and I'll go down in my hole again," he said hoarsely. "You call me arter Hallibut has been here and gone. I wanter get away inter the States. You'll let me have a rifle, won't you, men?" he begged. "I'm scart o' the wolves—they've been bad this winter."

Watson wheeled upon him.

"You swear you won't shoot anybody," he said.

"Haven't I enough t' answer fer?" groaned the wretch.

"All right, then, you can have the rifle."

Then the trap-door fell, and Watson, resuming his seat by the table,

looked at Smythe.

“What are we going to do?” he asked.

Smythe shivered and glanced about him.

“You haven’t anything to hold you here, have you?” asked Watson.

“This place is mortgaged for all it’s worth—and you owe for everything in the store, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Well?”

“I think we will not tempt Providence by remaining much longer,” said Smythe. “We’ll flit to some far-off land and begin life anew.”

“And it won’t be a partnership affair, either,” said Watson.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A CLEAR TRAIL

Colonel Hallibut sat before the fire smoking and dreaming. The monotonous winter had proven drear enough for him, accustomed as he was to out-of-doors exercise, and now the splash of rain upon the roof fell on his ears like the tinkle of music. Every morning for three months the Colonel had told himself that he would visit those outlaws as soon as the trail was clear, and demand that the man who burned his schooner give himself up. But for three months the trail remained choked and the frost promised death to anyone venturing any distance from shelter. However, spring would now soon come bounding in, so the big man nursed his wrath and said, "To-morrow."

During the long waiting-time he walked between his house and stable, or stalked among his dogs with scolding voice. Dick, the man-of-all-work, kept out of his master's way as much as possible, but sometimes the Colonel had him come into the big room and sit before him while he unburdened his mind.

"Those Bushwhackers have dared to burn my vessel and have threatened to kill me," he would say. "Think of it—threatened to kill me! I wonder if the idiots have an ounce of sense or honor among them. They claim they have their own laws, but we'll show them that their laws don't go very far when it comes to firing men's property. Here was I, ready to give in that they were in the right about wanting to hold their timber. I was fool enough to let myself be influenced by sentimentality. I was fool enough to think them a simple nature-loving people who were attached to their environment. Now I find them a low, lawless band of cut-throats, capable of any crime. That Big McTavish, their ring-leader, is bad enough, but he has a son who will stop at nothing, I understand. I have no doubt that it was he set fire to my boat."

At such times Dick would listen attentively and vouchsafe no remark. Experience had taught him that silence was golden. The Colonel would shake his head, relight his pipe, and go on.

"I blame myself a whole lot for not going among the people and

finding out just what they were, before allowing anybody else to run into danger. I know they never did like me on account of my hounds. They claim I slaughtered the deer and fox, and I thought it policy to keep out of their way. I have nothing in common with those people. When I took a notion to their timber I naturally thought that Watson and Smythe could deal better with them than I could. You know how well they've succeeded. Watson has been nearly killed and has been robbed of six hundred dollars. At least he says so. Well, you numbskull, why don't you say something!"

Dick would grin foolishly and shake his head.

"I'm thinkin', sir, as I don't know hanythink t' say," he would remark. "I like t' 'ear you talk about what you know to be a fact, sir, an' beggin' your pardon, prefer t' listen, sir."

"Lord," the Colonel would murmur, "it's awful to have only a thick-skulled Englishman to pour out my troubles to. But I must talk to somebody. Your mother, lad, is a good woman, with more brains in one bump than you have in your whole cranium. But she's so deaf I'm afraid I'll bite her ear off trying to make her hear me. Then, too, she has a nice way with her of thinking out loud. Of course, she can't hear herself, but I can hear her, and when her thoughts turn to me I tell you I hear a lot that I would rather not hear. 'Rough on the surface, but a good man at heart, God bless him.' That's the kind of bouquets I get from your mother, Dick, whenever I open up and tell her what I intend to do with those Bushwhackers. 'He wouldn't hurt a baby, the kind gentleman. He's a Hallibut, every inch of him, and I carried him about when he was a baby.' That's the kind of rubbish I get when she's in the room. By George! if she wasn't an old family servant I'd fire her and I'd fire you, too, you good-for-nothing, you. Why, fellow, just you watch those dogs get down and crawl when I speak to 'em. Does that look as though I was a kind-hearted gentleman? Does it?—answer me, sir."

"It do not, sir. You surely are 'ell, sir, yes sir."

"Only sensible remark you have made since this cursed winter set in. Yes, I'm a rough 'un, I guess. I'm a match for that big hairy McTavish, or any of them, eh?"

"You are, sir."

“And you think they’ll find it out,—you do, don’t you?”

“They’ll find they have t’ deal with a tartar, sir. They’ll wish th’ ’eavens would fall an’ cover ’em, sir, I’m thinkin’.”

Dick would answer solemnly and the Colonel would slap him on the back and tell him that there was some hope for him yet.

Very often the big man would prefer to be alone, and there in his great chair he would sit listening to the wind moaning through the bare trees. Very often his thoughts would stray away back to the far-away days when he roamed the hills and valleys of the land where he had held and lost his happiness. And as he dreamed, his head would bend lower on his breast and his hand would unconsciously tighten on the arm of his chair. And after his dream he would awaken slowly, and, sighing, arise and stand before the portrait on the wall. All men have their little flower-gardens of memory—Colonel Hallibut’s lay away back among the far hills.

“If she only had not gone,” he would murmur. “If she only had not gone, or if only I had gone with her. Dear little Phoebe, my heart gets hungry for you, and now I can only lead you along the old paths in fancy, girl.”

And the pictured face would grow wistful and he would whisper:

“The part you knew and owned of me is all right, girl. I’m not such a bad chap; I’m a big bluff, just a big bluff. I remember, dear, even though the joy of memory is painful. Glimpses are all I can stand, my little sister.”

Then the shadows would flicker and the Colonel would creep back to his old place and snooze and forget. Sometimes, very late, as he groped his way from the room, his eyes would seek the face in the frame, and all bitter thoughts would melt away from him. He would speak “Good-night” from the door and the portrait would smile upon him. But many and many nights these questions would arise to trouble him:

“Why did they burn my boat! Why should they threaten my life?”

And now the first spring rain was falling, whispering a promise of clear trails and open weather. There was the very essence of spring in the soft voice and damp smell. The Colonel sat before the fire thinking

of what he would do, and how he would act, now that the weather permitted his going forth to show the Bushwhackers just how greatly they had erred. And he intended to show them that he had the law behind him. If they refused to give the incendiary up to justice, then he would get the machinery into motion which would speedily make them. He did not believe for a moment that they would refuse to give over the men who had broken the law. They well knew that he, Colonel Hallibut, wasted no words, and made no promise he could not fulfill. As for their threat to shoot him on sight, he hooted the idea as absurd. They might be murderers, but they were not fools. Nor would he, as he had first decided to do, take anyone else with him when he sought an explanation from and made a demand of the Bushwhackers. To take a body-guard would lead them to think that he was afraid.

All night long the Colonel sat listening to the rain, anticipating that of which the elements had deprived him for three long months. As the night advanced he grew more restless, and only when the tardy day began to dawn did his eyes close in sleep. The old housekeeper found him asleep in his big chair. This was nothing unusual, and she simply replenished the fire noiselessly and slipped out to prepare breakfast. Dick came in, when it was ready, and gently shook his master's arm.

"Breakfast, sir," he apologized; "it's ready, sir."

The Colonel arose and stretched his huge person. Then he went over to the window. Not a single patch of snow was visible. He threw open the door and stepped outside. From the ground arose a smoky haze that tasted of earth and roots, and he breathed it into his lungs with long, grateful breaths. He quickly prepared himself for breakfast and passed into the dining-room.

"After you have finished your meal, Dick, put the saddle on bay Tom," he commanded. "Don't ask any questions, now. Fact is, I'm going down to have it out with those murderers in Bushwhackers' Place. I'm going alone, but I'm going loaded for trouble. I'll take my pistols and the double-barreled rifle. If I don't come back in two days you had better come and look for me."

"Lor'!" breathed Dick, starting.

"There, now, you needn't get scared," laughed the Colonel. "I'm

going out now to say good-bye to the dogs. Get Tom out as soon as you can.”

Hallibut walked to the dog-kennels. Yelps and whines besought him as he passed along, but his head was bowed and he did not call out, as was his fashion, to his friends. Instead, he bent and patted each of those wistful-faced brutes that nosed and rubbed against him, speaking to each in an undertone of forced jollity.

“Sprague, you old beggar, you’re glad it’s spring, aren’t you? Hello, Nell, what are you doing away from your puppies at this time of day? Poor old Jep—come on, old chap. Ha, ha, he’s a good-for-nothing old codger, he is.”

He walked over to the corner of the yard, the pack following him, and, seating himself on a bench, called the dogs in close beside him.

“Boys,” he said, and his voice was not quite steady, “some people would think me either a fool or a crazy man if they saw me out here saying good-bye to you. But some people don’t know dogs. I do. We’ve been good friends, old chaps, haven’t we? There, Jep, it’s just like you to speak first,” as the old dog lifted his head and whined, “but I guess you voice the sentiment of the whole pack.” The Colonel glanced about him. “For the first time in a long while,” he said, “I’m going on a journey without taking any of you along. I wish I didn’t have to go, but go I must. If I come back we’ll have many a good chase together. And if I don’t——”

“Your ’orse, sir,” cried Dick from the gate.

Ten minutes later the Colonel rode the trail once again.

It was just coming noon when he drew rein before Smythe’s store at Bridgetown and sent a hello out upon the air. The new spring day was still misty with sweet-smelling fog. The wind blew from the south soft and refreshing. Mr. Smythe opened the door and, seeing who his visitor was, came forward with an exclamation of pleasant surprise.

“Heaven be praised, it’s the dear Colonel,” he cried.

“Watson,” he called, “come out and greet our dear friend, Colonel Hallibut. Just please dismount, sir, and I’ll stable your horse.”

“I’ll dismount, but I’ll stable my own horse, I guess. I want to be sure that he gets fed. He’s got fifteen miles of bush travel before him,”

grunted the Colonel.

Watson came forward with outstretched hand.

“How are you, Colonel Hallibut?” he said.

“Why, I hardly expected to see you, at least not in the flesh,” rejoined the Colonel, ignoring the hand. “Haven’t found that six hundred in any of your pockets, I suppose?”

Watson started.

“I have not,” he answered sullenly, a slow flush dyeing his face. “I don’t hope to, either. You know, of course, that the Bushwhackers stole the money.”

“So you said in your touching letter,” replied the Colonel, “but I expect you to repay it—every cent of it. I’ll give you two weeks. Smythe,” he asked, turning to that gentleman, “how is it Watson isn’t dead and buried! I understood you to say he was anxious to die and in a fair way of doing it.”

“Man proposes and God disposes,” said Smythe piously.

“Humph,” returned Hallibut, “it’s too bad the men who tried to dispose of Watson didn’t make a clean job of it.”

“Come into the other part,” invited Smythe, “dinner is all ready, sir.”

The Colonel sat down to the table, placing his rifle close beside his chair.

“A little liquor!” inquired the host, leaning toward the cupboard.

“Not any, thanks,” returned Hallibut. “Who’s smoking that rotten Canada-Green tobacco?” he demanded sharply. “’Tain’t you, is it?” as Watson turned quickly.

Watson shook his head and glanced at Smythe.

“Man by the name of Jamison was in here just before you came,” explained Smythe. “He smoked Canada-Green.”

“Funny,” murmured Hallibut, “it seems to be getting stronger.”

Smythe stamped gently upon the floor.

“What are you dancing about?” asked the Colonel, “isn’t it strictly against your religious code?”

“A touch of chilblain, my dear Colonel——‘ghost’s itch,’ my sainted mother used to call it.”

“Humph! it must be a ghost smoking that Canada-twist,” laughed

Hallibut.

“If I thought it was,” declared Smythe, “I would bid him cease. I would,” he cried, raising his voice, “I would command him in this way: ‘Stop smoking immediately!’” Mr. Smythe enforced his command by another thump on the trap-door.

“You must be crazy,” grunted the Colonel, “guess I’d better be pushing along. I’m going over to let those Bushwhackers know just where they stand.”

“Dear Colonel, don’t go to Bushwhackers’ Place,” begged Smythe. “They’ll shoot you as sure as you are born.”

“They certainly will,” confirmed Watson.

The Colonel nodded.

“Let ’em,” he grated, and, picking up his rifle, he passed out followed by the distressed Smythe.

When they had gone Watson lifted the trap-door.

“You idiot,” he fumed, “you almost cooked our goose with your stinkin’ Canada-Green tobacco. I’ll be mighty glad to see the last of your red head, Amos. No, you mus’n’t come up yet. Be patient for five minutes longer; then, away you go. And may you not stop until you’ve crossed the border.”

“I’ll lose no time, don’t you fear,” whispered a hoarse voice from the darkness, and Watson let the trap-door fall with a shudder.

CHAPTER XXIX

BLUE SKIES AND A CLOUD

Had Colonel Hallibut known that the Bushwhackers had awaited the melting of the snows quite as impatiently as he himself had, it might have surprised him. And had he known that the Bushwhackers were just as eager to have an explanation from him as he was to have an explanation from the Bushwhackers, he certainly would have been somewhat puzzled.

During the long evenings, as the loom of the weavers chided and the good wives turned the spinning-wheels, the men of the wood molded bright leaden bullets and measured black powder into curved horns. When the three-days' rain began Bill Paisley went over to McTavish's and stayed with Boy until the snows were licked away. All throughout Bushwhackers' Place there surged a wave of unrest; a feeling of apprehension held the people, and they waited for what they felt must soon come. Hallibut, so they believed, had threatened to drive them from their rights. Behind him lay a power of which they knew little, but which they were prepared to combat if necessary with their lives. So during the rains that broke the manacles of winter the bushmen came together, strong-armed and clear of eye, strong of purpose and true to the great law that governed them. On one point they had unanimously agreed, and that was, no shot must be fired upon the interlopers until they themselves had opened hostilities. Big McTavish had urged this and was firm in his mandate.

"We'll fight, men," he said, his arm about his wife's shoulder. "We'll fight for our own, even if we be but a handful, but we'll not fire first. Best to be sure than sorry."

Now the men had met together again on what they seemed to feel was the eve of battle. The trails would be clear to-morrow and Hallibut and his followers would come very soon. So, throughout the night, with the soft rain falling and the forest waking beneath the kiss of spring, the Bushwhackers sat speaking in low tones before the fire in the big inner room, and the wives sat together discussing the probabilities of the

coming conflict.

Big McTavish was for having all remain in their domain until the appearance of the enemy. Bill Paisley thought differently.

“What I advise,” he suggested, “is that we send out three men along the trail, and have ’em act as scouts. Let ’em keep to the timber, an’ when they see Hallibut and his men comin’, let ’em drop back and give the alarm. We’ll know best how to meet ’em when we know their numbers.”

Declute supported Paisley.

“I’ll go for one,” he volunteered, “and Peeler thar I know’ll go for another.”

“I’m with you,” nodded Peeler, and Boy sprang up.

“Let me go,” he begged; but the others shook their heads.

“You’re needed here,” they said, and Paisley drew Boy back into his seat again with:

“You can’t go, Boy; that’s all there is to it. Somethin’ tells me that Hallibut won’t bring his men down in a rush. Seems it ain’t his way to do things like ordinary men do ’em. He’s most like to send word by one of his tools that he’s comin’, first. I wouldn’t be at all surprised but that he’d come first himself. He’s goin’ to blame us for burnin’ his schooner, I have no doubt. He’s goin’ t’ do that so’s to have an excuse t’ wipe us out. He’s deep as he is wily. However, be that as it may, you men along the line mus’n’t let your feelin’s get the best of you. If Hallibut sends a spy along, keep clear of him, and don’t cock a gun, remember.”

Gloss stood in the doorway between the two rooms listening to the conversation of the men. Beside her was Daft Davie, his hand in hers. The girl’s face was pale and she looked as though she had not been resting well. Her great eyes were fastened on Boy’s face, and once he glanced toward her, but looked quickly down again. She passed across the room now, and over to him. The men were laying their plans of picketing along the trail. Boy looked up and smiled. Davie squatted in his old attitude beside him.

“Boy,” said the girl softly, “won’t you promise me what I’ve asked—won’t you?” she pleaded, bending over him.

Her breath fanned his cheek and the red blood leaped in his veins.

She brushed back his tangled curls with an old-time caress.

"It seems just as though we was little boy and girl again," she whispered, "and you always promised me what I wanted then."

"I can't promise you——" he hesitated. "Glossie," he said tenderly, "won't you please not ask it? I don't want to make a promise I can't keep, and you know what I intend to do."

"And if you do it," she gasped, "oh, Boy, if you do, I can't—we can't——"

She turned her head away and he saw a shudder run through her frame. He reached out and drew the girl close to him.

"You've got to finish," he said. "What can't we do, Gloss?"

"I don't know," she answered wearily.

She was looking past him and the despair in her eyes cut his soul.

"Girl," he whispered, "I'll promise you not to kill Simpson; 'course I'll promise you. I reckon I understand why you want my promise. I didn't know before, I only suspicioned and dreaded. If he was a good man, now," he smiled, "why, I'd be right down glad for your sake. But I won't hurt him, Gloss, not even if he tries to shoot me."

She stooped and looked into his face.

"Boy," she said softly, "thanks for the promise; but it's you I love—not him."

Then she ran from the room.

Boy arose. In his heart a song was ringing that set the whole world—his world—agog with joy. Paisley came over and touched him on the shoulder.

"I've asked you somethin' three times," he said. "It's comin' mornin', and the rain is done. The scouts are goin' out along the trail. I want to know who is to stay here with you and Mac while the rest of us are totin' up what we'll maybe need for a seige."

"I guess we don't need anybody here," said Boy.

He walked absently about the room and, coming back, put his hands on Paisley's shoulders.

"Bill," he pleaded, "I want t' go with the scouts."

Paisley shook his head decisively.

"No good," he said firmly, "you can't go; that's all."

“Bill,” said Boy, “I’ve give my promise that I won’t hurt Simpson, won’t that let me go?”

“Nor anybody else?”

“Nor anybody else.”

“Well, I guess that *will* let you go,” chuckled Bill. “I guess it will. Fact is, you’re the one ought to go. You’re worth all the others put together at scoutin’. Here you, Lapier, come back here. Boy’s goin’ along in your place. Your wife’s kickin’ like everythin’ on your goin’, so you stay here.”

Boy stepped forward and looked into the inner room. On the floor here and there, on furs, lay chubby-faced babies, sleeping sweetly, and on fur shake-downs close beside them the mothers of Bushwhackers’ Place lay sleeping and dreaming perhaps of olden days in the retreat, before troubles came to cloud its tranquil skies. He tiptoed across the room and stood beside two sleepers in the shadow. His mother’s arm encircled the neck of the girl who had let happiness into his heart. He removed his cap and kneeling kissed the mother’s cheek tenderly, then reverently he touched the girl’s brow with his lips, and slipped away. And through the faint light a pair of wide-open eyes, mellow with God’s earthly happiness, followed him. Boy found his waiting companions outside, and, slapping Declute’s narrow shoulders, he bounded down the path toward the creek.

All the world was waking up to spring. The woody doty smells of the Wild crept into his life and stirred his pulse to the symphony of his world. His whole being responded to the waking-time and his kingdom was still his—aye, more than his kingdom was now his. Above his head, a gray streak against the smoky fog, a flock of home-nesting ducks fluttered lazily by. They were flying low and the leader’s soft quack sounded to him like a greeting from friends long absent. The creek, washed of its snow, lay still ice-fast, but clear and milk-blue with the tinge of wakefulness upon its face. By night the ice would be broken and the current would bear it, grinding and joyful, out to the open water of the bay, and by and by into the clear waters of the lake. A lone grouse strummed his joy upon a log hidden in a thicket. Down in the fallow a cock-quail was whistling “Bob-White.” Across the creek the

heavy snows of winter had carried the flimsy roof of Hallibut's mill to the bank. It lay where the current would sweep it out into the open water. The schoolhouse, through the fog, loomed up tottering, seeming to bend as though imploring the creek to carry it away from the place from which it was estranged.

"Think the ice strong enough to bear us?" queried Declute. "It's some worn, ain't it?"

"It's strong enough," Boy answered. "We'll drag the canoes across. This ice'll be gone by night."

Quickly the men secured the boats and with two men to a boat they passed across the creek, carefully keeping to the white ice. Once a man broke through, and one of the others, by a quick movement, caught him and pulled him to safety. So, with a laugh and a "now all together," they beached the boats on Totherside and sought the soft-wood where the Triple Elm trail lay.

Along the trail the men moved, speaking little, for each was occupied with his own thoughts. To one and all the opening of spring had come as a blessing after the shackles of a long, harsh winter. They all felt its spirit and their steps were springy, their hearts, in spite of apprehension, were glad. Three miles along the trail Boy stationed his first picket.

"You'd better stay here, Jim," he said, "and keep a sharp lookout for Ander. If you hear a high-holder call, you answer it. Then make for Bushwhackers' Place fast as your legs'll carry you."

Two miles further on Declute took up his station and Boy passed on down the trail alone. In the wood it was deep and still and gloriously restful. Squirrels bounded hither and thither and grouse twittered their joy-notes. A red fox slunk into the thicket and the kittens rolled in front of him in playful dispute. He had to step over them to keep to the path. Further on, a pole-cat, or skunk as the animal was called by the Bushwhackers, was grubbing for food in a decayed log. Boy knew at a glance that she too had babies sleeping somewhere close by, and he smiled as she cast a look of inquiry at him from her bright eyes and went unconcernedly on with her work.

Three miles deeper into the wood Boy stepped aside into the

undergrowth and seated himself upon a log. All through the forenoon he sat there thinking and dreaming of Gloss and wondering why he had never before thought she cared. He reviewed bit by bit the events of the past four months and strove to piece them together so as to make something of the whole. Why had Hallibut instructed his men to steal Gloss? And why was Simpson one of the gang? He thought he knew the answer to that question.

The forenoon passed and two hours of the afternoon had gone before Boy's ears were rewarded with the sound of hoof-beats along the trail. He crept forward and peered down the path. Colonel Hallibut, astride a bright-bay horse, came riding slowly along the trail. His head was low on his breast and he passed so closely to Boy that he might have touched the horse's nose. Boy let him pass, his intention being to drop back into the timber and run ahead of him. Just as Boy was about to creep back into the bush he heard the muffled tread of a man's foot. He waited, his hand fumbling the lock of his rifle. As he peered through the brush he could hardly suppress an exclamation, for Amos Broadcreek, his huge form bent and his face haggard and sunken, crept swiftly past him. Five paces on the man sank on one knee and threw his rifle forward. Boy was quick to divine his motive and just as quick to act. His own rifle was leveled and one second before Broadcreek's rifle cracked Boy's bullet struck the barrel of the other gun and the would-be murderer's bullet went singing into the bush on the right.

The shock threw Broadcreek upon his face, and before he could regain his feet Boy was upon him. In vain the giant strove to shake off that sinewy form. Boy clung to him and held him. He heard Hallibut give a cry of surprise and a moment later Amos was pinned down the more effectively by the Colonel's weight. The big man held a pistol at Broadcreek's head and Boy arose and unbuckled one of the stirrup-straps. In another minute Amos was fast bound. Then Colonel Hallibut turned to Boy.

"Seems as though life was very uncertain about here," he remarked. "I understand that animal tried to shoot me, but can't understand why you didn't let him. Suppose you explain."

He frowned at Boy and put his pistol in his belt.

"I understand you Bushwhackers made a threat to shoot me on sight. Why didn't you let *him* do it?"

Boy's eyes gleamed dangerously.

"It won't do you any good to talk like that," he cried. "I guess if we did shoot you on sight it's about what you deserve. You tried to steal our little Gloss, you and your gang. And you send us word that you intend to drive us into the bay. Well, Colonel Hallibut, you'll find it pretty hard to drive us people anywhere. I saved you from bein' killed just now, but that was only 'cause you wasn't gettin' a chance. Us Bushwhackers are queer. We have a funny way of givin' things a square deal. We don't fire at folks from behind, and we don't try to steal women, either."

The Colonel's eyes opened in surprise.

"What are you talking about?" he thundered. "Do you mean to say that I tried to kidnap one of your women? Young man," he warned, "I'm grateful to you for what you've just done, but don't you try to be funny with me. I haven't been across on your Bushwhackers' Place. I haven't done anything to any of your people, either. I did try to buy your timber, but that's all. My agents have been among you, and a nice way you've used them, I must say. Nearly killed Watson, and stole six hundred dollars of my money from him. Then you up and burn my schooner. That's what I call hospitality with a vengeance."

"You burned your own schooner," cried Boy, "and if Watson and Simpson got rough handlin', it was because they deserved it."

"What had Simpson to do with this affair you speak of?" asked Hallibut quickly.

"He was there with you and Watson the night you tried to steal Gloss," said Boy, his mouth twitching.

"Young fellow, you're crazy," groaned Hallibut. "I tell you if anybody tried to steal the girl, I don't know anything about it."

"Your agent, Watson, says that you threatened to kill a few of us off," said Boy grimly. "Broadcrook there heard him, didn't you, Amos?" glancing down at the shaggy form on the ground.

Hallibut snorted.

"Humph! and come to think of it, it was Watson heard you say that

you would set fire to my schooner," he flashed. "You're Boy McTavish, I guess, aren't you?"

"I am Boy McTavish, but I never said that."

"It was me fired the schooner," said Amos.

"You?" cried the Colonel.

"He as much as hired me to do it," said Amos, "—Smythe did. And he hinted as he'd pay me fer doin' fer old Noah, and I did."

"No, you didn't," cried Boy; "Noah is alive and well."

"Then I ain't got no murder 'gainst me," cried Broadcrook, "an' they can't hang me, kin they?"

Hallibut stood biting his lip, his shaggy brows twitching. At last he raised his eyes slowly to Boy McTavish.

"See here," he said at length, "I can't just make this thing out. I guess I've been making a mistake and I guess you have, too, Boy. I've done you no wrong, neither you nor yours. And I know now that you and yours have done me no wrong. I came over here purposely to demand that you give yourself up for burning my boat, and I'm glad I came. I want to shake hands with you, if you'll do it, and thank you for saving my life. Then I want to go down to Bushwhackers' Place and shake hands all round. I—I——"

The big man's face was working, and Boy found it difficult to keep his own voice steady as he wrung the Colonel's hand and said:

"You won't find any of us hard to get acquainted with, Colonel. We're a queer lot in some ways, but I guess we all know real men. You come along with me and I'll show you."

"What are we going to do with this crazed wretch?"

Hallibut pointed down at Broadcrook.

Boy did not answer at once. He stood looking at Amos thoughtfully.

"What made you try to kill the Colonel?" he asked sternly.

"Smythe and Watson told me he was goin' t' set the hounds arter me," groaned the man, "an' I thort if I got his horse I would get across the border too quick fer 'em. Oh, I've been in hell, I tell you; shut up in the dark for three long months. I guess I was crazy."

"Here are Declute and Peeler," cried Boy. "We'll let them bring Amos back with them. You and I'll go on, Colonel Hallibut, if you're

ready.”

The Bushwhackers came running up, their faces showing their surprise. In a few words Boy explained everything, and leaving the two men to look after the captive, they passed down the trail, the Colonel riding and Boy leading the way. As they passed into the open of Totherside the Colonel pointed to the mill.

“That’s got to come out of there,” he said. “There aren’t going to be any more mills or schoolhouses in these parts until you people want them. Then you’re going to get what you want.”

Boy did not answer. He could not answer. But there was a crushing, choking joy in his heart. They stabled the horse in widow Ross’s barn. The place was strangely silent. The Rosses were over at Bushwhackers’ Place.

The ice in the creek was breaking up and running out fast. The creek, fed by the rivulets of the wood, was swollen now so as to make crossing by boat comparatively easy. This accomplished, Boy led Colonel Hallibut up to the house.

“Come in,” he invited.

The Colonel stepped inside and bowed low to the body of astonished people who watched him. Boy waved his hand for silence, then he stated the true facts of the case.

“Now,” he cried, “let every man shake hands with Colonel Hallibut.”

They surged about the big man joyfully. Hands were extended, and the Colonel with a laugh made as though to speak, but, instead, he stood gazing across at a tall girl clad in soft deerskin skirt and jacket. She was gazing back at him from eyes he had known long years ago in that playground far back.

“So like!” he whispered. “Same face, same hair, same great, glorious eyes!”

He leaned against the wall, trembling.

“Phoebe,” he said at length, and held out his arms.

Gloss leaned toward him.

“That was my mother’s name,” she said. “Did—did you know my mother, sir? See, this is her likeness in this little locket about my neck.”

She ran over to him and he took the locket from her hand and

opened it. For a brief moment he gazed on the face of the little picture, then he raised it to his lips.

“Little girl,” he said simply, “I did know your mother: she was my dear sister.”

Then, with a dry sob, the man clasped her in his shaking arms. She stroked his gray hair with her hand, her soul claiming him and clinging to him, and as she looked into his face she said softly:

“I’m so glad; so very, very glad. I had so much before you came and now I have you—you.”

The Colonel attempted to speak. The tears were streaming down his cheeks. Paisley walked from the room blowing his nose on his red handkerchief. Peeler, his back to the others, whistled a tuneless dirge and looked through the window. As for the women, they were one and all behaving like foolish women must behave on such an occasion. Only Boy stood unmoved, watching, thinking, waiting. It came at last.

“All I have in the world belongs to you now, little girl,” said Hallibut gently. “I give it all to you for the sunshine you have let into my gloomy life. You will never leave me again, now I have found you, Gloss, will you?”

Then Boy went out into his dark-blue open and sought his woods again. Thank God he was strong and able to fight. It was all over now—his newly found dream of happiness. His hope was dead, buried and put away forever. But even a grave may feel the warmth of sunshine. The sunshine of a girl’s new happiness would always warm the grave Boy dug that afternoon alone in the awakening forest. It is the nature of a hurt wild thing to creep away into the dark and heal its wounds or die alone. When Boy returned that night his scar was hidden, and no one guessed that he had fought and conquered for love’s sake.

CHAPTER XXX

THE DAWN OF A NEW DAY

Colonel Hallibut did not return to St. Thomas that night as had been his intention. Indeed, in his great and newly found happiness he forgot that he had cautioned Dick, his man, to come looking for him in case he did not return within a certain time.

And then the great-hearted Bushwhackers absolutely would not let him go so soon, now they knew him as he was.

“God bless us,” laughed the Colonel, “it’s so human of us to miss the worth-while things that might be secured by simply reaching out for them. Here you good people have been for years, and over there I have been for years—lonely, God knows, and hungry for such companionship as I am now enjoying. And to think—to think that I have not understood until now!”

So the Colonel stayed at Big McTavish’s and all the Bushwhackers came over in the evening to make merry, and make merry they did, for had they not reason to be glad?

And after the neighbors had gone Big McTavish sat with Hallibut before the fire and they talked of Gloss’s mother until the purple glow of another spring morning bored its way through the fragrant wood-mists. The Colonel sat with bowed head while McTavish told the story of the brave little woman he had known in Arizona; how she had endeared the rough cattlemen to her; how unwavering and unselfish she had been; and finally how she had intended to come to live with his family in the new Canadian Wild, and how they had looked for her coming in vain!

At the conclusion of his narrative the Colonel sat caressing a little gold locket. The tears were running down his seamed cheeks.

“I used to think that God made fewer noble men and women than He did dogs,” he said huskily, “but I don’t think that now. He made you and your wife, McTavish. I can’t thank you for what you have done. I know my thanks don’t count anyway. But, look here, I have always been a rich man, and, Mac, if I were asked to choose between this new happiness

I've lately found and all my lands and money, d'ye know which I would choose?"

McTavish smiled.

"Us bush-folks believe that best and most lastin' joys are always close to us and easy found," he said.

Hallibut arose and paced to and fro across the room.

"McTavish," he said abruptly, "I know the man who sent little Gloss to you."

Big McTavish looked up quickly.

"You do? Then, who is he?"

"Paisley told me to-night that Watson had reminded him of somebody, and only lately did he recollect who. Paisley says that Watson's real name is Watts, and Watts has five thousand dollars of my sister's money. He stole it, McTavish; stole it from a dead mother and a helpless baby. I'll tell you the story."

Hallibut seated himself and related the story which had been told him by the Sandwich fisherman.

"What are you goin' to do to him, Colonel?" asked McTavish after Hallibut had finished.

The Colonel drew in his breath quickly. His eyes were on the tall, dark-faced girl who had just entered like a breath of spring. The set look faded from his face and the flashing eyes grew tender as he held out his arms. She came to him and patted his face caressingly.

"I heard you speaking," she said. "I heard what you said about Watson. Uncle, dear, let's forget all about Watson. Let's just be happy now, all of us."

"But, child——" commenced the Colonel.

"How much am I worth to you?" she smiled, throwing her arms about his neck.

"All the world, Gloss," he answered.

"If he had not sent me away with Noah you would never have found me," she whispered.

"It's true, it's true," cried Hallibut. "Strange I didn't see it that way before."

"Then you won't punish him—nor anybody, will you?" she pleaded,

“—not even Amos Broadcrook.”

“But Broadcrook burned my boat,” cried the Colonel. “It is best to put him in jail, dear, where he can do no more harm.”

“Amos couldn’t live in jail,” said the girl, “for he’s of the woods. He’ll die if you cage him up.”

Hallibut gathered her close to him.

“Ah, child, but you’re like your little mother,” he laughed. “She was always pleading for the trapped and downed things, and, egad! she always got her way with me, as you will be bound to get yours.”

“Then you’ll not punish him,” she cried gladly. “Oh, that is so good of you!”

She darted away and Hallibut looked at Big McTavish and shook his head.

“I don’t know but that was a mistake on my part,” he said. “Those fellows deserve punishment if ever men did. They as much as bribed Broadcrook to burn my boat, and I guess he was after me, too. He tried to steal dear little Gloss, and intended trying to make you good people believe I did it, and by pretending to be in sympathy with you get possession of the deeds of your properties.”

The door was thrown open and in sprang Boy. He was panting as from a race.

“Hello,” exclaimed his father, “where’ve you been?”

“I stayed with Bill Paisley last night,” explained Boy. “You know we had Amos Broadcrook locked up at his place. We fell asleep for a few minutes and Amos got away. Somebody outside helped him—his brother Hank likely. Anyway, he’s got clean away.”

“And where do you suppose he has gone?” asked Hallibut.

“Across the border likely,” returned Boy. “We’re goin’ after him, sir, and we’ve got to start right now, ’cause the creek’s risin’ and gettin’ dangerous. In half an hour we can’t get across.”

Hallibut looked at Big McTavish, then he turned to Boy.

“Do you think he’ll go across the line?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Then, let the poor beggar go. I’ve promised Gloss that I won’t prosecute him.”

Boy whistled.

“Well——” he commenced, then turned abruptly away.

He was glad, glad, glad. He did not know why, nor care why. He could not bear to think of anything of the bush-world being shut up without a chance of escape. He passed outside and Hallibut followed him.

“Boy,” said the big man, “I guess you think me an old fool, don’t you?”

He went over and laid his hand affectionately on the young man’s arm.

“I guess I’m getting old and rather childish, Boy. I’ve just received one of God’s great gifts, and there is nothing much in my old heart this spring morning but joy—joy I’ve had to do without for many weary years. Well, Boy, you know how the old trees of the bush lean when they’ve lived their full years. You know how they topple and sag. You have seen them do it, haven’t you? But sometimes a strong young sapling props them up and they go on living and throwing out their leaves—but they’re not standing alone.”

His arm slipped about Boy’s shoulders.

“Boy,” he said huskily, “I need a prop. I want to hang on because I’ve just found real happiness. But I’m sagging, lad; I’m just an old tree.”

Boy turned and grasped the Colonel’s hand. He felt a tear splash down and his throat tightened and burned.

“I guess I understand,” he said softly. “I’ve growed deep into—all this, and there’s always a saplin’ you can lean on if you care to.”

He sprang away down the path toward the log-barn and the Colonel watched him, a deep glow in his heart.

From the kitchen came the savory smell of frying bacon and Gloss’s happy voice singing an old-fashioned song.

When they all sat down to breakfast, Big McTavish bowed his head and asked God’s blessing on his bounty in these words:

“We thank thee for feedin’ us, O God. We thank thee for thy many mercies, and we thank thee greatly for the sunshine after the darkness.”

And Granny from her end of the table added a fervent “Amen.”

After breakfast the Colonel drew Big McTavish aside and held a whispered controversy with him. Then he turned to the “little ma,” and, holding her hand in both of his, said:

“There is no reward that earth can give you great enough for what you and yours have done for me and mine, but the great reward awaits you all. I have received a great and wondrous blessing,” stroking the brown curls of the tall girl beside him, “ah, so great a blessing! I am going now, but I will come back soon, very soon, again.”

He turned, his eyes blinking, and glanced about the room at the others.

“God bless you all,” he said heartily, and strode outside, followed by Big McTavish and Boy.

Coming up the path was a tired, dripping horse, bestrode by a weary, dripping rider.

“Dick,” murmured the Colonel. “Of course, I might have known that he would come searching for me.

“Why, lad,” he called, “you’re a bigger ninny than I thought you. You’re half drowned.”

Boy ran forward and helped support the man as he dismounted.

“What’s wrong, Dick, lad?” asked Hallibut, catching sight of the new arrival’s face.

Dick fumbled in one of his pockets.

“’Ere’s a letter, sir. I found it tacked to a tree houtside the lawn, sir.”

Hallibut took the letter. It was a dirty, crumpled thing, and scrawled across it were the words “Kenul Halbut.”

“Listen,” said the Colonel, “it’s from Amos Broadcrook. This is what he says:

“‘i intnted to git even with Smyth an Watson but they had skiped fer the stats but i have burnt the stor an hope you will be plesed i am goin away an haint ever comin back dont you put your dorgs onter me i be goin to live strate

‘amos broadcrook.’”

The men exchanged glances.

“Did he do it, Dick?” asked the Colonel.

“Yes, sir, the place was in hashes as I passed.”

“So endeth the——” began Hallibut, but he was abruptly checked by a wet, bedraggled something that hurled itself against him with a low whine of joy.

“Old Zip,” cried the Colonel, “you poor, crippled old devil, Zip. Where—how——”

He staggered back, wiping the wet kiss from his cheek, and tears of laughter stood in his eyes.

“’E jist wouldn’t stay ’ome, sir,” stammered Dick. “’E chewed three good tie-reins clean through, sir, t’ git t’ you; ’e did, sir.”

Then the Colonel said a most extraordinary thing.

“He’d crawl through hell for me, boys, that old dog. And he’s come to-day because we’ve always shared our joys and sorrows together. Come and meet little Gloss, Zip.”

CHAPTER XXXI

A MATING TIME

Spring held the world of the Bushwhackers in her soft arms. She awoke the sleeping things with her warm breath. Her light shone on land and marsh and sky. The great trees shivered and stretched their long arms wakefully. The dry rushes along the creek quivered and sang in low whispers, as the blue waters laved their drowsy roots. When the sun flashed out at intervals the quiet waters of the flats would break, here and there, and the flashing body of a pike would leap upward with a mighty flop and, tumbling back, would twist and dart from rush-clump to rush-clump, her mate, a long, mottled fish, following slowly, one length behind, his blue-green dorsal-fin standing up above the water like a tiny sail. Of the wood and marsh mating time, the strong, swift fish claimed first right. They sought the quiet waters even when the ice still crashed and ground, onward and outward. Up against the cold current a school of them would move steadily, parting and mingling again, a fragment detaching itself here where the rat-run offered a haven, a fragment detaching itself there where the quiet water of the flats rested beneath the white, smoky fog. This was the pike's spawning season, their play-time and love-time. In the early morning sunbeams they would dart and leap and play until the shallow waters of the rushland were white with foam, and there, after the manner of their kind, they would mate and drift and move out into the deeper waters again in twos and threes and fives, and seek the harbored spawning-beds among the rushes further inland.

Next came the wee brown song-thrush, tumbling, an animated fragment, from a fleeing snow-cloud, dropping from the sky and alighting with a low chirp of joy on the bare twig of a baby tree of the woodland. Its sweet, shrill little song, simple and glad, would travel into the quiet places of the wood. "Gray-bird" it was called, and last to leave in dreary fall, first to come back in springtime, it was Daft Davie's choice of all the birds he loved so well.

He stood beside the margin of the creek this morning, his face aglow

with the gladness of the spring. He looked across the swollen waters and waved his arms toward the low-lying V-shaped water-fowl that swerved and twisted and called in honking voices. It was Davie's time of rejoicing. His wild things were coming back to him. Ere long the black duck would sweep above the marshland tinged with shooting green, and, trailed by his mate, find his old nesting-ground. The boy's soul craved what it knew and understood. He was glad with the gladness of the wild, free thing of wood and marsh. The gray-bird sang to him a little song which he understood full well, and the wind, soft and balmy, sighed him a promise that he knew would be redeemed. It was the first day of *his* coming back, for he, too, had been away from his own just as the wee bird had been. He turned from the creek and, followed by his pet raccoon, sped upward across the hardwood ridge until he came to a lower one of tall maple trees. Down across the soft, springy moss that breathed him an essence he went. Davie's joy-season had been born again.

Soon the green shoots would peep above the water and the rush-clumps would rustle lullabys to tiny wide-mouthed fledgelings that gapped and stretched in soft nests in the swinging reeds. The blackbirds would swoop back again soon; and the marsh-birds that nested in the low swales. In his basswood canoe Davie would explore anew the old haunts and watch the tiny wood-duck dive and hide and peer with beedy eyes from behind the tangled weeds. He loved the baby wild things with a love too great to be understandable. Across the blue Eau, Point Aux Pins was taking on a deeper tinge of green. Davie would go there and seek out the nests of the timid grouse. He knew exactly where to find these nests and the joy of watching the little baby grouse hide from him. He loved to play hide-and-seek with them; to watch them scamper and dart and vanish. They did not hide from Davie because they feared him, but because it is the nature of all young things to play at hide-and-seek.

Down across the ridge the sugar-camp fire sent up a spiral of white through the trees. In the early morning Boy McTavish stood before the boiling sap, dipping from a large kettle into a smaller one. Big McTavish, coming in with a barrel of newly gathered sap on a stone-boat, stopped his oxen and laid his hand on Davie's bare head.

"How's Pepper?" he asked, smiling as he watched the raccoon roll and sprawl upon the ground.

"Goad," answered Davie simply in his own language.

McTavish laughed and proceeded to empty the barrel on the stone-boat into the one alongside the kettles. This done he went over and sat down beside Boy on the log.

"Never saw such sugar weather in all my life before," he declared. "It's a good thing old Noah understands sugar-makin'. Don't know what we'd do without him, us havin' to keep the pot a-boilin' night and day this way."

"Did the Colonel leave this mornin'?" asked Boy, his eyes fixed on a bit of blue sky in the open.

"No, but I guess maybe he will this afternoon though," replied the father. "He says that if he don't go to-day Dick'll likely come huntin' him same's he did before."

"Dad," said Boy, "don't it all seem so queer? Think of Gloss bein' the Colonel's niece, and think what that means to her. She can be educated and all that now. The Colonel says he is goin' to make her one of the first ladies in the land. Says he's goin' to take her back to England with him."

Boy's voice was husky and a film dimmed the spot of blue in the skies.

"Don't he think a lot of Gloss, though!" agreed the father in emphatic tones of satisfaction. "D'ye notice how he watches her, Boy? He says it's just like havin' his little sister back with him again. Seems so odd to hear him take on the way he does, and I guess he's a big man in more than size, Boy. You heard him say as he wouldn't take her away from us, didn't you?"

Boy nodded.

"Yes," he said with a sigh, "and that was big of him; but it would be mighty selfish on our part, dad, if we tried to keep Gloss here now when all he owns is hers, as he says. I guess it's best that she goes along with him. Maybe we can get a chance to see her once in a while. I don't think the Colonel will ever forget that Gloss sort of belongs to us Bushwhackers, d'you?"

“Well, no,” mused McTavish, “I don’t think he will. He asked me to explain just what he intended to do for her, and I couldn’t do it. Wanted me to tell Gloss that she was to have an education and was to live in a big, beautiful house in England. I said, ‘No, Colonel, it’s your place to tell her yourself. I’d like break down on the job.’ And so he’s goin’ to tell her this mornin’, Boy.”

Davie came over and put his raccoon on Boy’s knee. The animal rubbed its sharp nose against Boy’s cheek, and he softly stroked its thick fur.

“I guess me’n you is built for the bush, Pepper,” he said. “We understand, me’n you and Davie, what it means to belong to just one place.”

Down on the clear air a girl’s voice came ringing.

“Boy,” it called, “oh, Boy!”

Boy sprang erect.

“It’s Gloss and the Colonel, dad,” he cried. “He’s told her and she’s just so happy she wants us to know.”

“Hello, Gloss,” he called back, “just in time for a sugar-off. I was gettin’ one ready for Davie.”

The Colonel was puffing and wiping his brow on his handkerchief.

“Gracious,” he cried, “our Gloss is a tartar on the walk. She has me about winded.”

He drew Boy aside and spoke to him in a low tone.

“I can’t understand the darling,” he confessed. “She thinks a whole lot of me already, Boy—I can see that. But she actually turned white when I told her what we all thought would be good news to her. Says she, ‘Does Boy know?’ And I said, ‘Why, dear, of course he knows, and he’s tickled to death.’ ”

Boy bit his lips.

“Of course,” he agreed; “I’ll see what I can do, sir.”

“Yes, do,” cried the Colonel. “She seems to think what you say is about right.”

Boy tried to laugh, but the attempt was a failure. He passed over to where Gloss stood with Davie’s hand in hers.

“There’s some adder-tongues just peepin’ up in the valley, Gloss,”

he said. "Would you like to see 'em?"

She passed down the path beside him, and when the thicket of hazel hid them from the others she put her hand on his arm.

"Tell me, Boy," she said wistfully, "why am I to go away from you all?"

She looked at him with wide eyes and waved her hand outward. "—And all this?" she added with a sob.

"Why, Gloss," began Boy, then stood unable to go on, his whole being revolting at the very thought of what he must say. "You see," he managed to say at last, "you're the Colonel's niece. You come of different stock from us, Gloss. He has any amount of money and we all want you to go with him and be educated like a lady. Oh, we'll miss you, girl—but there, that's all there is to it. We want you to go. It'll be best for you."

She caught her breath.

"Of course, if you want me to go," she said, "why—why, Boy, I'll go."

"That's a good girl," smiled Boy bravely. "Now for the flowers."

"I think I would rather go back," she whispered. "I—I don't want the flowers."

They walked back slowly and in silence. McTavish and Injun Noah were piling fresh wood beneath the kettles.

"I guess we'll all go up to the house," said the big man. "Noah'll watch the boilin' for an hour or so."

They went back along the mossy, springy bush-path, drinking in the breath of wild flowers, drinking in the songs of wild mating birds.

"I'll come after her again in two weeks," spoke Hallibut softly, when Boy, as they walked side by side up the path, told him that Gloss had consented to go with him. "God bless her; she has made a new man of me. You don't know what she has done for me. I've been so lonely for years and years—and now it's just like having little Phoebe back with me again. Oh, but God is good!"

They were a happy enough gathering at dinner. The Colonel told some of his amusing stories and Paisley recited his little experience in hunting bee-trees. Boy spoke little, but seemed to enjoy listening to the

others. After dinner they all went out again into the sunshine. Widow Ross was there, and she and Mrs. McTavish had their heads together, and Paisley, who had drawn a little apart with Mary Ann, said he knew they were plotting a custard or something equally delicious. Ander Declute was there also; Ander and his large wife and all the little Declutes with the big Biblical names. Peeler, too, with his family, and in fact all of Bushwhackers' Place seemed to be congregated to celebrate the good tidings that McTavish's Gloss had come into a "fortun'."

After dinner was over Colonel Hallibut, beaming and smiling, shook hands all round.

"What I've missed by not knowing you good people long ago," he exclaimed, "I'm going to make up for from this time on. As soon as I get our Gloss comfortably settled in a young ladies' college in the old land I'm coming back here. I love all this wild place just as you all love it. I know you will let the little girl and me share it with you at times."

"We'll all be glad to have you," shouted the Bushwhackers.

Gloss was standing with one hand on the old ash-leach and now she lifted her face and looked at the Colonel.

"Uncle," she said softly. The big man turned, then came over and stood beside her.

"Dear little Gloss," he said, patting the hand that grasped his. She raised her head and looked across at Boy. Then she held out her other hand. He came over, his heart beating wildly, the blood pounding his temples. He took the hand and stroked it with a caress belonging to childhood.

Colonel Hallibut's brows puckered, then he smiled.

"Well, I'll be——" He checked himself, and glanced from one to the other of the young people. "Suppose we understand one another," he said. "Gloss," he asked, "do you—do you love Boy here?"

"Yes," she answered simply.

"And you love all this big, beautiful Wild, too?"

"So much!" she said.

"And you don't want to leave it, dear?"

"No."

The Colonel's mouth twitched and the girl patted his cheek with her

hand.

“You love it, too,” she smiled. “Why not all stay here together?—surely there is enough for all.”

“Hurrah,” seconded the Bushwhackers.

The Colonel chuckled and put an arm about each of the two young lovers.

“That’s a splendid idea,” he nodded, “—a splendid idea. Good people, I’ll take you at your word. I’ll come and we’ll live here together. I can’t say that I want to leave this place since I’ve been initiated into the Brotherhood of the Untamed.”

Twilight had scratched its purple tally-mark in the fringed west, and the ducks were sweeping in from south in long lines, when Boy and Gloss paused before a spot beside the path.

“That’s poor Joe’s grave,” said Boy. “Seems I miss him an awful lot since the birds are comin’ back and the world’s alive again.”

“Poor old Joe,” sighed Gloss. “He won’t lie and watch and sleep by the old ash-leach no more, Boy.”

He drew her close to him.

“Let’s don’t talk of Joe to-night, girl,” he said. “Let it be you and me and the Wild.”

And so they passed up the path and the streak of crimson faded to orange in the low sky, and from orange to gray-drab. In the lone tree beside the path a little gray-bird sang its song.

THE END

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. The author's use of the term 'Wall' versus 'Wal' has been maintained.

Inconsistencies in punctuation have been maintained.

A frontispiece illustration has been added from a different edition.

[The end of *Love of the Wild*, by Archie P. McKishnie.]