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THE BIG OTTER

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**The Big Otter**

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# R. M. Ballantyne

## The Big Otter

### Chapter One.

#### Sleeping in Snow

Cold comfort is naturally suggested by a bed of snow, yet I have enjoyed great comfort and much warmth in such a bed.

My friend Lumley was particularly fond of warmth and of physical ease, yet he often expressed the opinion, with much emphasis, that there was nothing he enjoyed so much as a night in a snow-bed. Jack Lumley was my chum—a fine manly fellow with a vigorous will, a hardy frame, and a kindly heart. We had a natural leaning towards each other—a sort of undefinable sympathy—which inclined us to seek each other's company in a quiet unobtrusive way. We were neither of us demonstrative; we did not express regard for each other; we made no protestations of undying friendship, but we drew together, somehow, especially in our hunting expeditions which were numerous.

On holidays—we had two in the week at the outpost in the American backwoods where we dwelt—when the other young fellows were cleaning gulls or arranging snow-shoes for the day's work, Lumley was wont to say to me:—

“Where d’you intend to shoot to-day, Max?” (Max was an abbreviation; my real name is George Maxby.)

“I think I’ll go up by the willows and round by Beaver Creek.”

“I’ve half a mind to go that way too.”

“Come along then.”

And so we would go off together for the day.

One morning Lumley said to me, “I’m off to North River; will you come?”

“With pleasure, but we’ll have to camp out.”

“Well, it won’t be the first time.”

“D’you know that the thermometer stood at forty below zero this morning before breakfast?”

“I know it; what then? Mercurial fellows like you don’t freeze easily.”

I did not condescend to reply, but set about preparing for our expedition, resolving to carry my largest blanket with me, for camping out implied sleeping in the snow.

Of course I must guard my readers—especially my juvenile readers—from supposing that it was our purpose that night to undress and calmly lie down in, or on, the pure white winding-sheet in which the frozen world of the Great Nor’-west had been at that time wrapped for more than four months. Our snow-bed, like other beds, required making, but I will postpone the making of it till bed-time. Meanwhile, let us follow the steps of Lumley, who, being taller and stronger than I, *always* led the way.

This leading of the way through the trackless wilderness in snow averaging four feet deep is harder work than one might suppose. It could not be done at all without the aid of snow-shoes, which, varying from three to five feet in length, enable the traveller to walk on the surface of the snow, into which he would otherwise sink, more or less, according to its condition. If it be newly fallen and very soft, he sinks six, eight, or more inches. If it be somewhat compressed by time or wind he sinks only an inch or two. On the hard surface of exposed lakes and rivers, where it is beaten to the appearance of marble, he dispenses with snow-shoes altogether, slings them on his gun, and carries them over his shoulder.

Our first mile lay through a clump of pine-wood, where snow had recently fallen. When I looked at my comrade's broad back, and observed the vigour of his action as he trod deep into the virgin snow at every stride, scattering it aside like fine white powder as he lifted each foot, I thought how admirably he was fitted for a pioneer in the wilderness, or for the work of those dauntless, persevering men who go forth to add to the world's geographical knowledge, and to lead the expeditions sent out in search of such lost heroes as Franklin and Livingstone.

My own work was comparatively light. I had merely to tread in the beaten path. I was not, however, thereby secured from disaster, as I found when, having advanced about half a mile, my right shoe caught a twig to which it held for a moment, and then, breaking loose, allowed me to pitch head down with such violence that I almost reached mother earth four feet below the surface.

This kind of plunge is always awkward owing to the difficulty of rising, and usually disagreeable, owing to the manner in which snow stuffs itself into neck, ears, nose, eyes, mouth—if open—and any convenient crevice of person or garments. The snow-shoes, too, which are so serviceable when you are above them, become exasperatingly obstructive when you are below them. After a struggle of two minutes I got my head clear, winked the snow out of my eyes, blew it from my mouth and nostrils, and looked up. Lumley was standing there with a bland smile on his amiable face; he seldom laughed, though he sometimes chuckled!

“What do you mean by grinning there like a Cheshire cat?” I exclaimed, “why don't you lend a hand?”

“What do you mean by tumbling there like a Christmas goose?” he retorted, “why don't you look out for stumps and twigs as I do?”

He made some amends for this reply by extending his hand and helping me to rise.

In a few minutes we were clear of the pine-wood, and came out upon a piece of swampland, where the stunted willow bushes just showed their tops above the surface of the snow. This led us to a bend of the broad river near to which, further down, stood our outpost—Fort Dunregan.

For four months there had been neither sight nor sound of water in that river. It was frozen to the bottom, except in the middle where its dark unseen waters flowed silently under six feet or more of solid ice through many a river-channel and lake to the distant sea. In fact, save for the suggestive form of its banks, the river might have been mistaken for an elongated plain or piece of open land. The surface of the snow here was, from exposure to wind and sun, as hard as pavement. We therefore took off our snow-shoes, and, the necessity for maintaining the Indian-file position being removed, we walked abreast.

“The air is keen here,” remarked Lumley, pulling the thick shawl that was round his neck as far up over his mouth as his well-developed nose would permit.

“It is,” said I, following his example with greater success, my own nose being a snub.

There was no wind; not even a breeze—there seldom is at such temperature—but there was a very slight movement of the air, caused by our own advance, which was just sufficient to make one appreciate the intensity of the cold. It became necessary now to pay frequent attention to our noses and cheek-bones and toes, to prevent frostbite. But the sun was brilliant and the air invigorating. So was the aspect of nature, for although there was no grandeur in the character of the scenery, there was extreme beauty in the snow lacework of the trees and leafless shrubs; in the sky, whose bright blue was intensified by the white drapery of earth; and in the myriads of snow-crystals which reflected the dazzling sun with prismatic splendour.

Indeed, the scene was too dazzling, and as there was a tendency in it to produce snow-blindness, we soon returned to the friendly shelter of the woods.

“Tracks!” exclaimed Lumley, in a low voice, pointing to the ground, where footmarks were clearly visible, “and fresh,” he added, turning up the snow under the track with the butt of his gun.

“Ptarmigan!” said I in a whisper, pointing towards a little knoll, not quite a gunshot ahead of us, where some dozens of the beautiful snow-white creatures stood gazing at us in motionless surprise.

Their plumage was so white that we had not observed them at first, almost the only black specks about them being their sparkling eyes, and the tips of their wings and tails.

Our guns were pointed instantly. I am ashamed to say that we were guilty of shooting them as they stood! In that land we shot for food as much as for amusement, and, some of us being poor shots, we were glad to take our game sitting! Nay, more, we tried to get as many of the birds in line as possible, so as to make the most of our ammunition. We were not sportsmen in the civilised sense of that term.

The extreme stillness of the woods was broken by the report of our guns in quick succession. A very cloud of pure white birds arose, as if Nature had taken to snowing upwards in rather large flakes, and seven victims remained behind.

“A good supper,” remarked Lumley, as we bagged the game and re-loaded.

It is not my intention here to describe a day’s shooting. Let it suffice to say that a little before nightfall we arrived at a place where was a snowy mound capped by a clump of spruce firs of small size but picturesque appearance.

“Behold our camp!” said Lumley.

“Not inviting at present,” said I, as we slowly toiled up the mound, for we were weary, having walked about twenty miles, weighted with heavy flannel-lined deerskin-coats, blankets, and cooking utensils, besides a small quantity of pemmican, sugar, tea, and ship’s biscuit, axes and firebags. It is true, the cooking utensils were few and simple, consisting of only two tin kettles and two tin mugs.

Dreary indeed—lonesome, desolate, and eerie was our mound when we got to the top of it. By that time the sun had set, and a universal ghostly grey, fast deepening into night, banished every sensation of joy aroused by the previous lightness. Although the scene and circumstances were nothing new to us we could not shake off the depressing influence, but we did not allow that to interfere with our action. Silently, but vigorously—for the cold was increasing—we felled several small dead trees, which we afterwards cut into lengths of about four feet. Then we cleared a space in the snow of about ten or twelve feet in diameter until we reached the solid earth, using our snowshoes as shovels. What we threw out of the hole formed an embankment round it, and as the snow lay at that spot full four feet deep, we thus raised the surrounding wall of our chamber to a height of six feet, if not more. Standing on the edge of it in the ever-deepening twilight, and looking down into the abyss, which was further darkened by the overspreading pines, this hole in the snow suggested a tomb rather than a bed.

At one end of it we piled up the firewood. Extending from that towards the other end, we spread a carpet of pine-branches, full six inches thick. To do all this took a considerable amount of time and labour, and when Lumley stood up at last to strike a light with flint, steel, and tinder, we felt pretty well exhausted. The night had by that time become profoundly dark, insomuch that we had to grope for the various articles we required.

“We’ve been rather late of beginning to make the camp,” said I, as I watched the sparks.

“Never mind, Max, my boy, we shall soon be all right,” replied my friend, as one of the sparks at last caught on the tinder. In a few seconds the spark was blown into a blaze, and placed in the midst of a handful of dry moss and thin chips. This was applied to some dry twigs under our piled-up logs, and a vivid tongue of flame shot upward.

Blessed fire! Marvellous light! It is a glorious, wonder-working influence, well chosen by the Almighty as one of his titles. There is no change in Nature so intense as that from darkness to light as well in physical as in spiritual things. No sudden change from heat to cold, or from calm to storm; no transformation ever achieved in the most gorgeous of pantomimes, could have the startling effect, or produce the splendid contrast that resulted from the upward flash of that first tongue of fire. It was a vivid tongue, for the materials had been well laid; a few seconds later it was a roaring tongue, with a host of lesser tongues around it—all dancing, leaping, cheering, flashing, as if with ineffable joy at their sudden liberation, and the resulting destruction of dismal darkness.

Our snow-abyss was no longer black and tomb-like. Its walls sparkled as though encrusted with diamonds; its carpet of pine-branches shone vividly green; the tree-stems around rose up like red-hot pillars, more or less intense in colour, according to distance; the branching canopy overhead appeared to become solid with light, and the distance around equally solid with ebony blackness, while we, who had caused the transformation, stood in the midst of the ruddy blaze like jovial red-hot men!

“There’s nothing like a fire,” I remarked with some enthusiasm.

“Except supper,” said Lumley.

“Gross creature!” I responded, as he went about the preparation of supper with a degree of zest which caused me to feel that my epithet was well deserved.

“Gross creature!” he repeated some time afterwards with a pleasant smile of intense enjoyment, as he sat in front of the blaze sipping a can of hot tea, and devouring pemmican and biscuit with avidity. “No, Max, I am not a gross creature. Your intellects are probably benumbed by the cold. If phrenologists are right in dividing the human brain into compartments, wherein the different intellectual powers are said to be located, I should think that some of those chambers lying nearest to the top of the skull are apt to freeze at a temperature of forty below zero, in which case the perfect working of the half-paralysed machine can scarcely be looked for. Hold your head to the fire, and thaw it while I expound this to you.”

“Stay,” said I, holding out my tin pannikin for more tea; “inward heat as well as outward is necessary to my thorough comprehension of *your* expositions.”

“True, Max, all the faculties of such mind as you possess, in their most active condition, are required to enable you to take in the simplest proposition. Just give my bird a turn, like a good fellow.”

He referred to a ptarmigan which, plucked, split open, roughly cleaned, and impaled on a stick, was roasting in front of the fire. I turned his bird and my own, while he continued:—

“To gratify the appetite with thorough and hearty appreciation after working hard for your food, or walking far to find it, is not gross. Grossness consists in eating heavily when you have not toiled, and stimulating with fire-water, pepper, or mustard, your sluggish appetite. To call me a gross creature, then—”

He stopped short, and, looking up, performed that operation with the nose which is styled sniffing.

“What do I smell?”

“My bird—burnt!” I shouted, snatching at the stick on which it was impaled. In doing so I capsized our can of tea. Lumley looked at it with a sigh, while I regarded with a groan the breast of my bird burnt to a cinder.

“Max, you should remember that a fire strong enough to subdue forty degrees below zero is intense—also, that our supply of tea is limited. All this comes of your unwisely calling me a gross creature.”

“No, it comes of the intense application of my unthawed intellect to your absurd expositions.”

“Whatever it comes of,” returned Lumley, “we must remedy the evil. Here, fall upon my ptarmigan. I’m not quite ready for it, being still engaged with the pemmican. Meanwhile, I’ll replenish the kettle.”

So saying, he took up the kettle, went to the margin of our hole, and filled it with fresh snow well pressed down. This being put on the fire, soon melted; more snow was added, till water enough was procured, and then fresh tea was put in to boil. We were not particular, you see, as to the mode of infusion. While my friend was thus engaged, I had plucked, split, cleansed and impaled another bird. In a marvellously short time—for our fire was truly intense—the tea and ptarmigan were ready, and we proceeded with supper as comfortably as before.

“Now I shall continue,” said Lumley, with a satisfied clearing of the throat, “the exposition of grossness,—”

“Oh, pray spare me that,” said I, quickly, “but tell me, if you can, why it is that such a tremendous fire as that does not melt our snow walls.”

“Put your head nearer to it, Max, for some of the phrenological chambers must still be frozen, else it would be clear to you that the intensity of the cold is the reason. You see that only a small part of the snow quite close to the fire is a little softened. If the fire were hotter it would melt more of it—melt the whole hole and us too. But the cold is so great that it keeps the walls cool and us also—too cool indeed, for while my face and knees are roasting my back is freezing, so I shall rise and give *it* a turn. Now,” he continued, rising and turning his back to the blaze as he spoke, “I will resume my remarks on gross—”

“You’ve no objection to my making our bed while you lecture?” said I, also rising.

Lumley had not the least objection, so, while he held forth, I spread a large green blanket over our carpet of pine-brush. A bundle of the same under the blanket formed a pretty good pillow. Wrapping myself tightly round in another blanket (for physical heat evaporates quickly in the frozen regions) I lay down. My friend lay down beside me, our feet being towards the fire.

After a silent interval, while lying thus, gazing up through the overhanging branches at the stars that twinkled in the clear frosty sky, our thoughts became more serious. The grandeur of creation led us to think and speak of the Creator—for we were like-minded friends, and no subject was tabooed. We conversed freely about whatever chanced to enter our minds—of things past, present, and to come. We spoke of God the Saviour, of redemption and of sin. Then, with that discursive tendency to which most minds are prone, we diverged to home and civilised lands, contrasting these with life in the wild-woods of the Great Nor’-west. After that we became sleepy, and our converse was more discursive—at times even incoherent—in the midst of which Lumley reverted to his unfinished exposition of grossness, and, in the enthusiasm of his nature, was slowly working himself back into a wakeful condition, when I put an abrupt end to the discourse by drawing a prolonged snore. It was a deceptive snore, unworthy of success, yet it succeeded.

My friend turned round and, with a contented sigh, went to sleep. After a brief space the snore which had been a fiction became a reality, and thus, on our bed of snow, in the depths of an Arctic night, in the heart of the frozen wilderness, and while the mighty fire burned slowly down, we unitedly took our departure for the land of Nod.

## Chapter Two. The Winter Packet

On returning next morning towards the outpost from our encampment in the woods, Lumley and I made a discovery which excited us greatly. It was nothing more than a track in the snow, but there was a revelation in the track which sent the blood tingling through our veins.

It was not the track of a Polar bear. We should have been somewhat surprised, no doubt, but not greatly excited by that. Neither was it the track of a deer or an Arctic fox. It was only the track of a sledge!

“Is that all?” exclaims the reader. No, that is not all. But, in order that you may understand it better, let me explain.

Fort Dunregan, in which we dwelt, stood more than a thousand miles distant from the utmost verge of civilised life in Canada. We were buried, so to speak, in the heart of the great northern wilderness. Our nearest neighbour lived in an outpost between one and two hundred miles distant, similar to our own in all respects but even more lonely, being in charge of a certain Scotsman named Macnab, whose army of occupation consisted of only six men and two Indian women! The forests around us were not peopled. Those vast solitudes were indeed here and there broken in upon, as it were, by a few families of wandering Red-Indians, who dwelt in movable tents—were here to-day and away to-morrow—but they could not be said to be peopled, except by deer and bears and foxes and kindred spirits.

Of course, therefore, we were far beyond the every day influences of civilised life. We had no newspapers, no mails; no communication whatever, in short, with the outer world except twice in the year. The one occasion was in summer, when a brigade of boats arrived with our outfit of goods for the year’s trade with the few scattered Indians above referred to; the other occasion was in the depth of our apparently interminable winter, when a packet of letters was forwarded from outpost to outpost throughout the land by the agents of the Hudson’s Bay Company which we served.

This half-yearly interval between mails had a double effect on our minds. In the first place, it induced a strange feeling that the great world and all its affairs were things of the past, with which we had little or nothing to do—a sort of dream—and that the little world of our outpost, with its eight or ten men and three or four Indian women, its hunting, and trapping, and firewood-cutting, and fishing, and trading, and small domestic arrangements and dissensions, was the one place of vital importance and interest, before which empires and dynasties and the trifling matter of politics sank into mere insignificance! In the second place, it created an intense longing—a hungering and thirsting—for news of our kindred “at home.”

Our chief, Mr Strang, and our two selves, with another fellow-clerk who was named Spooner, as well as most of our men, were from “the old country,” where we had left fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters—in some cases sweethearts—behind us. It may be conceived then with what anxiety and yearning we looked forward to the periodical break in the weary six months of total silence that had enveloped us. Men in civilised, or even semi-civilised communities, cannot understand this. Convicts on penal servitude for long periods may have some faint notion of it, but even these have periods of literary intercourse more frequently than we had. The reader must just take the statement on trust therefore, that our anxious yearnings were remarkably powerful. What might not have occurred in these six months of dark silence! Who might not have been married, born, laid low by sickness, banished to the ends of the earth like ourselves, or even removed by death!

Is it surprising, then, that we caught our breath and flushed, and that our hearts leaped when we came unexpectedly upon the track of the two men who had dragged news from home for hundreds of miles over the snow? We knew the tracks well. Our intimate acquaintance with every species of

track that was possible in that particular region, rendered a mistake out of the question. There was the step of the leader, who wore a snow-shoe the shape of which, although not unknown, was somewhat unfamiliar to us. There was the print of the sled, or toboggan, which was different in pattern from those used at Dunregan, and there was the footprint of the man in rear, whose snow-shoe also made an unfamiliar impression.

“The packet!” exclaimed Lumley, opening his solemn grey eyes to their widest as he looked up from the track to me.

“At last!” I returned, unconsciously betraying the prolonged state of suspense with which my mind had been afflicted.

“Come along!” said my companion, starting off homeward at a pace that was almost too much for me.

We soon reached the outpost, and there stood the makers of the track which had roused in us so much excitement.

Two strong men, chosen expressly for a duty which required mental endurance and perseverance as well as physical vigour. They stood at the door of the entrance-hall, talking with Mr Strang, the one with his snow-shoes slung over his shoulder on the butt of his gun, the other using the same implements as a rest for his hands, while Spooner, in a state of great excitement, was hastily undoing the lashings of the sled, to get at the precious box which contained “the packet.”

“Well, gentlemen, here it is at last,” said our chief, with a genial smile as we came up.

“Yes, we followed the track immediately we struck it,” said Lumley, stooping to assist Spooner in his work.

We soon had the box carried to our chief’s private room, while the two strangers were had off by our men to their own house, there to be feasted on venison, ptarmigan, salt-pork, fish, and pease-pudding to satiety, and afterwards “pumped” to a state of exhaustion.

I followed our chief, who had a provokingly deliberate way of opening the packet and examining its contents, while my feverish agitation and expectancy increased. There was a humorous twinkle in his eye, I thought, which told of mischievous purpose, while he kept up a murmuring commentary.

“Hm! as I expected—no news from Macnab. What’s this?—ah! The Governor! A voluminous epistle, and—hallo! Lumley’s friends must be fond of him. His packet is the biggest in the box. And Spooner too, not so bad for him. Here, take these to them. Stay—here is a bundle of letters for the men. You’d better deliver these yourself.”

I hesitated, while a mist of great darkness began to descend on my soul.

“Nothing for me, sir?” I asked faintly.

“There seems to be—nothing—stay! what’s this?—why, I thought it was a big book, but, yes, it *is* a packet for you, Mr Maxby—there!”

My heart leaped into my mouth—almost out of it—as I received a thick packet wrapped in newspaper.

Hastening to what was called the clerk’s winter house with these treasures I distributed them, and handed the men’s packet to one of themselves, who was eagerly awaiting it. Then I went to my room and barricaded the door to prevent interruption.

In Bachelors’ Hall, as we stiled our apartments, we had an inveterate habit of practical joking, which, however interesting and agreeable it might be at most times, was in some circumstances rather inconvenient. To guard against it at such times we were in the habit of retiring to our respective dens and barricading the doors, the locks being sometimes incapable of standing the strain brought to bear on them.

On this particular occasion I made my barricade stronger than usual; sat down on my bed and opened the packet from home.

But here I must let the curtain fall. I cannot suppose that the reader, however amiable, will sympathise with the joys and sorrows of an unknown family, interesting though they were to me. I

may state, however, that before I got through the budget it was so late that I turned into bed and read the remainder there. Then, as the fire in the hall-stove sank low, the cold obliged me to put on above my voluminous blankets (we dared not sleep in sheets out there) a thick buffalo robe, which, besides having on the outside the shaggy hair of the animal to which it had belonged, was lined with flannel. Thus nestled into a warm hole, I read on until a shout arrested me and brought me suddenly back from the hills of bonny Scotland to the frozen wilderness.

“I say,” shouted Lumley at the back of the door, which he saluted with a kick, “my sister is married!”

“Poor thing!” said I. “Who to?”

“Open the door.”

“I can’t. I’m in bed.”

“You must.”

“I won’t.”

“No! then here goes.”

He retired as he spoke, and, making a rush, launched himself against my door, which, however, withstood the shock.

“Here, Spooner,” I then heard him say, “lend a hand; let us go at it together.”

They went at it together. The lock gave way; the chest of drawers went spinning to the other side of the room, and Lumley tumbled over Spooner as both fell headlong to the floor.

As this was by no means an unfamiliar mode of entering each other’s rooms, I took no notice of it, but proceeded to inquire about the married sister; and Lumley, sitting down on my bed with Spooner, for neither of them had yet undressed, began to tell me of home and friends with as much eagerness as if I had been a member of both families. Young Spooner interrupted Lumley now and then when a touch of coincidence struck him with reference to his own family affairs, and I could not resist the pleasure of occasionally making some such remark as, “How odd! that’s very like what happened to my little brother Bob,” etcetera, whereupon Spooner would immediately become excited and draw a parallel more or less striking in regard to his own kindred and so we went on far into the night, until we got our several families mixed up to such an extent that it became almost impossible to disentangle them; for, being three families, you know, we became inextricably confused as to which was which, though each was perfectly clear in regard to his own! Thus, to me, Jane Lumley became confused with Janet Spooner, so that Janet Lumley and Jane Spooner were always tripping over each other in my brain, while my dear cousin Maggie Maxby became a Maggie Spooner to Lumley, and a Maggie Lumley to Spooner, and to each sometimes a Janet or a Jane respectively. If the reader will multiply into this question two mothers and three fathers, four brothers and six sisters, besides numberless aunts, uncles, and cousins, male and female, he will easily perceive how between mental perplexity and a tendency to slumber, we at last gave the matter up in a sort of jovial despair.

We were startled suddenly from this condition by a crash and an exceedingly sharp and bitter cry.

It must be remarked here, that, in order to subdue King Frost in those northern strongholds of his, we had, besides double doors and double windows and porches, an enormous cast-iron stove from the famous Carron foundry. It stood in the centre of our hall, so that its genial favours might be distributed with equal justice to the various sleeping-rooms that opened out of the hall all round. From this stove an iron pipe arose, and, turning at a right angle when within a couple of feet of the ceiling, proceeded to the chimney at the upper end of the hall. When the thermometer stood much below zero, we were accustomed to raise the stove and part of its pipe to a dull-red heat, which had the effect of partially melting the contents of the water-jugs in our bedrooms, and of partially roasting the knees of our trousers. To keep this stove up to its work was the duty of an Indian youth, whom we styled Salamander, because he seemed to be impervious to heat. He was equally so to cold. When I first went to Dunregan I used to pity Salamander, on hearing him every morning enter our hall with

a gust of air that seemed cold enough to freeze a walrus, and proceed to strike a light and kindle our fire. My own nose, and sometimes an eye, was all that protruded from the buffalo robe at such times. But Salamander never shivered, and always grinned, from which I came to understand that my pity was misplaced. About nine o'clock each night he left us to look after the great Carron stove ourselves, and we were all pretty good stokers. Self-interest kept us up to duty. Sometimes we overdid it, raising the dull-red to brightness now and then.

On this particular occasion, in the exuberance of his feelings, Lumley, before bursting into my room, had heaped on as much dry wood as the stove could hold. It chanced to be exceedingly resinous wood. He also opened the blow-hole to its utmost extent. Being congregated in my bedroom, as I have described, deeply engaged in eager comments and family reminiscences, we failed to observe that the great Carron stove roared like a wrathful furnace, that it changed from a dull to a bright red in its anger, and eventually became white with passion. As "evil communications" have a tendency to corrupt, the usually innocent pipe became inflamed. It communicated the evil to the chimney, which straightway caught fire, belched forth smoke and flames, and cast a ruddy glare over the usually pallid snow. This chanced to meet the eye of Salamander as he gazed from his "bunk" in the men's house; caused him to bounce up and rush out—for, having a taste for sleeping in his clothes, he was always ready for action—burst open our door with a crash, and rudely dispel our confusedly pleasant intercourse with the exceedingly sharp and bitter cry before mentioned.

"Hallo!" shouted Lumley and Spooner simultaneously, as they bounded rather than rose from my bed. Before they had crossed the threshold I was out of bed and into my trousers.

There is nothing like the cry of "Fire!" for producing prompt action—or paralysis! Also for inducing imbecile stupidity. I could not find my moccasins! Thought is quick—quicker than words. Amputation at the knee joints stared me in the face for a certainty if I went out with naked feet. In desperation I seized my capote and thrust both feet into the sleeves, with some hazy intention of tying a knot on each wrist to protect the toes. Happily I espied my moccasins at the moment, pulled them on—left shoe on right foot, of course—and put the coat to its proper use.

By this time Salamander, contrary to all traditions of Indian stoicism, was yelling about the fort with his eyes a flame and his hair on end. The men were out in a few seconds with a ladder, and swarmed up to the roof of our house without any definite notion as to what they meant to do. Mr Strang was also out, smothered in winter garments, and with an enormous Makinaw blanket over all. He was greatly excited, though the most self-possessed among us—as most chiefs are, or ought to be.

"Water! water!" shouted the men from the roof.

A keen breeze was blowing from what seemed the very heart of King Frost's dominion, and snow-drift fine as dust and penetrating as needles, was swirling about in the night-air.

Water! where was water to come from? The river was frozen almost to the bottom. Ice six feet thick covered the lakes and ponds. The sound of trickling water had not been heard for months. It had become an ancient memory. Water! why, it cost our cook's assistant a full hour every day to cut through the result of one night's frost in the water-hole before he could reach the water required for daily use, and what he did obtain had to be slowly dragged to the fort by that slowest of creatures, an ox. Nevertheless there *was* water. In the warmest corner of the kitchen—at that hour about zero—there stood a water-barrel.

"Run, cook—fetch a bucketful!" cried our chief.

Cook, who had "lost his head," obediently ran, seized a big earthenware jug, dipped it into the barrel, and smashed it to atoms on a cake of thick ice! This had the effect of partially recovering his head for him. He seized an axe, shattered the cake, caught up a bucket, dipped it full and rushed out spilling half its contents as he ran. The spillings became icicles before they reached the flaming chimney, but the frost, keen as it was, could not quite solidify the liquid in so short a space of time.

Blondin, the principal bearer of the winter packet who was a heroic man and chief actor in this scene, received the half-empty bucket.

“Bah!” he exclaimed, tossing bucket as well as water contemptuously down the wide chimney. “Bring shuvill, an’ blunkits.”

Blondin was a French-Canadian half-caste, and not a good linguist.

A shovel was thrown up to him. He seized it and shovelled volumes of snow from the house-top into the chimney. A moment later and two blankets were thrown up. Blondin spread one over the flames. It was shrivelled up instantly. He stuffed down the remains and spread the second blanket over them, while he shouted for a third. The third came, and, another bucket of water arriving at the same moment, with a large mass of snow detached from the roof, the whole were thrust down the chimney *en masse*, the flames were quenched and the house was saved.

During this exciting scene, I had begun to realise the great danger of fire in the chimney of a wooden house, and, with the aid of my comrades, had been throwing the contents of Bachelors’ Hall out into the snow. We now ceased this process, and began to carry them back again, while the men crowded round the iron author of all the mischief to warm their half-frozen bodies. I now observed for the first time that Blondin had a black patch on the end of his nose. It was a handsome feature usually, but at that time it was red, swelled, and what may be termed blobby.

“What’s the matter with it, Blondin?” I asked.

“My noz was froz,” he replied curtly.

“You’d better have it looked to, or it’ll be worse than froz, my man,” said Lumley.

Blondin laughed and went off to attend to his nose in the men’s house, accompanied by the others, while we set to work to clean ourselves and our abode. Thereafter, with moderated fire, we again got under our buffalo robes, where we spent the remainder of a disturbed night in thinking and dreaming about the thrilling contents of the winter packet.

## Chapter Three. Deeper Desolation

Eight months of winter! Those who have read and entered into the spirit of Arctic voyagers, may have some idea of what that means, but none save he or she who has had experience of it can fully understand it.

To us who dwelt at the little outpost in the Great Nor'-west, snow and ice had become so familiar—such matter-of-course conditions of existence—that green fields and flowers were a mere reminiscence of the remote past. The scent of a rose was a faded memory—indeed the scent of anything belonging to the vegetable kingdom had not once saluted our nostrils during those eight months. Pure white became one of the chief and most impressive facts of our existence in regard to colour, if we may so call it—white, varying in tone, of course, to pearly grey. Cold, of varied intensity, was the chief modifier of our sensations. Happily light was also a potent factor in our experiences—bright, glowing sunshine and blue skies contrasted well with the white and grey, and helped to counteract the cold; while pure air invigorated our frames and cheered our spirits.

“I tell you what, boys,” said Lumley, one afternoon as he entered the hall with gun and snow-shoes on shoulder, and flung down a bag full of ptarmigan, “winter is drawing to a close at last. I felt my deerskin coat quite oppressive to-day; does any one know what the thermometer stood at this morning?”

“Yes, it was twenty-two above zero,” answered Spooner, who was attempting to smoke a pipe beside the stove; “I went to register it just after breakfast.”

“I thought so—only ten below freezing point; why, it feels quite summery, and the snow has a softness that I have not noticed since last autumn. I hope dinner will soon be ready, for I'm very sharp set. Why, Spooner, what are you making such faces for?”

“Am I making faces?” said Spooner, blushing and trying to look unconcerned.

“Of course you are, a marmozette monkey with the toothache could scarcely make worse.”

Spooner attempted to laugh, and I felt it difficult to refrain from joining him, for I knew well the cause of his faces. He was the youngest of us three and exceedingly anxious to imitate Lumley, who was unfortunately a great smoker; but Spooner, like myself, had been born with a dislike to smoke—especially tobacco smoke—and a liability to become sick when he indulged in the pipe. Hence, whilst foolish ambition induced him to smoke, outraged nature protested; and between the two the poor fellow had a bad time of it. He had a good deal of determination about him, however, and persevered.

The dinner-bell rang at the moment, and put an end to further badinage.

Lumley was right. Spring was in truth at hand, and a host of new anticipations began from that day to crowd upon our minds.

About the same time there came another break in the monotony of outpost life which had, if possible, a more powerful and exciting influence on us than the arrival of the winter packet.

Now at this point I must beg the reader's pardon for asking him to go with me to a still more desolate and remote outpost than our own. Between one and two hundred miles nearer to the pole the little post of Muskrat House lay under a beetling cliff, near the banks of an affluent of the great Saskatchewan river. It was in charge of Peter Macnab, before mentioned, who, in command of his army of six men and two women, held the post against all comers—the chief comers there being the North Wind and Jack Frost.

Poor Macnab was a jovial and sociable Scottish Highlander, who had been condemned to worse than Siberian banishment because of being one of the most active, enterprising, and pushing fellows in the service of the Fur-Traders. His ability to manage men and Indians, and to establish new trading-posts, excelled that of his fellows. He regarded it as a complimentary though trying circumstance

when Mr Strang sent him to establish the post which was named by him Muskrat House, but he faced the duty—as he faced everything—like a man; did his best for his employers, and made the most of the situation.

But it is not easy for even the strongest mind and lightest heart to be jovial when buried for eight months in snow more than twelve hundred miles beyond the influences of civilised life; and it is hard to be sociable with six uneducated men and two Indian women for one's companions. Macnab tried it, however, and was in a measure successful. He had his Bible with him—the one given him long ago by his mother—and a bound volume of Chambers's Edinburgh Journal, and three copies of the *Times* newspaper nearly two years old, and a few numbers of an American paper called the *Picayune*.

With these materials he set to work—after each day's labour of water-drawing, firewood-cutting, and trapping was done—to educate his army in religion, politics, political economy, and the varied ramifications of social life. He had intelligent and grateful scholars. If they had not been so, Macnab would at all events have made them obedient pupils, for he was a physically large and powerful man—and might was unavoidably right in those regions!

Still, with all his energy and resources, the genial Highlander began, towards the end of winter, to feel an intense longing for a little intercourse with his equals.

Returning one night to the solitude of his little room, as was his wont, after a couple of hours' intercourse with his men in their own house, he sat down before his stove and addressed it thus:—

“It won't last long, I fear. My brain is gradually turning into something like mashed potatoes, and my heart into a tinder-box, ready enough to catch fire, but with neither flint nor steel to light it! The Indians won't be here for many weeks, and when they do come what good can I get from or do to them? Wow! wow! it's terribly slow work. Oh! Jessie, Jessie, my dear, what would I not give if I only had *you* here!”

Lest the reader should suppose Macnab to be a love-sick swain, I may remark here that Jessie was a sister whom he had left on the shores of Loch Ness, and with whom he kept up a vigorous biennial correspondence.

As the stove made no reply, he continued his address.

“If I only had a few books now, it wouldn't be so hard to bear. To be sure, the Bible is a great resource—a blessed resource; but you see I want something light now and then. A laugh, you know, seems to be absolutely needful at times. Why, now I think of it, we wouldn't have been given the power to laugh if it hadn't been necessary, and the last hearty laugh I had was, let me see—that time three months ago, when my long-nosed interpreter mistook a dead mouse in the soup—ha! ha!—for a bit of pemmican, and only found out his mistake when the tail got between his teeth!”

The solitary man burst into peals of laughter at the reminiscence, and then, becoming suddenly grave, looked slowly round the room.

“If I could only have an echo of that,” he resumed, “from somebody else! Well, well, I'll just go and have another chat with Jessie.”

So saying, Macnab rose, drew a small table near to the stove, laid upon it a very large desk made by himself of pine-wood, and, placing a sheet of paper thereon, began to write.

The sheet of paper merits notice. Like the man who wrote, it was extremely large, being several sizes bigger than foolscap, and very loosely ruled. As I have said, communication with the outer world being possible only twice in the year, our Highlander resolved, as usual, to make the most of his opportunities. Hence he not only used the largest paper which the company provided, but filled up several such sheets with the smallest possible writing, so that Jessie might ultimately get something worth having. It is but justice to add that Macnab wrote not only a very small but a remarkably clear and legible hand—a virtue which I earnestly commend to correspondents in general, to those of them at least who wish their epistles to meet with thorough appreciation.

It was late when our solitaire completed that evening's addition to his already voluminous letter, and he was thinking about going to bed when a stamping in the porch outside announced that a visitor was clearing the snow from his moccasins.

"One o' the men forgot something, I fancy," muttered Macnab to himself.

The latch was lifted, for locks were not deemed necessary in those regions, and the door opening slowly disclosed the copper-hued visage and tall bony figure of a very powerful and handsome native of the soil—perhaps I should rather say—of the snow!

"Hallo! hey! come in," shouted Macnab, giving way to a gush of his pent-up social feelings; "why it's good for sore eyes to see a new face, even a red one. What cheer? what cheer? Where d'ye hail from? Come in, come in, and welcome!"

The hearty Highlander spoke the Indian tongue fluently, but in the excitement of his feelings mingled it with a good deal of English and an occasional growl of expressive Gaelic.

The Indian, whose horned cap and person were well powdered with snow, stepped slowly over the threshold, extending his hand to the Highlander's grasp, and looking cautiously round with rolling black eyes, as if he half expected a dynamite explosion to follow his entrance. His garments bore evidence of rough usage. Holes in his moccasins permitted portions of the duffle socks underneath to wander out. Knots on his snow-shoe lines and netting told of a long rough journey, and the soiled, greasy condition of his leathern capote spoke of its having been much used not only as a garment by day but as a shirt by night.

Placing his gun and snow-shoes in a corner, after solemnly responding "watchee, watchee," to Macnab's "what cheer," the red-man seated himself on the floor beside the stove, with silent disregard of the chair that his host politely offered.

It is the custom of North American Indians—on arriving at an establishment—to withhold the most interesting portion of what they may have to communicate until after they have had a pipe, or a feed, and have answered the questions put on the less interesting objects of their visits. Being well aware of this trait of character, Macnab forebore to question too closely this fine-looking Indian until he had well thawed and smoked himself. Ultimately, however, he brought him to the point.

To the north-westward of Muskrat House, many long days' march, he said (of course in his native tongue) there was a grand country full of fine furs and fine people, who found it a very long journey indeed to come all the way to Muskrat House to trade their furs. Would his white father go and build a house there, near Lake Wichikagan, and shoot and fish, and trade?—waugh!

To which Macnab replied that he was glad to hear about the plenty of furs and the friendly natives and the fine country, and that he would take the matter into his consideration—waugh!

To this the red-man responded "ho!" and then "how!"—not interrogatively but interjectionally—with much gravity.

That night Macnab took the matter into consideration with his wonted vigour, and came to the conclusion that it was of sufficient importance to warrant a visit on his part to headquarters—Dunregan being headquarters to Muskrat House. Accordingly, he went to the men's house and introduced the stranger, whose name in the Indian tongue signified Big Otter. The men received him with as much joy as if he had been an angel of light.

"Get a sled and four of the best dogs ready to start by daybreak to-morrow," said Macnab to one of his men, "and have breakfast sharp," he added, turning to the cook. "You'll go with me to Dunregan, won't you, Big Otter?"

Big Otter was ready for anything at a moment's notice!

When daylight glimmered faintly in the east the following morning, Macnab sat at his table devouring venison steaks, pancakes, and tea. Big Otter sat opposite to him, having condescended to use a chair in order to be on a level with the table. The chair gave him much anxiety, however. He evidently feared to fall off or upset it, for, on rising to reach some food opposite, he had tilted it back, and received a tremendous though unacknowledged start from the crash that followed.

Half an hour later, Macnab, having left his interpreter in charge of the establishment, was beating the track on snow-shoes through the forest, his four wolfish-looking dogs following with a sled-load of provisions and bedding, and Big Otter bringing up the rear.

The day turned out to be bright calm, and frosty. It was in thorough unison with Macnab's feelings, for the near prospect of soon meeting with men somewhat like himself produced a calm and bright condition of mind which he had not experienced for many a day. It is true that the frost can scarcely be said to have represented the Highlander's temperament; but if there be truth in the saying that extremes meet, it may be admissible to say that intense cold, which had the effect of expanding water into ice so that it rent the very rocks, might be appropriately compared with that intense warmth of Macnab's feelings which had the effect of all but bursting his very bosom! There was not a breath of air stirring when the two men passed from the forest, and struck out upon the marble surface of the great lake which lay at the distance of about two miles from their establishment. The sun was rising at the time on the horizon of the ocean-like lake, gloriously bright and cheering, though with no appreciable warmth in its beams. Diamonds innumerable glittered on the frosted willow-boughs; the snow under the travellers' tread gave forth that peculiar squeak, or chirping sound, which is indicative of extreme Arctic frost, and the breath from their mouths came out like the white puffs of a locomotive, settling on their breasts in thick hoar-frost, and silvering such of their locks as straggled out beyond the margin of their caps. There was no life at first in the quiet scene, but, just as they passed through the last clump of bushes on the margin of the lake, a battalion of ptarmigan, seemingly a thousand strong, burst with startling whirr from under their very feet, and skimmed away like a snow-cloud close to the ground, while an Arctic fox, aroused from his lair by the noise, slunk quietly off under the false belief that he had not been seen.

The rise of the ptarmigan had another effect, on which the travellers had not counted. The four wolfish dogs were so startled by the whirr, that their spirits were roused to the mischievous point. Up to that moment they had been toiling and panting through the soft snow in the woods. They had now emerged upon the hard, wind-beaten snow of the open ground and the lake. The sudden freedom in the action of their limbs, coupled with the impulse to their spirits, caused the team to bound forward with one accord. The sled swung round against Macnab's legs, and overturned him; and the tail-line was jerked out of Big Otter's grasp. In a vain effort to recover it, that solemn savage trod, with his right, on his own left snow-shoe, and plunged into a willow bush. Thus freed altogether, the dogs went away with railway speed over the hard snow, ever urged to more and more frantic exertions by the wild boundings of the comparatively light sled behind them.

"After them, lad!" shouted Macnab, as he cast off his snow-shoes and gave chase.

The Indian followed suit in desperate haste, for his receptive mind at once perceived the all but hopeless nature of a chase after four long-legged dogs, little removed from genuine wolves, over a hard level course that extended away to the very horizon.

Happily, there was a small island not far from the shore of the lake, on which grew a few willow bushes whose tops protruded above the overwhelming snow, and whose buds formed the food of the ptarmigan before mentioned. Towards this island the dogs headed in their blind race just as the white man and the red began to regret the comparative slowness of human legs.

"Good luck!" exclaimed Macnab.

"Waugh!" responded his companion.

There was ground for both remarks, for, a few minutes later, the dogs plunged into the bushes and the sled stuck fast and held them.

This was a trifling incident in itself, but it shook out of the travellers any remains of lethargy that might have clung to them from the slumbers of the previous night, and caused them to face the tramp that lay before them with energy.

"Oh, you rascals!" growled Macnab, as he went down on his knees beside the leading dog to disentangle the traces which had been twisted up in the abrupt stoppage.

I know not whether those dogs, being intellectually as well as physically powerful beyond their fellows, understood the uncomplimentary term and lost their tempers, but certain it is that the words were no sooner uttered than the hindmost dog made an unprovoked assault on the dog in front of it. Of course the latter defended itself. The dog next to that, being probably pugnacious, could not resist the temptation to join in, and the leader, feeling no doubt that it was “better to be out of the world than out of the fashion,” fell upon the rest with remarkable fury. Thus the sled, traces, and dogs, instantly became a tumultuous mass of yelling, gasping, heaving, and twisting confusion.

Big Otter carried a short, heavy whip. Without uttering a word, he quietly proceeded to flog the mass into subjection. It was a difficult duty to perform, but Big Otter was strong and persevering. He prevailed after some time. The mass was disentangled; the subdued dogs went humbly forward, and the journey, having been thus auspiciously begun, was continued until nightfall.

They had left the lake and Muskrat House some thirty miles behind them, and had got into a thick and profoundly still part of the great wilderness, when the waning light warned them to encamp.

## Chapter Four. The Winter Journey

It was not long before our travellers had a large space cleared of snow, its floor spread with pine-branches, a roaring fire kindled, a couple of ptarmigan roasting and the tea-kettle bubbling, while the dogs in the background solaced themselves with raw birds to their heart's content.

Then the red-man and the white man smoked a friendly pipe. They would probably have smoked even if it had been an unfriendly pipe!

"I wonder," said Macnab, who was apt to become speculative and philosophical over his pipe after supper, "I wonder if dogs ever envy us our pipes? You look so comfortable, Big Otter, as you sit there with half-shut eyes letting the smoke trickle from your mouth and nose, that I can't help thinking they must feel envious. I'm sure that I should if I were not smoking!"

The Indian, who was neither a speculator nor a philosopher—though solemn enough for either or both—replied, "Waugh!"

"Very true," returned the Highlander, "I have no doubt your opinion is quite correct, though not as clearly put as might be wished. Have you ever been at Fort Dunregan?"

"Once when Big Otter was a little boy, he stood beside the Great River," answered the Indian, gravely; "but the white man had no tent there at that time."

"The white man has got some pretty big tents there now—made of wood most of 'em," returned Macnab. "In a few days you shall judge for yourself, if all goes well."

The red-man smoked over this remark in silence for a considerable time, evidently engaged in profound thought. He was one of those children of nature whose brains admit ideas slowly, and who, when they are admitted, turn them round and round and inside out without much apparent advantage.

At last he looked earnestly at his companion and asked—"Is there fire-water at Fort Dunregan?"

"Well, no—I believe not. At least there is none for red-men. Why do you ask? Did you ever taste fire-water?"

The Indian's dark eyes seem to gleam with unwonted light as he replied in tones more solemn than usual:—

"Yes. Once—only once—a white brother gave some fire-water to Big Otter."

"Humph!" ejaculated Macnab, "and what did you think of it!"

"Waugh!" exclaimed the red-man, sending a cloud out of his mouth with such energy that it seemed like a little cannon-shot, while he glared at his friend like a superannuated owl. "Big Otter thought that he was in the happy hunting-grounds with his fathers; his heart was so light and his limbs were so strong, but that was only a dream—he was still in this world. Then he took a little more fire-water, and the dream became a reality! He was away with his fathers on the shining plains; he chased the deer with the lightness of a boy and the strength of a bear. He fought, and his foes fell before his strong arm like snowflakes on the river, but he scalped them not. He could not find them—they were gone. Big Otter was so strong that he had knocked both their lives and bodies into the unknown! He saw his father and his mother—and—his wife and the little one who—died. But he could not speak to them, for the foes came back again, and he fought and took some more fire-water to make him fight better; then the world went on fire, the stars came down from the sky like snow when the wind is high. The Big Otter flew up into the air, and then—forgot—"

"Forgot what?" asked Macnab, much interested in his red friend's idea of intoxication.

"Forgot everything," replied the Indian, with a look of solemn perplexity.

"Well, I don't wonder; you must have had a good swig, apparently. How did ye feel next morning?"

If the Indian's looks were serious before, they became indescribably solemn now.

“Big Otter felt,” he replied with bated breath, “like bags of shot—heavy like the great stones. He could scarcely move; all his joints were stiff. Food was no longer pleasant to his tongue. When he tried to swallow, it would not remain, but came forth again. He felt a wish to drink up the river. His head had an evil spirit inside which squeezed the brain and tried to burst open the skull. His eyes, also, were swelled up so that he could hardly see, and his nose was two times more big than the day before.”

“That must have been an awful size, Big Otter, considering the size of it by nature! And what d’ye think was the cause of it all?”

As this question involved thought, the Indian smoked his pipe in silence for some time, staring for inspiration into the fire.

“It must have been,” he at length replied, “hunting with his fathers before the right time had come. Big Otter was not dead, and he chased the deer too much, perhaps, or fought too much. It may be that, having only his earth-body, he ate too much.”

“Don’t ye think it’s just possible,” suggested Macnab, “that, having only your earth-body, you *drank* too much?”

“Waugh!” replied the red-man. Then, after a few minutes’ devotion to the pipe, he added, “Big Otter would like very much to taste the fire-water again.”

“It’s well for you, my boy,” returned the other, “that you can’t get it in these regions, for if you could you’d soon be in the happy hunting-grounds (or the other place) without your earth-body.”

At this point the Highlander became more earnest, and treated his companion to what would have passed in civilised lands for a fair temperance lecture, in which he sought to describe graphically the evils of strong drink. To this the Indian listened with the most intense attention and an owlsh expression, making no audible comment whatever—with the exception, now and then, of an emphatic “Waugh!” but indicating his interest by the working of his features and the glittering of his great eyes. Whether the reasoning of Macnab had much influence at that time could not be ascertained, for he was yet in the middle of one of his most graphic anecdotes when the Indian’s owlsh eyes shut with a suddenness that was quite startling, and he roused himself just in time to prevent his chin from dropping on his chest.

“Waugh!” he exclaimed with a slightly-confused look.

“Just so,” replied Macnab with a laugh, “and now, boy, we’ll turn in, for it strikes me we’re going to have warmish weather, and if so, we shall have to make the most of our time.”

Soon the blankets were spread; the fire was replenished with mighty logs; the travellers lay down side by side and in a few minutes snored in concert; the flames leaped upwards, and the sparks, entangling themselves on the snow-encrusted branches of bush and tree, gleamed there for an instant, or, escaping, flew gaily away into the wintry sky.

While the two men were sleeping, a change came over the scene—a slow, gentle, scarce perceptible change, which, however, had a powerful influence on the prospects of the sleepers. The sky became overcast; the temperature, which had been down at arctic depth for many months, suddenly rose to that of temperate climes, and snow began to fall—not in the small sharp particles to which the fur-traders of the great northern wilderness are accustomed, but in the broad, heavy flakes that one often sees in England. Softly, silently, gently they fell, like the descent of a sweet influence—but steadily, persistently, continuously, until every object in nature became smothered in the soft white garment. Among other objects the two sleepers were buried.

The snow began by powdering them over. Had any one been there to observe the process, he would have seen by the bright light of the camp-fire that the green blankets in which they were wrapt became piebald first; then assumed a greyish-green colour, which speedily changed into a greenish-grey, and finally into a pure white. The two sleepers might thus have represented those figures in chiselled marble on the tombs of crusaders, had it not been that they lay doubled up, for warmth—perhaps also for comfort—with their knees at their chins, instead of flat on their backs with their

hands pressed together. By degrees the correct outline of their forms became an incorrect outline, and gradually more and more rotund—suggesting the idea that the buried ones were fat.

As the night wore on the snow accumulated on them until it lay several inches deep. Still they moved not. Strong, tired and healthy men are not easily moved. The fire of course sank by degrees until it reached that point where it failed to melt the snow; then it was quickly smothered out and covered over. The entire camp was also buried; the tin kettle being capped with a knob peculiarly its own, and the snow-shoes and other implements having each their appropriate outline, while some hundredweights, if not tons, of the white drapery gathered on the branches overhead. It was altogether an overwhelming state of things, and the only evidence of life in all the scene was the little hole in front of each slumberer's nose, out of which issued intermittent puffs of white vapour.

So the night passed by and the morning dawned, and the wintry sun arose like a red-hot cannon ball. Then Macnab awoke with a start and sat up with an effort.

“Hallo!” was his first exclamation, as he tried to clear his eyes, then he muttered something in Gaelic which, being incomprehensible, I cannot translate, although the worthy man has many a time since the day of which I write tried to explain it to me!

It may have been his action, or it may have been indignant northern fairies, I know not, but certain it is that the Gaelic was instantly followed by an avalanche of snow from the branch over the Highlander's head, which knocked him down and reburied him. It also knocked Big Otter up and drew forth the inevitable “Waugh!”

“Humph!” said Macnab, on clearing himself a second time, “I was half afraid of this. We've got our work cut out for us.”

The Indian replied not, but proceeded to light the fire and prepare breakfast, while his companion cleared the camp of some of its snow. The wolfish dogs took a lively interest in these proceedings, but lent no assistance beyond wagging their tails, either in approval or in anticipation of breakfast.

Of course breakfast was a repetition of the previous supper, and was soon disposed of both by men and dogs. Then the latter were harnessed to their sledge, the snow-shoes were put on, and the journey was resumed—Macnab manfully leading the way.

And let not the reader imagine that this leadership involved little or no manhood. Northern snow-shoes are about five feet long, and twelve or fifteen inches broad. The netting with which the frames are filled up—somewhat like the bottom of a cane chair—allows fine well-frozen snow to fall through it like dust and the traveller, sinking it may be only a few inches in old well-settled-down snow, progresses with ease. But when a heavy fall such as I have described takes place, especially in spring, and the weather grows comparatively warm, the traveller's circumstances change greatly for the worse. The new snow being light permits him to sink deep into it—perhaps eight or ten inches—at every step; being also soft, that which falls upon the shoes cannot pass through the netting, but sticks there, giving him many extra pounds weight to lift as he goes heavily along. Add to this that his thick winter garb becomes oppressive in mild weather, and you will perceive that Macnab's duties as beater of the track were severe.

At first their progress was very slow, for it was through the thick woods, where fallen trees and bushes obstructed them as well as deep snow, but towards noon they came out on a more open country—in summer a swamp; at that time a frozen plain—and the travelling improved, for a slight breeze had already begun to make an impression on the new snow in exposed places.

“Now, Big Otter,” said Macnab, coming to a halt, “we'll have some grub here, and then you will take a turn in front.”

The Indian was ready for anything. So were the dogs—especially for “grub.” Indeed it was obvious that they understood the meaning of that word, for when Macnab uttered it they wagged their tails and cocked their ears.

It was a cold dinner, if I may describe the meal by that name. The work was too hard, and the daylight in which to do it too brief, to admit of needless delay. A frozen bird thrown to each of the dogs, and a junk of equally frozen pemmican cut out of the bag with a hatchet for the travellers, formed the repast. The latter ate it sitting on a snow-wreath. They, however, had the advantage of their canine friends in the matter of hard biscuits, of which they each consumed two as a sort of cold pudding. Then they resumed the march and plodded heavily on till near sunset, when they again selected a suitable spot in the woods, cleared away the snow, and encamped as before.

“It’s hard work,” exclaimed Macnab with a Celtic sigh, as he sipped his tea that night in the mellow light of the log fire.

“Waugh! Big Otter has seen harder work,” returned the Indian.

“No doubt ye have, an’ so have I,” returned Macnab; “I mind, once, when away on a snow-shoe trip on the St. Lawrence gulf, bein’ caught by a regular thaw when the snow turned into slush, an’ liftin’ the snow-shoes was like to tear one’s legs out o’ their sockets, not to mention the skinning of your toes wi’ the snow-shoe lines, an’ the wet turning your moccasins into something like tripe. Yes, it might be worse, as you say. Now, boy, I’ll turn in.”

The next day travelling was no better, and on the next again it became worse, for although the temperature was still below the freezing point, snow continued to fall all day as well as all night, so that our travellers and their dogs became like animated snowballs, and beating the track became an exhausting labour.

But difficulties cannot finally stop, though they may retard, a “Nor’-wester.” On the sixth day, however, they met with a foe who had power to lay a temporary check on their advance. On the night of the fifth day out, another change of temperature took place. A thermometer, had they carried one, would probably have registered from ten to twenty below zero of Fahrenheit. This, however, was so familiar to them that they rather liked the change, and heaped up fresh logs on the roaring fire to counteract the cold; but when a breeze sprang up and began to blow hard, they did not enjoy it so much, and when the breeze increased to a gale, it became serious; for one cannot face intense cold during a gale without the risk of being frost-bitten. In the shelter of the woods it was all right, but when, towards noon, they came out on an extended plain where the wild winds were whirling the wilder snow in blinding drifts, they halted and looked inquiringly at each other.

“Shall we try it?” asked Macnab.

The Indian shook his head and looked solemn.

“It’s a pity to give in without—”

A snow-drift caught the Highlander full in the mouth and literally shut him up! The effect was not to subdue, but to arouse.

“Yes,” he said in a species of calm ferocity, when the gale allowed him the power of utterance, “we’ll go on.”

He went on, followed by the obedient native and the unhappy dogs, but he had not taken half a dozen steps when he tripped over a concealed rock and broke a snow-shoe. To walk with a broken snow-shoe is impossible. To repair one is somewhat difficult and takes time. They were compelled, therefore, to re-enter the sheltering woods and encamp.

“You’re better at mending than I am,” said Macnab to the Indian. “Set to work on the shoe when the camp is dug out, an’ I’ll go cut some firewood.”

Cutting firewood is not only laborious, but attended with danger, and that day ill-fortune seemed to have beset the Highlander; for he had barely cut half a dozen logs, when his axe glanced off a knot and struck deep into the calf of his left leg.

A shout brought Big Otter to his side. The Indian was well used to such accidents. He bound up the wound securely, and carried his comrade into camp on his back. But now Macnab was helpless. He not only could not walk, but there was no hope of his being able to do so for weeks to come.

“Lucky for us we brought the dogs,” he remarked when the operation was completed.

“Waugh!” exclaimed the Indian by way of assent, while he busied himself in preparing food.

It was indeed lucky, for if they had dragged the provision-sled themselves, as Macnab had once thought of doing, it would have fallen to Big Otter’s lot to haul his comrade during the remainder of the journey. As it was, the dogs did it, and in the doing of it, despite the red-man’s anxious and constant care, many a severe shake, and bump, and capsize in the snow did the unfortunate man receive before that journey came to a close. He bore it all, however, with the quiet stoicism characteristic of the race from which he sprang.

## Chapter Five. The Wounded Man

It is needful now to return to Fort Dunregan.

The long winter is not yet past, but there are symptoms, as I have said, that it is coming to a close. Snow and ice are still indeed the prevailing characteristic of the region, but the air is no longer intensely cold. On the contrary, a genial warmth prevails, inducing the inhabitants to discard flannel-lined leathern capotes and fur caps for lighter garments. There is a honeycombed look about the snow-drifts, which gives them an aged appearance; and, above all, there is an occasional dropping of water—yes, actual water—from the points of huge icicles! This is such an ancient memory that we can scarce believe our senses. We sniff, too, as we walk about; for there are scents in the air—old familiar smells of earth and vegetation—which we had begun to fancy we had almost forgotten.

The excitement caused by the arrival of the winter packet had also by that time passed almost out of memory, and we had sunk back into that calm state of patient waiting which may probably be familiar to the convict who knows that some months of monotonous existence still lie before him; for, not until the snow and ice should completely clear away and the summer be pretty well advanced could we hope for the blessed sight of a new face and the cheering sound of a fresh human voice. Of course we had the agreeable prospect of hearing ere long the voices of wild-fowl in their noisy northern flight, but such a prospect was not sufficient to satisfy poor secluded humanity.

“Oh that I were a bird!” exclaimed Spooner, one morning as we were seated round the Carron stove in our hall.

“No need to wish that,” said Lumley, “for you’re a goose already!”

“Well, I’d even consent to be a real goose,” continued Spooner, “if I could only thereby use my wings to fly away over the snowy wilderness and alight in my old home.”

“What a surprise you’d give them if you did!” said Lumley, “especially if you came down with your ruffled feathers as clumsily as you tumbled into the saw-pit the other day when—”

He stopped, for at that moment I said “Hush!” and held up a finger.

“Sleigh-bells!” exclaimed Spooner, with a catch of his breath.

“Nothing new in that,” said Lumley: “we hear them every day.”

“Nothing new,” I retorted, “to your unmusical ear, but these bells are not *our* bells—listen!”

I started up as I spoke, flung open the outer door, and we all listened intently.

Clear and pleasant they rang, like the music of a sweet new song. We all gave a shout, clapped on our caps, and ran out to the fort gate. There an almost new sensation thrilled us, for we beheld a team of dogs coming up weary and worn out of the wilderness, preceded by a gaunt yet majestic Indian, whose whole aspect—haggard expression of countenance, soiled and somewhat tattered garments, and weary gait—betokened severe exhaustion. On the sled, drawn by four lanky dogs, we could see the figure of a man wrapped in blankets and strapped to the conveyance.

“Who *can* it be?” exclaimed Lumley, as he hastened out to meet the new arrivals.

“A sick man from somewhere,” suggested Spooner.

“Perhaps the governor,” said I, “on an unexpected tour of inspection.”

As we drew near we could see that the recumbent figure waved a hand and cheered.

“Macnab,” said I, as the familiar voice struck my ear.

“Ill—dying!” gasped the anxious Spooner.

“No dying man ever cheered like that!” cried Lumley, “except a hero of romance in the hour of death and victory!”

A few seconds more and the matter was put at rest, while we warmly shook the hearty and genial Highlander by both hands.

“Help me out, boys,” he said; “I’m tired o’ this sled, and think I can do the little remaining bit o’ the journey on foot with your help.”

We disentangled him from the sledge and set him on his feet.

“Hold on, Lumley,” he said, with a smile on his haggard and unshaven face, “I want to embrace you, like the Frenchmen. There—my arm round your neck—so. Now, Max, I want to embrace you likewise wi’ the other arm. I’ve grown awful affectionate in my old age. You are rather short, Max, for a good crutch, but you’re better than nothing. You see, I’ve only got one good leg.”

“But what has happened to the other—when, how, and where?” we exclaimed in chorus.

Macnab answered the questions to our chief, who came forward at the moment with welcome in his visage and extended hands.

“It’s only a cut, sir, stupidly done with my own hatchet when we had been but a few days out. But rest will soon put me to rights. My poor man, Big Otter, is more to be pitied than I. But for him I should have perished in the snow.”

“What cheer? what cheer?” said our chief, grasping the Indian’s hand on hearing this.

“What cheer?” we all exclaimed, following his example.

“Watchee! watchee!” echoed Big Otter, returning the hearty salutation as well as his tongue could manage it, and giving us each a powerful squeeze with his huge bony hand, which temporary exhaustion had not appreciably reduced in strength.

The native was obviously a sociable, well-disposed man, for his eyes glittered and his white teeth gleamed and his bronzed visage shone with pleasure when Macnab explained the cause of our sudden burst of affection for him.

Thus chatting and limping we got the Highlander slowly up to the hall, set him down in our only armchair—a wooden one without stuffing—and fetched him a basin of hot soup, that being a liquid which our cook had always more or less frequently on hand.

“Ha! boys!” cried Macnab, smacking his lips, “that’s the thing to put life into a man! I’ve not had anything like it for many a day. You see, we had a small misfortune soon after my accident, which cost us our kettle, and rendered soup or tea impossible.”

“How was that?” inquired our chief, sitting down, while we gathered round the stove to listen.

“Well, you see, sir, not long after my accident, there came a sharp frost which made the surface of the snow hard after the thaw, so the dogs could run on the top of the crust without breaking it, but Big Otter, bein’ heavy, broke through—by the way, I hope he’s bein’ looked after.”

“You may be sure of that,” said Spooner. “I saw him safely placed in the men’s house, and Salamander, who, it turns out, is a sort of relation of his, set to work to stuff him with the same sort of soup you think so much of. I only hope they’ve enough to keep him going, for before I left the house he had drunk off two bowls of it almost without taking breath, though it was scalding hot.”

“Good. He’ll do it ample justice,” returned Macnab, taking another pull at his own bowl. “I hope you’re well provisioned, for Big Otter’s an awful consumer of victuals. Well, as I was saying, the surface of the snow got frozen thinly, and the work o’ tramping after the sled and holding on to the tail-line was uncommonly hard, as I could see, for I lay with my head to the front, looping back on the poor man. But it was on the exposed places and going down the slopes that the greatest difficulty lay, for there the dogs were keen to run away. Once or twice they did fairly get off, and gave me some rough as well as long runs before my man could catch them up. At last we came one afternoon to an open plain where the snow had melted the thaw and been frozen again pretty hard. The moment we got on it away went the dogs. Big Otter tried to run, but one of his shoes went through the crust and the other didn’t, so down he came, and had to let go the line. I felt easy enough at first, for the plain was level, but after a time it became lumpy, and I got some ugly bumps. ‘Never mind,’ thought I, ‘they’ll be sure to come to some bushes, and that’ll pull them up.’ Just as I thought so, we came to a slope, and the team went slap over a bank. The sled and I threw a complete somersault. Fortunately we came down on the dogs, which broke our fall, though it half killed them!

“When Big Otter came and turned me right side up, I found that I had sustained no damage whatever, but, woe’s me! our tin kettle was almost knocked flat. The worst of it was that in trying to put it right we drove a big hole in the bottom of it, so we had to bid farewell to hot food, except what we roasted. We could also melt snow by plastering up the hole so as to get enough to drink, but boiling water was quite out of the question.”

“Well, Macnab,” said our chief, rising, “since you have got the soup over at last, come along with me and let’s hear about your Indian friend’s proposals.”

We assisted our visitor into the mess-room, which was also our principal council-chamber, and there left him to talk business with Mr Strang while we returned to Bachelors’ Hall to let off our effervescing spirits by indulging in a running commentary on the unexpected visit, and a minute analysis of the characters of Macnab and Big Otter, which, I must add, was decidedly favourable.

“It seems to me a piece of good luck that he has got here at all,” said Lumley, after we had finished the analysis.

“Why so?” asked Spooner.

“Because there are some unmistakable symptoms that winter is about over, and that snow-shoe and dog-sleigh travelling will soon be impossible.”

That Lumley was right, the change of weather during the next few days clearly proved, for a thaw set in with steady power. The sun became at last warm enough to melt ice and snow visibly. We no longer listened with interest to the sounds of dropping water from eaves and trees, for these had become once more familiar, and soon our ears were greeted with the gurgling of rills away in mysterious depths beneath the snow. The gurgling ere long gave place to gushing, and it seemed as if all nature were dissolving into liquid.

While this pleasant change was going on we awoke with song and laugh and story the echoes of Bachelors’ Hall—at no time very restful echoes, save perhaps in the dead hours of early morning; and even then they were more or less disturbed by snoring. For our sociable Highlander, besides having roused our spirits by his mere presence to the effervescing point, was himself much elated by the mighty change from prolonged solitude to joyous companionship.

“My spirit feels inclined,” he remarked one day, “to jump clean out of my body.”

“You’d better not let it then,” said Lumley, “for you know it might catch cold or freeze.”

“Not in this weather, surely,” retorted Macnab, “and if I did feel coldish in the circumstances, couldn’t I borrow Spooner’s blanket-capote? it might fit me then, for I’d probably be a few sizes smaller.”

“Come, Mac,” said I, “give us a song. You know I’m wildly fond of music; and, most unfortunately, not one of us three can sing a note.”

Our visitor was quite willing, and began at once to sing a wild ditty, in the wilder language of his native land.

He had a sweet, tuneful, sympathetic voice, which was at the same time powerful, so that we listened to him, sometimes with enthusiasm swelling our hearts, at other times with tears dimming our eyes. No one, save he who has been banished to a wilderness and long bereft of music, can understand the nature of our feelings—of mine, at least.

One evening, after our wounded man had charmed us with several songs, and we all of us had done what we could, despite our incapacity, to pay him back in kind, he pulled a sheet of crumpled paper out of his pocket.

“Come,” said he, unfolding it, “I’ve got a poet among the men of Muskrat House, who has produced a song, which, if not marked by sublimity, is at least distinguished by much truth. He said he composed it at the rate of about one line a week during the winter, and his comrades said that it was quite a picture to see him agonising over the rhymes. Before they found out what was the matter with him they thought he was becoming subject to fits of some sort. Now, then, let’s have a good chorus. It’s to the tune of ‘The British Grenadiers.’”

## The World of Ice and Snow

Come listen all good people who dwell at home at ease,  
I'll tell you of the sorrows of them that cross the seas  
And penetrate the wilderness,  
Where arctic tempests blow—  
    Where your toes are froze,  
    An' the pint o' your nose,  
    In the world of Ice and Snow.

You've eight long months of winter an' solitude profound,  
The snow at your feet is ten feet deep and frozen hard the ground.  
And all the lakes are solid cakes,  
And the rivers all cease to flow—  
    Where your toes are froze,  
    An' the pint o' your nose,  
    In the world of Ice and Snow.

No comrade to enliven; no friendly foe to fight;  
No female near to love or cheer with pure domestic light;  
No books to read; no cause to plead;  
No music, fun, nor go—  
    Ne'er a shillin', nor a stiver,  
    Nor nothin' whotsomediver,  
    In the world of Ice and Snow.

Your feelin's take to freezin', so likewise takes your brain;  
You go about grump-and-wheezin', like a wretched dog in pain;  
You long for wings, or some such things,  
But they're not to be had—oh! no—  
    For there you are,  
    Like a *fixéd* star,  
    In the world of Ice and Snow.

If you wished you could—you would not, for the very wish  
    would die.  
If you thought you would—you could not, for you wouldn't  
    have heart to try.  
Confusion worse confounded,  
Would aggravate you so—  
    That you'd tumble down  
    On the frozen ground  
    In the world of Ice and Snow.

But “never-give-in” our part is—let British pluck have sway  
And “never-say-die,” my hearties—it's that what wins the day.  
To face our fate in every state,

Is what we've got to do,  
An' laugh at our trouble  
Till we're all bent double—  
In the world of Ice and Snow.

Now all ye sympathisers, and all ye tender souls;  
Ye kind philanthropisers, who dwell between the poles,  
Embrace in your affections  
Those merry merry men who go—  
Where your toes are froze,  
An' the pint o' your nose,  
In the world of Ice and Snow.

It almost seemed as though the world of ice and snow itself had taken umbrage at Macnab's song, for, while we were yet in the act of enthusiastically prolonging the last "sno-o-ow," there sounded in our ears a loud report, as if of heavy artillery close at hand.

We all leaped up in excitement, as if an enemy were at our doors.

"There it goes at last!" cried Lumley, rushing out of the house followed by Spooner.

I was about to follow when Macnab stopped me.

"Don't get excited, Max, there's no hurry!"

"It's the river going to break up," said I, looking back impatiently.

"Yes, I know that, but it won't break up to-night, depend on it."

I was too eager to wait for more, but ran to the banks of the river, which at that place was fully a mile wide. The moon was bright, and we could see the familiar sheet of ice as still and cold as we had seen it every day for many months past.

"Macnab's right," said I, "there will be no breakup to-night."

"Not so sure of that," returned Lumley; "the weather has been very warm of late; melting snow has been gushing into it in thousands of streams, and the strain on the ice—six feet thick though it is—must be tremendous."

He was checked by another crashing report; but again silence ensued, and we heard no more till next morning. Of course we were all up and away to the river bank long before breakfast, but it was not till after that meal that the final burst-up occurred. It was preceded by many reports—towards the end by what seemed quite a smart artillery fire. The whole sheet of ice on the great river seemed to be rising bodily upwards from the tremendous hydraulic pressure underneath. But though the thaws of spring had converted much snow into floods of water, they had not greatly affected the surface of the ice, which still lay hard and solid in all its wintry strength.

A greater Power, however, was present. If the ice had been made of cast-iron six feet in thickness, it must have succumbed sooner or later.

At last, as Macnab said, "She went!" but who shall describe *how* she went? It seemed as if the mighty cake had been suddenly struck from below and shattered. Then the turmoil that ensued was grand and terrible beyond conception. It was but an insignificant portion of God's waters at which we gazed, but how overwhelming it seemed to us! Mass rose upon mass of ice, the cold grey water bursting through and over all, hurling morsels as large as the side of a house violently on each other, till a mighty pile was raised which next moment fell with a crash into the boiling foam. Then, in one direction there was a rush which seemed about to carry all before it, but instead of being piled upwards, some of the masses were driven below, were thrust deep into the mud, and a jam took place. In a few minutes the ice burst upwards again, and the masses were swept on to join the battalions that were already on their way towards the distant lake amid noise and crash and devastation. It seemed as if ice and snow and water had combined to revive the picture if not the reality of ancient chaos!

Thus the drapery of winter was rudely swept away, and next morning we had the joy of seeing our river sweeping grandly on in all the liquid beauty of early and welcome spring.

## Chapter Six.

### An Express and its Results

Some weeks after the breaking up of the ice, as we were standing at the front gate of Fort Dunregan, we experienced a pleasant surprise at the sight of an Indian canoe sweeping round the point above the fort. Two men paddled the canoe, one in the bow and one in the stern.

It conveyed a message from headquarters directing that two of the clerks should be sent to establish an outpost in the regions of the far north, the very region from which Macnab's friend Big Otter had come. One of the two canoe-men was a clerk sent to undertake, at Dunregan, the work of those who should be selected for the expedition, and he said that another clerk was to follow in the spring-brigade of boats.

"That's marching orders for *you*, Lumley," said Macnab, who was beside us when the canoe arrived.

"You cannot tell that," returned Lumley. "It may be that our chief will select Max or Spooner. Did you hear any mention of names?" he asked of the new clerk, as we all walked up to the house.

"No, our governor does not tell us much of his intentions. Perhaps your chief may be the man."

"He's too useful where he is," suggested Macnab. "But we shall know when the letters are opened."

Having delivered his despatches, the new arrival returned to us in Batchelors' Hall, where we soon began to make the most of him, and were engaged in a brisk fire of question and reply, when a message came for Mr Lumley to go to the mess-room.

"I've sent for you, Lumley," said our chief, "to say that you have been appointed to fill an honourable and responsible post. It seems that the governor, with his wonted sagacity, has perceived that it would be advantageous to the service to have an outpost established in the lands lying to the westward of Muskrat House, on the borders of Lake Wichikagan. As you are aware, the Indian, Big Otter, has come from that very place, with a request from his people that such a post should be established, and you have been selected by the governor to conduct the expedition."

As our chief paused, Lumley, with a modest air, expressed his sense of the honour that the appointment conferred on him, and his willingness to do his best for the service.

"I know you will, Lumley," returned Mr Strang, "and I must do you the justice to say that I think the governor has shown his usual wisdom in the selection. Without wishing to flatter you, I think you are steady and self-reliant. You are also strong and big, qualities which are of some value among rough men and Indians, not because they enable you to rule with a strong hand, but because they enable you to rule without the necessity of showing the strength of your hand. Bullies, if you should meet with any, will recognise your ability to knock them down without requiring proof thereof. To say truth, if you were one of those fellows who are fond of ruling by the mere strength of their arms, I should not think you fit for the command of an expedition like this, which will require much tact in its leader. At the same time, a large and powerful frame—especially if united to a peaceable spirit—is exceedingly useful in a wild country. Without the peaceable spirit it only renders its possessor a bully and a nuisance. I am further directed to furnish you with the needful supplies and men. I will see to the former being prepared, and the latter you may select—of course within certain limits. Now go and make arrangements for a start. The lakes will soon be sufficiently free of ice, and you are aware that you will need all your time to reach your ground and get well established before next winter sets in."

"Excuse me, sir," said Lumley, turning back as he was about to depart. "Am I permitted to select the clerk who is to go with me as well as the men?"

"Certainly."

"Then I should like to have Mr Maxby."

Our chief smiled as he replied, "I thought so. I have observed your mutual friendship. Well, you may tell him of the prospect before him."

Need I say that I was overjoyed at this prospect? I have always felt something of that disposition which animates, I suppose, the breast of every explorer. To visit unknown lands has always been with me almost a passion, and this desire has extended even to trivial localities, insomuch that I was in the habit, while at fort Dunregan, of traversing all the surrounding country—on snow-shoes in winter and in my hunting canoe in summer—until I became familiar with all the out-of-the-way and the seldom-visited nooks and corners of that neighbourhood.

To be appointed, therefore, as second in command of an expedition to establish a new trading-post in a little-known region, was of itself a matter of much self-gratulation; but to have my friend and chum Jack Lumley as my chief, was a piece of good fortune so great that on hearing of it I executed an extravagant pirouette, knocked Spooner off his chair by accident—though he thought it was done on purpose—and spent five or ten minutes thereafter in running round the stove to escape his wrath.

As to my fitness for this appointment, I must turn aside for a few moments to pay a tribute of respect to my dear father, as well as to tell the youthful reader one or two things that have made a considerable impression on me.

"Punch," said my father to me one day—he called me Punch because in early life I had a squeaky voice and a jerky manner—"Punch, my boy, get into a habit of looking up, if you can, as you trot along through this world. If you keep your head down and your eyes on the ground, you'll see nothing of what's going on around you—consequently you'll know nothing; moreover, you'll get a bad habit of turning your eyes inward and always thinking only about yourself and your own affairs, which means being selfish. Besides, you'll run a chance of growing absent-minded, and won't see danger approaching; so that you'll tumble over things and damage your shins, and tumble into things and damage your clothes, and tumble off things and damage your carcass, and get run over by wheels, and poked in the back by carriage-poles, and killed by trains, and spiflicated in various ways—all of which evils are to be avoided by looking up and looking round and taking note of what you see as you go along the track of life—d'ye see?"

"Yes, father."

"And this," continued my father, "is the only mode that I know of getting near to that most blessed state of human felicity, self-oblivion. You won't be able to manage that altogether, Punch, but you'll come nearest to it by looking up. Of course there are times when it is good for a man to look inside and take stock—self-examination, you know—but looking *out* and *up* is more difficult, to my mind. And there is a kind of looking up, too, for guidance and blessing, which is the most important of all, but I'm not talking to you on that subject just now. I'm trying to warn you against that habit which so many people have of staring at the ground, and seeing and knowing nothing as they go along through life. I've suffered from it myself, Punch, more than I care to tell, and that's why I speak feelingly, and wish to warn you in time, my boy.

"Now, there's another thing," continued my father. "You're fond of rambling, Punch, and of reading books of travel and adventure, and I have no doubt you think it would be a grand thing to go some day and try to discover the North Pole, or the South Pole, or to explore the unknown interior of Australia."

"Yes, father," I replied, in a tone which made him laugh.

"Well, then, Punch, I won't discourage you. Go and discover these places by all means, if you can; but mark me, you'll never discover them if you get into the habit of keeping your eyes on the ground, and thinking about yourself and your own affairs. And I would further advise you to brush up your mathematics, and study navigation, and learn well how to take an observation for longitude and latitude, for if you don't know how to find out exactly where you are in unknown regions, you'll never be a discoverer. Also, Punch, get into a habit of taking notes, and learn to write a good hand, for editors and publishers won't care to be bothered with you if you don't, and maybe the time will

come when you won't be able to make out your own writing. I've known men of that stamp, whose penmanship suggested the idea that a drunk fly had dipped its legs in the ink-pud an' straggled across his paper."

These weighty words of my dear father I laid to heart at the time, and, as a consequence I believe, have been selected on more than one occasion to accompany exploring parties in various parts of the world. One very important accomplishment which my father did not think of, but which, nevertheless, I have been so fortunate as to acquire, is, sketching from Nature, and marking the course of rivers and trend of coasts. I have thus been able not only to make accurate maps of the wild regions I have visited, but have brought home many sketches of interesting scenes of adventure, which words alone could not have sufficed to pourtray.

But to return from this long digression. I set about my preparations without delay, and was soon ready with a small but very select amount of baggage. You may be sure also that Lumley was active in his preparations, and the result was that, on a fine afternoon in the early spring, we—that is, Lumley, Macnab, Big Otter, and I—set out on our expedition in a strong new boat which was manned by two Indians, two Scotchmen, and a number of Canadian half-breeds—all picked men.

I must not however, drag my readers through the details of our arduous voyage, not because those details are devoid of interest or romance, far from it, but because I have other matters more interesting and romantic to relate. I will, therefore, pass them over in silence, and at once proceed to the remote region where our lot at that time was to be cast.

One beautiful evening we encamped on the margin of one of those innumerable lakelets which gleam like diamonds on the breast of the great wilderness through which for many weeks we had been voyaging. The vast solitudes into which we had penetrated, although nearly destitute of human inhabitants, were by no means devoid of life, for aquatic birds of varied form and voice made sweet music in the air as they swept over their grand domains on whirring wing, or chattered happily in their rich feeding-grounds.

Those pleasant sounds were augmented by the axes of our men as they busied themselves in cutting firewood, and preparing our encampment.

The spot chosen was a piece of level sward overhung by trees and surrounded by bushes, except on the side next the little lake where an opening permitted us to see the sheet of water gleaming like fire as the sun sank behind the opposite trees. By that time we had traversed hundreds of miles of wilderness, stemming many rivers and rivulets; crossing or skirting hundreds of lakes which varied from two hundred miles to two hundred yards in length; dragging our boat and carrying our baggage over innumerable portages, and making our beds each night, in fair weather and foul, under the trees of the primeval forest, until we had at last plunged into regions almost unknown—where, probably, the foot of a white man had never before rested. On the way we had passed Muskrat House. There, with feelings of profound regret, we parted from our genial Highlander, promising, however, to send him an unusually long account of all our doings by the packet, which we purposed sending to headquarters sometime during the winter.

The particular duty which Lumley and I undertook on the evening in question was the lighting of the fire, and putting on of the kettles for supper. We were aided by our guide, Big Otter, who cut down and cut up the nearest dead trees, and by Salamander, who carried them to the camp.

"Three days more, and we shall reach the scene of our operations," said Lumley to me, as we watched the slowly-rising flame which had just been kindled; "is it not so?" he asked of Big Otter, who came up at the moment with a stupendous log on his shoulders and flung it down.

"Waugh?" said the Indian, interrogatively.

"Ask him," said Lumley to Salamander, who was interpreter to the expedition, "if we are far now from the lodges of his people."

"Three times," replied the red-man, pointing to the sun, "will the great light go down, and then the smoke of Big Otter's wigwam shall be seen rising above the trees."

“Good; I shall be glad when I see it,” returned Lumley, arranging a rustic tripod over the fire, “for I long to begin the building of our house, and getting a supply of fish and meat for winter use. Now then, Salamander, fetch the big kettle.”

“Yis, sar,” replied our little servant, with gleeful activity (he was only sixteen and an enthusiast) as he ran down to the lake for water.

“Cut the pemmican up small, Max. I’ve a notion it mixes better, though some fellows laugh at the idea and say that hungry men are not particular.”

“That is true,” said I, attacking the pemmican with a small hatchet; “yet have I seen these same scoffers at careful cookery doing ample and appreciative justice to the mess when cooked.”

“Just so. I have observed the same thing—but, I say, what is Big Otter looking so earnestly at over there?”

“Perhaps he sees a bear,” said I; “or a moose-deer.”

“No, he never pays so much attention to the lower animals, except when he wants to shoot them. He shakes his head, too. Let’s go see. Come, Salamander, and interpret.”

“Big Otter sees something,” said Lumley through Salamander as we approached.

“Yes, Big Otter sees signs,” was the reply.

“And what may the signs be?”

“Signs of wind and rain and thunder.”

“Well, I suppose you know best but no such signs are visible to me. Ask him, Salamander, if we may expect the storm soon.”

To this the Indian replied that he could not tell, but advised that preparation should be made for the worst.

It may be well here to remark that although Lumley and I, as well as some of our men, had acquired a smattering of the Indian tongue, our chief deemed it expedient to give us a regular interpreter whose knowledge of both languages was sufficiently extensive. Such an interpreter had been found in the youth whom we had styled Salamander, and whose real name I have now forgotten. This lad’s knowledge of Indian was perfect. He also understood French well, and spoke it badly, while his comprehension of English was quite equal to any emergency, though his power of speaking it was exceedingly limited. What he spoke could scarcely be styled a broken tongue; it was rather what we may call thoroughly smashed-up English! Such as it was, however, it served our purpose well enough, and as the lad was a willing, cheery, somewhat humorous fellow, he was justly deemed an acquisition to our party. While on this subject I may add that Blondin, who brought the winter packet to Dunregan, was one of our number—also, that both our Scotsmen were Highlanders, one being named Donald Bane, the other James Dougall. Why the first called the second Shames Tougall, and the second styled the first Tonal’ Pane is a circumstance which I cannot explain.

Among the French-Canadian half-breeds our blacksmith, Marcelle Dumont and our carpenter, Henri Coppet, were the most noteworthy; the first being a short but herculean man with a jovial temperament, the latter a thin, lanky, lugubrious fellow, with a grave disposition. Both were first-rate workmen, but indeed the same may be said of nearly all our men, who had been chosen very much because of their readiness and ability to turn their hands to anything.

Soon the kettles boiled. In one we infused tea. In another we prepared that thick soup so familiar to the Nor’-wester, composed of pemmican and flour, which is known by the name of *robbiboo*. From a frying-pan the same substances, much thicker, sent up a savoury steam under the name of *richeau*.

There was not much conversation among us at the commencement of the meal, as we sat round the camp-fire, but when appetite was appeased muttered remarks were interchanged, and when tobacco-pipes came out, our tongues, set free from food, began to wag apace.

“Dere is noting like a good *souper*,” remarked Marcelle Dumont, the blacksmith, extending his burly form on the grass the more thoroughly to enjoy his pipe.

“Shames Tougall,” said Donald Bane, in an undertone, and with the deliberate slowness of his race, “what does he mean by soopy?”

“Tonal’,” replied Dougall with equal deliberation, “ye’d petter ask his nainsel’.”

“It be de French for *supper*,” said Salamander, who overheard the question.

“Humph!” ejaculated Dougall and Bane in unison; but they vouchsafed no further indication of the state of their minds.

“You’re a true prophet, Big Otter,” said Lumley, as a low rumbling of distant thunder broke the silence of the night, which would have been profound but for our voices, the crackling of the fire, and the tinkle of a neighbouring rill.

Soon afterwards we observed a faint flash of lightning, which was followed by another and deeper rumble of heaven’s artillery. Looking up through the branches we perceived that the sky had become overcast with heavy clouds.

Suddenly there came a blinding flash of lightning, as if the sun in noonday strength had burst through the black sky. It was followed instantly by thick, almost palpable darkness, and by a crash so tremendous that I sprang up with a sort of idea that the end of the world had come. The crash was prolonged in a series of rolling, bumping thunders, as though giants were playing bowls with worlds on the floor of heaven. Gradually the echoing peals subsided into sullen mutterings and finally died away.

## Chapter Seven.

### A Tremendous Storm and Other Experiences

It need hardly be said that we all sprang up when the thunder-clap shook the earth, and began hastily to make preparation for the coming storm. The broad flat branches of a majestic pine formed a roof to our encampment. Dragging our provisions and blankets as near as possible to the stem of the tree, we covered them up with one of our oiled-cloths, which were somewhat similar in appearance and texture to the tarpaulings of seafaring men, though light in colour. Then we ran down to the lake, carried all our goods hastily to the same spot, covered them up in like manner, and finally dragged our boat as far up on the beach as possible.

Several blinding flashes and deafening peals saluted us while we were thus employed, but as yet not a drop of rain or sigh of wind disturbed us, and we were congratulating ourselves on having managed the matter so promptly, when several huge drops warned us to seek shelter.

“That will do, boys,” cried Lumley, referring to the boat, “she’s safe.”

“*Voilà! vite!*” shouted Marcelle, our volatile son of Vulcan, as the first big drops of rain descended on him.

He sprang towards the sheltering tree with wild activity. So, indeed, did we all, but the rain was too quick for us. Down it came with the suddenness and fury of a shower-bath, and most of us were nearly drenched before we reached our pine. There was a good deal of shouting and laughter at first, but the tremendous forces of nature that had been let loose were too overwhelming to permit of continued levity. In a few minutes the ground near our tree became seamed with little glancing rivulets, while the rain continued to descend like straight heavy rods of crystal which beat on the earth with a dull persistent roar. Ere long the saturated soil refused to drink in the superabundance, and the crystal rods, descending into innumerable pools, changed the roar into the splash of many waters.

We stood close together for some time, gazing at this scene in silent solemnity, when a few trickling streams began to fall upon us, showing that our leafy canopy, thick though it was, could not protect us altogether from such a downpour.

“We’d better rig up one of the oiled-cloths, and get under it,” I suggested.

“Do so,” said our chief.

Scarcely had he spoken when a flash of lightning, brighter than any that had gone before, revealed to us the fact that the distant part of the hitherto placid lake was seething with foam.

“A squall! Look out!” shouted Lumley, grasping the oiled-cloth we were about to spread.

Every one shouted and seized hold of something under the strong conviction that action of some sort was necessary to avert danger. But all our voices were silenced in a dreadful roar of thunder which, as Donald Bane afterwards remarked, seemed to split the universe from stem to stern. This was instantly followed by a powerful whirlwind which caught our oiled-cloth, tore it out of our hands, and whisked it up into the tree-tops, where it stuck fast and flapped furiously, while some of our party were thrown down, and others seemed blown away altogether as they ran into the thick bush for shelter.

For myself, without any definite intentions, and scarce knowing what I was about, I seized and clung to the branches of a small tree with the tenacity of a drowning man—unable to open my eyes while sticks and leaves, huge limbs of trees and deluges of water flew madly past, filling my mind with a vague impression that the besom of destruction had become a veritable reality, and that we were all about to be swept off the face of the earth together.

Strange to say, in this crisis I felt no fear. I suppose I had not time or power to think at all, and I have since that day thought that God perhaps thus mercifully sends relief to His creatures in

their direst extremity—just as He sends relief to poor human beings, when suffering intolerable pain, by causing stupor.

The outburst was as short-lived as it was furious. Suddenly the wind ceased; the floods of rain changed to slight droppings, and finally stopped altogether, while the thunder growled itself into sullen repose in the far distance.

But what a scene of wreck was left behind! We could not of course, see the full extent of the mischief, for the night still remained intensely dark, but enough was revealed in the numerous uprooted trees which lay all round us within the light of our rekindled camp-fire. From most of these we had been protected by the great pine under which we had taken shelter, though one or two had fallen perilously near to us—in one case falling on and slightly damaging our baggage.

Our first anxiety, of course, was our boat, towards which we ran as if by one impulse, the instant the wind had subsided.

To our horror it was gone!

Only those who know what it is to traverse hundreds of leagues of an almost tenantless wilderness, and have tried to push a few miles through roadless forests that have grown and fallen age after age in undisturbed entanglement since the morning of creation, can imagine the state of our minds at this discovery.

“Search towards the woods, men,” said Lumley, who, whatever he might have felt, was the only one amongst us who seemed unexcited. We could trace no sign of anxiety in the deep tones of his steady voice.

It was this quality—I may remark in passing—this calm, equable flow of self-possession in all circumstances, no matter how trying, that rendered our young leader so fit for the work with which he had been entrusted, and which caused us all to rely on him with unquestioning confidence. He never seemed uncertain how to act even in the most desperate circumstances, and he never gave way to discontent or depression. A gentle, good-humoured expression usually played on his countenance, yet he could look stern enough at times, and even fierce, as we all knew.

While we were stumbling in the dark in the direction indicated, we heard the voice of Salamander shouting:—

“Here it am! De bot—busted on de bank!”

And “busted” it certainly was, as we could feel, for it was too dark to see.

“Fetch a blazing stick, one of you,” cried Lumley.

A light revealed the fact that our boat, in being rolled bodily up the bank by the gale, had got several of her planks damaged and two of her ribs broken.

“Let’s be thankful,” I said, on further examination, “that no damage has been done to keel or gun’le.”

“Nor to stem or stern-post,” added Lumley. “Come, we shan’t be delayed more than a day after all.”

He was right. The whole of the day that followed the storm we spent in repairing the boat, and drying such portions of the goods as had got wet, as well as our own garments. The weather turned out to be bright and warm, so that when we lay down to rest, everything was ready for a start at the earliest gleam of dawn.

“Lumley,” said I, next day, as we rested after a good spell at the oars, “what would have become of us if our boat had been smashed to pieces, or bodily blown away?”

“Nothing very serious would have become of us, I think,” he replied with an amused look.

“But consider,” I said; “we are now hundreds of miles away from Muskrat House—our nearest neighbour—with a dense wilderness and no roads between. Without a boat we could neither advance nor retreat. We might, of course, try to crawl along river banks and lake shores, which would involve the wading or swimming of hundreds of rivulets and rivers, with provisions and blankets on our backs, and even then winter would be down on us, and we should all be frozen to death before the end of

the journey. Besides, even if we were to escape, how could we ever show face after leaving all our supply of goods and stores to rot in the wilderness?”

“Truly,” replied my friend with a short laugh, “the picture you paint is not a lively one, but it is I who ought to ask *you* to consider. There are many ways in which we might overcome our supposed difficulties. I will explain; and let me begin by pointing out that your first error lies in conceiving an improbability and an impossibility. In the first place it is improbable that our boat should get ‘smashed to pieces.’ Such an event seldom occurs in river navigation, except in the case of going over something like Niagara. In the second place it is impossible that a boat should be blown bodily away. But let us suppose that, for the sake of argument, something of the kind had happened, and that our boat was damaged beyond repair, or lost; could we not, think you, fabricate a couple of birch-bark canoes in a country where such splendid birch-trees grow, and with these proceed to our destination?”

“Very true,” said I, “that did not occur to me; but,” I continued, waxing argumentative, “what if there had been no birch-trees in this part of the country?”

“Why then, Max, there would be nothing to prevent our placing most of our goods *en cache*, construct a small portable raft for crossing streams, and start off each man with a small load for Big Otter’s home, at which we should arrive in a week or two, and there set about the erection of huts to shelter us, begin a fishery, and remain until winter should set fast the lakes and rivers, cover the land with snow, and thus enable us to go back for our goods, and bring them forward on sledges, with aid, perhaps, from the red-men.”

“True, true, Lumley, that might be done.”

“Or,” continued my friend, “we might stay where the disaster overtook us, remain till winter, and send Big Otter on to tell his people that we were coming. When one plan fails, you know, all you’ve got to do is to try another. There is only one sort of accident that might cause us a deal of trouble, and some loss—and that is, our boat getting smashed and upset in a rapid, and our goods scattered. Even in that case we might recover much of what could swim, but lead and iron would be lost, and powder damaged. However we won’t anticipate evil. Look! there is a sight that ought to banish all forebodings from our minds.”

He pointed as he spoke to an opening ahead of us, which revealed a beautiful little lake, whose unruffled surface was studded with picturesque bush-clad islets. Water-fowl of many kinds were swimming about on its surface, or skimming swiftly over it. It seemed so peaceful that I was led to think of it as a miniature paradise.

“Come, Henri, chante, sing,” cried Lumley, with a touch of enthusiasm in eye and tone.

Our carpenter, Coppet, was by general consent our leading singer. He possessed a sweet tenor voice, and always responded to a call with a willingness that went far to counteract the lugubrious aspect of his visage. On this occasion he at once struck up the canoe-song, “*A la claire fontaine*,” which, besides being plaintive and beautiful, seemed to me exceedingly appropriate, for we were at that time crossing a height of land, and the clear, crystal waters over which we skimmed formed indeed the fountain-head of some of the great northern rivers.

The sudden burst of song had a wonderful effect upon the denizens of Clear Lake, as we named the sheet of water; for, after a brief momentary pause in their chatter—as if of incredulity and blazing surprise—they all arose at once in such myriads that the noise of their wings was not unlike what I may style muffled thunder.

Before the song was well finished we had reached the other end of the lakelet, and found that a deep river ran out of it in a nor’easterly direction. The current of the river was powerful, and we had not proceeded many miles down its course when we came to a series of turbulent rapids.

As we entered them I could not help recalling Lumley’s remarks about the risks we ran in descending rapids; but no thought of actual danger occurred to me until I saw Blondin, who was our bowman, draw in his oar, grasp a long pole with which he had provided himself, and stand up in the bow, the better to look out inquiringly ahead.

Now, it must be explained that the bowman's is the most important post in river navigation in the Nor'-west—equal, at all events, to that of steersman. In fact the two act in concert; the bowman, whose position commands the best view of rocks and dangers ahead, giving direction, and the watchful steersman acting sympathetically with his long oar or sweep, so that should the bowman with his pole thrust the head of the boat violently to the right the steersman sweeps its stern sharply to the left, thus causing the craft to spin round and shoot aside from the danger, whatever it may be. Of course the general flow and turmoil of a rapid indicates pretty clearly to skilled eyes where the deepest water lies; nevertheless, in spite of knowledge, skill, and experience, disasters will happen at times.

"Monsieur," said Blondin in French to Lumley, as we gained a smooth piece of water at the foot of a short rapid, "I know not the rocks ahead. It may be well to land and look."

"Do so, Blondin."

We ran the boat's head on shore, and while the bowman and our leader went to look at the rapids in advance, most of our men got out their pipes and began to chat quietly.

Our scouts quickly returned, saying that the rapids, though rough, were practicable. Soon we were among them, darting down with what would have seemed, to any inexperienced eye, perilous velocity. The river at the place was about a hundred yards wide, with an unusually rugged channel, but with a distinctly marked run—deep and tortuous—in the middle. On both sides of the run, sweeping and curling surges told of rocks close to the surface, and in many places these showed black edges above water, which broke the stream into dazzling foam.

"Have a care, Blondin," said our chief, in a warning voice, as the bowman made a sudden and desperate shove with his pole. A side current had swept us too far in the direction of a forbidding ledge, to touch on which might have been fatal. But Henri Coppet, who acted as steersman as well as carpenter, was equal to the occasion. He bent his lanky form almost double, took a magnificent sweep with the oar, and seconded Blondin's shove so ably that we passed the danger like an arrow, with nothing but a slight graze.

That danger past we were on the brink of another, almost before we had time to think. At the time I remember being deeply impressed, in a confused way, with the fact that, whatever might await us below, there was now no possibility of our returning up stream. We were emphatically "in for it," and our only hope lay in the judgment, boldness, and capacity of the two men who guided our frail bark—doubly frail, it seemed to me, when contrasted with the waters that surged around, and the solid rocks that appeared to bar our way in all directions. Even some of our men at the oars, whose only duty was to obey orders promptly, began to show symptoms of anxiety, if not of fear.

"Smooth water ahead," muttered Lumley, pointing to a small lake into which the turbulent river ran about a quarter of a mile further down.

"All right soon," I said, but just as I spoke the boat lightly touched a rock. Blondin saw that there was not sufficient depth in a passage which he had intended to traverse. With a shout to the steersman he thrust his pole over the side with all his might. The obedient craft turned as if on a pivot, and would have gone straight into a safe stream in another second, if Blondin's pole had not stuck fast either in mud or between two rocks.

In a moment our bowman was whisked over the side as if he had been a feather. Letting go the pole he caught the gunwale and held on. The boat was carried broadside on the rocks, and the gushing water raised her upper side so high that she was on the point of rolling over when all of us—I think instinctively—sprang to that side and bore her down.

"Over the side, some of you," cried Lumley, leaping into the water on the lower side, followed by six of us, including myself. Some of us were breast deep; others, on rocks, stood higher.

"Now—together—shove!—and hold on!"

There was no need to give us the latter caution.

Our boat shot into deep water and we all held on for life. Fortunately the more open part of the rapid had been gained. The steersman without aid could keep us in deep water, and, before we

had fairly scrambled back into our places, we were floating safely on the quiet lake into which the river ran.

You may be sure that we had matter not only for gratulation but for conversation that night at supper; for, after discussing our recent adventure in all its phases, nearly every one of our party had numerous similar incidents to tell of—either as having occurred to himself, or to his friends. But the pleasure of that night's intercourse and repose was materially diminished by a pest with which for some time previously we had not been much afflicted.

Who has not heard of mosquitoes? We may inform those who have never seen or felt them that they are peculiarly virulent and numerous and vicious and bloodthirsty in the swampy lands of North America, and that night we had got into a region of swamps. It may also, perhaps, be unknown to some people that mosquitoes do not slumber—unless, indeed, they do it on a preconcerted plan of relieving guard. Either there is a “day and night shift” or they do not rest at all. As a consequence *we* did not rest. Groans and maledictions were the order of the night. We spent much time in slapping our own faces, and immolated hundreds of the foe at each slap, but thousands came on to refill the ranks. We buried our heads under our blankets, but could not sleep for suffocation. Some of the men left their faces exposed, went to sleep in desperate exhaustion, after hours of fruitless warfare, and awoke with eyes all but shut up, and cheeks like dumplings. Others lay down to leeward of the fire and spent the night in a compound experience of blood-sucking and choking. One ingenious man—I think it was Salamander—wrapped his visage in a kerchief, leaving nothing exposed save the point of his nose for breathing purposes. In the morning he arose with something like a huge strawberry on the end of his prominent feature.

Indeed, it was a wearing night to follow such a trying day!

## **Chapter Eight.**

### **Deep in the Wilderness we find our Home which is Shared with the Wild Beast, the Wild Bird, and the Savage**

Availing myself now of that wonderful power which we possess of projecting the mind instantaneously through space and time, I will leave our adventurous fur-traders, and, conveying my reader still deeper into the heart of the great wilderness, set him down on the margin of one of those lesser sheets of water which lie some distance in a south-westerly direction from that mighty fresh-water ocean called Athabasca.

This lake, although small when compared with the vast reservoirs which stud those northern wilds, is, nevertheless, of goodly dimensions, being about six miles in diameter, and studded here and there with numerous islets, some of which are almost bare rocks of a few yards in extent, while others are not less than a quarter of a mile in circumference, and thickly wooded to the edge.

It is a somewhat peculiar lake. It does not lie, as many lakes do, in the bottom of a valley, from which the spectator lifts his eye to surrounding heights, but rests in a little hollow on a height of land from many points of which the eye looks down on the surrounding low country. It is true, that in one direction, westward, a line of distant blue hills is seen, which are obviously higher than our lake, for the land rises gently towards them; but when you ascend a wooded knoll close by, the summit of which is free from underwood, it is seen at a glance that on all other sides the land is below you, and your eye takes in at one grand sweep all round the compass a view of woodland and plain, mound and morass, lake, river, and rivulet, such as is probably unequalled—certainly unsurpassed—in any other part of the known world.

Solitude profound—as far as men and their works are concerned—marked this lovely region at the time of our arrival, though there was the most telling evidence of exuberant animal life everywhere, to the ear as well as to the eye; for the air was vocal with the plaintive cries and whistling wings of wild-fowl which sported about in blissful enjoyment of their existence, while occasional breaks in the glassy surface of the water, and numerous widening circles, told that fish were not less jovial in the realms below. This was at last the longed-for Lake Wichikagan.

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