ROBERT MICHAEL BALLANTYNE

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Содержание

R. M. Ballantyne
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Chapter One
The Outpost

On the northern shores of the Gulf of Saint Lawrence there stood, not very long ago, a group of wooden houses, which were simple in construction and lowly in aspect. The region around them was a vast uncultivated, uninhabited solitude. The road that led to them was a rude one. It wound round a rugged cliff, under the shelter of which the houses nestled as if for protection from the cold winds and the snowdrifts that took special delight in revelling there.

This group of buildings was, at the time we write of, an outpost of the fur-traders, those hardy pioneers of civilisation, to whom, chiefly, we are indebted for opening up the way into the northern wilderness of America. The outpost was named the Cliff after the bold precipice near the base of which it stood. A slender stockade surrounded it, a flag-staff rose in the centre of it, and a rusty old ship's carronade reared defiantly at its front gate. In virtue of these warlike appendages the place was sometimes styled "the Fort."

When first established, the Cliff Fort lay far beyond the outmost bounds of civilised life, but the progress of emigration had sent forward wave after wave into the northern wilderness, and the tide rose at last until its distant murmur began to jar on the ears of the traders in their lonely dwelling; warning them that competition was at hand, and that, if they desired to carry on the trade in peace, they must push still further into the bush, or be hopelessly swallowed up in the advancing tide.

When the unwelcome sounds of advancing civilisation first broke the stillness of this desolate region, the chief of the trading-post was seated at breakfast with his clerk. He was a tall, good-looking, young Englishman, named Reginald Redding. The clerk, Bob Smart, was a sturdy youth, who first saw the light among the mountains of Scotland. Doubtless he had been named Robert when baptised, but his intimates would not have understood you had you mentioned him by that name.

Bob had just helped Reginald to the wing of a salt goose, and was about to treat himself to a leg of the same when the cook entered.

This cook was a man. It may also be said with truth that he was more than most men. At the outpost men were few, and of women there were none. It may be imagined, then, that the cook's occupations and duties were numerous. François Le Rue, besides being cook to the establishment, was waiter, chambermaid, firewood-chopper, butcher, baker, drawer-of-water, trader, fur-packer, and interpreter. These offices he held professionally.

When "*off duty*," and luxuriating in tobacco and relaxation, he occupied himself as an amateur shoemaker, tailor, musician, and stick-whittler, to the no small advantage of himself and his fellow-outcasts, of whom there were five or six, besides the principals already mentioned.

Le Rue's face bore an expression of dissatisfaction and perplexity as he entered the hall.

"Oh, Monsieur Redding," he exclaimed, "dem squatters, de black scoundrils what is be called Macklodds has bin come at last."

"Ho, ho! the McLeods have come, have they?" said Redding, laying down his knife and fork, and looking earnestly at the man; "I had heard of their intention."

"Oui, yis, vraiment," said Le Rue, with vehemence, "dey has come to Jenkins Creek more dan tree veeks pass. Von sauvage come an' tell me he have see dem. Got put up von hut, an' have begin de saw-mill."

"Well, well, François," returned Redding, with a somewhat doubtful smile, as he resumed his knife and fork, "bring some more hot water, and keep your mind easy. The McLeods can't do us much harm. Their saw-mill will work for many a day before it makes much impression on the forests hereabouts. There is room for us all."

"Forests!" exclaimed the cook, with a frown and a shrug of his shoulders, "non, dey not hurt moche timber, but dey vill trade vid de Injins—de sauvages—an' give dem drink, an' git all de furs,

an' fat den vill come of dat?"

Without waiting for a reply the indignant cook went in quest of hot water, leaving the traders to discuss the salt goose and the news.

"That's bad news," said Bob Smart. "What do you propose to do in the circumstances?"

"Something definite must be done," replied Redding, "but I don't yet see my way as to what."

Having finished the goose between them, and turned its skeleton over with an inquisitive glance to make sure that nothing eatable had escaped, the two friends finished their frugal meal with a cup of tea and a fried cake of the simplest elements—flour and water—after which they drew their chairs to the fireplace, —a large open chimney well filled with blazing logs,—lighted their pipes, and entered on a discussion of the McLeods and their present position.

When their pipes were emptied, Redding arose, and, turning his back to the fire, said:—

"Well, Bob Smart, this is the outcome of our cogitations. I am almost certain that these McLeods have taken up their quarters within the boundary of our Company's reserve lands, and if so, they must be routed out of their nest at once. Delay in such matters is often fatal. The law of use and wont, Bob, is soon established; but I have a strong objection to act in uncertainty. I will therefore drive up to the hut of Jonas Bellew, with whom I shall leave horse and sleigh, as the track ends at Boulder Creek,

and proceed on snow-shoes to the new settlement in Partridge Bay, where the surveyor lives, who has the plans of our reserve lands. I shall examine these plans, and if I find that our property has been invaded, then—"

"Death and confusion to the McLeods," interrupted Bob. "Well, perhaps that is the best thing to do; but the spring is well advanced. The thermometer stood high this morning. If a thaw should set in, you will find the walking in snow-shoes bad."

"'If' is a word to which you attach too much importance, Bob. We have not at present to do with what may be, but with what is."

"True, nevertheless a prudent man has regard to probabilities," replied Bob, with an air of much wisdom, as he relighted his pipe.

"Just so," returned Redding, "and as there is every probability that I shall be absent a good many days, I leave you in charge of this establishment, with strict injunctions to keep aloof from the McLeods, and at the same time to keep an eye on them. François Le Rue will accompany me. I shall start immediately, therefore be pleased to go and tell Le Rue to get himself and the sleigh ready while I put on my travelling gear."

Obedient to the order, Smart left the room while his superior clothed himself in a leathern coat and leggings, fur cap, moccasins, and mittens.

In half an hour Redding and his man stepped into a sleigh, which was barely large enough to hold them. They packed themselves up to the armpits in bearskin rugs, and then Redding gave his rough little nag a touch of the whip, which caused him

to start forward with a jerk that set all the bells on his harness ringing merrily. Another minute and they dashed out at the gate, swept round the base of the beetling cliff that frowned above the outpost, and entered the sombre shadow of the forest.

Chapter Two
The Recluse of Boulder Creek

The road along which the travellers proceeded was desolate and dreary in the extreme.

Already darkened by clouds and snow-drift, it was rendered still more gloomy by overhanging and snow-laden branches of stunted pines. It was just broad enough to permit the passage of a single vehicle, being a mere woodman's track, which had been extended beyond the ordinary limits of such tracks, for his personal convenience, by Jonas Bellew, a trapper who dwelt at that part of the coast already mentioned as Boulder Creek. The track followed the windings of a streamlet which was at that time covered with snow, and only distinguishable by the absence of bushes along its course. It turned now to the right, now to the left, as rocks, or mounds, or cliffs presented obstacles. In some places it dived precipitately into a hollow that necessitated careful driving; in others it ran straight up to the brow of a hill at an angle that obliged the travellers not only to get out and walk, but also to aid their panting pony by putting their shoulders to the back of the sleigh. Here and there a level patch occurred over which they trotted briskly, and then down they went again by a steep incline into the bed of an ice-buried stream, to find a similarly steep ascent on the other side. Occasionally, coming to a wall-

like cliff surrounded by a tangled and trackless forest, they were forced to seek the shores of the sea, and there, among rocks and ice-drift, pick their way slowly along.

Fortunately this road, just opposite to Jenkins Creek, where the McLeods had commenced their squatting operations, ran along the shore at some distance from the entrance to the creek, so that Redding could pass without encountering the newcomers, whom he was anxious to avoid until the question of the invasion of the Fur Company's rights was settled.

Despite their utmost efforts, night began to close upon the travellers before they reached Bellew's shanty in Boulder Creek.

"Take care, Monsieur, there is von portion dangereux here," said François Le Rue.

"Where?" asked Redding, as he checked the pony a little and looked earnestly ahead.

"Ah! dere!" exclaimed Le Rue.

His remark was needless, for at that moment the sleigh turned over a ledge of rock and pitched its occupants into a snow-drift.

"Killded?" gasped the Canadian, as he emerged from the snow with eyes, ears, and nostrils stuffed full; "no—not quite!"

Satisfying himself that no bones were broken, he turned abruptly to look for his companion, whose motionless legs sticking out of the drift were the only visible portions of his body.

Anxiously and swiftly did François drag his master out, and great was his relief when poor Redding looked at him with a bewildered gaze and demanded to know what had happened!

"Oh! I see, capsized," he said, rising and pressing his hand to his brow, "I believe I must have hit my head against a stump, for I've been slightly stunned. However, 'all's well that ends well.' Not hurt, François?"

"No, Monsieur,—not fatever."

"That's right, lend a hand to lift the sleigh—hoop! there—jump in."

Le Rue obeyed. The bear-rug was replaced around them, and the pony, which had stood as quiet as a lamb during the accident, started forward again.

"Voilà! von light," exclaimed the Canadian.

At that moment they had rounded the corner of a high cliff, and come into view of Boulder Creek. There was just light enough to make the chaotic grandeur of the place visible in a ghostly degree. Great boulders and masses of rock, which had fallen from the neighbouring mountains and cliffs, lay piled about in the creek or gully in wildest confusion. Some of these masses were as large as a small hut, but they were of all sizes as well as shapes. It was a weird scene, and forbidding; nevertheless some human being had seen fit to take up his abode there, as was made apparent by the light referred to by Le Rue.

Picking their way carefully among the boulders, the travellers at last reached a log-hut which was so small, weather-worn, and grey, that, from a short distance, it might have easily been mistaken, even in daylight, for one of the rocks by which it was surrounded.

The door stood wide open, and through it streamed the light of a roaring fire of wood. So powerful was the contrast between the ruddy light and the cold grey scene without, that to the approaching travellers it appeared as if the whole interior of the hut glowed with fervent heat.

In the small doorway stood the figure of a man who was so large as almost to fill up the entrance, and so black, by contrast with the glowing background, that neither feature nor form was distinguishable save his sharp outline. The outline, however, was a remarkably telling one. It told of a broad chest and square shoulders, of massive limbs, and an easy air, and a sturdy attitude, and suggested difficulty in the way of entering that hut without leave asked and obtained.

"Hallo!" exclaimed the outline, in a voice so deep that it must have been unfathomable.

"How d'ee do, Bellew?" cried Reginald Redding, as he drove into the stream of light, pulled up, and sprang from the sleigh.

"Hearty, sir, hearty, thank 'ee," replied the outline, advancing and becoming a little more visible on the surface as he did so. "Hallo! Le Rue, how are 'ee? Glad to see you both. Step in. A good fire on a coldish night is cheery—ain't it, Mister Redding?"

"Indeed it is, Bellew, especially when the night happens to be also darkish."

"Ha! oui," interposed Le Rue, bustling into the hut with the bear-rug, "it vas so darkish dat ve capsize under de cliff an' a'most knock de whole affair to smattoms—sleigh, cheval, an'

peepil."

"I'm glad to see that the 'peepil' is all right, however," said Bellew, glancing at his visitors with what may be called a grave smile; "it might have bin worse, for that's an ugly corner under the cliff, an' needs careful drivin' even in daylight."

"I've not come off quite scatheless, however," said Redding, rubbing the top of his head tenderly, "for here is a bump that would perplex the whole college of phrenologists."

"Skin broke, sir?" asked Bellew, advancing and examining the part. "No, all right. A good supper will be the best cure for it. If I was a phrenologist now, I'd name it the bump of top-heaviness. Sit down, sir; sit down, Le Rue, an' look after my kettle while I see to your nag."

So saying, their host went out and left his unexpected, but evidently welcome, guests to make themselves comfortable.

Although Jonas Bellew was a recluse, he was by no means an ascetic. He was marked by deep gravity of countenance coupled with a kindly humorous disposition. No one knew where he came from or why he had taken up his abode in such a lonely spot. Many of the rough fellows who hang on the outskirts of the wilderness had tried as they said, to "pump" him on these points, but Jonas was either a dry well or a deep one, for pumping brought forth nothing. He gained a livelihood by shooting, fishing, trapping wild animals for their skins, and, sometimes, by doing what he called "odd jobs" in the settlements.

"Your home appears to me to grow wilder every time I see it,"

said Redding, as Bellew re-entered the hut, and busied himself in spreading on a rough deal table the materials of a plain but substantial meal.

"That seems to be the idea of most men who come here," replied the trapper, "but it's not many that favour me with a visit."

"Ha! vraiment, dat must be true," interposed the Canadian, "for no body vill com' here 'xcept them as do want hims legs broke."

"Well, I have seen a few damaged shins and broken heads since I came to this location," said Jonas, "but such accidents occur chiefly among the Canadian French, who seem on the whole to be a clumsy set."

"Not von half so clumsy as de Engleesh, or Irish, or Scosh," retorted Le Rue.

"Perhaps you're right, an' mayhap you're wrong, lad, anyway here is supper. The Frenchmen are always good at their victuals, so sit in an' go to work. Take the keg, Mister Redding. I've not found time yet to make chairs, but it's wonderful how well a man gets along without such luxuries."

"Especially when a man sits down to a venison-steak like this," said the fur-trader, taking the offered seat, while his man sat down on a block of wood set on end, and prepared to prove the truth of the trapper's assertion in regard to French capacity for food.

"'Taint venison," said Bellew, assisting his companions to the meat in question, "it's bear."

"Indeed? and not bad food for a hungry man," returned Redding, as he began supper. "Where got you him?"

"Down near Jenkins Creek, where the McLeods are setting up their saw-mill."

"The McLeods!" exclaimed Redding, looking up suddenly, "have you seen the McLeods?"

"Ay, I've bin helpin' them a bit wi' the mill. Goin' down again to-morrow. If this weather holds, the ice must give way soon, and then we'll be able to push ahead faster."

The trapper said this quietly and without looking up from the bear-steak with which he was busy, so that Redding's look of surprise appeared to be lost on him. The fur-trader and his man exchanged glances.

For a few minutes the process of mastication completely engrossed the trio, but the thoughts of the fur-trader were busy, for he was disappointed to find that one whom he respected so much as Jonas Bellew should thus coolly state that he was aiding the interlopers.

Presently he laid down his knife and fork, and said:—

"Are you aware, Bellew, that these McLeods have settled themselves on the Company's reserve lands?"

"No, sir, I wasn't aware of it."

"Well, then, I now tell you that they have," said Redding, who, unfortunately for himself and others, possessed an easily-roused spirit and was apt to become irascible when the rights—real or supposed—of the Company which he represented appeared in

danger of violation. “At least,” he continued, in a less positive tone, “I have reason to believe that such is the case, and I am now on my way to—”

He paused abruptly, feeling the impropriety of revealing his plans to one who, although a quiet and sensible man, and not given to talk too much, was, nevertheless, by his own admission, an aider and abettor of the enemy.

“Whereabouts is the boundary line?” asked Bellew, after a short silence.

“At Jenkins Creek—*that* creek is the boundary,” answered the fur-trader. “On which side of the creek have they begun to build the mill?”

“They haven’t begun yet, sir, but I believe they intend to commence on the south side.”

“So far well,” replied Redding, “but if I find that they have raised a stone or planted a stake on the *north* side of the creek, I’ll—”

Here feeling that he was about to give way to a boastful spirit, he got himself out of the difficulty of having to finish the sentence by making a sudden and somewhat stern demand for “more bear-steak.”

“Vid pleasieur, Monsieur,” said Le Rue, placing a huge slice on his master’s plate.

“Well, sir, I hope you’ll find that they haven’t overstepped the boundary,” said Bellew, “because the McLeods look as if they’d be troublesome customers to deal with.”

The fur-trader made no reply. He felt indignant at the bare idea of his being checked in doing his duty by any man, or men, who were "troublesome," by which expression he understood Bellew to mean that they were resolute and physically powerful in opposition; he therefore thought it best to avoid any further tendency to boast by holding his tongue.

Not so his volatile retainer, who stuck his fork into a lump of meat vindictively, as if it had been the body of a McLeod, and exclaimed:—

"Hah! vat you say? troblesom, eh? who care for dat? If de Macklodds do touche, by von small hinch, de lands of de Companie—ve vill—hah!"

Another stab of the fork was all that the savage Le Rue vouchsafed as an explanation of his intentions.

In this frame of mind Reginald Redding and his man started off next morning on foot at an early hour, slept that night at a place called Sam's hut, and, the following evening, drew near to the end of their journey.

Chapter Three
A Brief but Agreeable Meeting

The little outskirt settlement of Partridge Bay was one of those infant colonies which was destined to become in future years a flourishing and thickly-peopled district of Canada. At the period of our story it was a mere cluster of dwellings that were little better than shanties in point of architecture and appearance. They were, however, somewhat larger than these, and the cleared fields around them, with here and there a little garden railed in, gave them a more homelike aspect than the dwellings of the woodmen.

The valley in which the settlement stood was one of those magnificent stretches of primeval forest which used to be the hunting-grounds of the red man, and from which he had not at that time been thrust by the "paleface," for, here and there, his wigwam might still be seen sending its wreath of blue smoke above the tree-tops.

It was evening—a calm, sunny, glorious, spring evening—when Redding and his man overtopped the heights that enclosed the vale, and paused as well to gaze upon the scene as to recover breath. Far below them lay the hamlet, a cluster of black dots on a field of pure snow. Roseate lights on undulations, and cold blue shadows in hollows, were tamed down in effect by the windows

of the hamlet which shot forth beams of blazing fire at the setting sun. Illimitable space seemed to stretch away to the place where the horizon would have been if it had not lost itself in a golden glory, and this vast reach was a varied irregular network of dark pines and fields of snow—the pines tipped everywhere with sparkling snow-wreaths, the fields streaked everywhere with long shadows. Little winding lines of a grey colour which radiated from the hamlet indicated the tracks where the settlers drove their sleighs and wood-sledges. Many of these were seen moving along the far-off tracks like insects, while the tinkle of the sleigh-bells floated upwards like fairy music.

"Yes, I shall take up my abode there," murmured Redding, as he gazed in rapt admiration on the beautiful scene.

"Monsieur?" said his companion.

"I say that I should like to dwell there," answered Redding. "It is a splendid country, and will be better known in days to come."

"Vraiment, truly, a magnifircent kontry," returned Le Rue, "gorgeows, magnifique! I vould giv moche, ver moche, to have leetil cottage, an vife, an cow, an pigs dere."

As Redding had been thinking of something similar, he laughed, and commenced the descent of the zigzag track that led to the hamlet.

They had proceeded only a few yards when, turning round a cluster of pines, they suddenly discovered some travellers in difficulty—a man whose horse had shied or stumbled off the narrow track and was embedded up to the girths in the soft snow,

and two females, whose furry garments, all besprinkled with snow, showed that they had just emerged from the sledge, which lay on its side behind the horse. The driver's chief anxiety seemed to be to quiet and restrain his horse, which being high-spirited, was plunging in vain and frantic efforts to extricate himself, to the great danger of shafts and harness.

To run up and aid the man was of course the instant impulse of our travellers.

"Ah! good luck to 'ee," exclaimed the driver, in tones that were unmistakably Irish, "here, howld 'is head till I get the sled clear."

"All right," cried the Englishman, seizing the reins near the mouth of the terrified animal and holding its head forcibly down, while Le Rue assisted the owner to unharness.

In a few minutes the vehicle was righted, and the horse released.

While the driver was busy readjusting the harness, he accompanied the operation with a running fire of grateful expressions, such as— "there now, ain't ye in luck, Rooney? Arrah! gentleman, it's my blissin' I bestow on yez. Och! but I'd have bin lost intirely widout ye. Well well, it's always the way. I'm no sooner in a scrape than I'm sure to get out of it. It's meself is a favoured man. Now thin, ladies, git in, for we're late enough on the road."

On the two "ladies" thus addressed Redding and his man had been gazing in silent surprise, for they were so good-looking and so blooming, that it seemed to the two men, who had been

accustomed of late to the sight of none but the brown dames of the red skins, as if a couple of beings from another and a purer world had dropped suddenly upon their path. One of the two was evidently a lady, and was possessed of no common share of beauty. Her dark hair contrasted powerfully with the fairness of her skin and the whiteness of her teeth. Her dazzling black eyes almost, and her red lips altogether, laughed as she observed Redding's gaze of astonishment. Her companion, a very pretty Canadian girl, was evidently her maid.

"We owe you many thanks, kind sirs," said the lady, "for your opportune assistance."

"Pardon me, madam," said Redding, hastening forward in some confusion as he recovered from his rather rude stare of surprise, "I dwell in the wilderness and have been so unaccustomed of late to the sight of ladies that—that—allow me to assist you into the sleigh!"

"Mademoiselle, permettez moi," said Le Rue, advancing to the waiting-maid and politely offering his hand.

Another moment and the "ladies" were seated in the vehicle and carefully repacked by our travellers, while their Irish driver mounted to his seat in front and gathered up the reins.

"Thanks, gentlemen, many thanks," repeated the ladies, with bewitching smiles.

"Good luck to 'ee both," cried the driver, as he flourished his whip and drove away.

Redding and his man stood silently gazing for several minutes

at the turn in the road where the vision had vanished.

"Heaven for two minits, an' now—gone for evair!" said Le Rue, with a deep sigh.

Redding echoed the sigh, and then laughed at the lugubrious expression of his man's face.

"Oh *such* eyes!" exclaimed Le Rue.

"Yes, she's rather good-looking," replied Redding, thinking of the lady.

"Good-looking! non—bootifool—exiquitely bootifool," cried Le Rue, thinking of the maid.

Again Redding laughed. "Well well, François," said he, "whether good-looking or beautiful matters little, for it's not likely that we shall ever see them again, so the less you think about them the better.—Allons! we are late enough and must not loiter."

They pushed ahead at once at a rapid pace, but although neither spoke, each thought with somewhat similar feelings of the little incident just described.

Lest the reader should be surprised at so small a matter affecting them so deeply, we must remark that these fur-traders had lived for some years in a region where they saw no females except the brown and rather dirty squaws of the Indians who visited the Cliff Fort with furs. Their fort was indeed only three days' journey from the little settlement of Partridge Bay, but as the space which lay between was a particularly rugged part of the wilderness, with only a portion of road—unworthy of the name

—here and there, and the greater part of the way only passable on foot or by means of dog-sledges, none but an occasional red man or a trapper went to and fro; and as the nature of the fur-trader's business called for very little intercourse with the settlements—their furs being sent by water to Quebec in summer—it followed that the inhabitants of the Cliff Fort rarely visited Partridge Bay. The sudden vision, therefore, of two pretty females of a higher type had not only the effect on Redding and his man of novelty, but also stirred up old memories and associations.

Such good use did they now make of their time that the settlement of Partridge Bay was reached before dark, and our hero went off immediately in quest of the surveyor.

Mr Gambart was a cheerful, healthy, plump little man, with a plump little wife, and three plump little daughters. Plumpness was not only a characteristic of the Gambarts, but also of their surroundings, for the cottage in which they dwelt had a certain air of plumpness about it, and the spot on which it stood was a round little knob of a hill.

Here Reginald Redding was hospitably received—we might almost say joyfully, because visitors to the settlement were so rare that whoever made his appearance was sure to be received as a "welcome guest" if he only carried the credentials of honesty and ordinary good nature on his countenance.

Redding's impatience, however, to get at the truth of the matter that had brought him there, induced him very soon to forsake the society of the three plump little daughters and retire

to the plump little father's work-room.

"It is my opinion," said Mr Gambart, as he carefully unfolded the plan, "that you may find the McLeods have trespassed somewhat on your reserves, for, if my memory serves me rightly, there is a small islet—as you see here—just in the centre of the creek, *half* of which belongs to you."

"I see it," said the fur-trader, earnestly gazing on the dot which represented the said island.

"Well," continued the surveyor, "that islet is a mere rock just above the waterfall, and I am of opinion that it would be almost impossible for any one to erect a mill there without encroaching to some extent on your half of it."

"Good," replied the fur-trader, "can you let me have a copy of the plan to-morrow?"

"To-night if you please. I have one by me."

"Then I'll be off by daybreak the day after to-morrow," said Redding, with much decision.

"Why such haste?" asked the surveyor, "the McLeods are not likely to run away from you. I know them well, for they dwelt long in this settlement, and were ever regarded as men of firm purpose—quite immovable indeed when once they had made up their minds on any point, so you'll be sure to find them at Jenkins Creek carrying out their plans, even though you should delay your return for a month. Come, make up your mind to stay with us at least a few days. It will do you as well as me good, and will send you back to banishment in a better frame of mind."

Redding, although strongly tempted by the comforts of civilised life and the hospitality of his host—not to mention the attractions of the plump little daughters—sternly resolved not to swerve an inch from the path of what he believed to be his duty. He entertained a strong suspicion that these McLeods had penetrated into the wilderness to the neighbourhood of the Cliff Fort, not so much for the purpose of cutting timber as for secret opposition in the fur-trade, of which the company he represented had for many years enjoyed almost a monopoly. His pride was touched, his spirit was fired. Perhaps the peaceful and secluded life he had led rendered this little opportunity of warfare more a pleasure than a pain to him. At all events the thing was not to be tolerated. The saw-mill, which the McLeods had an undoubted right to erect on the unoccupied lands, was being planted on the very border of the Company's reserve lands, which they had purchased, and which were clearly laid down in plans. He would see to it that these interlopers did not trespass by an inch—no, not by an eighth of an inch—if *he* had power to prevent it! The fact that the McLeods were said to be resolute men made him more determined to assert his rights. He therefore declined Mr Gambart's invitation firmly.

"I will stay," said he, "only one day, to look out for a house, and then return."

"Look out for a house!" exclaimed the surveyor, in surprise, "what mean you? Do you think of settling down here?"

"Indeed I do," replied Redding, with a smile. "I have long been

brooding over that subject. The fact is, Mr Gambart, that I am tired of solitude. I am a sociable being, and find it hard to endure the society of only five or six men in a place where there are no women, no children, and no end of bears! I intend to leave the Fur Company's service,—indeed my resignation is already sent in,—purchase a small farm here, and get—"

"Get a wife, a horse, a dog, and a gun, and settle down to enjoy yourself, eh?" interrupted the surveyor.

"Well, I had not gone quite so much into details," answered Redding, with a laugh, "but you are right in so far as settling down goes. My only fear is that it won't be easy to find a place that will at once suit my fancy and my purse. The small sum of money left me by my father at his death two years ago will not purchase a very extensive place, but—"

"I know the very thing to suit you," interrupted the surveyor with emphasis, "a splendid little cottage—quite a mansion in miniature—with garden, fences, fields, outhouses, etcetera, all complete and going literally for an old song. Come, we'll 'go visit it by the pale moonlight' just now, return to have tea with the ladies, and to-morrow we'll go see it by daylight. It is close at hand, the name is Loch Dhu, and it has only one objection."

"What may that be?" asked Redding, much amused at the abrupt little man's energy.

"Won't tell you till you've seen it; come."

Without more ado they sallied forth and walked along the snowy track that led to the cottage in question. A few minutes

sufficed to bring them to it, and the first glance showed the fur-trader that his friend had not exaggerated the beauty of the place. The cottage, although small, was so elegant in form and so tastefully planned in every respect that it well deserved the title of a mansion in miniature. It stood on a rising ground which was crowned with trees; and the garden in front, the summer-house, the porch, the trellis-work fence, the creepers, the flower-beds —everything in fact, told that it had been laid out and planned by a refined mind.

Of course Redding had to call in the aid of his imagination a little, for at the moment when he first beheld it, the whole scene was robed in a mantle of snow. Close to the house, and in sight of the front windows, was a small lake or pond, by the side of which rose an abrupt precipice of about fifty feet in height. Beyond this, a little to the right, lay the undulating fields of the settlement, dotted with clumps of trees and clusters of cottages.

"Most beautiful!" exclaimed the fur-trader, "but why named Loch Dhu, which, if I mistake not, is the Gaelic for Black Lake?"

"Because that little pond," answered the surveyor, "when freed from its wintry coat, looks dark and deep even at mid-day under the shadow of that beetling cliff."

"Truly, I like it well," said Redding, as he turned again to look at the cottage, "are you its architect?"

"I am," answered Mr Gambart, "but a greater mind than mine guided my pencil in the process of its creation."

"Indeed! and what is the objection to it that you spoke of?"

"That," replied the surveyor, with a mysterious look, "I must, on second thoughts, decline to tell you."

"How, then, can you expect me to buy the place?" demanded Redding, in surprise.

"Why, because I, a disinterested friend, strongly recommend you to do so. You believe in me. Well, I tell you that there is no objection to the place but one, and that one won't prove to be an objection in the long run, though it is one just now. The price is, as you know, ridiculously small, first, because the family who owned it have been compelled by reverses of fortune to part with it, and are in urgent need of ready cash; and, secondly, because few people have yet found out the beauties of this paradise, which will one day become a very important district of Canada."

"Humph, well, I believe in your friendship, and to some extent in your wisdom, though I doubt your capacity to prophesy," said Redding. "However, if you won't tell me the objection, I must rest content. To-morrow we will look at it in daylight, and if I then see no objections to it myself, I'll buy it."

The morrow came. In the blaze of the orb of day Loch Dhu looked more beautiful than it did by moonlight. After a thorough examination of house and grounds, the fur-trader resolved to purchase it, and commissioned his plump little friend to carry out the transaction. Thereafter he and his man retraced their steps to the wilderness, still breathing unutterable things against the entire clan of McLeod.

Chapter Four
Pioneering

We turn now to “the enemy”—the McLeods. The father and his two sons sat in a rude shanty, on a bench and an empty keg, drinking tea out of tin cans. They were all stalwart, dark-haired, grave-visaged mountaineers of Scotland. Unitedly they would have measured at least eighteen feet of humanity. The only difference between the father and the sons was that a few silver hairs mingled with the black on the head of the former, and a rougher skin covered his countenance. In other respects he seemed but an elder brother.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.