

**ROBERT
MICHAEL
BALLANTYNE**

SILVER LAKE

Robert Michael Ballantyne

Silver Lake

«Public Domain»

Ballantyne R.

Silver Lake / R. Ballantyne — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Chapter One.	5
Chapter Two.	7
Chapter Three.	10
Chapter Four.	12
Chapter Five.	15
Chapter Six.	18
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	20

R. M. Ballantyne

Silver Lake

Chapter One. The Hunters

It was on a cold winter morning long ago, that Robin Gore, a bold hunter of the backwoods of America, entered his parlour and sat him down to breakfast.

Robin's parlour was also his dining-room, and his drawing-room, besides being his bedroom and his kitchen. In fact, it was the only room in his wooden hut, except a small apartment, opening off it, which was a workshop and lumber-room.

Robin's family consisted of himself, and his wife, and his son Roy, who was twelve years of age—and his daughter Nelly, who was eight, or thereabout. In addition to these, his household comprised a nephew, Walter and an Irishman, Larry O'Dowd. The former was tall, strong, fearless, and twenty. The latter was stout, short, powerful, and forty.

The personal history of Robin Gore, to the point at which we take it up, runs briefly thus:—

He had been born in a backwood's settlement, had grown up and married in the little hamlet in which he had been born, and hunted around it contentedly until he was forty years of age. But, as population increased, he became restive. He disliked restraint; resolved to take his wife and family into the wilderness and after getting his nephew and an Irish adventurer to agree to accompany him, carried his resolution into effect.

He travelled several hundreds of miles into the woods—beyond the most remote settlement—built three wooden huts, surrounded them with a tall stockade, set up a flagstaff in the centre thereof, and styled the whole affair, “Fort Enterprise.”

“I'm sorry to bring you to such a lonesome spot, Molly, my dear,” said Robin, as he sat on the trunk of a fallen tree on the afternoon of the day on which he arrived at the scene of his future home; “it'll be rayther tryin' at first, but you'll soon get used to it, and we won't be bothered hereaway wi' all the new-fangled notions o' settlement folk. We'll dwell in the free wilderness, where there are no tyrannical laws to hamper a man, an' no nonsensical customs to fix the fashion of his coat an' leggins. Besides, you'll have Roy an' Nelly an' Walter an' Larry to keep you company, lass, not to mention our neighbours to look in upon now and again.”

“Very true, Robin,” replied the wife, “I have no doubt it will be quite cheery and homelike in course of time.”

She looked out upon the broad bosom of the lake which lay before the site of their forest home, and sighed. It was evident that Mrs Gore had a strong partiality for the laws and customs which her husband abhorred.

The “neighbours” to whom Robin referred lived in a leather tent twenty miles distant from the Fort. They were an Indian, named “The Black Swan,” his wife, named “The White Swan,” and a half-caste trapper, whose proper name was unknown to all save himself. His cognomen in the wilderness was “Slugs,” a name which originated in his frequent use of clipped pieces of lead instead of shot in the loading of his gun.

But to return to the point from which we started:—

It was on a cold winter morning that Robin Gore entered his parlour and sat him down to breakfast.

It was not only cold—very cold; colder than ever was experienced in our favoured British isles—but it was also very dark. Robin had risen before daybreak in order to visit his traps, and shoot

some game as early in the day as possible. The larder chanced to be nearly empty that day, a fact which was all the more to be regretted that it was New Year's day, and, as Robin remarked, "that day didn't occur more than once in the year." This statement Larry O'Dowd disputed, affirming that it occurred "at laste twice ivery year—wance at the beginnin' an' wance at the end of it!"

"Come along, lad," said Robin, trimming the candle as his nephew Walter entered, "we'll ha' to make the most of our time to-day, for we dine at sharp five p.m., an' our dinner—leastwise the most of it—is at this moment alive an' kickin', if it's not sleepin', in the forest, and has got to be found and shot yet. Hallo! boy, where are *you* bound for?"

"For the woods, father, with you and Walter," replied his son Roy, sitting down and coolly helping himself to a portion of bear's meat with which the hunter was regaling himself.

"Nonsense, boy," said Robin, somewhat gruffly.

"You'll not be able to keep up with us," added Walter, "for we've little time before us, an' a long way to go."

"If I break down I can turn back," retorted Roy.

"Very good; please yourself," said Robin in a tone of indifference, although his glance seemed to indicate that he was not sorry to see his boy determined to attempt an expedition which he knew from experience would be very trying to a lad of his years.

Breakfast over, the three hunters clothed themselves in habiliments suitable to the climate—leathern coats and trousers which were impervious to the wind; cloth leggings to keep the snow from the trousers; leather mocassins, or shoes with three pairs of blanket socks inside of them; fur-caps with ear-pieces; leather mittens with an apartment for the fingers and a separate chamber for the thumb, powder-horns, shot-pouches, guns, and snow-shoes. These latter were light wooden frames, netted across with deerskin threads, about five feet long and upwards of a foot wide. The shoes were of this enormous size, in order that they might support the wearers on the surface of the snow, which was, on an average, four feet deep in the woods. They were clumsy to look at, but not so difficult to walk in as one might suppose.

In silence the three hunters entered the dark woods in front of Fort Enterprise. Robin went first and beat the track, Walter followed in his footsteps, Roy brought up the rear. The father sank about six inches at every step, but the snow which fell upon his snow-shoes was so fine and dry, owing to the intense frost, that it fell through the net-work of the shoes like dust. Walter and Roy, treading in the footsteps, had less labour in walking, but Walter, being almost as strong as his uncle, took his turn at beating the track every two hours.

Through the woods they went, over mound and hollow, across frozen swamp and plain, through brush and break, until near noon, when they halted for rest and refreshment. While Walter cut firewood, Robin and Roy cleared away the snow, using their snow-shoes as shovels, and prepared their meal. It was simple; a few mouthfuls of dried meat and a tin can of hot tea—the backwoodsman's greatest luxury, next to his pipe. It was short, too. Half an hour sufficed to prepare and consume it.

"Let's see, now, what we have got," said Robin, counting the game before resuming the march.

"More than enough," said Walter, lighting his pipe for a hurried whiff, "ten brace of white grouse, four rabbits, six red foxes and a black one, and two wolves. We can't eat all that."

"Surely we won't eat the foxes and wolves!" cried Roy, laughing.

"Not till we're starvin'," replied his father. "Come, let's go on—are ye tired, lad?"

"Fresh as Walter," said the boy, proudly.

"Well, we won't try you too much. We'll just take a sweep round by the Wolf's Glen, an' look at the traps there—after which make for home and have our New Year's dinner. Go ahead, Walter, and beat the track; it is your turn this time."

Without speaking, Walter slipped his feet into the lines of his snow-shoes, extinguished his pipe, and led the way once more through the pathless forest.

Chapter Two.

The Starved Indian

In the depths of the same forest, and not far from the locality to which we have introduced our reader, a Red Indian was dragging his limbs wearily along over the untrodden snow.

The attenuated frame of this son of the soil, his hollow cheeks and glaring eye-balls, his belt drawn with extreme tightness round his waist, to repress the gnawings of hunger, as well as his enfeebled gait, proved that he was approaching the last stage of starvation.

For many weeks Wapaw had been travelling in the woods, guided on his way by the stars, and by those slight and delicate signs of the wilderness—such as the difference of thickness in the bark on the north, from that on the south side of a tree—which are perceptible only to the keen eye of an Indian, or a white man whose life has been spent in the wilderness.

But Wapaw was a very different man when he quitted his tribe from what he was at the time we introduce him to our reader. Strong, wiry, upright, and lithe as a panther, he left his wigwam and his wife, and turned his face towards the rising sun; but the season was a severe one, and game was scarce; from the very beginning of his journey he had found it difficult to supply himself with a sufficiency of food. Towards the middle of it he was on short allowance, and much reduced in strength; and now near its termination, he was, as we have said, almost in the last stage of starvation.

Fort Enterprise was Wapaw's goal. He had never been there before, but from the description of the place and its locality, given by those of his kindred who had visited Robin Gore, he was able to direct his march with unerring certainty towards it. Of course, as he drew near to it he could not ascertain his exact distance—whether he was a day or several days' journey off—but from the tracks of Robin's snow-shoes, which he crossed more than once, he guessed that he was nearing the Fort, and pushed on with renewed hope and energy.

Robin, however, was an active hunter. He often made long and rapid marches from his lonely dwelling—sometimes staying away a week or two at a time even in winter; so that Wapaw thought himself nearer Fort Enterprise than he really was when he first discovered the bold hunter's tracks. When, at length, he did arrive at less than a day's journey from the Fort, he was not aware of its close proximity, and, having tasted nothing whatever for two days, he felt the approach of that terrible state of exhaustion which precedes death.

It was a somewhat stormy day when the poor Indian's strength finally broke down. Hitherto he had pushed forward with some degree of hope, but on the morning of this day a broken branch caught his snow-shoe and tripped him. At any other time the fall would have been a trifle, but in his weak condition it acted like the last straw which breaks the camel's back. Wapaw rose with difficulty, and brushing the snow from his eyes, looked earnestly at his snow-shoes, well knowing that if they had been broken in the fall his power of advancing would have been taken away and his fate sealed, for he had neither strength nor energy left to repair them. They were uninjured, however; so he once more attempted to stagger on.

A slight rising ground lay before him. To ascend this was a labour so great that he almost sank in the midst of it. He reached the top, however, and gazed eagerly before him. He had gazed thus at the top of every rising ground that he had reached during the last two days, in the hope of seeing some sign of the Fort.

A deep sigh escaped him as he rested his hands on the muzzle of his gun, and his grave countenance was overspread with a look of profound melancholy. For the first time in his life, the once stout and active Wapaw had reached the point of giving way to despair. A wide open plain stretched out before him. The cold wind was howling wildly across it, driving the keen snow-drift before it in whirling clouds. Even a strong man might have shrunk from exposing himself on such a plain and to

such a blast on that bitter arctic day. Wapaw felt that in his case to cross it would be certain death; so, with the calm philosophy of a Red Indian, he made up his mind to lay him down and die!

His manner of preparing for his end was somewhat singular. Turning aside into the woods, he set about making an encampment with as much vigour as he could summon up. Clearing away the snow from the roots of a large spreading pine-tree, he strewed branches on the ground, and thus made a rude couch. On this he spread his blanket. Then he cut some firewood with the axe that hung at his side, and soon kindled, by means of flint, steel, and tinder, a good fire. Seating himself before the warm blaze, the exhausted man rested awhile, with his legs drawn together and his head resting on his knees.

He sat so long thus that he nearly fell asleep. Presently he roused himself, and proceeded to make a close examination of his wallet and firebag—the latter being a beautifully ornamented pouch, which Indians and fur-traders wear at their belts, for the purpose of containing the materials for producing fire, besides pipes and tobacco.

Poor Wapaw had already searched his wallet and firebag twice, without finding a crumb of food or a morsel of tobacco. He knew well that they were empty, yet he turned them inside out, and examined the seams and corners with as much earnestness as if he really expected to find relief from his sufferings there.

There was no expression of pain on the red man's face—only a look of profound melancholy.

He laid aside the firebag after a little while, and then quietly drew his knife, and cut a piece of leather from the skirt of his hunting coat.

The leather had been dried and smoked, and contained no substance whatever that could sustain life. Wapaw was aware of this—nevertheless he singed a portion of it until it was reduced almost to ashes, and mingling a little snow with this, ate it greedily.

Then, raising his eyes to the sky with a long earnest gaze, he sat immovable, until the sinking fire and the increasing cold recalled his wandering faculties.

There was a wild, glassy look about the Indian's eyes now, which probably resulted from exhaustion. He seemed to struggle several times to rouse himself before he succeeded; shuddering with intense cold, he crept to the little pile of firewood, and placed several billets on the fire, which speedily blazed up again, and the dying man cowered over it, regardless of the smoke which ever and anon wreathed round his drooping head.

In a few minutes Wapaw started up as if new energy had been infused into him. He placed his gun, axe, firebag, and powder-horn by themselves on the ground; then he wrapped himself in his blanket and lay slowly down beside them with his feet towards the fire. For a few minutes he lay on his back, gazing earnestly upwards, while his lips moved slowly, but no sound issued from them. Then he turned wearily on his side, and, covering his head with the blanket and turning his face towards the ground, he resigned himself to death.

But God had ordained that, at that time, the red man should not die.

About the time when he lay down, our hunters emerged upon the plain which had caused the Indian to despair.

"It's of no use goin' farther," observed Robin, as he and his companions stood at the edge of the forest and looked across the plain; "the wind blows too hard, and the drift is keen; besides there ain't much to be got hereaway, even in seasons of plenty."

"Father! is that smoke risin' over the bluff yonder?" asked Roy, pointing with his finger as he spoke.

"No doubt of it, lad."

"Indians, may be," said Walter.

Robin shook his head. "Don't think so," said he, "for the redskins don't often come to see me at this time o' the year. But we'll go see; an' look to your primin', lads—if it's a war-party we'll ha' to fight, mayhap, if we don't run."

The three hunters crossed the plain in the teeth of the howling drift, and cautiously approached the bluff referred to by Roy, and from behind which the smoke ascended.

"It's a camp fire," whispered Robin, as he glanced back at his companions, "but I see no one there. They must have just left the place."

There was a shade of anxiety in the hunter's voice as he spoke, for he thought of Fort Enterprise, its defenceless condition, and the possibility of the Indians having gone thither.

"They can't have gone to the Fort," said Walter, "else we should have seen their tracks on the way hither."

"Come," said Robin, stepping forward quickly, "we can see their tracks now, anyhow, and follow them up, and if they lead to the Fort."

The hunter did not finish his sentence, for at that moment he caught sight of the recumbent form of Wapaw in the camp.

"Hist! A redskin alone, and asleep! Well, I never did 'xpect to see that."

"Mayhap, he's a decoy-duck," suggested Walter. "Better look sharp out."

Robin and Roy heeded not the caution. They at once went forward, and the father lifted the blanket from the Indian's head.

"Dead!" exclaimed Roy, in a solemn tone.

"Not yet, lad! but I do b'lieve the poor critter's a'most gone wi' starvation. Come, bestir you, boys—rouse up the fire, and boil the kettle."

Walter and Roy did not require a second bidding. The kettle was ere long singing on a blazing fire. The Indian's limbs were chafed and warmed; a can of hot tea was administered, and Wapaw soon revived sufficiently to look up and thank his deliverers.

"Now, as good luck has it, I chanced to leave my hand-sled at the Wolf's Glen. Go, fetch it, Roy," said Robin.

The lad set off at once, and, as the glen was not far distant, soon returned with a flat wooden sledge, six feet long by eighteen inches broad, on which trappers are wont to pack their game in winter. On this sledge Wapaw was firmly tied, and dragged by the hunters to Fort Enterprise.

"Hast got a deer, father?" cried little Nelly, as she bounded in advance of her mother to meet the returning party.

"No, Nelly—'tis dearer game than that."

"What? a redskin!" exclaimed Dame Gore in surprise; "is he dead?"

"No, nor likely to die," said Robin, "he's in a starvin' state though, an'll be none the worse of a bit of our New Year's dinner. Here is game enough for one meal an' more; come, lass, get it ready as fast as may be."

So saying the bold hunter passed through the Fort gate, dragging the red man behind him.

Chapter Three.

Preparations for a Feast

"Why so grave, Robin?" inquired Mrs Gore, when her husband returned to the parlour after seeing Wapaw laid in a warm corner of the kitchen, and committed to the care of Larry O'Dowd.

"Molly, my dear, it's of no use concealin' things from you, 'cause when bad luck falls we must just face it. This Injun—Wapaw, he calls himself—tells me he has com'd here a-purpose, as fast as he could, to say that his tribe have resolved to attack me, burn the Fort, kill all the men, and carry you off into slavery."

"God help me! can this be true?"

"True enough, I don't doubt, 'cause Wapaw has the face of an honest man, and I believe in faces. He says some of the worst men of his tribe are in power just now; that they want the contents of my store without paying for them; that he tried to get them to give up the notion, but failed. On seeing that they were bent on it, he said he was going off to hunt, and came straight here to warn me. He says they talked of starting for the Fort two days after he did, and that he pushed on as fast as he could travel, so it's not likely they'll be here for two or three days yet. I'll get ready for them, hows'ever, and when the reptiles do come they'll meet with a warm reception, I warrant them; meanwhile, do you go and get dinner ready. We won't let such varmints interfere with our New Year's feast."

While Robin's wife went to her larder, his children were in the kitchen tending the Indian with earnest solicitude, and Larry was preparing a little soup for him.

"Do you like rabbit soup?" asked Nelly, kneeling beside the pallet of pine branches on which Wapaw lay.

The Indian smiled, and said something in his native tongue.

"Sure he don't onderstan' ye," exclaimed Larry, as he bustled in an energetic way amongst his pots and pans.

"Let me try him with Cree," said Roy, kneeling beside his sister, "I know a little—a *very* little Cree."

Roy tried his "very little Cree," but without success.

"It's o' no use," he said, "father must talk to him, for *he* knows every language on earth, I believe."

Roy's idea of the number of languages "on earth" was very limited.

"Och! don't bother him, see, here is a lingo that every wan onderstan's," cried Larry, carrying a can of hot soup towards Wapaw.

"Oh, let me! *do* let me!" cried Nelly, jumping up and seizing the can.

"Be all manes," said Larry, resigning it.

The child once more knelt by the side of the Indian and held the can to him, while he conveyed the soup to his lips with a trembling, unsteady hand. The eyes of the poor man glittered as he gazed eagerly at the food, which he ate with the avidity of a half-famished wolf.

His nurses looked on with great satisfaction, and when Wapaw glanced up from time to time in their faces, he was advised to continue his meal with nods and smiles of goodwill.

Great preparations were made for the dinner of that New Year's Day. Those who "dwell at home at ease" have no idea of the peculiar feelings with which the world's wanderers hail the season of Christmas and New Year. Surrounded as they usually are by strange scenes, and ignorant as they are of what friends at home are doing or thinking, they lay hold of this season as being one point at least in the circle of the year in which they can unite with the home circle, and, at the *same time*, commemorate with them the birth of the blessed Saviour of mankind, and think with them of absent friends. Much, therefore, as the "happy" season is made of in the "old country," it is made more of, if

possible, in the colonies; especially on the outskirts of the world, where the adventurous and daring have pitched their tents.

Of course Robin Gore and his household did not think of the “old country,” for they were descendants of settlers; but they had imbibed the spirit of the old country from their forefathers, and thought of those well-remembered friends whom they had left behind them in the settlements.

Notwithstanding the delay caused by the conveying of Wapaw to the Fort, the hunters had walked so fast that there was still some time to spare before dinner should be ready.

Roy resolved to devote this time to a ramble in the woods with his sister Nelly. Accordingly the two put on their snow-shoes, and, merely saying to their mother that they were going to take a run in the woods, set forth.

Now, it must be known that Mrs Gore had looked forward to New Year’s Day dinner with great interest and much anxiety. There was a general feeling of hilarity and excitement among the male members of the self-exiled family that extended itself to the good woman, and induced her to resolve that the entire household should have what Walter styled a “rare blow-out!” During the whole morning she had been busy with the preparation of the various dishes, among which were a tart made of cloudberry jam, a salt goose, and a lump of bear’s ham, besides the rabbits and ptarmigan which had been shot that day.

“That’s the way to do it, Molly,” cried Robin, as he opened the door and peeped in upon his wife during the height and heat of her culinary labours; “keep the pot bilin’, my dear, and don’t spare the butter this day. It only comes once a year, you know.”

“Twice,” muttered Larry in a low voice, as he stirred the contents of a large pot which hung over the fire.

“And see that you look after Wapaw,” continued Robin. “Don’t give him too much at first, it’ll hurt him.”

“No fear of that,” replied Larry, “he’s got so much a’ready that he couldn’t howld another morsel av he was to try.”

“Well, well, take care of him, anyhow,” said Robin, with a laugh; “meanwhile I’ll go see after the defences o’ the Fort, and make all snug.”

By dint of unwearied perseverance the dinner was cooked, and then it occurred to Robin to ask where the children were, but no one could tell, so the hunter remarked quietly that they would “doubtless make their appearance in a short while.”

Gradually the dinner reached that interesting point which is usually styled “ready to dish.” Whereupon Robin again asked where the children were. Still no one could tell, so he said he would go out and hail them. Loudly and long did the hunter call, but no one answered; then he made a rapid search in and about the Fort, but they were not to be found. Moreover, a snow-storm had begun to set in, and the drift rendered it difficult to distinguish tracks in the snow.

At last the day’s labours were brought to a close. Dinner was served, and smoked invitingly on the table. The party only awaited the return of Robin with the children. In a few minutes Robin entered hastily.

“Molly,” said he, in a tone of anxiety, “the foolish things have gone into the woods, I think. Come, lads, we must hunt them down. It’s snowin’ hard, so we’ve no time to lose.”

Walter and Larry at once put on their capotes, fur-caps, and snow-shoes, and sallied forth, leaving Mrs Gore seated alone, and in a state of deep anxiety, by the side of her untasted New Year’s Day dinner.

Chapter Four.

Lost in the Snow

When Roy and Nelly set out for a ramble, they had at first no intention of going beyond their usual haunts in the woods around the Fort; but Roy had been inspirited by his successful march that day with his father and Walter, and felt inclined to show Nelly some new scenes to which they had not, up to that time, dared to penetrate together.

The snow-storm, already referred to, had commenced gradually. When the children set forth on their ramble only a few flakes were falling, but they had not been away half an hour when snow fell so thickly that they could not see distinctly more than a few yards ahead of them. There was no wind, however, so they continued to advance, rather pleased than otherwise with the state of things.

“Oh, I *do* like to see falling snow,” cried Nelly, with a burst of animation.

“So do I,” said Roy, looking back at his sister with a bright smile, “and I like it best when it comes down thick and heavy, in big flakes, on a *very* calm day, don’t you?”

“Yes, oh it’s so nice,” responded Nelly sympathetically.

They paused for minutes to shake some of the snow from their garments, and beat their hands together, for their fingers were cold, and to laugh boisterously, for their hearts were merry. Then they resumed their march, Roy beating the track manfully and Nelly following in his footsteps.

In passing beneath a tall fir-tree Roy chanced to touch a twig. The result was literally overwhelming, for in a moment he was almost buried in snow, to the unutterable delight of his sister, who stood screaming with laughter as the unfortunate boy struggled to disentomb himself.

In those northern wilds, where snow falls frequently and in great abundance, masses are constantly accumulating on the branches of trees, particularly on the pines, on the broad flat branches of which these masses attain to considerable size. A slight touch is generally sufficient to bring these down, but, being soft, they never do any injury worth mentioning.

When Roy had fairly emerged from the snow he joined his sister in the laugh, but suddenly he stopped, and his face became very grave.

“What’s the matter?” asked Nelly, with an anxious look.

“My snow-shoe’s broken,” said Roy.

There was greater cause for anxiety on account of this accident than the reader is perhaps aware of. It may be easily understood that in a country where the snow averages four feet in depth, no one can walk half-a-mile without snow-shoes without being thoroughly exhausted; on the other hand, a man can walk thirty or forty miles a day by means of snow-shoes.

“Can’t you mend it?” asked Nelly.

Roy, who had been carefully examining the damaged shoe, shook his head.

“I’ve nothing here to do it with; besides, it’s an awful smash. I must just try to scramble home the best way I can. Come, it’s not very far, we’ll only be a bit late for dinner.”

The snow-shoe having been bandaged, after a fashion, with a pocket-handkerchief, the little wanderers began to retrace their steps; but this was now a matter of extreme difficulty, owing to the quantity of snow which had fallen and almost obliterated the tracks. The broken shoe, also, was constantly giving way, so that ere long the children became bewildered as well as anxious, and soon lost the track of their outward march altogether. To make matters worse, the wind began to blow clouds of snow-drift into their faces, compelling them to seek the denser parts of the forest for shelter.

They wandered on, however, in the belief that they were drawing nearer home every step, and Roy, whose heart was stout and brave, cheered up his sister’s spirit so much that she began to feel quite confident their troubles would soon be over.

Presently all their hopes were dashed to the ground by their suddenly emerging upon an open space, close to the very spot where the snow-mass had fallen on Roy's head. After the first feeling of alarm and disappointment had subsided, Roy plucked up heart and encouraged Nelly by pointing out to her that they had at all events recovered their old track, which they would be very careful not to lose sight of again.

Poor Nelly whimpered a little, partly from cold and hunger as well as from disappointment, as she listened to her brother's words; then she dried her eyes and said she was ready to begin again. So they set off once more. But the difficulty of discerning the track, if great at first, was greater now, because the falling and drifting snow had well-nigh covered it up completely. In a very few minutes Roy stopped, and, confessing that he had lost it again, proposed to return once more to their starting point to try to recover it. Nelly agreed, for she was by this time too much fatigued and alarmed to have any will of her own, and was quite ready to do whatever she was told without question.

After wandering about for nearly an hour in this state of uncertainty, Roy at last stopped, and, putting his arm round his sister's waist, said that he had lost himself altogether! Poor Nelly, whose heart had been gradually sinking, fairly broke down; she hid her face in her brother's bosom, and wept.

"Come now, don't do that, dear Nell," said Roy, tenderly, "I'll tell you what we shall do—we'll camp in the snow! We have often done it close to the house, you know, for fun, so we'll do it now in earnest."

"But it's so dark and cold," sobbed Nelly, looking round with a shudder into the dark recesses of the forest, which were by that time enshrouded by the gathering shades of night; "and I'm *so* hungry too! Oh me! what *shall* we do?"

"Now *don't* get so despairing," urged Roy, whose courage rose in proportion as his sister's sank; "it's not such an awful business after all, for father is sure to scour the woods in search of us, an' if we only get a comfortable encampment made, an' a roarin' fire kindled, why, we'll sit beside it an' tell stories till they find us. They'll be sure to see the fire, you know, so come—let's to work."

Roy said this so cheerfully that the child felt a little comforted, dried her eyes, and said she would "help to make the camp."

This matter of making an encampment in the snow, although laborious work, was by no means a novelty to these children of the backwoods. They had often been taught how to do it by Cousin Walter and Larry O'Dowd, and had made "playing at camps" their chief amusement in fine winter days. When, therefore, they found themselves compelled to "camp-out" from necessity, neither of them was at a loss how to proceed. Roy drew a circle in the snow, about three yards in diameter, at the foot of a large tree, and then both set to work to dig a hole in this space, using their snow-shoes as shovels. It took an hour's hard work to reach the ground, and when they did so the piled-up snow all round raised the walls of this hole to the height of about six feet.

"Now for bedding," cried Roy, scrambling over the walls of their camp and going into the woods in search of a young pine-tree, while Nelly sat down on the ground to rest after her toil.

It was a dark night, and the woods were so profoundly obscured, that Roy had to grope about for some time before he found a suitable tree. Cutting it down with the axe which always hung at his girdle, he returned to camp with it on his shoulder, and cut off the small soft branches, which Nelly spread over the ground to the depth of nearly half a foot. This "pine-brush," as it is called, formed a soft elastic couch.

The fire was the next business. Again Roy went into the bush and gathered a large bundle of dry branches.

"Now, Nelly, do you break a lot of the small twigs," said Roy, "and I'll strike a light."

He pulled his firebag from his belt as he spoke, and drew from it flint, steel, and tinder. No one ever travels in the wilds of which we write without such means of procuring fire. Roy followed the example of his elder companions in carrying a firebag, although he did not, like them, carry tobacco and pipe in it.

Soon the bright sparks that flew from the flint caught on the tinder. This was placed in a handful of dry grass, and whirled rapidly round until it was fanned into a flame. Nelly had prepared another handful of dry grass with small twigs above it. The light was applied, the fire leaped up, more sticks were piled on, and at last the fire roared upward, sending bright showers of sparks into the branches overhead, lighting the white walls of the camp with a glow that caused them to sparkle as with millions of gems, and filling the hearts of the children with a sensation of comfort and gladness, while they stood before the blaze and warmed themselves, rubbing their hands and laughing with glee.

No one, save those who have experienced it, can form any conception of the cheering effect of a fire in the heart of a dark wood at night. Roy and Nelly quite forgot their lost condition for a short time, in the enjoyment of the comforting heat and the bright gladsome blaze. The brother cut firewood until he was rendered almost breathless, the sister heaped on the wood until the fire roared and leaped high above their heads. Strange though it may appear to some, the snow did not melt. The weather was too cold for that; only a little of that which was nearest the fire melted—the snow walls remained hard frozen all round. Roy soon sat down to rest, as close to the fire as he could without getting scorched; then Nelly seated herself by his side and nestled her head in his breast. There they sat, telling stories and gazing at the fire, and waiting for “father to come.”

Meanwhile Robin and his comrade ranged the forest far and near in desperate anxiety. But it was a wide and wild country. The children had wandered far away; a high ridge of land hid their fire from view. Moreover, Robin, knowing the children’s usual haunts, had chanced to go off in the wrong direction. When night set in the hunters returned to Fort Enterprise to procure ammunition and provisions, in order to commence a more thorough and prolonged search. Poor Mrs Gore still sat beside the cold and untasted feast, and there the hunters left her, while they once more plunged into the pathless wilderness to search for the lost ones on that luckless New Year’s Day.

Chapter Five. Carried Off

While Robin Gore and his companions were anxiously searching the woods around Fort Enterprise for the lost children, a war-party of savages was making its way swiftly towards the Fort.

A chief of the Indians, named Hawk, who was a shrewd as well as a bad man, had suspected Wapaw's intentions in quitting the camp of his people alone and in such unnecessary haste. This man had great influence over his fellows, and easily prevailed on them to set off on their murderous expedition against the Fort of the "pale-faces" without delay.

Being well supplied with food, they travelled faster than their starving comrade, and almost overtook him. They finally encamped within a short distance of the Fort the day after Wapaw's arrival, and prepared to assault it early next morning.

"If the wicked skunk has got there before us," said Hawk to his fellows, as they prepared to set out before daybreak, "the pale-faces will be ready for us, and we may as well go back to our wigwams at once; but if that badger's whelp has been slow of foot, we shall hang the scalps of the pale-faces at our belts, and eat their food this day."

The polite titles above used by Hawk were meant to refer to Wapaw.

Indians are not naturally loquacious. No reply was made to Hawk's remark, except that one man with a blackened face, and a streak of red ochre down the bridge of his nose, said, "Ho!" and another with an equally black face, and three red streaks on each of his cheeks, said, "Hum!" as the war-party put on their snowshoes and prepared to start.

They had not gone far when Hawk came to a sudden pause, and stood transfixed and motionless like a dark statue. His comrades also stopped abruptly and crouched. No question was asked, but Hawk pointed to a spark of fire, which every Indian in the band had observed the instant their leader had paused. Silently they crept forward, with guns cocked and arrows fitted to the bowstrings, until they all stood round an encampment where the fire was still smouldering, and in the centre of which lay a little boy and girl, fast asleep and shuddering with cold.

Poor Roy and Nelly had told each other stories until their eyes would not remain open; then they fell asleep, despite their efforts to keep awake, and, as the fire sank low, they began to shiver with the cold. Lucky was it for them that the Indians discovered them, else they had certainly been frozen to death that night.

Hawk roused them with little ceremony. Roy, by an impulse which would appear to be natural to those who dwell in wild countries, whether young or old, seized his axe, which lay beside him, as he leaped up. Hawk grinned, and took the axe from him at once, and the poor boy, seeing that he was surrounded by dark warriors, offered no resistance, but sought to comfort Nelly, who was clinging to him and trembling with terror.

Immediately the savages sat down in the encampment, and began an earnest discussion, which the children watched with great eagerness. They evidently did not agree, for much gesticulation and great vehemence characterised their debate. Some pointed towards the Fort, and touched their tomahawks, while others pointed to the woods in the direction whence they had come, and shook their heads. Not a few drew their scalping knives partially from their sheaths, and, pointing to the children, showed clearly that they wished to cut their career short without delay, but several of the more sedate members of the party evidently objected to this. Finally, Hawk turned to Roy, and said something to him in the Indian tongue.

Roy did not understand, and attempted to say so as well as he could by signs, and the use of the few words of the Cree language which his father had taught him. In the course of his speech (if we may use that term), he chanced to mention Wapaw's name.

“Ho! ho! ho!” said one and another of the Indians, while Hawk grinned horribly.

A variety of questions were now put to poor Roy, who, not understanding, of course could not answer them. Hawk, however, repeated Wapaw’s name, and pointed towards the Fort with a look of inquiry, to which Roy replied by nodding his head and repeating “Wapaw” once or twice, also pointing to the Fort; for he began to suspect these must be Wapaw’s comrades, who had come to search for him. He therefore volunteered a little additional information by means of signs; rubbed his stomach, looked dreadfully rueful, rolled himself as if in agony on the ground, and then, getting up, pretended to eat and look happy! By all of which he meant to show how that Wapaw had been on the borders of starvation, but had been happily saved therefrom.

Indians in council might teach a useful lesson to our members of parliament, for they witnessed this rather laughable species of pantomime with profound gravity and silence. When Roy concluded, they nodded their heads, and said, “Ho! ho!” which, no doubt, was equivalent to “Hear hear!”

After a little more discussion they rose to depart, and made signs to the children to get up and follow. Roy then pointed out the broken state of his snow-shoe, but this difficulty was overcome by Hawk, who threw it away, and made him put on his sister’s snow-shoes. A stout young warrior was ordered to take Nelly on his back, which he did without delay, and the whole party left the encampment, headed by their chief.

The children submitted cheerfully at first, under the impression that the Indians meant to convey them to the Fort. Great, however, was their horror when they were taken through the woods by a way which they knew to be quite in the opposite direction.

When Roy saw this he stopped and looked back, but an Indian behind him gave him a poke with the butt of his gun which there was no resisting. For a moment the lad thought of trying to break away, run home, and tell his father of Nelly’s fate; but a second thought convinced him that this course was utterly impracticable. As for Nelly, she was too far from her brother in the procession to hold converse with him; and, as she knew not what to do, say, think, she was reduced to the miserable consolation of bedewing with her tears the shoulders of the young warrior who carried her.

The storm which had commenced the day before still continued, so that, in the course of a few hours, traces of the track of the war-party were almost obliterated, and the chance of their being followed by Robin and his friends was rendered less and less likely as time ran on.

All that day they travelled without halt, and when they stopped at night to encamp, Roy was nearly dead from exhaustion. “My poor Nell,” said he, drawing his sobbing sister close to him, as they sat near the camp fire, after having eaten the small quantity of dried venison that was thrown to them by their captors, “don’t despair; father will be sure to hunt us down, if it’s in the power of man to do it.”

“I don’t despair,” sobbed Nelly; “but oh! what will darling mother do when she finds that we’re lost, and I’m so afraid they’ll kill us.”

“No fear o’ that, Nell; it’s not worth their while. Remember, too, what mother often told us—that—that—what is it she used to read so often out of the Bible? I forget.”

“I think it was, ‘Call upon Me in the time of trouble, and I will deliver thee.’ I’ve been thinkin’ of that, Roy, already.”

“That’s right, Nell; now, come, cheer up! Have you had enough to eat?”

“Yes,” said Nelly, with a loud yawn, which she did not attempt to check.

Roy echoed it, as a matter of course, (who ever did see anyone yawn without following suit?) and then the two lay down together, spread over themselves an old blanket which one of the Indians had given them, and fell asleep at once.

Day succeeded day, night followed night, and weeks came and went, yet the Indians continued their journey through the snow-clad wilderness. Roy’s snow-shoes had been picked up and repaired by one of the savages, and Nelly was made to walk a good deal on her own snowshoes; but it is justice to the Indians to say that they slackened their pace a little for the sake of the children, and when

Nelly showed symptoms of being fatigued, the stout young warrior who originally carried her took her on his shoulders.

At length the encampment of the tribe was reached, and Nelly was handed over to Hawk's wife to be her slave. Soon after that the tents were struck, and the whole tribe went deeper into the northern wilds. Several gales arose and passed away, completely covering their footprints, so that no tracks were left behind them.

Chapter Six.

The Camp, the Attack, and the Escape

It were vain to attempt a description of the varied condition of mind into which the brother and sister fell when they found themselves actually reduced to a state of slavery in an Indian camp, and separated from their parents, as they firmly believed, for ever.

Nelly wept her eyes almost out of their sockets at first. Then she fell into a sort of apathetic state, in which, for several days, she went about her duties almost mechanically, feeling as if it were all a horrible dream, out of which she would soon awake, and find herself at home with her “darling mother” beside her. This passed, however, and she had another fit of heart-breaking sorrow, from which she found relief by recalling some of the passages in God’s Word, which her mother had taught her to repeat by heart; especially that verse in which it is said, “that Jesus is a friend who sticketh closer than a brother.” And this came to the poor child’s mind with peculiar power, because her own brother Roy was so kind, and took such pains to comfort her, and to enter into all her girlish feelings and sympathies, that she could scarcely imagine it possible for anyone to stick closer to her in all her distress than he did.

As for Roy, he was not given to the melting mood. His nature was bold and manly. Whatever he felt, he kept it to himself, and he forgot more than half his own sorrow in his brotherly efforts to assuage that of Nelly.

Both of them were active and willing to oblige, so that they did not allow their grief to interfere with their work, a circumstance which induced their captors to treat them with forbearance, and even kindness. Nelly sobbed and worked; gradually, the sobbing decreased, and the work was carried on with vigour, so that she soon became quite expert at skinning rabbits, boiling meat, embroidering mocassins, smoking deerskins, chopping firewood into small pieces, and many other details of Indian household economy; while Roy went out with the hunters, and became a very Nimrod, insomuch that he soon excelled all the lads of his own age, and many of those who were older, in the use of the bow, the snow-shoes, the spear, the axe, and the gun. But all this, and what they did and said in the Indian camp during that winter, and what was said and done to them, we do not mean to write about, having matter of deeper interest to tell.

Winter passed away, and spring came. But little do those who dwell in England know of the enchantment of returning spring in the frozen wilderness of North America. The long, long winter, seems as though it would *never* pass away. The intense frost seals up all the sweet odours of the woods for so many months, that the nostrils become powerfully sensitive, and, as it were, yearn for something to smell. The skin gets so used to frost, that a balmy breeze is thought of as a thing of the past, or well-nigh forgotten.

Spring in those regions comes suddenly. It came on our wanderers with a gush. One night the temperature rose high above the freezing point; next day all the sights and sounds of Nature’s great awakening were in full play. The air fanned their cheeks like a summer breeze; the strange unwonted sound of tinkling and dropping water was heard; scents, as of green things, were met and inhaled greedily. As the thirsty Bedouin drinks from the well in the oasis, so did Roy and Nelly drink in the delicious influences of melting nature. And they thought of those words which say, that the wilderness shall rejoice and blossom as the rose. The rejoicing had commenced, the blossoming would soon follow.

But warlike and wicked men were even then preparing to desecrate the beautiful land. A war-party of enemies had come down upon the tribe with whom they dwelt. Scouts had brought in the news. All was commotion and excitement in the camp. Goods and chattels were being packed up.

The women and children were to be sent off with these, under an escort, to a place of greater security, while the Braves armed for the fight.

In the middle of all the confusion, Roy took Nelly aside, and, with a look of mystery, said—

“Nell, dear, I’m goin’ to run away. Stay, now, don’t stare so like an owl, but hold your sweet tongue until I have explained what I mean to do. You and I have picked up a good deal of useful knowledge of one sort or another since we came here, and I’m inclined to think we are quite fit to take to the woods and work our way back to Fort Enterprise.”

“But isn’t it an *awful* long way?” said Nelly.

“It is, but we have an *awful* long time to travel; haven’t we all our lives before us? If our lives are long, we’ll manage it; if they are short, why, we won’t want to manage it, so we need not bother our heads about that?”

“But the way home,” suggested Nelly, “do you know it?”

“Of course I know it; that is to say, I know, from that ugly thief Hawk, that it lies somewhere or other to the south-west o’ this place, some hundreds of miles off; how many hundreds does not much matter, for we have got the whole of the spring, summer, and fall before us.”

“But what if we don’t get home in the fall?”

“Then we shall spend the winter in the woods, that’s all.”

Nelly laughed, in spite of her anxieties, at the confident tone in which her brother spoke; and, being quite unable to argue the matter farther, she said that she was ready to do whatever Roy pleased, having perfect confidence in his wisdom.

“That’s right, Nell; now, you get ready to start at a moment’s notice. When the Injuns attack the camp, we’ll give ’em the slip. Put all you want to take with you on a toboggan,¹ and meet me at the crooked tree when the camp moves.”

That night the camp was struck, and the women and children departed, under a strong escort. Almost at the same time the enemy came down on their prey, but they met men prepared for them. In the dark, Nelly crept to the crooked tree, dragging the toboggan after her. She was met by Roy, who took the sledge-line and her hand and led her into the dark forest, while the savages were fighting and yelling like fiends in the camp. There let us leave them to fight it out. Enough for us to know that their warfare prevented any pursuit of the young fugitives.

¹ A small Indian sledge, dragged on the snow, either by hand or by dog with loops at the sides for lashing the loading of the sledge upon it.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.