

Sir Charles G. D. Roberts

The Heart of the Ancient Wood



Charles Roberts

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Roberts Charles G. D., Sir

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Chapter I

The Watchers of the Trail

Not indolently soft, like that which sifts in green shadow through the leafage of a summer garden, but tense, alertly and mysteriously expectant, was the silence of the forest. It was somehow like a vast bubble of glass, blown to a fineness so tenuous that a small sound, were it but to strike the one preordained and mystic note, might shatter it down in loud ruin. Yet it had existed there flawless for generations, transmuting into its own quality all such infrequent and inconsequent disturbance as might arise from the far-off cry of the panther, or the thin chirp of the clambering nuthatch, the long, solemn calling of the taciturn moose, twice or thrice repeated under the round October moon, or the noise of some great wind roaring heavily in the remote tops of pine and birch and hemlock. Few and slender were the rays of sun that pierced down through those high tops. The air that washed the endless vistas of brown-green shadow was of a marvellous clarity, not blurred by any stain of dust or vapour. Its magical transparency was confusing to an eye not born and bred to it, making the far branches seem near, and the near twigs unreal, disturbing the accustomed perspective, and hinting of some elvish deception in familiar and apparent things.

The trail through the forest was rough and long unused. In spots the mosses and ground vines had so overgrown it that only the broad scars on the tree trunks, where the lumberman's axe had blazed them for a sign, served to distinguish it from a score of radiating vistas. But just here, where it climbed a long, gradual slope, the run of water down its slight hollow had sufficed to keep its worn stones partly bare. Moreover, though the furrowing steps of man had left it these many seasons untrodden, it was never wholly neglected. A path once fairly differentiated by the successive passings of feet will keep, almost forever, a spell for the persuasion of all that go afoot. The old trail served the flat, shuffling tread of Kroof, the great she-bear, as she led her half-grown cub to feast on the blueberry patches far up the mountain. It caught the whim of Ten-Tine, the caribou, as he convoyed his slim cows down to occasional pasturage in the alder swamps of the slow Quah-Davic.

On this September afternoon, when the stillness seemed to wait wide-eyed, suddenly a cock-partridge came whirring up the trail, alighted on a gnarled limb, turned his outstretched head twice from side to side as he peered with his round beads of eyes, and then stiffened into the moveless semblance of one of the fungoid excrescences with which the tree was studded. A moment more and the sound of footsteps, of the nails of heavy boots striking on the stones, grew conspicuous against the silence. Up the trail came slouching, with a strong but laborious stride, a large, grizzled man in grey home-spuns. His trousers were stuffed unevenly into the tops of his rusty boots; on his head was a drooping, much-battered hat of a felt that had been brown; from his belt hung a large knife in a fur-fringed leather sheath; and over his shoulder he carried an axe, from the head of which swung a large bundle. The bundle was tied up in a soiled patchwork quilt of gaudy colours, and from time to time there came from it a flat clatter suggestive of tins. At one side protruded the black handle of a frying-pan, half wrapped up in newspaper.

Had he been hunter or trapper, Dave Titus would have carried a gun. Or had he been a townsman, a villager, or even an ordinary small country farmer, he would have taken care to be well armed before penetrating a day's journey into the heart of the ancient wood. But being a lumberman, he was neither quite of the forest nor quite of the open. His winters he spent in the very deep of the wilderness, in a log camp crowded with his mates, eating salt pork, beans, hot bread; and too busy all

day long with his unwearied axe to wage any war upon the furred and feathered people. His summers were passed with plough and hoe on a little half-tilled farm in the Settlements. He had, therefore, neither the desire to kill nor the impulse to fear, as he traversed, neutral and indifferent, these silent but not desolated territories. Not desolated; for the ancient wood was populous in its reserve. Observant, keen of vision, skilled in woodcraft though he was, the grave-faced old lumberman saw nothing in the tranquillity about him save tree trunks, and fallen, rotting remnants, and mossed hillocks, and thickets of tangled shrub. He noted the difference, not known to the general eye, between white spruce, black spruce, and fir, between grey birch and yellow birch, between withe-wood and viburnum; and he read instinctively, by the lichen growth about their edges, how many seasons had laid their disfiguring touch upon those old scars of the axe which marked the trail. But for all his craft he thought himself alone. He guessed not of the many eyes that watched him.

In truth, his progress was the focus of an innumerable attention. The furtive eyes that followed his movements were some of them timorously hostile, some impotently vindictive, some indifferent; but all alien. All were at one in the will to remain unseen; so all kept an unwinking immobility, and were swallowed up, as it were, in the universal stillness.

The cock-partridge, a well-travelled bird who knew the Settlements and their violent perils, watched with indignant apprehension. Not without purpose had he come whirring so tumultuously up the trail, a warning to the ears of all the wood-folk. His fear was lest the coming of this grey man-figure should mean an invasion of those long, black sticks which went off with smoky bang when they were pointed. He effaced himself till his brown mottled feathers were fairly one with the mottled brown bark of his perch; but his liquid eyes lost not a least movement of the stranger.

The nuthatch, who had been walking straight up the perpendicular trunk of a pine when the sound of the alien footsteps froze him, peered fixedly around the tree. His eye, a black point of inquiry, had never before seen anything like this clumsy and slow-moving shape, but knew it for something dangerous. His little slaty head, jutting at an acute angle from the bark, looked like a mere caprice of knot or wood fungus; but it had the singular quality of moving smoothly around the trunk, as the lumberman advanced, so as to keep him always in view.

Equally curious, but quivering with fear, two wood-mice watched him intently, sitting under the broad leaf of a skunk-cabbage not three feet from the trail. Their whiskers touched each other's noses, conveying thrills and palpitations of terror as he drew near, drew nearer, came – and passed. But not unless that blind, unheeding heel had been on the very point of crushing them would they have disobeyed the prime law of their tribe, which taught them that to sit still was to sit unseen.

A little farther back from the trail, under a spreading tangle of ironwood, on a bed of tawny moss crouched a hare. His ears lay quite flat along his back. His eyes watched with aversion, not unmixed with scorn, the heavy, tall creature that moved with such effort and such noise. “Never,” thought the hare, disdainfully, “would he be able to escape from his enemies!” As the delicate current of air which pulses imperceptibly through the forest bore the scent of the man to the hare's hiding-place, the fine nostrils of the latter worked rapidly with dislike. On a sudden, however, came a waft of other scent; and the hare's form seemed to shrink to half its size, the nostrils rigidly dilating.

It was the scent of the weasel – to the hare it was the very essence of death. But it passed in an instant, and then the hare's exact vision saw whence it came. For the weasel, unlike all the other folk of the wood, was moving. He was keeping pace with the man, at a distance of some ten feet from the trail. So fitted, however, was his colouring to his surrounding, so shadow-like in its soundless grace was his motion, that the man never discerned him. The weasel's eyes were fixed upon the intruder with a malignancy of hate that might well have seared through his unconsciousness. Fortunately for the big lumberman, the weasel's strength, stupendous for its size, was in no way commensurate with its malice; or the journey would have come to an end just there, and the gaudy bundle would have rested on the trail to be a long wonder to the mice.

The weasel presently crossed the yet warm scent of a mink, whereupon he threw up his vain tracking of the woodman and turned off in disgust. He did not like the mink, and wondered what that fish-eater could be wanting so far back from the water. He was not afraid exactly, – few animals know fear so little as the weasel, – but he kept a small shred of prudence in his savage little heart, and he knew that the mink was scarcely less ferocious than himself, while nearly thrice his size.

From the mossy crotch of an old ash tree, slanting over the trail, a pair of pale, yellow-green eyes, with fine black slits for pupils, watched the traveller's march. They were set in a round, furry head, which was pressed flat to the branch and partly overhung it. The pointed, tufted ears lay flat back upon the round brown head. Into the bark of the branch four sets of razor-edged claws dug themselves venomously; for the wild-cat knew, perhaps through some occult communication from its far-off domesticated kin of hearth and door-sill, that in man he saw the one unvanquishable enemy to all the folk of the wood. He itched fiercely to drop upon the man's bowed neck, just where it showed, red and defenceless, between the gaudy bundle and the rim of the brown hat. But the wild-cat, the lesser lynx, was heir to a ferocity well tempered with discretion, and the old lumberman slouched onward unharmed, all ignorant of that green gleam of hate playing upon his neck.

It was a very different gaze which followed him from the heart of a little colony of rotting stumps, in a dark hollow near the trail. Here, in the cool gloom, sat Kroof, the bear, rocking her huge body contemplatively from side to side on her haunches, and occasionally slapping off a mosquito from the sensitive tip of her nose. She had no cub running with her that season, to keep her busy and anxious. For an hour she had been comfortably rocking, untroubled by fear or desire or indignation; but when the whirring of the cock-partridge gave her warning, and the grating of the nailed boots caught her ear, she had stiffened instantly into one of the big brown stumps. Her little red eyes followed the stranger with something like a twinkle in them. She had seen men before, and she neither actively feared them nor actively disliked them. Only, averse to needless trouble, she cared not to intrude herself on their notice; and therefore she obeyed the custom of the wood, and kept still. But the bear is far the most human of all the furry wood-folk, the most versatile and largely tolerant, the least enslaved by its surroundings. It has an ample sense of humour, also, that most humane of gifts; and it was with a certain relish that Kroof recognized in the grey-clad stranger one of those loud axemen from whose camp, far down by the Quah-Davic, she had only last winter stolen certain comforting rations of pork. Her impulse was to rock again with satisfaction at the thought, but that would have been out of keeping with her present character as a decaying stump, and she restrained herself. She also restrained a whimsical impulse to knock the gaudy bundle from the stranger's back with one sweep of her great paw, and see if it might not contain many curious and edifying things, if not even pork. It was not till she had watched him well up the trail and fairly over the crest of the slope that, with a deep, non-committal grunt, she again turned her attention to the mosquitoes, which had been learning all the tenderness of a bear's nose.

These were but a few of the watchers of the trail, whose eyes, themselves unseen, scrutinized the invader of the ancient wood. Each step of all his journey was well noted. Not so securely and unconsideringly would he have gone, however, had he known that only the year before there had come a pair of panthers to occupy a vacant lair on the neighbouring mountain side. No, his axe would have swung free, and his eyes would have scanned searchingly every overhanging branch; for none knew better than old Dave Titus how dangerous a foe was the tawny northern panther. But just now, as it chanced, the panther pair were hunting away over in the other valley, the low, dense-wooded valley of the Quah-Davic.

As matters stood, for all the watchers that marked him, the old lumberman walked amid no more imminent menace than that which glittered down upon him from four pairs of small bright eyes, high up among the forking limbs of an old pine. In a well-hidden hole, as in a nursery window, were bunched the smooth heads of four young squirrels, interested beyond measure in the strange animal plodding so heavily below them. Had they been Settlement squirrels they would, without doubt, have

passed shrill comments, more or less uncomplimentary; for the squirrel loves free speech. But when he dwells among the folk of the ancient wood he, even he, learns reticence; and, in that neighbourhood, if a young squirrel talks out loud in the nest, the consequences which follow have a tendency to be final. When the old lumberman had passed out of their range of view, the four little heads disappeared into the musky brown depths of the nest, and talked the event over in the smallest of whispers.

As the lumberman journeyed, covering good ground with his long, slouching stride, the trail gradually descended through a tract where moss-grown boulders were strown thick among the trees. Presently the clear green brown of the mid-forest twilight took a pallor ahead of him, and the air began to lose its pungency of bark and mould. Then came the flat, soft smell of sedge; and the trees fell away: and the traveller came out upon the shores of a lake. Its waters were outspread pearly-white from a fringe of pale green rushes, and the opposite shore looked black against the pale, hazy sky. A stone's throw beyond the sedge rose a little naked island of black rock, and in the sheen of water off its extremity there floated the black, solitary figure of a loon.

As the lumberman came out clear of the trees, and the gaudy colours of his bundle caught its eye, the bird sank itself lower in the water till only its erect neck and wedge-shaped head were in view. Then, opening wide its beak, it sent forth its wild peal of inexplicable and disconcerting laughter – an affront to the silence, but a note of monition to all the creatures of the lake. The loon had seen men before, and despised them, and found pleasure in proclaiming the scorn. It despised even the long, black sticks that went off with smoky bang when pointed; for had it not learned, in another lake near the Settlement, to dive at the flash and so elude the futile, spattering pellets that flew from the stick.

The lumberman gave neither a first nor a second thought to the loon at all, but quickened his pace in the cheerful open. The trail now led some way along the lake-side, till the shore became higher and rougher, and behind a cape of rock a bustling river emptied itself, carrying lines of foam and long ripples far out across the lake's placidity. From the cape of rock towered a bleak, storm-whitened rampike, which had been a pine tree before the lightning smote it. Its broken top was just now serving as the perch of a white-headed eagle. The great bird bent fierce yellow eyes upon the stranger, – eyes with a cruel-looking, straight overhang of brow, – and stretched its flat-crowned, snake-like head far out to regard him. It opened the rending sickle of its beak and yelped at him – three times at deliberated interval. Then the traveller vanished again into the gloom of the wood, and the arrogant bird plumed himself upon a triumph.

The trail now touched the river, only to forsake it and plunge into the heart of a growth of young Canada balsam. This sweet-smelling region traversed, the soft roar of the stream was left behind, and the forest resumed its former monumental features. For another hour the man tramped steadily, growing more conscious of his load, more and more uninterested in his surroundings; and for another hour his every step was noted by intent, unwinking eyes from branch and thicket. Then again the woods fell apart with a spreading of daylight. He came out upon the spacious solitude of a clearing; pushed through the harsh belt of blackberry and raspberry canes, which grew as a neutral zone between forest and open; picked his way between the burned stumps and crimson fireweeds of a long desolate pasture; and threw down his bundle at the door of the loneliest cabin he had ever chanced to see.

Chapter II

The Cabin in the Clearing

Though a spur of black, uncompromising spruce woods gave it near shelter on the north, the harshly naked clearing fell away from it on the other three sides, and left the cabin bleak. Not a shrub nor a sapling broke the bareness of the massive log walls, whence the peeling bark hung in strips that fluttered desolately to every wind. Only a few tall and ragged weeds, pale green, and with sparse, whitish grey seed-heads, straggled against the foundation logs. The rough deal door sagged on its hinges, half open. The door-sill gaped with a wide crack, rotted along the edges; and along the crack grew a little fringe of grass, ruthlessly crushed down by old Dave's gaudy bundle. The two small windows still held fragments of glass in their sashes, – glass thick with spiders' webs, and captive dust, and the *débris* of withered insects. The wide-eaved roof, well built of split cedar-slabs, with a double overlay of bark, seemed to have turned a brave front to the assault of the seasons, and showed few casualties. Some thirty paces to one side stood another cabin, lower and more roughly built, whose roof had partly fallen in. This had been the barn, – this, with a battered lean-to of poles and interwoven spruce boughs against its southerly wall. The barn was set down at haphazard, in no calculated or contenting relation to the main building, but just as the lay of the hillocks had made it simplest to find a level for the foundations. All about it grew a tall, coarse grass, now grey and drily rustling, the brood of seeds which in past years had sifted through the chinks from the hay stored in the loft. The space between the two buildings, and for many square yards about the cabin door, was strewn thick with decaying chips, through which the dock and plantain leaves, hardy strangers from the Settlement, pushed up their broad, obtuse intrusion. Over toward the barn lay the bleached skeleton of a bob-sled, the rusted iron shoe partly twisted from one runner; and in the centre of the space, where the chips gathered thickest and the plantains had gained least ground, lay a split chopping-log, whose scars bore witness to the vigour of a vanished axe.

The old lumberman fetched a deep breath, depressed by the immeasurable desolation. His eye wandered over the weedy fields, long fallow, and the rugged stump lots aflame here and there with patches of golden-rod and crimson fire-weed. To him these misplaced flares of colour seemed only to make the loneliness more forlorn, perhaps by their association with homelier and kindlier scenes. He leaned on his axe, and pointed indefinitely with his thumb.

“Squat here! an' farm yon!” said he, with contemplative disapproval. “I'd see myself furdur first! But Kirstie Craig's got grit for ten men!”

Then he pushed the door open, lifting it to ease the hinge, and stepped peeringly inside. As he did so, a barn-swallow flickered out through a broken pane.

The cabin contained two rooms, one much smaller than the other. The ceiling of the smaller room was formed by a loft at the level of the eaves, open toward the main room, which had no ceiling but the roof of slabs and bark. Here, running up through the east gable, was a chimney of rough stone, arched at the base to contain a roomy hearth, with swinging crane and rusted andirons. A settle of plank was fixed along the wall under the window. Down the middle of the room, its flank toward the hearth, ran a narrow table of two planks, supported by unsmoothed stakes driven into the floor. In the corner farthest from the chimney, over against the partition, was a shallow sleeping bunk, a mere oblong box partly filled with dry red pickings of spruce and hemlock. The floor was littered with dead leaves and with ashes wind-drifted from the hearth.

Old Dave went over and glanced into the bunk. He found the spruce pickings scratched up toward one end, and arranged as they would be for no human occupant.

“Critters been sleepin’ here!” he muttered. Then laying down his bundle, he turned his attention to the hearth, and soon the old chimney tasted once more, after its long solitude, the cheer of the familiar heat.

It was now close upon sundown, and the lumberman was hungry. He untied the grimy, many-coloured quilt. Kroof, the she-bear, had been right in her surmise as to that bundle. It did contain pork, – a small, well-salted chunk of it; and presently the red-and-white-streaked slices were sputtering crisply in the pan, while the walls and roof saturated themselves once more in old-remembered savours.

By the time the woodman had made his meal of fried pork and bread, and had smoked out his little pipe of blackened clay, a lonely twilight had settled about the cabin in the clearing. He went to the door and looked out. A white mist, rising along the forest edges, seemed to cut him off from all the world of men; and a few large stars, at vast intervals, came out solemnly upon the round of sky. He shut the door, dropped the wooden latch into its slot, and threw a dry sliver upon the hearth to give him light for turning in. He was sparing of the firewood, remembering that Kirstie, when she came, would need it all. Then he took his pipe from his mouth, knocked out the ashes, wiped the stump on his sleeve, and put it in his pocket; took off his heavy boots, rolled himself in the coloured quilt, and tumbled comfortably into the bunk, untroubled by any thought of its previous tenants. No sooner was he still than the mice came out and began scampering across the loft. He felt the sound homely and companionable, and so fell asleep. As he slept the deep undreaming sleep of the wholesomely tired, the meagre fire burned low, sank into pulsating coals, and faded into blackness.

It was, perhaps, an hour later that Old Dave sat up, suddenly wide awake. He had no idea why he did it. He had heard no noise. He was certainly not afraid. There was no tremor in his seasoned nerves. Nevertheless, he was all at once absolutely awake, every sense alert. He felt almost as if there were some unkindred presence in the cabin. His first impulse was to spring from the bunk, and investigate. But, doubtless because he had spent so great a portion of his life in the forest, and because he had all that day been subtly played upon by its influences, another instinct triumphed. He followed the immemorial fashion of the folk of the wood, and just kept still, waiting to learn by watching.

He saw the two dim squares of the windows, and once imagined that one of them was for an instant shadowed. At this he smiled grimly there in the dark, well knowing that among all the forest-folk there was not one, not even the panther himself, so imprudent as to climb through a small window into a shut-up place, all reeking with the fresh and ominous scent of man.

Still he listened, in that movelessness which the haunted neighbourhood had taught him. The scurrying of the mice had ceased. There was no wind, and the darkness seemed all ears. The door, presently, gave a slow, gentle creaking, as if some heavy body pushed softly against it, trying the latch. The woodsman noiselessly reached out, and felt the handle of his axe, leaning by the head of the bunk. But the latch held, and the menacing furtive pressure was not repeated. Then, upon the very middle of the roof, began a scratching, a light rattling of claws, and footfalls went padding delicately over the bark. This puzzled the woodsman, who wondered how the owner of those clawed and velveted feet could have reached the roof without some noise of climbing. The soft tread, with an occasional scratch and snap, moved up and down the roof several times; and once, during a pause, a deep breath, ending with a sharp sniffing sound, was heard through the thin roof. Then came a muffled thud upon the chips, as of the drop of a heavy animal.

The spell was broken, and Old Dave rose from the bunk.

“It’s jumped down off the roof! wildcat, mebbe, or lynx. No painters ’round, ’tain’t likely; though’t did sound heavy fur a cat!” said he to himself, as he strode to the door, axe in hand.

Fearlessly he threw the door open, and looked out upon the glimmering night. The forest chill was in the air, the very breath and spirit of solitude. The mists gathered thickly a stone’s throw from the cabin. He saw nothing that moved. He heard no stir. With a shrug of the shoulders he turned, latched the door again with just a trifle more exactness of precaution than before, lounged back to

his bunk, and slept heedlessly till high dawn. A long finger of light, coldly rosy, came in through a broken pane to rouse him up.

When he went outside, the mists yet clung white and chill about the clearing, and all the weed tops were beaded with thick dew. He noted that the chips were disturbed somewhat, but could find no definite track. Then, following a grassy path that led, through a young growth of alder, to the spring, he found signs. Down to the spring, and beyond, into the woods, a trail was drawn that spoke plain language to his wood-wise scrutiny. The grass was bent, the dew brushed off, by a body of some bulk and going close to the ground.

“Painter!” he muttered, knitting his brows, and casting a wary glance about him. “Reckon Kirstie’d better bring a gun along!”

All that day Dave Titus worked about the cabin and the barn. He mended the roof, patched the windows, rehung the door, filled the bunk – and the two similar ones in the smaller room – with aromatic fresh green spruce tips, and worked a miracle of rejuvenation upon the barn. He also cleaned out the spring, and chopped a handy pile of firewood. An old sheep-pen behind the barn he left in its ruins, saying to himself: —

“What with the b’ars, an’ the painters, Kirstie ain’t goin’ to want to mess with sheep, I reckon. She’ll have lots to do to look after her critters!”

By “critters” he meant the cow and the yoke of steers which were Kirstie Craig’s property in the Settlement, and which, as he knew, she was to bring with her to her exile in the ancient wood.

That night, being now quite at home in the lonely cabin, and assured as to the stability of the door, Dave Titus slept dreamlessly from dark to dawn in the pleasant fragrance of his bunk. From dark to dawn the mice scurried in the loft, the bats flickered about the eaves, the unknown furry bulks leaned on the door or padded softly up and down the roof, but troubled not his rest. Then the wild folk began to take account of the fact that the sovereignty of the clearing had been resumed by man, and word of the new order went secretly about the forest. When, next morning, Dave Titus made careful survey of the clearing’s skirts, calculating what brush and poles would be needed for Kirstie’s fencing, making rough guesses at the acreage, and noting with approval the richness of the good brown soil, he thought himself alone. But he was not alone. Speculative eyes, large and small, fierce and timorous, from all the edges of the ancient wood kept watch on him.

Chapter III

The Exiles from the Settlement

Late that afternoon Kirstie Craig arrived. Her coming was a migration.

The first announcement of her approach was the dull *tank, tank, a-tonk, tank* of cow-bells down the trail, at sound of which Old Dave threw aside his axe and slouched away to meet her. There was heard a boy's voice shouting with young authority, "Gee! Gee, Bright! Gee, Star!" and the head of the procession came into view in the solemn green archway of the woods.

The head of the procession was Kirstie Craig herself, a tall, erect, strong-stepping, long-limbed woman in blue-grey home-spuns, with a vivid scarlet kerchief tied over her head. She was leading, by a rope about its horns, a meekly tolerant black-and-white cow. To her left hand clung a skipping little figure in a pink calico frock, a broad-brimmed hat of coarse straw flung back from her hair and hanging by ribbons from her neck. This was the five-year-old Miranda, Kirstie Craig's daughter. She had ridden most of the journey, and now was full of excited interest over the approach to her new home. Following close behind came the yoke of long-horned, mild-eyed steers, – Bright, a light sorrel, and Star, a curious red-and-black brindle with a radiating splash of white in the middle of his forehead. These, lurching heavily on the yoke, were hauling a rude "drag," on which was lashed the meagre pile of Kirstie's belongings and supplies. Close at Star's heaving flank walked a lank and tow-haired boy from the Settlement, his long ox-goad in hand, and an expression of resigned dissatisfaction on his grey-eyed, ruddy young face. Liking, and thoroughly believing in, Kirstie Craig, he had impulsively yielded to her request, and let himself be hired to assist her flight into exile. But in so doing he had gone roughly counter to public opinion; for the Settlement, though stupidly inhospitable to Kirstie Craig, none the less resented her decision to leave it. Her scheme of occupying the deserted cabin, farming the deserted clearing, and living altogether aloof from her unloved and unloving fellows, was scouted on every hand as the freak of a madwoman; and Young Dave, just coming to the age when public opinion begins to seem important, felt uneasy at being identified with a matter of public ridicule. He saw himself already, in imagination, a theme for the fine wit of the Settlement. Nevertheless, he was glad to be helping Kirstie, for he was sound and fearless at heart, and he counted her a true friend if she did seem to him a bit queer. He was faithful, but disapproving. It was Old Dave alone, his father, who backed the woman's venture without criticism or demur. He had known Kirstie from small girlhood, and known her for a brave, loyal, silent, strongly-enduring soul; and in his eyes she did well to leave the Settlement, where a shallow spite, sharpened by her proud reticence and supplied with arrows of injury by her misfortunes, made life an undesisting and immitigable hurt to her.

As she emerged from the twilight and came out upon the sunny bleakness of the clearing, the unspeakable loneliness of it struck a sudden pallor into her grave dark face. For a moment, even the humanity that was hostile to her seemed less cruel than this voiceless solitude. Then her resolution came back. The noble but somewhat immobile lines of her large features relaxed into a half smile at her own weakness. She took possession, as it were, by a sweeping gesture of her head; then silently gave her hand in greeting to Old Dave, who had ranged up beside her and swung the dancing Miranda to his shoulder. Nothing was said for several moments, as the party moved slowly up the slope; for they were folk of few words, these people, not praters like so many of their fellows in the Settlement.

At last the pink frock began to wriggle on the lumberman's shoulder, and Miranda cried out: —
"Let me down, Uncle Dave, I want to pick those pretty flowers for my mother."

The crimson glories of the fireweed had filled her eyes with delight; and in a few minutes she was struggling after the procession with her small arms full of the long-stalked blooms.

In front of the cabin door the procession stopped. Dave turned, and said seriously: —

“I’ve done the best I could by ye, Kirstie; an’ I reckon it ain’t so bad a site for ye, after all. But ye’ll be powerful lonesome.”

“Thank you kindly, Dave. But we ain’t going to be lonesome, Miranda and me.”

“But there’s painters ’round. You’d ought to hev a gun, Kirstie. I’ll be sackin’ out some stuff fur ye nex’ week, Davey an’ me, an’ I reckon as how I’d better fetch ye a gun.”

“We’ll be right hungry for a sight of your faces by that time, Dave,” said Kirstie, sweeping a look of tenderness over the boy’s face, where he stood leaning on Star’s brindled shoulder. “But I ain’t scared of panthers. Don’t you mind about the gun, now, for I don’t want it, and I won’t use it!”

“She ain’t skeered o’ nothin’ that walks,” muttered Young Dave, with admiration.

The strong face darkened.

“Yes, I am, Davey,” she answered; “I’m afeard of evil tongues.”

“Well, my girl, here ye’re well quit of ’em,” said the old lumberman, a slow anger burning on his rough-hewn face as he thought of certain busy backbiters in the Settlement.

Just then Miranda’s small voice chimed in.

“Oh, Davey,” she cried, catching gleefully at the boy’s leg, “look at the nice, great big dog!” And her little brown finger pointed to a cluster of stumps, of all shapes and sizes, far over on the limits of the clearing. Her wide, brown eyes danced elvishly. The others followed her gaze, all staring intently; but they saw no excuse for her excitement.

“It might be a b’ar she sees,” said Old Dave; “but I can’t spot it.”

“They’re plenty hereabouts, I suppose,” said Kirstie, rather indifferently, letting her eyes wander to other portions of her domain.

“Ain’t no bear there,” asserted Young Dave, with all the confidence of his years. “It’s a stump!”

“Nice big dog! I want it, mother,” piped Miranda, suddenly darting away. But her mother’s firm hand fell upon her shoulder.

“There’s no big dog out here, child,” she said quietly. And Old Dave, after puckering his keen eyes and knitting his shaggy brows in vain, exclaimed: —

“Oh, quit yer foolin’, Mirandy, ye little witch. ’Tain’t nothin’ but stumps, I tell ye.”

It was the child’s eyes, however, that had the keener vision, the subtler knowledge; and, though now she let herself seem to be persuaded, and obediently carried her armful of fireweed into the cabin, she knew it was no stump she had been looking at. And as for Kroof, the she-bear, though she had indeed sat moveless as a stump among the stumps, she knew that the child had detected her. She saw that Miranda had the eyes that see everything and cannot be deceived.

For two days the man and the boy stayed at the clearing to help Kirstie get settled. The fields rang pleasantly with the *tank, tank, a-tonk, tank* of the cow-bells, as the cattle fed over the new pasturage. The edges of the clearing resounded with axe strokes, and busy voices echoed on the autumn air. There was much rough fencing to be built, – zig-zag arrangements of brush and saplings, – in order that Kirstie’s “critters” might be shut in till the sense of home should so grow upon them as to keep them from straying.

The two days done, Old Dave and Young Dave shouldered their axes and went away. Kirstie forthwith straightened her fine shoulders to the Atlas load of solitude which had threatened at first to overwhelm her; and she and Miranda settled down to a strangely silent routine. This was broken, however, at first, by weekly visits from Old Dave, who came to bring hay, and roots, and other provisions against the winter, together with large “hanks” of coarse homespun yarn, to occupy Kirstie’s fingers during the long winter evenings.

Kirstie was well fitted to the task she had so bravely set herself. She could swing an axe; and the fencing grew steadily through the fall. She could guide the plough; and before the snow came some ten acres of the long fallow sod had been turned up in brown furrows, to be ripened and mellowed by the frosts for next spring’s planting. The black-and-white cow was still in good milk, and could be depended on not to go dry a day more than two months before calving. The steers were thrifty and

sleek, and showed no signs of fretting for old pastures. The hoarse but homely music of the cow-bells, sounding all day over the fields, and giving out an occasional soft *tonk-a-tonk* from the darkness of the stalls at night, came to content her greatly. The lines which she had brought from the Settlement smoothed themselves from about her mouth and eyes, and the large, sufficing beauty of her face was revealed in the peace of her new life.

About seven years before this move to the cabin in the clearing, Kirstie Craig – then Kirstie MacAlister – had gone one evening to the cross-roads grocery which served the Settlement as General Intelligence Office. Here was the post-office as well, in a corner of the store, fitted up with some dozen of lettered and dusty pigeon-holes. Nodding soberly to the loafers who lounged about on the soap boxes and nail kegs, Kirstie stepped up to the counter to buy a quart of molasses. She was just passing over her gaudy blue-and-yellow pitcher to be filled, when a stranger came in who caught her attention. He did far more than catch her attention; for the stately and sombre girl, who had never before taken pains to look twice on any man's face, now felt herself grow hot and cold as this stranger's eyes glanced carelessly over her splendid form. She heard him ask the postmaster for lodgings. He spoke in a tired voice, and accents that set him apart from the men of the Settlement. She looked at him twice and yet again, noted with a pang that he seemed ill, and met his eye fairly for just one heart-beat. At once she flushed scarlet under it, snatched up her pitcher, and almost rushed from the store. The loafers were too much occupied with the new arrival to notice her perturbation; but he noticed it, and was pleased. Never before had he seen so splendid a girl as this black-haired, sphinx-faced creature, with the scarlet kerchief about her head. She was a picture that awoke the artist in him, and put him in haste to resume his palette and brushes.

For Frank Craig, dilettante and man of the world, was a good deal of an artist when the mood seized him strongly enough. When another mood seized him, with sufficient vigour to overcome his native indolence, he was something of a musician; and again, more rarely, something of a poet. The temperament was his; but the steadiness of purpose, the decision of will, the long-enduring patience, these were not. He had just enough money to let him float through his world without work. Health he had not, and the poor semblance of it which mere youth supplied he had squandered childishly. Hearing of new health in the gift of the northern spruce woods, with their high, balsam-sweet airs, he had drifted away from his temptations, and at last sought out this remote backwoods settlement as a place where he might expect to get much for little. He was very good to look upon, – about as tall as Kirstie herself, – slender, active, alert in movement when not wearied, thoroughbred in every line of face and figure. His eyes, of a very deep greyish green under long black lashes, were penetrating in their clearness, but curiously unstable. In their beautiful depths there was waged forever a strange conflict between honesty and inconstancy. His face, pale and sallow, was clothed with a trimly pointed, close, dark beard; and his hair, just a trifle more abundant than the fashion of his world approved, was of a peculiar, tawny dark bronze.

The air of the Settlement was healing and tonic to the lungs, and before he had breathed it a month he felt himself aglow with joyous life. Before he had breathed it a month he had won Kirstie MacAlister, to whom he seemed little less than a god. To him, on her part, she was a splendid mystery. Even her peculiarities of grammar and accent did no more than lend a piquancy to her strangeness. They appealed as a rough, fresh flavour to his wearied senses. Here, safe from the wasting world, he would really paint, would really write, and life would come to mean something. One day he and Kirstie went away on the rattling old mail-waggon, which visited the Settlement twice a week. Ten days later they came back as man and wife, whereat the Settlement showed no surprise whatever.

For a whole year after the birth of his child, the great-eyed and fairy-like Miranda, Frank Craig stayed at the Settlement, seemingly content. He was loving, admiring, tactful, proud of his dark impressive wife, and the quickness with which she caught his purity of speech. Then one day he seemed restless. He talked of business in the city – of a month's absence that could not be avoided. With a kind of terror at her heart Kirstie heard him, but offered no hint of opposition to so reasonable

a purpose. And by the next trip of the rattling mail-waggon he went, leaving the Settlement dark to Kirstie's eyes.

But – he never came back. The months rolled by, and no word came of him; and Kirstie gnawed her heart out in proud anguish. Inquiry throughout the cities of the coast brought no hint of him. Then, as the months climbed into years, that tender humanity which resents misfortune as a crime started a rumour that Kirstie had been fooled. Perhaps there had been no marriage, went the whisper at first. “Served her right, with her airs, thinkin’ she could ketch a gentleman!” – was the next development of it. Kirstie, with her superior air, had never been popular at best; and after her marriage the sufficiency and exclusiveness of her joy, coupled with the comparative fineness of speech which she adopted, made her the object of jealous criticism through all the country-side. When the temple of her soaring happiness came down about her ears, then was the time for her chastening, and the gossips of the Settlement took a hand in it with right good-will. Nothing else worth talking about happened in that neighbourhood during the next few years, so the little rumour was cherished and nourished. Presently it grew to a great scandal, and the gossips came to persuade themselves that things had not been as they should be. Kirstie, they said, was being very properly punished by Providence, and it was well to show that they, chaste souls, stood on the side of Providence. If Providence threw a stone, it was surely their place to throw three.

At last some one of imagination vivid beyond that of the common run added a new feature. Some one else had heard from some one else of some one having seen Frank Craig in the city. There was at first a difference of opinion as to what city; but that little discrepancy was soon smoothed out. Then a woman was suggested, and forthwith it appeared that he had been seen driving with a handsome woman, behind a spanking pair, with liveried coachman and footman on the box. Thus gradually the myth acquired a colour to endear it to the unoccupied rural imagination. Kirstie's inquiries soon proved to her the utter baselessness of the scandal; but she was too proud to refute what she knew to be a cherished lie. She endured, for Miranda's sake, till the dark face grew lined, and the black eyes smouldered dangerously, and she began to fear lest she should do some one a hurt. At last, having heard by chance of that deserted clearing in the forest, she sold out her cottage at a sacrifice and fled from the bitter tongues.

Chapter IV

Miranda and the Furtive Folk

From the very first day of her new life at the clearing, Miranda had found it to her taste. Her mother loved it for its peace, for its healing; but to the elvish child it had an incomparably deeper and more positive appeal. For her the place was not solitary. Her wide eyes saw what Kirstie could not see; and to her the forest edges – which she was not allowed to pass – were full of most satisfying playmates just waiting for her to invite their confidence. Meanwhile, she had the two steers and the black-and-white cow to talk to. Her mother noticed that when she sat down in the grass by the head of one of the animals, and began her low mysterious communication, it would stop its feeding and hearken motionless. The black-and-red brindle, Star, would sometimes follow her about like a dog, as if spelled by the child's solemn eyes. Then the solemn eyes on a sudden would dance with light; her lips would break into a peal of whimsical mirth, shrill but not loud; and the steer, with a flick of his tail and an offended snort, would turn again to his pasturing.

In a hole in one of the logs, just under the eaves of the cabin, there was a family of red squirrels, the four youngsters about three-fourths grown and almost ready to shift for themselves. No sooner had the old lumberman and his son gone away than the squirrels began to make themselves much at home. They saw in Kirstie a huge and harmless creature, whose presence in the cabin was useful to scare away their enemies. But in Miranda they found a sort of puzzling kinship. The two old squirrels would twitch up and down on the edge of the roof, chattering shrilly to her, flirting their airy tails, and stretching down their heads to scan her searchingly with their keen protruding eyes; while Miranda, just below, would dance excitedly up and down in response, nodding her head, jerking her elbows, and chattering back at them in a quick, shrill voice. It was a very different voice to the soft murmurs in which she talked to the cattle; but to the squirrels it appeared satisfactory. Before she had been a week at the clearing the whole squirrel family seemed to regard her as one of themselves, snatching bread from her tiny brown fingers, and running up her skirt to her shoulder whensoever the freak possessed them. Kirstie, they ignored – the harmless, necessary Kirstie, mother to Miranda.

No sooner were they fairly settled than the child discovered an incongruity in her gay pink calico frocks, and got her mother to bury them out of sight in the deal chest behind the door. She was at ease now only in the dull, blue-grey homespun, which made her feel at one with her quiet surroundings. Nevertheless the vein of contradiction which streaked her baby heart with bright inconsistencies bade her demand always a bit of scarlet ribbon about her neck. This whim Kirstie humoured with a smile, recognizing in it a perpetuation of the scarlet kerchief about her own black hair. As for Miranda's hair, it was black like her mother's when seen in shadow; but in the sunshine it showed certain tawny lights, a pledge of her fatherhood to all who had known Frank Craig.

So the autumn slipped by; and the silent folk of the wood, watching her curiously and unwinkingly as she played while her mother built fences, came to know Miranda as a creature in some way not quite alien to themselves. They knew that she often saw them when her mother's eyes could not. Perceiving that her mother did not quite understand her, at times, when she tried to point out pretty animals among the trees, the child grew a little sensitive and reticent on the subject; and the furtive folk, who had at first inclined to resent her inescapable vision, presently realized her reserves and were appeased. Her grey little sprite of a figure might have darted in among the trees, turned to a statue, and become suddenly as invisible as any lynx, or cat, or hare, or pine-marten amongst them, except, indeed, for that disquieting flame of scarlet at her neck. This was a puzzle to all the folk of the wood, continually reminding them that this quiet-flitting creature did not really belong to the wood at all, but to the great woman with the red about her head, whose axe made so vexing a clamour amid the trees. As for Kroof, the bear, that bit of scarlet so interested her that one day,

being curious, she came much nearer than she intended. Miranda saw her, of course, and gazed with wide-eyed longing for the “great big dog” as a playmate. Just then Kirstie saw her, too – very close at hand, and very huge.

For the first time, Kirstie Craig felt something like fear, not for herself, but for the child. Thrusting Miranda roughly behind her, she clutched her axe, and stood motionless, erect and formidable, awaiting attack. Her great black eyes blazed ominously upon the intruder. But Kroof, well filled with late berries, and sweet wild roots, and honeycomb, was in most amiable humour, and just shambled off lazily when she saw herself detected; whereupon Kirstie, with a short laugh of relief, threw down her axe and snatched the child to her breast. Miranda, however, was weeping salt tears of disappointment.

“I want it, mother,” she sobbed; “the nice big dog. You scared it away.”

Kirstie had heard more than enough about the dog.

“Hark now, Miranda,” she said severely, giving her shoulder a slight shake to enforce attention. “You just remember what I say. That ain’t a dog; that’s a bear; *a bear*, I say! And don’t you ever go near it, or it’ll eat you up. Mind you now, Miranda, or I’ll just whip you well.”

Kirstie was a little fluttered and thrown off her poise at the idea of Miranda encountering the great animal alone, and perhaps attempting to bring it home to play with; so she forgot for a moment the wonted stringency of her logic. As for Miranda, she consented to obey, and held her tongue; but she clung secretly to her own opinion on the subject of the big dog. She knew very well that the fascinating animal did not want to eat her; and her mother’s order seemed to her just one of those bits of maternal perversity which nobody can ever hope to understand.

The incident, however, overshadowed the child’s buoyant spirits for the best part of two whole days. It thrust so very far off the time she hoped for, when she might know and talk to the shy, furtive folk of the wood, with their strange, unwinking eyes. Her mother kept her now ever close to her skirts. She had no one to talk to about the things her mother did not understand, except the steers and the black-and-white cow, and the rather irrepressible squirrels.

The winter, which presently fell white and soundless and sparkling about the lonely cabin, was to Miranda full of events. Before the snow Kirstie had repaired the old lean-to, turning it into a fowl-house; and now they had six prim hens to occupy it, and a splendid, flame-red cock who crowed most loftily. Miranda felt that this proud bird despised her, so she did not get on very well with him; but the hens were amiable, if uninteresting, and it was a perennial joy to search out their eggs in the loft or the corners of the stalls. Then there were the paths to be kept clear after every snow-fall, – the path to the spring, the path to the barn door and hen-house, the path to the woodpile. Uncle Dave had made her a hand-sled, and she had the exhilarating duty of hauling in the wood from the pile as fast as her mother could split it. It was a spirited race, this, in which her mother somehow always managed to keep just about one stick ahead.

And the fishing – this was a great event, coming about once a week, if the weather suited. Both Kirstie and Miranda were semi-vegetarians. Frank Craig had been a decryer of flesh-meat, one who would have chosen to live on fruits and roots and grains and eggs, had not his body cried out against the theory of his brain. But he had so far infected his wife with his prejudice that neither she nor the child now touched meat in any form. The aversion, artificial on Kirstie’s part, was instinctive on Miranda’s. But as for fish – fish seemed to them both quite another matter. Even Miranda of the sympathies and the perceptions had no sense of fellowship for these cold-blooded, clammy, unpleasant things. She had a fierce little delight in catching them; she had a contented joy in eating them when fried to a savory brown in butter and yellow cornmeal. For Miranda was very close to Nature, and Nature laughs at consistency.

The fishing in which Miranda so delighted took place in winter at the lake. When the weather seemed quite settled, Kirstie would set out on her strong snow-shoes, with Miranda, on her fairy facsimiles of them, striding bravely beside her, and follow the long, white trail down to the lake. Even

to Miranda's discerning eyes the trail was lonely now, for most of the forest folk were either asleep, or abroad, or fearful lest their tinted coats should reveal them against the snowy surface. Once in a while she detected the hare squatting under a spruce bush, looking like a figure of snow in his winter coat; and once or twice, too, she saw the weasel, white now, with but a black tip to his tail as a warning to all who had cause to dread his cruelty. Miranda knew nothing about him, but she did not quite like the weasel, which was just as well, seeing that the weasel hated Miranda and all the world besides. As for the lynx and the brown cat, they kept warily aloof in their winter shyness. The wood-mice were asleep, – warm, furry balls buried in their dry nests far from sight; and Kroof, too, was dreaming away the frozen months in a hollow under a pine root, with five or six feet of snow drifted over her door to keep her sleep unjarred.

Arrived at the lake, Kirstie would cut two holes through the ice with her nimble axe, bait two hooks with bits of fat pork, and put a line into Miranda's little mittened hands. The trout in the lake were numerous and hungry; and somehow Miranda's hook had ever the more deadly fascination for them, and Miranda's catch would outnumber Kirstie's by often three to one. Though her whole small being seemed absorbed in the fierce game, Miranda was all the time vividly aware of the white immensity enfolding her. The lifeless white level of the lake; the encircling shores all white; the higher fringe of trees, black beneath, but deeply garmented with white; the steep mountain-side, at the foot of the lake, all white; and over-brooding, glimmering, opalescent, fathomless, the flat white arch of sky. Across the whiteness of the mountain-side, one day, Miranda saw a dark beast moving, a beast that looked to her like a great cat. She saw it halt, gazing down at them; and even at that distance she could see it stretch wide its formidable jaws. A second more and she heard the cry which came from those formidable jaws, – a high, harsh, screeching wail, which amused her so that she forgot to land a fish. But her mother seemed troubled at the sound. She gazed very steadily for some seconds at the far-off shape, and then said: "Panthers, Miranda! I don't mind bears; but with panthers we've got to keep our eyes open. I reckon we'll get home before sundown to-day; and mind you keep right close by me every step."

All this solicitude seemed to Miranda a lamentable mistake. She had no doubt in her own mind that the panther would be nice to play with.

As I have said, the winter was for Miranda full of events. Twice, as she was carrying out the morning dish of hot potatoes and meal to the hens, she saw Ten-Tine, the bull caribou, cross the clearing with measured stately tread, his curious, patchy antlers held high, his muzzle stretched straight ahead of him, his demure cows at his heels. This was before the snow lay deep in the forest. Later on in the winter she would look out with eager interest every morning to see what visitors had been about the cabin during the night. Sometimes there was a fox track, very dainty, cleanly indented, and regular, showing that the animal who made it knew where he was going and had something definite in view. Hare tracks there were sure to be – she soon came to recognize those three-toed, triplicate clusters of impressions, stamped deeply upon the snow by the long, elastic jump. Whenever there was a weasel track, – narrow, finely pointed, treacherously innocent, – it was sure to be closely parallel to that of a leaping hare; and Miranda soon apprehended, by that instinct of hers, that the companionship was not like to be well for the hare. Once, to her horror, she found that a hare track ended suddenly, right under the cabin window, in a blood-stained patch, bestrewn with fur and bones. All about it the snow was swept as if by wings, and two strange footprints told the story. They were long, these two footprints – forked, with deep hooks for toes, and an obscure sort of brush mark behind them. This was where the owl had sat up on the snow for a few minutes after dining, to ponder on the merits of the general order of things, and of a good meal in particular. Miranda's imagination painted a picture of the big bird sitting there in the moonlight beside the bloody bones, his round, horned head turning slowly from one side to the other, his hooked beak snapping now and again in reminiscence, his sharp eyes wide open and flaming. There was also the track of a fox, which had come up from the direction of the barn, investigated the scene of action, and gone off at a sharp,

decisive angle toward the woods. Miranda had no clew to tell her how stealthily that fox had come, or how nearly he had succeeded in catching an owl for his breakfast; but from that morning she bore a grudge against owls, and never could hear without a flash of wrath their hollow *two-hoo-hoo-who-oo* echoing solemnly from the heart of the pinewood.

But the owl was not the only bird that Miranda knew that winter. Well along in January, when the haws were all gone, and most of the withered rowan-berries had been eaten, and famine threatened such of the bird-folk as had not journeyed south, there came to the cabin brisk foraging flocks of the ivory-billed snow-bird. For these Miranda had crumbs ready always, and as word of her bounty went abroad in the forest, her feathered pensioners increased. Even a hungry crow would come now and then, glossy and sideling, watchful and audacious, to share the hospitality of this kind Miranda of the crumbs. She liked the crows, and would hear no ill of them from her mother; but most of all she liked those big, rosy-headed, trustful children, the pine-grosbeaks, who would almost let her take them in her hands. Whenever their wandering flocks came down to her, she held winter carnival for them.

During those days when it was not fine enough to go out, – when the snow drove in great swirls and phantom armies across the open, and a dull roar came from the straining forest, and the fowls went to roost at midday, and the cattle munched contentedly in their stanchions, glad to be shut in, – then the cabin seemed very pleasant to Miranda. On such days the drifts were sometimes piled halfway up the windows. On such days the dry logs on the hearth blazed more brightly than their wont, and the flames sang more merrily up the chimney. On such days the piles of hot buckwheat cakes, drenched in butter and brown molasses, tasted more richly toothsome than at any time else, and on such days she learned to knit. This was very interesting. At first she knit gay black-and-red garters for her mother; and then, speedily mastering this rudimentary process, she was fairly launched on a stocking, with four needles. The stocking, of course, was for her mother, who would not find fault if it were knitted too tightly here and too loosely there. As for Kirstie herself, her nimble needles would click all day, turning out socks and mittens of wonderful thickness to supply the steady market of the lumber camps.

One night, after just such a cosey, shut-in day, Miranda was awakened by a scratching sound on the roof. Throughout the cold weather Miranda slept with her mother in the main room, in a broad new bunk which had been substituted for the narrow one wherein Old Dave had slept on his first visit to the clearing. Miranda caught her mother's arm, and shook it gently. But Kirstie was already awake, lying with wide eyes, listening.

“What's that, mother, trying to get in?” asked the child in a whisper.

“Hush-sh-sh,” replied Kirstie, laying her fingers on the child's mouth.

The scratching came louder now, as the light snow was swept clear and the inquisitive claws reached the bark. Then it stopped. After a second or two of silence there was a loud, blowing sound, as if the visitor were clearing his nostrils from the snow and cold. This was followed by two or three long, penetrating sniffs, so curiously hungry in their suggestion that even Miranda's dauntless little heart beat very fast. As for Kirstie, she was decidedly nervous. Springing out of bed she ran to the hearth, raked the coals from the ashes, fanned them, heaped on birch bark and dry wood, and in a moment had a great blaze roaring up the chimney-throat. The glow from the windows streamed far out across the snow. To the visitor it proved disconcerting. There was one more sharp rattle of claws upon the roof, then a fluffy thump below the eaves. The snow had stopped falling hours before; and when, at daylight, Kirstie opened the door, there was the deep hollow where the panther had jumped down, and there was the floundering trail where he had fled.

This incident made Miranda amend, in some degree, her first opinion of panthers.

Chapter V

Kroof, the She-bear

Spring came early to the clearing that year. Kirstie's autumn furrows, dark and steaming, began to show in patches through the diminished snow. The chips before the house and the litter about the barn, drawing the sun strongly, were first of all uncovered; and over them, as to the conquest of new worlds, the haughty cock led forth his dames to scratch. "Saunders," Miranda had called him, in remembrance of a strutting beau at the Settlement; and with the advent of April cheer, and an increasing abundance of eggs, and an ever resounding cackle from his complacent partlets, his conceit became insufferable. One morning, when something she did offended his dignity, he had the presumption to face her with beak advanced and wide-ruffled neck feathers. But Saunders did not know Miranda. Quick as a flash of light she seized him by the legs, whirled him around her head, and flung him headlong, squawking with fear and shame, upon his own dunghill. It took him a good hour to recover his self-esteem, but after that Miranda stood out in his eyes as the one creature in the world to be respected.

When the clearing was quite bare, except along the edges of the forest, and Kirstie was again at work on her fencing, the black-and-white cow gave birth to a black-and-white calf, which Miranda at once claimed as her own property. It was a very wobbly, knock-kneed little heifer; but Miranda admired it immensely, and with lofty disregard of its sex, christened it Michael.

About this time the snow shrank away from her hollow under the pine root, and Kroof came forth to sun herself. She had lived all winter on nothing but the fat stored up on the spaces of her capacious frame. Nevertheless she was not famished – she had still a reserve to come and go on, till food should be abundant. A few days after waking up she bore a cub. It was the custom of her kind to bear two cubs at a birth; but Kroof, besides being by long odds the biggest she-bear ever known in that region, had a pronounced individuality of her own, and was just as well satisfied with herself over one cub as over two.

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