

Trevena John

Menotah: A Tale of the Riel Rebellion



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PREFATORY NOTE

In the following story of the Canadian North-West Rebellion, Louis Riel – leader of a hopeless enterprise – has not been introduced as an active character. He was himself so colourless, so commonplace, that a true picture must have been uninteresting, while a fictitious drawing would have been unsatisfactory and out of place with the plan of this story. He was much like his brother, who lives to-day on an unpretentious farm in the Red River Valley, dull-witted, heavy-featured and obtuse – in fact, a French half-breed of the ordinary stamp.

So the plot of this work tends more towards the study of passion, and dwells upon what was undoubtedly one of the principal reasons for the revolt, viz., the unscrupulous treatment of the Indian women by the white invaders. The 'Governor and Company of Adventurers of England trading into Hudson's Bay,' generally and more commonly known by the simpler title of the 'Hudson's Bay Company,' had well paved the way for this miserable laxity in matters of morality.

The mighty shadow which looms behind this tale of the Rebellion is that of the loyal Archbishop Taché. He it was, though the fact has not been recognised generally, who, almost unaided, crushed the rising spirit of independence in half-breeds and Indians, and brought the insurrection to a close. Surely it is not too late to do justice to the memory of this truly unselfish prelate.

The writer was present in the riverside town of St Boniface on a certain still evening during the August of 1894. There all the houses, and even the trees that lined the streets, were heavily draped in black; men and women passed slowly with heads uncovered and attitude of grief; it was as though each had lost his or her nearest and dearest relative. There was not a sound along that little town of mourning.

For the Archbishop lay dead in the Cathedral. Later, when the sun was setting over this place of universal grief, the writer came within the dark building, crept up a winding stairway, to find himself confronted suddenly by a singularly solemn spectacle. Before the altar, robed in full pontificals, sat in State the dead Archbishop, while lamps flickered solemnly, and muttered intercessions arose from the trembling lips of a ring of kneeling priests.

This strange silence, broken only by the whisperings, or occasional deep gasps of breath; the feeble glimmerings of lights along the rapidly darkening scene; the presence of the mighty dead still presiding in the second Cathedral that his efforts had raised¹ – all this made up a spectacle dramatically impressive, and one not readily to be forgotten.

The writer came at length to the side of the dead prelate, and bent to reverently kiss the cold gloved hand of the mighty dead. Then he departed, with a silent resolve to do such justice as he could to the memory of this beloved Father and Pastor, who had worked so nobly for the welfare of the country of his adoption.

Menotah's story is a sad one, yet, for purposes of truth, not sad enough. The colours might well be painted with a far darker brush, but the book would then probably be deemed too ghastly and too realistic. The steady march of civilisation is pushing farther north each year, while Menotah's history is repeated daily. The only thing which can free that wonderful land from the vice and oppression of its masters is the building of the Hudson's Bay Railway. About forty miles of the track (from Winnipeg to St Laurent on Lake Manitoba) have been constructed, but the rails lie rotting in the

¹ The first Cathedral was destroyed by fire immediately after completion, when all the parish records were destroyed.

prairie grass. This line would open up a country of boundless timber and mineral resources, and might well create many a fresh industry.

The characters in this work are for the most part actual life studies. None are overdrawn, not even Peter Denton, least of all McAuliffe.

The local colour is simply so much word photography. The particular fort on the Great Saskatchewan has been described with absolute accuracy of detail. The river pool (Chap. II.) is there; also the island in mid-stream, where the fight actually occurred; the great rapids, the oil swamp, the log wharf – all are there. In fact, description and dialogue has entailed upon the writer rather an effort of memory than any strain upon the imagination.

PART I

THE HEART'S JOY

CHAPTER I

THE FOREST

'There will be full moon to-night, and a south wind. Then the evil one will steal from the marshes. For there will be war and fire. War and Fire!'

Within that deep green shade of the forest, amidst the picturesque sweepings of the foliage, the heat rays of the sun could scarcely be felt, for odorous firs overspread their thick tresses above. Here, in this strange, peaceful retreat, active squirrels leapt with mathematical accuracy from bough to bough; mosquito hawks, in their green and gold glories, cut through the slanting beams of light with a sharp hissing of wings; erratic locusts, on a lower plane, hurled their aimless bodies clumsily into space, falling wherever destiny might direct.

The speaker remained invisible, while the lingering sounds of the joyous voice died slowly away. A young man, who heard the sudden cry from the heart of the surrounding silence, started and listened eagerly for an approaching footstep, which came not. Only the happy echo broke upon the calm in a full tide of harmony; this merged into a half gasp of musical laughter; then came peace again as the last vibration settled into silence.

The listener wondered, then became interested. There had been no flaw in the musical cadence of that cry. The fiery utterance – bearing a latent warning – proceeded surely from the heart of one who found life a time of joy, who gloried in the exultation of overflowing vitality, who was also intoxicated by an over-gift of health. This passing sound, like the flitting shadow cast by an invisible presence, contained a message of youth's hot passion, of a self-conscious rapture of beauty. Those words fell from the lips of one who had made no acquaintance with sorrow.

The expectant, yet disappointed, listener shifted the rifle to his shoulder and rubbed his hands, which were hot and moist, upon a bunch of flowering moss. He seemed uneasy, if his feelings might be judged by the anxious attention he gave to each slight movement in the adjoining bush. But after a period of waiting he drew himself up, inclined his head forward, and listened attentively. Then he nodded and smiled in self-satisfied manner, listened again, and finally began to work his way through the thick undergrowth with the subtle motions of the practised bushman. Perhaps a rippling echo of that musical voice had travelled faintly down the wind and touched his ear.

He disappeared, while the boundless forest of the Great Saskatchewan whispered drearily beneath the soft-stirring breeze of evening.

Lonely, somewhat wild, yet certainly there was a rough grandeur in this particular arrangement of nature's handiwork; a stern beauty, which must have fascinated the hunter; a wonderful blending of colours, which would have caused the heart of the painter to despair. Paths, in the ordinary sense of the term, were there none, though a sinuous, barely defined trail, where mocassined feet passed occasionally, writhed dimly away here and there. The venturesome explorer who plunged into these unknown recesses chose out his own particular route, fought a way through the entanglement of undergrowth, while none might ever follow in his footsteps.

Tangled masses and bewildering festoons of drooping boughs, tinted to many a different shade of green; black and grey rocks; red sand stretches, surmounted by wire grass or huge ant-hills; octopus-like bushes, thorn-protected and thickly covered with red berries. Such were the principal objects of distinction beneath a solemn green canopy, which spread like some threatening cloud overhead.

Crack!

Wild echoes fled shrieking through the forest, while a pale mist of blue smoke rose, flouted upward fantastically, curled and lengthened – then finally melted.

Just before that sharp, whip-like report had cut the air, a splendid buck deer sprang from the thick of the sweeping branches out into the open. Away it bounded, with the ease and certainty of a well-aimed arrow, over a ridge of splintered rocks. Away – across to the opposite shadows, where lay shelter and life.

But then the weapon screamed death, and spat the bullet forth.

While still in the air, the graceful creature's body stiffened, as though each muscle had been thrilled and stretched by an electric current. The nimble feet touched the ground, but not now to dart away in fresh flight. The deer tottered forward, because the impulse to seek shelter was a dying passion, but the slender legs gave way. After staggering blindly, it fell to its knees; then, after swaying backwards and forwards with pitiful gasping, it finally rolled over upon the moss bed with a groan, while warm blood trickled cruelly over the short soft fur.

'Good shot, Winton! You took him fine, boy.'

Then two men stepped from the bushes. The one, who thus spoke his opinion of the other's aim, was an elderly man, thin and dark featured. His somewhat sallow face was decorated by nature with a grizzled beard, while more than an occasional grey hair might have been observed beneath the rim of his felt hat. Extremely dark eyes and heavy mouth revealed the fact of Indian ancestry.

His companion, scarcely more than a boy, was unmistakably English. The breeze stirred his fair hair at an altitude of over six feet above ground; age could not claim from him more than twenty-one years.

'Shot a bit too far back, though,' continued Sinclair the hunter. 'Don't say it wasn't difficult to kill from your position, and you took him on the jump.'

'Dead, isn't it?' said Winton, blowing down his rifle barrel.

The hunter laughed. 'No, sir. Get over there with your knife, and finish him. Don't leave the poor brute to bleed and sob himself to death.'

The other slung the rifle to his shoulder, drew a long hunting knife, then made across the open space. He knelt by the side of the panting creature, wound his fingers round a branching antler, and pulled the head round to inflict the *coup de grâce*.

Sinclair leaned up against a rock, his arms folded, a smug smile gradually widening across his features.

'You shouldn't mutilate,' he called out carelessly. 'Shoot to kill outright – specially deer. It's bad policy to only wound a buck.' Then he chuckled as he perceived the statuesque position of his companion.

With a necessary hardening of the heart – for the stabbing of a deer in cold blood makes the man of refinement feel strangely a murderer – Winton raised his knife and prepared to cut across the long veins swelling at the side of the palpitating neck. The blade descended, his grasp tightened, the steel flashed down – when suddenly the graceful creature lifted its head with a dying effort, and gazed with great, suffering eyes full into his face. It was then that the young man paused, while the dry chuckle broke out behind.

For in that seemingly unequal contest the animal won. All strength fled from the murdering hand when its owner beheld those dark fixed eyes of his piteous victim. They were large and luminous, while tear drops of pain trickled along and blackened the surrounding fur. The small black nostrils quivered pitifully in death gaspings. A heartbroken torture overspread the face, which reproached him for the cruel deed of his hand.

A minute later the knife fell unused to the ground. A sickening revulsion of feeling followed, sweeping over him with overpowering force, combined with weariness and a hatred of life. His eyes

could not alter the direction of their gaze, for they were held and fascinated by that dark, reproachful glance, as a bird is rendered helpless by the snake.

'Got it,' muttered Sinclair. 'Got it bad. But it will be good for the boy.'

That strange malady, the deer fever, had a firm hold upon Winton. His entire body became seized with violent ague. He trembled with cold, though conscious at the same time that his hands and feet were burning. His quick breath stabbed him with hot gasps. Moisture broke out on his forehead as a horrible vision presented itself to the imagination. He himself was the victim, while the conqueror lay before him. His only chance for life lay in immediate flight, but his feet were chained together and fastened to the ground. He must therefore remain and die.

'It's what I looked for,' muttered Sinclair into his beard. Then he came forward across the open space, and picked up the knife.

As he bent over the deer, and as the animal resigned its life with a deep sob, the man in the trance revived and gazed blankly, first at the dead creature stretched beside him, then at the grinning face of his companion.

'What in the devil's name have you been up to, Sinclair?' he said stupidly.

'Up to, eh?' remarked the hunter slowly, with evident enjoyment, as he wiped the knife. 'What are you doing anyhow, lying around there half asleep? Good sort of buck killer you are!'

The young man pulled himself up. 'You've been fooling.'

'I'm a clever chap, then. Reckon I could knock you over in that shape? Well, well, to think of a strong young fellow like you being beaten by a harmless sort of half dead beast.'

'You don't say it was the deer?' asked the young man, still dazed.

The hunter laughed. 'That's what. You had the fever, and as strong as I've ever seen it take a man.'

'Well – that beats all,' said Winton, hanging on each syllable.

'Told you it wasn't well to wound and not kill. Guess you won't fix another for quite a time.'

'How's that? Lots of them around, aren't there?'

'I reckon,' said the other drily. 'Question is whether you'll be able to shoot when you sight one. It'll worry you a bit. I'm thinking.'

Winton stretched his long limbs. 'It takes me all my time to understand this. Course I've heard of the fever – lots of times, but I didn't put much on hunters' talk –'

'And now you've had it.'

'It doesn't last, though?'

'Won't with you, I reckon. I've known some taken with it when they weren't any better than boys, and as they got older it didn't show any wearing off. Whenever they'd start to shoot at a deer, the fever would come up as bad as ever.'

'But it doesn't happen to everyone?'

'I guess it's the exception. I've never had it. Some say it's no bad sign when a young fellow gets knocked over with it. For it's generally men that are good shots who get bothered with the fever. Another thing – if a fellow goes to knife the beast with any sort of pity – you had, I know, for I watched you close – he's gone. You're feeling right again, eh?'

The other assented. 'It goes off as quickly as it comes on, anyhow.'

'And leaves a man none the worse,' added the hunter. Then he hastened to change the subject, as he noticed the gradual blackening of the surrounding shadows.

'See here, Winton, it's getting sort of late. Alf will be bothering, if we're not back by dark. Suppose you wait here, while I make tracks for the horses?'

'There's an hour of daylight yet,' said Winton. 'Let's sit down for a smoke. There's lot of time.'

Sinclair glanced round a little uneasily. 'Make it half a pipeful, and I don't mind joining you. I'm sort of hungry for a bit of plug. But, I tell you straight, I'm not wanting to hang around here long after sunset.'

Winton chuckled. 'My turn now,' he said. 'It's my laugh on you. Why, you're a regular old woman to-day, Sinclair. What's the racket now?'

The hunter bit at his moustache. 'Well, it's this way – I'm a little scared of the *nitchies*.'

'Pshaw! That's about the tenth time to-day you've shammed fright. Don't see why we should want to bother, just because the breeds 'way down south are painting their faces and making alarming fools of themselves. What's wrong with your courage, Sinclair?'

'That's all right,' said the other sullenly; then paused, while a dim blue flame shot upward from his pipe. He seated himself on the white moss near his companion, then placed a hand upon his knee. 'Tell you, Winton, this rebellion in the Territories is going to be something worth jotting down in a book of history.'

'Don't think much of it,' said the other contemptuously.

'That's because you don't know the people. I do, because I'm descended from them in a way myself. And I know Riel. Have seen him, spoken to him, more than that – I've fought with him knife to knife before to-day. Nothing's going to stop him, except a chance bullet, or the few yards of rope your countrymen are fond of allowing any poor devil who tries to get the better of them. Give me a match.'

Winton complied, while the hunter continued, 'You don't think much of the rebellion, eh? Still there's a pretty thick crowd of half crazy Indians and breeds. Darn me if I know what the opposition consists of.'

'Well, I do,' put in Winton. 'What's the matter with the militia and the police? They're good enough for you.'

'Yes, they're first-class bullet stoppers. Fine, targets, with their red coats, for the boys to drive their bullets into. Pshaw! The soldiers can't begin to save the country. I've not a bit of use for the farmers and settlers. But I allow it can be done, Winton. There's one man – a single man, with an almighty lot of power, who can swamp up the whole rebellion as I'd swallow a dram of whisky. Question is whether he'll do it.'

'Who are you talking of? Not General –'

'Pshaw! Not that sneaking coward. The man I'm thinking on is general of the Church, not the army. I reckon, Winton, that Archbishop Taché is the only one who can put a stopper to this rising. What?'

'Well, if that's so, Sinclair, what's it got to do with us 'way up here?'

The hunter pulled strongly at his pipe, then spat violently on the moss. 'You don't see it, eh? I'll show you, then. I'm as darned sure as though he'd told me himself that Riel means to stamp the whole crowd of whites clean out of the land. Course he can't be around every place himself, so he just sends round messages all over this country.'

'Telling the tribes to rise?'

'And clean out the whites in their district. They're bound to obey, for they look upon Riel as a sort of nickle-plate god. Besides, they're scared of his vengeance if they refuse and he comes off victorious. They're all dead sure he can't be beaten anyhow.'

'You think we shall have some sport round here?' asked Winton, lazily.

'I don't know anything for certain; but it's likely enough.'

'I don't think so. The *nitchies* around here are not well armed. We should be able to beat them off easily enough if they did attack the fort. Your pipe's gone out.'

Sinclair leaned forward. 'Give me a match.' Then he continued in a changed tone, 'You wouldn't talk like that if you knew everything. You only see Riel. You don't know a darned thing about anything behind – who's stirring him up, who's supplying the brains to run this rebellion, and all the rest of it. I tell you, I know more than any man living, and when the time comes – by God, I'll use my knowledge.'

He drew the match savagely along his breeches, and relighted his pipe.

'You're a lot safer up here than you'd be down in Manitoba.'

'I'd like to be back,' said the hunter; 'and I'm going by next boat, whether the hunting's good or bad. I'd no right to leave the wife and children in these bad times. How can I tell what's going on while I'm away up here? If they were all dead and planted, I'd be none the wiser.'

Winton stretched himself, accompanying the action with a subdued laugh.

'You're a terrible croaker, Sinclair. Why don't you look on the bright side? It's just as easy, and a lot pleasanter.'

The old hunter rose. 'Don't know how it is, Winton, but I feel sort of low-spirited just now.'

'That's something new. What's wrong?'

'Uneasy, I guess. Well, I'm off. It'll be dark presently.'

He picked up his rifle and prepared to move. 'I've no use for fooling around in the forest at this time. It isn't healthy. There's too much mischief drifting up, and a fellow never knows when it's going to break. You'll wait here till I'm up with the horses, eh?'

'I'll watch the meat and finish my smoke.'

'That's it. Guess you know which way to steer for the fort, eh? Make north-west till you come to the big fir that the *nitchies* call the death tree. You can just catch the top of the flagstaff from there, if you get up before the light goes out.'

'I know,' said Winton, quietly. 'But what are you telling me for?'

'So as you'd be all right if we got parted. Wouldn't do for you to get lost in the forest if anything happened to me.'

'What in the devil's likely to happen?'

'Nothing, I reckon. Still, it's good to keep on the right side. Well, don't fall asleep over your smoke; keep the rifle handy.' The next minute his spare figure disappeared amongst the bushes.

Left to himself, Winton pulled at his pipe and reflected upon the words of his late companion.

On ordinary occasions the old hunter was never accustomed to suffer from any such lack of courage, therefore his parting words became the more significant. Then there was another thing to remember: Sinclair, himself of mixed blood, understood the native character thoroughly. On his own confession, he possessed more knowledge – and that of a secret nature – than most, so after all it might be advisable to attend to his warning.

Winton settled his broad back firmly against a tree trunk, and reflected. For a small quarter of an hour he was left to himself in the dreary forest, at a time most productive of sentimental thought – when light was gradually merging into night. This was a solemn time, when a man was induced to think by the nature of his surroundings, and half unconsciously review the action of a past.

This young man was, without being aware of it, a type of civilization. He had not much to look back upon. Merely a schoolboy career, in which he had won a reputation of being the finest athlete and the most unprincipled character of his time; a year at Oxford, productive of more laurels, combined with disgrace for many a daring escapade; then the crowning act of foolishness, the expulsion, a hurried flight abroad, because he dared not face the wrath of parents, or the sad reproach of a pretty, petted sister; lastly the burying of his identity in a strange land.

There were many such characters in the country. At home they were considered superfluous beings of uselessness. Here they were the foundation of a new society, the pioneers of an incoming tide of civilization. Such men – not the stay-at-home successes of the schools – have often turned the wavering balance to their country's profit in such a world's crisis as a Waterloo, a Trafalgar. That recklessness, that daring – once labelled as viciousness by scholastic guardians – then become England's glory and shield at time of need.

Somewhere in the neighbouring bush a twig snapped with a sharp, dry sound. Winston glanced round quickly, while the fingers of his right hand closed mechanically round the rifle as he remembered Sinclair's warning. But no other sound reached his ears, while nothing unusual appeared before his eyes.

He began to wonder whether Sinclair's fear had communicated itself to him. This weakness was excusable, for the forest was growing very dark – lonely it always was – and full of strange sounds. Solitude works strangely upon the imagination.

His hand released the rifle, and roamed idly along the ground. Presently fingers came in contact with certain matter, which was thick and sticky to the touch. With a slight shudder he withdrew the hand, and when his eyes fell upon the red fingers he involuntarily uttered a sharp cry of astonishment and fear – but the next instant he laughed.

He had forgotten the dead animal, which lay stiffening at his side.

'Lucky old Sinclair isn't here,' he muttered. 'It would be his turn to have the smile.'

He wiped his red fingers upon the white moss, then began to pace up and down, listening anxiously for the tramp of horses, or cheery cry of his returning companion.

The minutes fled past in silence. The sun had fallen beneath the black tree line, which fringed the northern shore of the Saskatchewan. Glistening dew was settling softly, while a shadowy presence of evening stirred along the forest.

Winton grasped a bunch of foliage; the leaves were cold and slimy to the touch. 'Past the quarter hour. The horses must have strayed, so, like a fool, he's gone after them. I'll give him ten minutes more. If he isn't here then, I shall make tracks before the darkness gets any thicker.'

Ah! That sound was no work of the imagination.

He wheeled round sharply, with ready rifle to his shoulder. The sharp rustling of parting bushes brought the heart to his mouth. But he saw nothing.

Then a branch waved ominously, and he felt it was not caused by the wind. He strained his eyes to pierce the gloom which surrounded the mass of interlacing boughs.

Surely that was a dusky face of one who had sworn destruction to his race. Fierce eyes of hatred were glaring upon him; a mouth was set in thin line of determination; hands were raised, perhaps preparing to point a heavily charged muzzle-loader; he was the object of that aim.

Sinclair's words came back, as he sprang aside in a bath of fear. His one idea just then was immediate escape. Once he slipped in the thickening blood, then reached the bushes opposite. Once behind the thick leafy screen, he would be safe for the time.

But, as the clammy leaves swept upon his face, there was a loud, vibrating report.

For a second, the darkness round his head surged in a red glow. That Indian face had been no work of the imagination. The echoes thrilled through his head; a fearful stab, like a hot breath, glowed along his body.

He was shot. The charge had passed through his chest, and the blood was trickling forth sluggishly.

The wound might not be mortal. So he staggered forward, every moment dreading the shock of a second report. He clutched at a branch, which swayed up and down restlessly. His heart was beating furiously, his brain was burning, yet he seemed to grow no weaker. Then, with equal suddenness, there came to his ears, from the surrounding bush, the gasping cry – the voice of a man in pain, followed by the stamp of strong, hurrying hoofs.

He knew that the cry had been uttered by his hunter friend.

This brought him back to reason. So he was not shot after all; *but Sinclair was*. It would be his turn now. The dark enemies were closing round him to complete their work. There was still beating in his ears the horrible, dull sound of a shot body crashing through small bushes towards the ground of which it was then part.

Should he go back in the direction of that sound? What help could he hope to render a corpse? Besides, the whole bush was alive with threatening voices and vengeful faces. There was hostile movement everywhere along the dark, awful forest.

Then these noises increased tenfold and rose louder. A panting, mad struggling, a furious crashing, with sparks shooting upward from rugged stones, bridle reins flying and catching, while

before sped a mist of smoky breath. Such was the vision of the grey monster, which loomed suddenly from the darkness and stumbled heavily almost at his feet.

It was the grey mare he had ridden that day. But where was the dark horse, and where was Sinclair? Dead, and in that death lay the most convincing proof of the truth of the last word he had spoken.

Goaded by fear and the desperation of the moment, he had sprung forward. He was mounted, and dashing furiously through the forest, ignorant of direction, feeling only the great and terrible fear of the pursued. Branches cut and bruised his face; small twigs bent and lashed him angrily; the night wind hissed with menace upon his ears; while behind, around, in front, the great forest shrieked and raved.

Onward crashed the horse, the white breath streaming away, the flecks of foam dashing to each side. He bent down and shrank together, his single idea being to present as small a target as possible. Every second he expected to hear the crash of muzzle-loaders, to hear the screech of shot, to feel the sharp sting of lead in his back.

Still on, heading he knew not where in that terrible fright. Sparkling dew dashed off the leaves; long bushes streamed past his legs; red sparks shot madly upward from the iron-black rocks beneath.

CHAPTER II

MENOTAH – HEART THAT KNOWS NOT SORROW

Ne-ha-hah! Drip, flash, gurgle. Down from rock to rock – splash, tinkle – soft, softer, with a long, peaceful swirl of bubbles, as the lone rushes by the bank shivered again. With a gleam beneath a dancing ray of sunlight, with a beauty spot of white foam here and there. Min-ne-ha-hah! Splash, drip-drip – splash! Then a quickening run of black and silver bars, a long, golden line of light – with a bright singing voice, and with a peal of music like the chime of distant bells. Ne-ha-hah!

The place of the laughing waters. Here the sun quivered for colour music, while wind and water met and kissed with the whispering caress of an ever endless song. First came the wind, with deep, long sigh through the bushes, then the sunlight. After this overture, one might listen to the melody of the waters.

'Ne-pink, ink-ink-ah. Min-ne-sot-ah-hah. Ha-hah-ne-ah-ah! Ne-ha-hah-ah! Pink-ink-ink. Ne-pink. Ne-ah. Nepink-ah-hah. Min-ha! Ne-ah-ink-ink. Min-ne-ha-ink-ink! Ne-sot-ah! So-tah. So-tah-ha-hah-ah! Min-ne-ha. Pink-ink-ink. Ne-ah! Pink-ink-ink. Ne-ha! Ne-hah! Ne-ha! Ne-sot-ah! Ne-ha-hah-ha! Ne-ha-hah! Ah! Hah!'

Then the wind swelled louder for the great wordless opera. The sunrays grew whiter and stronger to light up the great rugged stage of Nature.

There was a mighty slab of black rock, which the waves lapped listlessly, at one side of the river pool. This appeared to shoot straight from the heart of the forest – part bathed by the water, part shielded and hidden by a tangle of bushes. To a pendulous branch, projecting over the black stone, had been attached a coloured streamer of cloth, which rose and fell gaily with the wind, like the guiding beat of a conductor's bâton.

Then the voice of Nature was broken into, yet not disturbed, again. A clear, thrilling cry came from the forest, the careless, happy cry of a young life.

'There will be full moon to-night, and a south wind. Then the evil one will steal from the marshes, for there will be war and fire. War and Fire!'

That same voice again, but now the speaker was nearer and approaching. In such a place, at such a time, it might almost have been Wasayap on her way to meet the Heelhi-Manitou at the Passing Place of the Spirits.

The music of the waters swelled a little higher into a louder, purer burst of melody. The departing sun streamed slantingly across the so-far empty stage, where a few white grass stems shivered.

'Min-ne-ha! Pink-ink-ink. Ne-ha! Min-ne-ha. Ne-ha! Ne-hah! Ne-ha! Ne-sot-ah! Ne-ha-hah-ha! Ne-ha-hah! Ne-ha! Ah! Hah!'

The clinging bushes hung around and above without motion. Suddenly they parted, with quick swish and rapid rustling of leaves, and the next moment appeared a wonderful vision.

'Men-ha! Ot-ah! Me-e-e-e-ot-ah. Ah-ha! Ha-hah-ha-ah! Me-ot-hah. Ot-ah! Ah-ah-ah! Ot-ah! Ot-ah! Ah-hah! Men-ot-ah! Ot-ah! Menotah!'

With a noisy, petulant fluttering of foliage the bushes sprang back to their former position. The vision finally resolved itself into human form and shape, as it sprang down to the rock with the agile bound of a young deer. Then the waters smiled into the laughing face of a young and lovely girl.

With a soft, gurgling laughter, suggestive of sheer happiness and exuberance of life, she deftly balanced her dainty body upon one tiny foot, then, with quick clutch, snatched at and captured the overhanging bough, which bent itself barely within reach of her hand. When she had pulled this to a level with her forehead, she swung herself airily backwards and forwards, her feet softly caressing the hard rock with the beating motions of a gentle dance.

She had thrown her head well back, and thus revealed the delicate moulding of her velvet neck; her long hair was rippling unbound along the bright rays of intermittent sunshine; the liquid song-notes of a native ditty trilled from her red, smiling lips.

She was admirable; she was perfect; she was adorable.

Her skin was dark, yet by no means swarthy. Soft and delicate in its purity, she resembled more the refined Creole than an Indian girl of the forest. Her dress, which reached a little below the knees, was of a coarse material dyed red, while her arms and feet were bare, or, rather, clothed in their own perfect beauty. Entwined round her temples, twisted in careless profusion through the cloud of her flowing hair, wound a festoon of emerald leaves and glowing berries, snatched from some forest bush as she sped lightheartedly amongst the trees. Radiant as were these berries, Nature had not painted them with the rich scarlet of Menotah's cheeks, nor with the deep carmine of her parted lips, through which came the pearly glitter of the teeth. And above, the dark eyes flashed and shone, spreading the happy contagion of mirth as they passed, with the hovering action of the swallow, from one object to another.

So, unconscious of evil, insensible to suffering, she swung herself from side to side upon the black rock, while her face shone with rapture, like the laughing water which bubbled beneath her feet. The sun dropped down to the uneven line of a long ridge opposite, while a fine glow shot into the sky. Again she swung on tiptoe, and sang in a clear voice a sweet voice with a thrill in it that sounded through the forest and over the water, light and sparkling as the tinkling of raindrops upon the leaves.

In her youthful, ignorant passion she sang to the Spirit for understanding of life, for knowledge of human secrets, for unending joy and eternal love in the years to come, while the wind and the water played her a wonderful accompaniment.

She stopped suddenly, with a musical cry of sheer happiness, then sprang, lithe and supple as a squirrel, from the higher ridge of the rock, in mid-air releasing her grasp of the branch. Upward it darted, with the force of a steel spring, striking down upon the dark tresses a shower of brown fir spines with many small green cones.

Lightly as a snowflake the girl came to the lower platform of stone, which lay almost at a level with the water. Her step was sure, for her young limbs were strong and yielding. She made a dancing step; cast her arms delightedly above her head, accompanying the action with a merry burst of laughter; passed two shapely hands beneath a dark mist of hair, which had streamed forward over her face, and threw it back with a graceful gesture.

She gazed around and upward, finally fixing her eyes upon the branch she had lately clung to. It seemed as though she searched for something not at once discernible. Presently she clasped her hands together with a short cry of pleasure.

'The Spirit is pleased,' she cried, with a sudden catch to her rich voice. 'I am always to be beautiful; I am always to be happy. The Spirit himself has waited here to tell me.'

For the coloured steamer had disappeared. Probably it had been shaken away to the neighbouring bushes, when the bough had sprung back into position; perhaps it had then been unsecured and the wind had since removed it. At all events it had vanished, and this knowledge brought her happiness.²

She paused for awhile, as though in thought. Her soft forehead fell into little, curved lines, while the beautiful face grew grave. 'It might have been the wind,' she said doubtfully, speaking slowly to the rippling waters, 'but, if it was, the wind is a spirit – yes, a good spirit. Now he has spoken to me. I am beautiful, and I shall be happy.'

² It is a native custom thus to hang streamers to some bush after a prayer. The disappearance of such is a sign that the Spirit is pleased and will grant the desired favour.

A dull roar from the distant rapids beat down ominously along the evening wind. With the wind that bore the sound came a wave, which broke itself against the black rock, casting a tiny cloud of spray upward.

The girl's face altered its expression at once. The thought lines vanished, while others appeared to bend round her mouth in the shape of a smile.

'Beautiful,' she murmured, alone, yet half bashful; 'the water has told me so often, and now it calls me again.'

She inclined her head forward, while the smile deepened. 'Listen!'

The waters splashed, rippled, flashed, swung round in a long gurgling eddy, then splashed again. Out of this rose a low, musical tinkle, with a soft lap-lap upon the rocks which sounded like a kiss.

'Yes. That was a name. Listen! There it comes again – Menotah! Heart that knows not sorrow.'

She timidly came to the extreme edge, then fell to her knees. As the sun disappeared behind the grey-dark ledge opposite, she bent her dainty head over and down, until the long black hair divided and fell in two glossy strands, the ends of which floated like seaweed upon the foam patches.

The river pool commenced to blacken, while flowering rushes tossed their shivering heads and murmured. The Spirit of the waters called her. So she leant over – down, nearer, closer, until her fingers curved over the stone amid the moisture and green slime.

For a moment or so she was motionless, in a set posture of watching and wonder. Then, with the darting action of a bird, she was up to the higher ridge of rock with a single bound. Another spring, and she was upon the grass track at the side. An invisible frog awoke his water-side orchestra into sharp chirpings with a gruff note. It was time for her to desert the quiet river pool, for evening was pressing down, and there was much on hand.

But, as she was about to flit away, a guttural cry proceeded from the bush behind, while the stroke of a thick staff tapped fretfully upon the rock platform she had recently abandoned. Casting a glance back over her shoulder, she perceived an old man, with long hair and scrubby white beard, emerging from the bushes.

'So, I have come upon you, child. I have found you at length.' Such was the manner of his greeting.

She turned back, and placed a curling foot upon a point of stone. 'And what has led your footsteps into the forest, wise Antoine?' she asked lightly.

'You, child – you.' He spoke slowly.

'What! You wish to borrow my eyes? You have come forth to pluck berries and gather strong medicines. Come! I will help you.'

The old man fixed his keen eyes upon her laughing face, then drew his coarse blanket of a gaudy yellow more conveniently over his shoulders. Then he came forward and said, 'Girl, I have been seeking you for long. I watched you dart like a sunbeam into the forest, so I followed with my slow speed to give you warning.'

She tossed back her head. 'Warn me! Of what, and why?'

'The white man,' said the other impressively. 'He is abroad in the forest. From this time he is our foe. Perchance one might meet you in such a spot as this, and –'

She interrupted him scornfully, with a proud movement of her head. 'Let him find me. I am stronger than any man, since I can disarm him with a woman's weapons.'

The old man raised a reproving hand. 'You speak, Menotah, with the folly of youth. Now will I answer you with the wisdom of age. For who are you that you should know the cunning of the white man? He feels not the emotion of love, for his heart is made of ice, while his dark mind changes as the waters of yon river. Mayhap you might be captured by him. Then, what darkness would settle upon the tribe without its heart of joy? There would be no music in the song, nor passion in the dance.'

The girl laughed with a long musical burst of happiness.

'Child! I have warned you. Listen to an old man's words. Follow his advice, and keep the heart to yourself.'

For answer, Menotah snatched a long tendril of bright green from a neighbouring bush. She cast this wreath around the old man's neck, then danced back, clapping her hands in delight.

'Now you are young again,' she cried joyously. 'You are to forget that the frost of age has ever stiffened your limbs. You must now cast aside all your wise sayings, which always fall like cold water upon my ears. Come! Take me by the hand. Then we will wander forth together. If you are mournful, I will sing to you. I will dance and laugh, that you may forget your infirmities. For where I come, sorrow may never be found.'

The red glow on her cheeks deepened, as the light in her eyes leapt into a flame. The ruddy berries dropped over her temples and kissed the eyelids when she stirred.

But the old man only shook his white head, and gave back no reply.

Then Menotah stepped to his side, and bent her graceful figure down. She held her face near his, while the soft mouth twitched in the effort to restrain its mirth.

'Wise Antoine,' she said, with an attempt at carelessness. 'You have travelled over much land and water. You have seen many people. Is it not so?'

Wonderingly he replied, 'It is so, my daughter.'

'Then tell me' – and there was a slight tremor in her voice – 'since you have seen so many women, tell me, have you ever looked upon one more beautiful than I? Have you seen any more perfect? – more graceful?'

Her face was quite solemn as she finished her question.

The old man frowned, and pulled at the falling blanket with a claw-like hand.

At length he spoke. 'It is true that I have seen many women. I have looked upon the daughters of white men, and some of these are fair. I have watched, also, generations of my own people, as they passed from childhood to maturity, growing and ripening like green berries in the sunshine. Many of these were very good to look upon.'

'But I –' she murmured, and then stopped short.

The old Antoine smiled feebly, displaying a perfect row of teeth. Then he would have turned aside, but she touched him with light, eager hand.

'I stopped your words, old father. What more had you to say?'

'Let us go back,' he said. 'See! the night comes upon us.'

But Menotah only laughed again, while the roar of the great rapids beat down upon their ears with sound of sombre menace.

She bent her beautiful head over his shoulder, and asked, 'The daughters of the white men are fair – you have said so?'

'But you are more beautiful than all,' broke forth the old man, half fiercely. 'Surely. None, on whom my eyes have rested, have owned such flow of life, such health, such gladness of spirit. These things are beauty. You are as straight as a young fir, and as fair as the evening star.'

In an instant her assumed gravity had disappeared. Laughing merrily, she darted back, with black hair streaming cloud-like behind. But the old man pursued her with a searching question, —

'Child! Menotah! What dream spirit has whispered into your brain, as you slept beneath the moon? What is that which has told your mind that you were more beautiful than others – that you were even fair at all? You have learnt from me, yet on such matters have I given you no knowledge.'

Menotah was singing gaily, unconcernedly, and for the time appeared not to notice his quick questionings. But suddenly she sprang aside to the bushes, and parted them with eager hands. Then she glanced back, and commenced to chant in loud, distinct tones, —

'Old father, you have taught me much, yet, being a man, you might not read a woman's heart. You could not tell her all – not that she wished especially to learn. So she has searched for that knowledge wherever it might be found. Behold! she has succeeded.'

The Ancient would have spoken aloud in wonder, but the bright girl gave him no opportunity.

'One day, near the setting of the sun, I came along this way. The river-pool was already growing black, while long rushes bent and murmured when they saw me approach. Then, when I stood upon the black rock, I heard the echo of a soft voice, which arose in music at my feet, and crept up until it touched my ears. So I knew that it was the Spirit of the waters who was calling me. And he had knowledge for my ear, and mine alone. Do you still hear the soft voice calling beneath us, old father?'

She raised her dainty figure, then uplifted a small hand, inclining her head forward with a graceful gesture. The waters lapped and whispered against the slime-green base of the rock.

'Men-ha! Ot-ah! Me-e-e-e-ot-ah. Ah-ha! Ha-hah-ha-ah! Me-ot-hah. Ot-ah! Ah-ah-ah! Ot-ah! Ot-ah! Ah-hah! Men-ot-ah! Ot-ah! Menotah!'

'Do you hear, old father?' she cried joyfully. 'Can you hear the voice of the laughing waters? Each night they call me, and bid me come.'

Then the old man frowned, and raised a crooked hand to point upward over the rock-ledge opposite, where a cold ray of white light struggled through shadows.

'Hear also the voice of the great rapids, daughter. They shout, and they call, also. Would you hasten to their bidding?'

She shuddered slightly, then replied, 'Not so, old father. I would not obey the summons to death and silence.'

Antoine shivered also, as the night chilled his body. 'We tarry past the sun-setting,' he muttered. 'It is not well to be abroad at this time.'

'Ah! But listen first,' she pleaded. 'Here what the Spirit of the water had to show me.'

Again he paused, while she wrapped the cold bushes round her waist, and bathed her fingers in the dew-wet foliage. Then she spoke, —

'I came onward to the rock-brink, yet I trembled. For I feared lest the Spirit might stretch forth an angry arm to draw me down, and claim me as his victim.'

'So I came with hesitating footstep, and leant with hidden dread over the great stones, whereon the brown reeds beat their flowering heads. I looked, yet saw nothing, but the drifting clouds and bright pictures of evening sunset, for the waters swirled and bubbled, as though in anger. Again I looked, but there was still nothing, save the shadow of the bright sky.'

'But then a dim mist formed slowly and rose with gradual motions from the bottom. As it came nearer it gathered together, and took a wonderful shape, while my heart beat loudly as it rose to the surface, which was now calm and smooth, for the white foam and curling ripples had fled beneath the rock. And as I bent down – lower – nearer, until the ends of my unbound hair kissed the face of the waters, that shadow lay upon the surface, and held its lips up to mine.'

'Then I looked upon a being of beauty. There was a maiden, with eager, parted lips which were curved into a smile. I saw also eyes, happy but determined, and thick waves of hair enclosing a blameless face. At the pleasure of beholding so much beauty I smiled. And, behold! the vision smiled also, while the waters broke into ripples of silent laughter. Then I frowned, creasing up my forehead into long wrinkles, and forthwith the waters moaned with storm breath, while sunshine departed from the valley. So then I laughed aloud, bringing again joy to the Spirit, with adornment to the face of the waters.'

'For I knew that I was beautiful – beautiful – beautiful!'

She bent her happy face forward, with a small shake of the head at each repetition of her final word. Then she liberated the bushes. They closed behind, and she vanished. But her happy song was still borne through the forest as she glided, bird-like, amongst the trees.

The Ancient was left again to himself. He pulled the blanket over his scanty white locks with weak motions, while his thin lips parted in unspoken words. His deeply furrowed face was pinched and frowning.

Then he turned, also, and went his way.

CHAPTER III

THE BUDDING OF A PASSION

Nearer the outskirts of the mighty forest, where between the tree trunks might be caught, when the bushes sometimes parted beneath a slight gust of wind, a silvery flash of the sun-kissed river, two men stood side by side in earnest conference. Very dissimilar were they in every particular, save in the one important distinction of race. One was much bent by time's heavy hand; the other enjoyed the full vigour of early manhood.

This latter was tall and finely shaped; his arms were like strong wire ropes, and swelled with blue muscles as he moved with the unconscious animal grace of the native; his dark-skinned face was clearly cut and set in firm lines of determination, while the keen eyes flashed and the nostrils expanded as he listened to the words of the shrunk figure at his side and gave him back reply.

They were completely alone in this great solitude. Close behind there spread a thick tangle of bush, which gradually merged into the dark forest line, a luxuriant growth, which might readily have concealed many an invisible foe. But these men had no fear of their own, and as for the hostile white – well, there were but very few of them, and these harmless, since they could not be suspicious of approaching danger.

The old man slowly turned himself from the glowing face of the setting sun, and raised his wrinkled countenance heavily towards the powerful features of the young warrior. His cheeks were thickly painted with a lurid stain of carmine; the effect of the unnatural colour upon the dried up flesh was ghastly to an extreme. His form was doubled together almost by infirmity and time, for the weight of over four score years was pressing him down to the grave.

He extended and spread an almost fleshless hand upon the warm flesh of the other's rounded arm.

'You have finished all preparations, Muskwah? The young men are now ready, and each has weapons for the fight?'

'All that I can accomplish as leader of your children has been done, Father.'

The old man was chief of the tribe and therefore regarded as the titular father of all.

'But the warriors understand their duties Muskwah? I would have no sad scene of women lamenting in the encampment. I would not listen to the low chanting of death songs.'

'I have done your bidding, Father. I have made all things clear,' replied the young man.

'There has been nothing left undone, Muskwah? I am old, and have often seen the brave conquered, not by greater strength or skill, but by the thing unlooked for, the one thing forgotten. This is that which causes the defeat of the brave. Tell me now the words the wise Antoine spoke into your ears. Repeat to me the orders you have given to my children.'

He wrapped the cloak round him and bent again in close attitude of listening. The wind whispered in the pines behind, while the sun went out and the colours slowly faded into greyness. Then the young warrior cast out his long arms, drew his figure to its greatest height, and in clear, sonorous voice declaimed aloud the following spirited apostrophe, —

'Warriors! O, Warriors!

'Ye, who are brave, ye, who have earned the glad approval of women, draw round me, and listen to the words of your Father and Chief.

'The Spirit has whispered into his ear, "Destroy now the white men, for they are wrong-minded and have offended me. Cast them forth from this my land in death." Your Father and Chief will obey the great command of the Spirit, lest black sickness come upon the tribe, lest the hunters be caused to return empty-handed to the tents.

'Warriors! O, Warriors!

'Ye, who speed forth with the great strength of the winds, ye, who dart over earth like shadows when the moon shines, listen to the voice of your leader. When the night light casts silver upon the fir tops, and the spirits crawl from the marshes to their deeds, ye shall be ready and await my signal. Then shall ye hear thrice repeated the cry of a horned owl. When the last echo has died, gather ye yourselves round the sad death tree, where ye shall find me awaiting, and there will I separate ye into two bands. Those who are young and strong upon their feet shall descend the valley along by the way of the river-pool, and these shall wait at the foot of the cliff beneath the fort of the white men. And at the sound of the first report of a gun, ye shall ascend, each man bearing dry branches of the fir. These shall ye place around the walls at the cliff side and apply the fire. And, as for the other band, these shall advance with stealth upon the open and hide behind the rocks. When the red fire shoots upward, ye shall fire upon the door. Then will the white men come forth, driven out by the hot fire behind, and when they appear they must be killed, nor must one escape to carry away the deed. For the white man knows not how to pardon.

'Warriors! O, Warriors!

'Ye, who fly over the ground with the swiftness of deer, ye, who laugh with joy when the hot blood flows, listen to the words of the Spirit.

'Destroy and spare not. Avenge, as ye have been wronged. Spare not your strength. Lose not your courage. And while ye fight, the women around the tents will dance, and call upon the Ghosts and Skeletons of the tribe. Then, also, will the Father's daughter come forth to greet ye with a smile, when ye return, laden with victory and the glad spoils of war.

'Warriors! O, Warriors!

'Ye, who are brave, ye, who have earned the approval of women, heed and obey the words of your Father and Chief.'

The young warrior paused and lowered his arms, while the fire in his eyes died out. A feeble impulse of passion spread itself over the Chief's half dead face as he listened with rapt attention to the recital. Then he spoke in his thin voice, —

"Tis good, Muskwah. You have spoken well. Tell me now, are the hearts of my children full of a warm courage? Do their eager hands reach out for their weapons? Do their eyes gleam with thoughts of slaughter and vengeance? Have they well oiled the body and painted the face? Are they withal hard to restrain, like our dogs on the clear day of winter? Is it so, Muskwah?"

The young warrior's brow grew sterner as he shook his head. 'Nay, Father, 'tis not so. The courage of the young men is faint. This is what they spoke in my ear, "What calls us to the fight? At this place the white men have done us no wrong —"

'False, Muskwah!' cried the old man shrilly. 'They have robbed us.'

'Only the old Antoine thirsts for the blood of the invaders,' said the other quietly.

The Chief struck his staff in anger upon the ground. 'The young men know not all. Did you not remind them, Muskwah, how the base white man has deprived us of our land and food?'

'And their answer still comes, Father, that here we have been deprived of naught. The hunters take their skins, and the wives carry oil to the fort. In return they bring back to the tents food for the body, with tobacco and clothing.'

'There are others, Muskwah,' pursued the old man solemnly. 'There are many of our brothers far across the great water. These have suffered to the bitterness of death, and their wrongs still lie unavenged.'

'This did I tell to the young men,' continued the warrior. 'They listened to my words, but still replied, "We know none of these. If they have been wronged, let them look to their own. When they rejoice, what part do they offer us in their joy? Now that they have cause for grief, what duty calls us to take part in their voice of mourning?" There is wisdom in the words of the young men. Father.'

The old man but turned at him angrily. 'There is also rebellion,' he cried, with fierceness. 'It is their duty to obey, and not seek a cause. Tell them, Muskwah, make known to each one of them,

that he who shrinks from the battle, let the cause be what it may, that man shall be beaten openly by the women of the camp. I have said it.'

Muskwah bowed his stately head, but replied in defence of his underlings. 'There are no cowards among the Children of the River, my Father. Their wish is only for no strife with those who have done them no wrong.'

The Chief cast his bleared eyes round suspiciously, and finally rested them on the tall figure at his side. 'But you, Muskwah, what are your inner thoughts?'

'I obey my Father,' came the instant reply. 'It is not for me to reason.'

The Chief was satisfied. 'Obedience is a sure footway to power,' he muttered. He tore apart his shirt with tremulous fingers, to display many a long black scar crawling across his brown chest.

'See, Muskwah. Obedience gave me these life marks. Still I obeyed, until that same gift made me Chief of my tribe.'

The young man listened, while the shadow of solicitude gathered slowly upon his face. Presently he exclaimed his thoughts aloud.

'Is it well to thus provoke the wrath of the white man? Should we not rather dwell ourselves in peace, and leave those who have suffered to carry out the work of vengeance?'

The doubts thus expressed aroused the old man, and his answering voice rang forth loudly, —

'Has the foolishness of my other children touched your brain also, Muskwah? What did the old Antoine tell you beneath the quiet of the tent, when the moon was young. Have you no memory for that story? A man came across the great water,³ up the river, and along the forest trail, to pause at our encampment with a solemn message. He commanded me, in the name of the friend of the Great Spirit, to attack the white men who dwelt in our land, and to destroy them all. How should I refuse to listen to the command of Riel? For when he has conquered the white men and made himself great chief, he will turn to the punishment of those who have refused to listen to his words. To such he will show no forgiveness nor pity.'

The young warrior stirred his limbs with a mute gesture of resignation.

'If the Father of the tribe says to us, "Fight," surely we will strive until the enemy is swept away, or our own feet have been tripped up by death. Yet methinks the storm will arise when the battle is past. For then must we face either the vengeance of Riel, or the fury of the white men. But now is there little boldness in the minds of the young men, for their hearts have not been warmed by the song, nor has passion been thrust into each limb by the madness of the dance.'

'True – 'tis true,' muttered the Chief, regretfully. 'There has been no dance of the Ghosts. Yet will the Spirit not for that desert us. The shrill cries of warriors, as they leapt along the measured circle, and the loud beating of music must surely have warned the white men. Then would they have made themselves ready for fight, and perchance have escaped or defeated our efforts. Our prayers to the Spirit must ascend in silence, until the fight is over, and victory comes to the Children of the River.'

At the last words Muskwah picked up his antique gun, and placed it in the crook of his left arm. Then he pointed ahead with steady brown fingers. 'The light of the sun has sunk beneath yonder tree tops. The night comes. Shall we not return?'

The Chief gave no heed to the remark. He but fastened his sunk eyes upon a bunch of dead leaves which rattled in the wind.

Suddenly he spoke abruptly, and with forehead creased up in a frown, as he put a question which touched his heart closely, —

'Hast seen the heart of joy, Muskwah, since the sun crossed the centre of the heaven?'

The young warrior shifted with an awkward motion before replying. 'Nay, Father. These eyes have not rested upon her beauty since the drying of the dew. Perchance she wanders in the forest.'

³ Lake Winnipeg.

'Too often is she absent,' said the old man fretfully. 'She passes from place to place like a bright ray of sunlight, and none may stay her. Often does she forget me and my needs; yet I cannot speak to her in the voice of anger. Dost think her fair, Muskwah?'

The question came with unexpected suddenness. For a time the young man's quick breathing was plainly audible.

'Father!' he cried at length passionately, 'what am I, that you should ask me whether the heart of joy is beautiful? Surely there is none made of the spirit to compare with her. There is no flower on the earth, nor star in the night sky, that is so beautiful. And when she speaks, a man may hear the laughing of waters. Which is he of the tribe, who would not give life to save Menotah from sorrow, or win from her a smile? When she is happy, all the Children of the River rejoice; should she see the shadow of grief, then shall not be found a glad eye or a light heart.'

He paused and panted, while his sinewy chest rose and fell.

The Chief watched him from beneath shaggy grey eyebrows. 'So, Muskwah,' he muttered slowly, as though in thought, 'the passion flame has burnt your heart also. A man may not so speak, when the cause moving him is but some idle fancy of the mind. What, Muskwah, is there more to tell? Has she cast the glance of favour towards you? Has she ever smiled upon you as she came across your way? Has she dwelt upon her pleasure, when you have done the service of her wish?'

The young warrior sought in vain for words with which to fashion reply. But the old Chief laughed aloud with the feeble sounds of age, and spoke further with many a sidelong glance, 'Closely have I watched you, until I came to understand the hidden secrets of your mind. You would be chief after me. I know it. But first must you win scars and spill the blood of your foes, that all may learn to fear the utterance of your name. Higher still does the ambition of the heart lead you, for you seek to make the fair heart of joy a bride. Who may speak on the future, Muskwah, and learn that which lies in the beyond? What gifts the Great Spirit may stretch towards us in his clenched hands we may not know. Yet you are young, and much lies in front. For me all is behind, save a few poor shadows.'

Muskwah would have spoken, but the old man drew away with the uncertain motions of weak age. 'The night comes upon us,' he said, as he drew the coarse blanket to his chin. 'There is toil ahead, and we must make ready.'

Leaning heavily upon his staff, the aged Chief advanced slowly along the sinuous trail, while in his footsteps came the young warrior with head erect. There was that within him which words might not express, so his heart beat wildly with the hot passion of his years, while it seemed to him good to live.

So they both passed on, the young and the old, until the evening shadows closed round them at the point ahead.

But the solitude was soon to be again invaded. Scarcely had the two natives disappeared, when the green tangle of dew-besprinkled bush in front of which they had made their stand became suddenly agitated, as though some imprisoned animal held therein, then sought to free itself.

Presently the long sweeping tendrils lifted, small scrub bushes parted with a sharp hissing of leaves through the air, while the next instant a young man – he who had listened earlier to the musical voice ringing through the forest – came forward and stood alone in the open.

He stretched his well-formed limbs and smiled in a self-satisfied manner. Then he bent, groped among the thick undergrowth, and finally extracted a rifle from the bush. Quickly he glanced along the sights, passed the sleeve of his coat along the dark barrel to remove a slight smear, afterwards looking up again, along the dim trail that wound round towards the distant point, where the wreathing smoke of the camp fires lingered.

Then he laughed softly to himself, and spoke aloud, addressing the weapon which his white fingers caressed lovingly.

'Good business that, though those rascals kept me tied in an aching knot longer than I'd bargained. So they're going to make a raid on the fort to-night, are they. *Bien!* Let them come. It's

going to be a fine, clear night, with full moon into the bargain. Lucky stroke for me – I can now redeem part of my lost character. As usual, I go to the best side.'

He laughed again. 'I reckon it might surprise them to know who has overheard their plans. The best shot in the Dominion – likely enough, in the world. It's something to boast of, having escaped the white chief's aim.'

Then the smile disappeared, as memory stirred within, and he frowned. At once a deep line broke along each side of his face, running past the corners of the mouth to wander away indefinitely along the chin. During that moment the finely-cut features wore a hard and ill-favoured look, which disappeared in an instant when the lips were again parted.

He flicked away a savage and belated bull-dog, which had settled upon his hand. 'I've scored another point,' he muttered complacently. 'My friends, who are few, have combined with my foes, who are many, to swear that it's impossible to play the spy on a *nitchi*. Bah! it's as easy as hating. What if those two had turned me out? The old man was no better than a child. The other would have dropped for the coyotes before he could have stirred a finger.'

The rising darkness reminded him of duty to be performed. He fastened his coat and pulled the felt hat down over his forehead. 'And now for the fort; I've a good enough passport now.'

He waved his hand lightly in the direction of distant fir tops, where many branches had been lopped away, where many long shadows formed and hung. Then he prepared to depart, with the knowledge of such importance which had unwittingly been imparted to him.

One step away he made, then his foot halted, as the whispering sound of a quick footstep came from behind through the bush. His senses were very keen. Round he started like a well-drilled soldier, with a hand to his side. But the next instant the fingers released their sure grip on the revolver which lay there concealed. He started, with a sudden exclamation, as his eyes fell upon the outer fringe of the forest, then stood again motionless.

For here surely – he felt it instinctively – was the author of that happy passing voice.

Standing opposite him in the dim light, and at no great distance, appeared the vision of a perfectly beautiful girl. She was bareheaded – indeed, she required no artificial covering to that wealth of hair, which flowed in luxuriant masses down her back and trailed in confused tresses over her dainty shoulders. A long wreath of red berries shone jewel-like from the thick of these black coils.

She stood there, for the time, scarce without motion. Her shapely head was tilted slightly back, as though soliciting a caress; two radiant eyes flashed across to those of the young man a bold challenge of love; a pair of red lips were divinely parted in a smile, half mischief, half passion, beneath which lurked the covert invitation prompted by desire. In her slender hands swayed a long red-willow wand, plucked by the side of the black rock platform.

Thus did Menotah, as she passed from the river-pool to the encampment beneath the evening, present herself to the young Canadian.

And he stood spellbound, completely over-mastered by a new power of fascination. As he kept his gaze fixed upon this lovely apparition of the summer forest, all his anxiety for the present, all the necessities of the present, fled away forgotten.

She was wonderful with the rich colouring of her perfect health, in the glorious line moulding of her fully matured figure. It was happiness of itself to stand and feast the eyes upon such a triumph of Nature's handiwork, and if the stronger was satisfied to gaze, the weaker was equally delighted to be admired. Yet it was the latter who gave the first intimation of the monotony of such a pleasure.

So she commenced with those dainty alluring wiles, irresistible yet dangerous, in which the graceful woman of beauty, whatever her blood or race, excels. She gave a slight nod of her pretty head, accompanying the coquettish movement with a wonderful smile. Then she raised the red-willow wand, and pettishly struck at the tall flowering head of a plant before her.

The young man felt as though his senses were yielding beneath the subtle influence of an anæsthetic. In a dreamy mood he watched the curious evolutions of the beheaded bunch of bloom, as it darted upward, then settled softly and without sound to the ground.

But this mood changed when she looked across at him again. Then there surged over his entire being an irresistible impulse, which prompted him to spring forward and clasp this lovely being in his arms. Menotah, with the quick skill of her sex, read the keen desire of his mind at a glance. So, after the manner of women, she but hastened to add fuel to the growing ardour of his inclination.

An erratic firefly wandered down from the overhanging branches, then commenced to dart from side to side near her head. She followed its shining course with her bright eyes, and twisted her little face into a charming expression, which revealed a sudden glimpse of two gleaming lines of pearl-like teeth. Then, as the insect tumbled near her, she made a quick snatch at the glowing point of fire. She missed, of course. In disappointed resentment, very pretty to watch, she endeavoured to cut short its career by means of her willow twig, but failed again. Then she glanced across at the watching eyes opposite. The following second the silence was broken for the first time by her clear burst of light, melodious laughter.

Nature has set a varying limit to all human endurance. One extra turn of the tormentor's screw, and the spirit, so dauntless the moment before, yields in abject submission. This young Canadian was very human indeed. Menotah's laughter exceeded the extreme limit of his self-control.

So what happened during the next minute he hardly knew. The forest had melted away, drawn back as it were into the mysterious night; his eyes saw nothing but the alluring loveliness beyond his body felt nothing, beyond the strange warmth of passion. Memory, duty, danger, became empty words that had no meaning.

He felt that he had moved forward with a sudden motion, and maddened by impulse. He was conscious of a lovely face with red, curling lips upturned to his, of liquid eyes, and a soft mouth wreathed in smiles.

So near, so close, he could feel the warmth emanating from her young body, with the fanning breath playing like a summer breeze around his neck. This was a gift reserved for him, and sent to him alone.

Then his eager arms darted forward, but met nothing save cold, dewy bushes. His hot, excited lips came only in contact with the keen air of a northern night, while the melodious echo of a clear, departing voice mocked his ears.

So, when understanding returned to his brain, he found himself alone, standing beneath the gloomy trees, with the night shadows falling thickly round his head. In the neighbouring bush great frogs were chirping derisively. The air became suddenly chilly, while life seemed a burden.

There was something in his hands – his eyes became fastened upon a trailing festoon of green leaves studded with bright red berries, which flickered from his fingers irresolutely beneath the breeze.

CHAPTER IV

THE FORT

Before a low fringe of willow undergrowth, which gradually led up to the first thick bank of firs, spread a narrow strip of turf, not more than fifty feet in width, and terminating in the broken cliff line of the Great Saskatchewan River.⁴ Scattered irregularly along this undulating grass expanse appeared great rocks, deeply imbedded for the most part in the soil, some, indeed, not exhibiting more than an iron-grey splinter, which protruded aggressively from the turf in the shape of a grotesque nose or elbow.

At one side of this small clearing uprose a single-storey hut. This was built of unshapen logs, whitewashed, the crevices being filled in with mud; while, not more than a dozen yards distant, another equally incomplex building stood close to a lofty fir, which had been denuded of all branches and converted into a natural flagstaff. Here two flags indolently whipped the air. Above flew the ever-victorious ensign of England; below, that of the Hudson's Bay Company.

In a southerly direction, lying between the forest line and cliff brink, were dotted small huts at long intervals. These were all grass-roofed and innocent of windows, other than a square cut hole at one side of each dwelling, while occasionally the smoke-begrimed apex of an Indian *tépee* forced itself from the thick of a separate tree clump. Yet, for all this, no human being appeared in sight; no canoe sped bird-like over the waters of the Saskatchewan; no sounds of human activity uprose on the breeze.

In the principal room, or office usually styled, of the log fort, which was the whitewashed hut situated a few yards from the cliff brink, and beside the flagstaff, two men were creating conversation by a simple process of mutual disagreement. A dilapidated sofa, minus legs, supported on two boxes; a deal wood table, well chipped with knives; an aged writing desk, and small bookcase crammed to overflowing with all kinds of literature, ranging from a translation of Homer and yellow-covered narratives of sanguinary impossibilities to a treatise on the parables, and a deep work of Hooker's – such were the chief articles of furniture in the room. Behind the door, unmethodical hands had piled a stack of dirty boots and empty bottles, while hard by an assortment of guns and rifles stood supported by the log wall.

Behind were two other apartments, used respectively as bed and store room, while, running from the centre of the building, a passage had recently been erected, which led into a diminutive kitchen, where at the present moment a half-breed cook was preparing supper for the garrulous mouths within.

From a small window in the back room the great river could be readily scanned. At this point the stream of the great Saskatchewan was unusually wide, being divided by a long, though somewhat narrow island, thickly covered with vegetation, and rising to some height above water level.

Conspicuous in the centre appeared a tree-environed hut. This rough habitation was the property of the H.B.C, and had been erected some years back to afford a harbour of refuge for any officers of the Company who might be compelled to retreat from the fort on the main bank, owing to Indian hostility.

Into the office a subtle aroma of supper stew crept insidiously, while the two disputants became refreshed into other differences by the pleasant anticipation of a satisfactory meal. Chief Factor McAuliffe rose from the box on which he had been seated, and having opened the door gazed up and down along the river bank. This representative of the most powerful company in the world presented a strange appearance. His was an average height, yet he was broad and strongly built, of great strength

⁴ The less known Little Saskatchewan empties itself into the lake on the opposite side, about forty miles further south.

and activity, in spite of his age, which hovered in close proximity to the three score. His immense head, posed on a bull-like neck, and the determined set of every muscle in his face, betokened an obstinate character, which would never allow itself to be thwarted by even a superior – either in argument or actual fight – whether he were in the right or wrong. His black beard and moustache, plentifully besprinkled with grey, had recently been clipped into short lines of bristles, evidently by the amateur hand of one of his companions, while the same inquisitorial agency had ruthlessly reaped the hair on his scalp as close to the skull as scissors could touch. His costume was primitive and economical.

The other occupant of the room was a tall, ungainly man, who moved with stiff motions, and swung his arms with the mechanical action of semaphore signals whenever exacted. This was extremely often, for he and McAuliffe were generally bickering over some question, raised by the one, merely for the sake of argument, and as warmly refuted by the other. Externally there was little remarkable about Peter Denton, as this individual was named. He owned a yellow moustache, coarse hair of the same complexion, and watery-blue eyes. Internally he was complicated and extraordinary.

The Factor stood at the open door, watching the slowly gathering shadows lengthening upon the trees. At length he remarked abruptly, 'Don't catch any signs of the other boys, Justin. Time they were back, for it's bad travelling in the forest after dark.'

The half-breed was arranging the table. He turned his head, gave a low grunt, then spread out his fingers in the air. 'Moose,' he ejaculated.

'That's so, I reckon. They're on a fresh track, and don't feel like giving up.'

'Let boy look,' said Justin, pointing a crooked forefinger. 'His eyes good.' Then he moved towards the kitchen with a dull chuckle.

The Factor wheeled round, his great face aglow. 'His eyes! I could make better ones out of a toad's body. They're like a potato's – only fit to be cut out and chucked away.'

Denton's hollow voice sounded from a corner, where he sat mending a coat. 'Make use of your eyes in searching after righteousness, as I've done, Alfred. Perhaps then there would be still a chance of escaping the lake of fire which yawns beneath your feet.'

'I'm glad you allow you haven't found righteousness, Peter. By the way you're searching, you can go on until they want you 'way under. I never found any use striking north when I wanted to get south.'

Denton wagged his head mournfully. 'The time must come when you will be cut down and perish in your sins.'

'Don't take trouble, Peter. The good are taken early, mind; so there's a pile of years ahead for you after I've gone.' And McAuliffe chuckled loudly.

Denton was ready with rebuke.

'I'd like you to listen a few hours to the preaching of our pastor, Dr McKilliam. But that holy man would refuse to cast his pearls before such swine.'

The Factor was more interested. 'None of your ministers could knock spots off my hide. Talk of preaching! Why, I've heard our Dr Bryce preach on hell-fire, until everyone in the congregation was fairly sweating.'

Denton groaned and cast his eyes upward. 'Well you might sweat, with your sins staring you in the face. But if you come to preaching, I've heard our minister talk for three hours without a break, except to tell a stranger to quit throwing orange peel around the church. When he'd finished, the congregation clapped so loudly that he had to bow his acknowledgments three times from the pulpit. I tell you, we advertised that in the papers, and filled our church to the doors within the month.'

'With a lot of bummers who hadn't any comfortable place to sleep in Sunday nights. I heard one of your ministers preach once, and 'twas worse than chloroform. They might have taken a leg off me without my knowing it.'

Here Justin entered with a steaming bowl of stewed moose meat and prairie spinach. This he set on the table, then pointed maliciously at Denton. 'Boy preach,' he said. 'I hear him.'

The Factor at once interposed. 'You're right, Justin. This fifth-rate specimen of humanity the Company's burdened me with, used to be a minister in the summer and a bar-tender in the winter. When it was hot, he cursed fellows for drinking cool-eyes, and reminded them there was a sultry place all ready for their whisky-black souls. During the cold weather, he put in his time making fellows drunk, and getting full himself.'

Denton fired up instantly. 'Whoever told you that is a right friend for you. He's as bad a liar –'

'Then you must have converted him, Peter. He was straight enough when I last came across him,' said the Factor. 'I suppose you'll say next you never ran that menagerie?'

'I do,' said Denton, sullenly. 'My only dealings with menageries were to denounce them as sinful pleasures.'

McAuliffe whistled. 'Better get outside, Justin, before the roof tumbles.' He glanced admiringly at Denton. You're wasting good talents, Peter. If I could lie like you, I'd expect to make my fortune in a few years as newspaper correspondent. See here a minute, Justin, while I show him up. This spot of dirt turned up one Sunday evening at his church, so full he couldn't see straight. He started in to work by cursing all the black sheep that had come to hear him. Of course they couldn't take that. They'd got to obey their natural instinct of hypocrisy, though they might envy their minister's power of language. So they took Mister Man, and fired him out of the place, which is the only good deed they're ever likely to have to look back upon. Then he makes off with another deadbeat, and starts a kind of show outside the town – this was in Port Arthur, mind. He used to stand on a chair by the door of the tent, with dollar bills stuck in his hat brim, trying to catch the people's money. I tell you, what with the menagerie by day, and with shooting loaded craps by night, these two blacklegs looted a pile of dollars out of the pockets of decent citizens.'

Denton raised his head from the half-mended coat, and said sulkily, 'You're a shameless liar, Alfred! It stamps a man for life to be seen in your company.'

'So it does, Peter,' said the Factor, heartily; 'let's shake on that. If you're seen along with me a few more months, some folks may begin to think of trusting you. Don't lose heart, lad. There's hope even for the worst.'

'Not when a man gets to your state,' retorted Denton.

The Factor laughed. 'That's a sharp answer for you, Peter. You're learning fast under me. If you keep that pace – steer clear of brain fever and such diseases – you'll perhaps be able to give an answer to a ten-year-old child in another five years. Can't promise all that, Peter; but it's wonderful what perseverance will do.'

Denton extended a denouncing and dirty forefinger at the Factor's broad chest. 'Stop your wicked judgment of fellow creatures! – you, who walk through life with the mark of Satan on your knee!'

McAuliffe's nether garments were fashioned out of sacking originally used for packing liquor cases. Consequently, on that portion of the garment indicated, a lurid red star was visible above the stencilled letters – 'Old Rye Whisky.'

'We differ again, Peter. It's better having it on the knee than the forehead. You're wonderful jealous to-night. It's the minister talking, instead of the bar-tender.'

'I never was a bar-tender,' said the other sullenly.

The Factor glanced at the heavens. 'It's going to be a fine night, with full moon. Don't get spoiling it by bringing up a thunderstorm. Were you ever a minister? Let's have a bit of truth. You're getting monotonous, Peter.'

Denton was about to return an angry reply, when the half-breed again appeared and pointed significantly to the waiting supper.

McAuliffe paced to the door with the exclamation, 'Say, Justin, I wish those fellows were back.'

'It's near quarter to nine,' muttered Denton.

'And your insides are aching for grub – might as well say so right out.' The Factor turned back into the room. 'Well, if they must stay away half the night, they can't expect us to keep a look-out. Come on, Justin. Pass me over that sturgeon steak before Peter gets his teeth against it.'

The three gathered round the crazy table, and for a few minutes there was silence of tongues.

Thus quarter of an hour passed. Then the Factor cleaned a greasy hand upon his beard, and stretched himself with a sigh of satisfaction. He drew out his pipe, and had just commenced to shave a plug of T.&B., when Justin raised his hand and whistled in a manner peculiar. McAuliffe understood the signal. He listened, and presently there came dull, distant sounds from without.

His face grew very grave, while the knife in his hand tapped gently upon the table. An ashen hue crept over Denton's sallow features. Nearer came the sounds and louder, as they spread towards the fort through thickening shadows and the white dews of night.

Then McAuliffe spoke. 'That's Kitty. I know that gallop of hers. Goldam! how she's tumbling through the bush!'

The night was fearfully still – not a breath stirring the tree tops. Above, the stars were lit one by one.

Justin pushed back the door, and listened stolidly to the crashing of green boughs, the snapping of dead branches, the sharp click of hoofs against rock splinters. Inside – no sound, except the Factor's deep breathing, and an irregular tattoo, produced by Denton's heels tapping upon the floor. Then he turned, and, without altering a muscle in his heavy face, began to load the rifles and lay them out upon the table.

The Factor peered into the darkness, for the moon had not yet risen. 'She'll be clear presently,' he said carelessly. 'Reckon young Winton got switched off from Billy. Then he got bothered by a touch of forest fright and lost his herd. What the devil you doing, Justin?'

The half-breed was methodically counting out shells. He glanced up and said laconically, '*Nitchies!*'

'Pshaw! you're crazy, boy. There's no rebellion up here.'

Justin grunted. 'You wrong. Riel send message. They paint and fight. You see.' Then he coolly fell to oiling his rifle, while a fresh wave of fear passed over the shivering Denton.

The Factor swore quietly. The next moment a grey mare dashed furiously from the darkness. At the door she pulled up panting, with blood-red nostrils, her sides covered with foam-sweat, while a figure tumbled helplessly from the improvised saddle.

McAuliffe caught him as he staggered forward, and half carried him inside.

Justin stood by the mare, with his rifle at the ready, and his bead-like eyes staring into the gloom, but there was no sign of pursuer. The black trees whispered solemnly in a light breeze.

'Fetch my whisky keg along!' bellowed McAuliffe. 'Give the boy a good dram, and damn the water.'

Denton shuffled off to obey, while Justin's voice came rolling inside with weird effect. 'Billy! – be gone!'

The Factor's great hands shook as he administered the liquor. Winton gasped and clutched at him.

'Don't claw me; I'm not a *nitchi*. Now, then, you're right again, eh?'

The young fellow struggled up and glared round wildly. 'So it's you, Alf?'

'That's what. Old Billy's coming on behind?'

Winton shuddered. The words rattled forth like shot upon a hollow wall. 'They've fixed him.'

Justin entered in time to catch this. The long hair at the sides of his face shook solemnly. 'I tell you; *nitchies* fight. See, boy?'

McAuliffe was wiping his massive forehead with an oily rag the half-breed had recently employed for gun-cleaning purposes. 'Mix me a glass, Justin – a stiff one to straighten my nerves out. Goldam! this corks me.'

Winton blinked his eyes like an owl in the sunlight. 'He's dead. Plugged by those devilish *nitchies*! Then he briefly told his tale.

'You didn't see him corpsed?' cried the Factor, eagerly.

'Next thing. The shot, groan, the fall – all the rest.'

'This fairly sets me on the itch,' said the Factor, pacing up and down. 'Poor old Billy. Goldam! I'd like to get my axe alongside the skull of the skunk who did the lead-pumping business. I'd set his body to pickle, I tell you.'

'Vengeance will fall upon the wicked man who striketh his neighbour secretly,' came in a weak voice from the corner. 'Let us watch and pray.' Denton became himself again when he understood that Winton was unpursued.

'Never mind him,' said McAuliffe, generally. 'He's only a crazy kind of fool, anyhow. He don't know what he's talking about.'

Again Justin's dark hand shot upward, and the warning whistle sounded. He set his head forward, then remarked, as though it were the most natural thing in the world, 'Boy coming.'

Denton's heels recommenced their tattoo, while the others caught up their guns. The moon was rising now, and some silvery rays slanted through the window. Suddenly a heavy knock fell upon the door.

'Ho!' cried the half-breed through a crack.

'Open up,' came back the answer in pure English.

'Goldam!' shouted McAuliffe, 'it's the devil, or a pal of his.'

The door creaked back. On the threshold, with the night behind, stood a young man, a rifle swinging from his hand.

'Chief Factor McAuliffe, I reckon?' he said smoothly, entering the fort.

'That's so,' the burly Factor replied. 'The devil bless me if I know who you are.'

'*Benedicite!*' laughed the new-comer, a strange smile crossing his handsome face. 'My name is Hugh Lamont – at the service of the Hudson's Bay Company,' he concluded.

'I guess the Company can hustle along without smashing your shoulders,' returned McAuliffe, who was absolute despot of the district.

'I'm not so sure,' came the cool answer. 'This is a bad time for modesty, so I'll hurt my feelings to the extent of letting you know that there isn't a man in the Dominion who can down me at any range with rifle or revolver. Like to try?'

This was an unfortunate challenge. McAuliffe was accustomed to boast of being the worst shot on the Continent. It was, however, a fact that he was perfectly useless as a marksman.

'You've just come from the Lord knows where to tell me that,' he shouted angrily. 'Just you quit your shooting toy, and get your arms round my body. I tell you, I could throw your weight from here to the forest.'

Lamont laughed contemptuously. He glanced through the window at the Saskatchewan burning beneath the moon, then remarked, 'I guess you'll be hearing an owl pumping out hoots round here presently.'

'Let them hoot,' said the Factor, hotly. 'Goldam! the derved old owls don't have to ask your permission –'

'These owls don't grow feathers on their skins,' continued the young man, unmoved. 'The kind that'll be hooting presently are just now laying paint on their faces, and fixing up their shooters.'

Then the others gathered round him at once.

'What's that?' cried the Factor. 'Never mind my crazy talk. What are the *nitchies* after?'

'They're going to clear you out at midnight,' replied Lamont, nonchalantly.

Quarter of an hour later, the position had been discussed and plan of action determined on. There was only one course open, namely, a retreat to the island on mid-stream, where they would

be fairly safe against a small attacking force. It was then two hours before midnight, so they had ample time.

Angry and excited, McAuliffe paced the narrow floor, his great voice booming forth like a bull's bellow. Lamont took a seat at the table, and coolly attacked the remnants of the supper with the hearty appetite of hunger. Winton stood upright, refreshed and ready to meet the men who had cut short the career of his hunter friend. Nobody noticed Denton squirming in a dark corner.

'Boys, we must be shifting. Say, Justin, the York boat lies right below, eh?'

The half-breed grunted, while the Factor continued, 'Let's get. Don't make more noise than you want to. We'll fix up and come back for you, Lamont,' he concluded, with the easy familiarity of the country.

The three men left the fort, and followed a winding path along the side of the cliff. Drawn up on a narrow sandspit, like some antediluvian monster, lay a black York boat, which was dragged by concerted effort to the water's edge. Then burdens were disposed of, Justin left on guard, while the others climbed back up the stony pathway, talking in loud tones, as though there were no such things as Indians in the world. McAuliffe, who had given the warning, was of course principal offender. Yet it was difficult to be low-spirited on such a night.

There was no wind – no sound, except a soft sighing over the waters, and a whispering through scarce quivering leaves. The moon, rising in her silvery glory, cast over the lonely forest and glittering river track a gorgeous mantle of light, investing all things with mystical shadow of unreality. The shimmering foliage of the bushes, agitated by the bodies of the men as they passed, appeared bathed in a flood of radiance, while from the point of each jewelled leaf small dewdrops fell like pearls in a shower of silver. Across the river a broad ladder of light lay shivering and burning. Little gilded serpents wound their phosphorescent coils from wave to wave, darting to each side of the glowing road into blacker water, then casting tiny lamps of fire and points of beauty upon the curling crest of each murmuring ripple. Again they darted back, to receive new energy, while in a breath the eye was dazzled anew by fresh wonders.

Above, in a clear sky, the constellations glimmered faintly, their beauty somewhat dimmed by the nearer glories of earth's satellite. A few fragile *cirri* floated, like dream spirits, beneath the blue expanse, while, in the distance, long auroral streamers, indistinct cones and spindles of vapour, shot upward from an arched smoky cloud, rising a few degrees above the northern horizon.

'Wonder they didn't make off with the boat,' said Winton, as they struggled along the difficult track.

'The devils are too clever; it would have given us fair warning. They couldn't have dragged the old ark far without bringing Justin down. The old chap can see everything.'

'Grand night, isn't it?'

'Fine,' agreed McAuliffe, slapping his mighty chest. 'Just the time when a fellow feels like devilry of some sort. Give me the night, a good moon lighting up the trees, a clear sky and soft wind, and I'm fit to throw a dozen men one after the other. Time of day makes a lot of difference to me. In the morning, I feel sort of weak, and want to knock around doing woman's chores. Noon, I'm for eating; while in the afternoon, I'm bound to stretch out my legs and pull at the pipe. But when the darkness comes round, I begin to feel good. I want to use up my spare strength on anything handy. The night's the time, I tell you. When you're tired, there's always a glass of whisky and bed waiting. What more can a man want?'

'Only home and friends,' muttered the other, in a low voice.

Lamont, in the meantime, was left to himself, as he thought, in the fort. So, as he satisfied the cravings of man within, he speculated upon the possibility of danger for man without. For that night he would have his hands full. The Factor was useless as a rifle shot, so they were very short-handed. Still, his own aim was unerring.

He smiled to himself, as he lay back in a bright ray of moonlight. A scene of blood, burnt powder, shrieking bullets, and cries of agony rose before him. He saw again that desperate struggle at Fish Creek. A gallant, though straggling, line of the 90th, Manitoba's pride, came charging recklessly up the flowery slope – there were brave boys in the 90th, but they lacked good leadership. Young boys from the Red River Valley, with sterner fighters from Fort Garry. Up they came, their beardless faces red with determination and heat of battle. But many of them were dropped silently at long range, and fell upon the soft bed of prairie grass, bleeding from a mortal wound.

Lamont's smile grew crueller, as he saw again a lithe, graceful figure stretched along a declivity in the ridge, with cheek cuddling a rifle stock. Every time that weapon spoke, one of the 90th boys grabbed the air and tumbled. Riel had at least one powerful auxiliary at the Creek.

Shuffling movements in an opposite corner brought him back to the present. He uttered a quick exclamation, then snatched up the lamp and held it above his head. As a dark body stirred slowly, his brow grew damp and his face white. But the blood returned slowly to his face, when the feeble rays smote upon the abject countenance of the miserable Denton. 'I thought I was alone,' he said, with a short laugh. 'Are you one of the crowd?'

Denton crept up to the table, with shivering limbs and ghastly eyes.

'You're looking sick,' Lamont continued. 'What were you doing in that corner?'

'I was asleep,' came the shaky answer. 'My eyes were weary from much searching of the Scriptures.'

The young man laughed openly. 'I guess a rifle will be of more use to you than the Scriptures to-night.'

The other grabbed his arm. 'Say, this is just a job you're putting up on McAuliffe, eh?'

'You keep your ears fairly active when you're asleep. But it's true enough, siree. The *nitchies* are on the red-hot jump for us.'

'We shall be killed,' quavered Denton, with hands shaking like river reeds.

A hearty roar of laughter burst from the doorway as the Factor's burly figure blocked the aperture. 'The *nitchies* are after you, Peter, so you'll be killed sure. Never mind, lad. You're all the time saying you can see the gates of the heavenly city open before you. Kind of anxious now whether you haven't switched off on a side track, eh?'

Lamont sprang to his feet, passing his fingers caressingly round the rifle stock. 'I'm ready to shift, Factor. The sooner we're over the better. There may be spies around.'

'They're dead sure we're trapped,' said McAuliffe 'Anyway, we'll be as easy there as here. Get a gait on, Peter. We're going to stick you up the end of the island, same as we used to fix up a pole with old clothes on it, in the fields at home, to scare away the crows.'

'Choke off, Alf,' interposed Winton. 'If you chaps start that chin music, we sha'n't get away before sunrise.'

'Well, I'm not delaying you. Peter's mismanager here. Goldam! listen to that, will you?'

His face grew stern again, and he held up a great hairy hand.

'The half-breed's whistle,' said Lamont. 'There's danger around.'

'Shut the door!' shouted the ex-minister, wildly.

'Quit your blasted noise. There it comes. Goldam! listen to it.'

Again the weird conflict of sounds proceeded from the forest. There was a great crashing of branches, the sharp striking of hoofs upon rock, the heavy plungings of a frightened animal. Up from the river came the second warning whistle.

The moonlight poured into the room; the Factor dashed outside, with weighty axe in his hands; the next minute a loud oath rolled off his tongue.

A black horse was pawing at the turf. At every sound he flung up his head and trembled, while his eyes glittered savagely.

'You tell me old Billy's been fixed by *nitchies*?' shouted McAuliffe. 'If anyone says that, it's a dam' great lie. There's been filthy work around here to-night, boys, or I'm talking through my hat.'

Then Lamont came forward, with his usual grace of motion. 'You're right,' he said slowly; 'the rifle's strapped to the saddle yet. No Indian would lose such a chance.'

The Factor bit at his moustache, and glanced round towards Winton beneath heavy eyebrows. Midway his gaze was arrested by Lamont, and the two stared at each other in the white light. McAuliffe was the first to lower his gaze.

Kitty, the grey one-eyed mare, came and rubbed her nose against the black horse. Then an owl hooted loudly from the edge of the bush.

A weird shriek came from the interior of the fort.

'It's the signal!' exclaimed Winton, excitedly.

'That's the genuine moper,' said the Factor, sullenly. 'Come on, boys, let's get across the water. I reckon the devil himself's among us to-night.'

CHAPTER V

THE FIGHT

A long hour had dragged away. The moon, then a glowing disc of radiance, had reached the centre of the heavens, and cast over the northern land a shivering mantle of white light.

On the long, wooded island, round which the mighty river hissed and murmured, five men were stationed at various points. Sheltered behind the efficient rampart of the black York boat, which had been drawn up on the shingle beach, Lamont knelt, nursing his rifle. He had taken off his coat to sling over head and neck, for protection against the mosquitoes that swarmed in malignant numbers between river and under growth. Before him a delicate green poplar branch waved from the boat. This concealed the gleam of his weapon without interfering with his sight.

Not far distant Winton lay stretched along a fir-shadowed rock, the slime-green base of which was washed by the lipping waves. He kept a watchful eye on the opposite shore, while pulling strongly at a short pipe.

In the dark shadows behind, the comedy of a melodrama was being rehearsed. McAuliffe, self-appointed leader of the defence party, having placed his crack shots, paced up and down before the log hut, drawing ghastly pictures of a probably impending fate for the benefit of the terror-stricken Denton. As his mercurial excitement increased, he swung his only weapon – a keen-edged bush axe – over his head, while at each flash of the metal the quondam bar-tender shrank back with a fresh shudder. Reproof came at length from young Winton.

'Say, Alf, that axe shines like lightning. You're raising an awful racket.'

The Factor quickly lowered his weapon. 'You're right. I'm just explaining things to Peter, though. He wants to know which is the position of danger, as he's dead set on getting it. There's a lion's heart under Peter's modesty, I tell you.'

Winton chuckled softly, and carefully struck a match. With huge relish, the Factor continued, 'See here, Peter, when the *nitchies* get hold of you they'll start to work and strip you bare as a shell-fish. Likely then they'll fix you up with a tight suit of paint trimmed with atmosphere. Wonderful playful they can be when they set their minds to it. Shouldn't wonder if they didn't pour oil on your wool and touch it up with a light; just to see how you'd dance, or hear the talk you used preaching. They've got lots of fun in them, Peter. All they want's a fellow with humour, one that could see the point of their jokes. You'd do that fine. Might stick skewers into your stomach to try your digestion, or –'

Here the rifle Denton had been grasping gingerly fell with a crash. Small sweat-beads stood upon his white forehead.

'Hold on!' cried McAuliffe, with more concern, 'we haven't got too many rifles as it is. Pick up that shooter, and just come along with me. Don't point the derved thing at my stomach.'

'It's not loaded,' stammered the ex-minister.

'Not loaded!' shouted the Factor, in a voice that might almost have been heard at the mouth of the Saskatchewan. 'You old doodle-now! I reckon you think that when you point it at a *nitchi* he's going to tumble dead just to oblige you. Here, hand over your shells, while I pack the thing for you.'

'I haven't any,' quavered Denton.

'I'd like to know darned well what you have got, outside a lump of pigeon heart and chunk of white liver. Justin!'

The half-breed appeared at the low doorway.

'Give me some shells,' continued the Factor. 'And – Goldam!'

After his favourite oath, the agile tongue became silent. From the distant forest came the solemn hooting of an owl. The dreary sound hung solemnly over the water. Again it screeched forth, then a third time.

Lamont shifted his position slightly, while a light glittered in his keen eyes. Winton slipped the warm pipe into his pocket, and nervously rubbed at his arms, to remove a suggestion of stiffness. Justin handed a fistful of shells to the Factor, then proceeded unconcernedly to the water's edge. Squatting on his haunches he wrenched a large tobacco-wad from a black plug, then leaned over towards his neighbour and grunted.

Winton looked across inquiringly. 'Tobak?' queried the half-breed, extending the greasy plug. The young man shook his head.

'Good,' affirmed Justin, touching his right eye and raising the rifle to his shoulder.

'No good to me,' came the answer. So Justin grunted again, while his jaws moved faster.

McAuliffe dropped his axe and vigorously forced the shells into the rifle chamber. Then he shoved the weapon into Denton's hand, and hurried him over the shingle with the remark, 'Now chuck off the fleece, Peter. Be a ravening wolf, and worthy of the Company. We've got to fight, and there's no flies on it. You do your biz to-night, and I'll let you hold a prayer meeting in the fort when everything's over. Think of that, Peter.'

Then he passed to the others, with axe under arm, kicking up the wet sand and muttering, 'Darn it, why can't I shoot? I'd give my nose and ears to be able to send a bullet straight.'

The minutes dragged heavily after the signal had been given. McAuliffe stood in a deep shadow, leaning forward on his axe. He fixed his gaze upon the low, whitewashed walls of the fort – where his best years had been spent in isolation from the world – showing ghastly in the moonlight; he looked on to the open space, with the black rocks and long forest shadows, then at the motionless bank of trees, which concealed the approaching foe. Casting his eyes higher, he beheld the majestic flag of England swaying listlessly from the denuded fir; yet higher – he saw the pale stars, and for the moment wondered what lay beyond.

Justin's small eyes were keener even than Lamont's, for he it was who first perceived dark forms, half concealed by bushes they were carrying, winding in single file round the base of the cliff. He gave his low whistle, then deliberately glanced an eye along his sights.

The Factor was sprawling along the shingle, watching the Indians as they commenced to climb the cliff face, led by one man particularly agile. He muttered softly, 'They're fooled by the light you left burning, Justin. Goldam! I'd like to be on top of that cliff now. This old axe of mine would rattle among their jawbones!'

Then Lamont turned himself and called, 'Say, boys, I want you to give me first shot.'

A word, then a grunt, came back by way of assent, but there was no third voice.

'Wonder what Peter's doing,' resumed McAuliffe. 'Hope he won't play monkey tricks with us, anyway. If he aims this way, we're right enough; but if he shoots at the *nitchies*, there's a fair chance for one of us to damage a bullet.'

That unearthly silence still brooded over the great river and lonely forest. The northern lights crept higher up the sky with a stronger glow. A few sounds, which intensified the solitude, beat the air – the sharp chirping of frogs from the white muskegs behind, the sullen roar of great rapids miles up stream, the piercing refrain of the chief of insect pests.

The tall leader crept up the cliff front, followed by his companions, their bodies flattened against the rock. On the island shore lay Lamont, rifle to shoulder, his cheek caressing the stock, head leaning over as though in sleep. He might have been a stone figure. Another minute, and the leader came up to the summit. He shot forth a long arm to seize the overhanging rock cornice and drag his body over the ledge. But, as he did so, two or three pale blue smoke rings circled peacefully from the island, to float down with the murmuring river. Afterwards came a whip-like *crack*, which set the wild northern echoes shrieking.

The leader flung up both arms with convulsive action, then crashed backward, down amongst his followers, sweeping them to the cruel rocks and sand beach beneath. Then Lamont aroused himself and looked round for criticism.

McAuliffe shambled up from his bed of loose stones with ungraceful motions. Up and down the beach he went, laughing and bellowing, bull-like, in his excitement.

'Goldam!' he shouted again and again. 'That beats all! That's the daisiest thing in long shots I've ever blinked at! Goldam, Lamont! you're a peach! Brought them all down, by the almighty Jerusalem! Every dirty, lickspittle squaw's papoose! Here they are again. Pump away your lead, boys. Goldam! Goldam!'

The attacking party from the forest appeared out in the open. Some ventured round the corner of the fort, and these discovered the fate of their companions. But directly they showed themselves, three shots rang out sharply.

The Factor narrowly escaped wounding his leg with the axe in his evolutions. He puffed out his beard, while his great red face glowed and shone. 'I tell you, you're doing fine, boys. You picked off that big fellow as though he'd been a chicken on a fence post, Justin. Hope he isn't dead, though; he owes the Company for a pair of blankets. Look at that, would you?'

Small shot whistled through the air, pattering against rocks, through leaves, and dropping like hail into the river. The natives had fired a volley from their old muzzle loaders, which were almost useless at the distance. Then the attacking party, evidently disappointed and mystified, withdrew again into the forest.

The defenders left their post and came round McAuliffe, with the unimportant exception of Denton. A sharp query at once arose, 'Where's that derved skunk, Peter?'

The half-breed jerked his head towards the trees, and muttered, 'He no good.'

'The mean devil. He can shoot well if he wants. I'm going to track him up, then tie him down to his place.'

'What's the good, Alf?' said Winton. 'Let him alone. He won't be any good if you do find him.'

The other yielded. 'Well, well, I guess you're right. Now I wonder what scheme the rascals t'other side mean working.'

'Get canoe,' said Justin, abruptly.

'I reckon. Then they'll try their dirtiest to land. I shall have my chores to see to soon as they cross the Jordan. How many boats, Justin?'

The half-breed held up a hand, then replied, 'Canoe; one boat.'

'Five canoes and a York,' said McAuliffe, interpreting the sign language. 'That's rough. There's not another tribe in the district with a York boat. This is an old one; used to belong to the Company. It may be leaky, still I reckon it'll do the trip.'

'How large is the tribe?' asked Lamont.

'Small. Not more than sixty males, counting the old 'uns and boys. We should be able to hold them off.'

'Hope they'll soon come,' said Winton, stretching his long arms.

McAuliffe passed his thumb across the axe edge. 'I reckon this is an interval for refreshment,' he observed. 'There should be a bottle in the hut, boys. Let's turn in for a nerve-straightener and a bit of plug. Justin'll whistle out when we're wanted.'

Then they disappeared within, while the night silence grew again.

About half an hour had slipped away, before the half-breed's whistle gave warning of danger. The men were quickly back in their places, to see a couple of canoes working up stream, hugging the opposite bank closely.

Lamont knelt for a time at the side of the half-breed, talking and explaining. Justin nodded and grunted as a sign of understanding, then took a fresh wad of chew, and, without the least outward show of interest, watched the progress of the enemy.

McAuliffe now wore the axe strapped to his back, and appeared with a huge breech loader, which he had loaded with No. 2 shot and a heavy charge. This was for close quarters.

But as he scanned the moon-lit prospect, his peace of mind was considerably perturbed by a slight, yet sufficiently significant omen. The rope might have been tampered with by some Indian, or the slight wind might possibly have loosened the rings, but it was certain that the two flags, which recently had fluttered in their proper places, were now hanging at half-mast.

The Factor was superstitious, like most northerners, so the sight troubled him. It did not appear as though the others had noticed the change – Justin would not have understood the meaning of the sign – and this was perhaps as well.

A gaunt, flat-bottomed York boat came suddenly round the bend in mid-stream. Six paddles flashed on either side between water and moonlight. Even so, progress was slow.

'Ready, Justin?' called Lamont, quickly. A sonorous grunt.

'First canoe.'

Brief silence, then a double report. Two Indians, one at each end of the leading canoe, staggered and fell over the side. Immediately the birch-shell overturned, and cast its occupants into the river.

But the black York boat came steadily on. In vain Justin crashed his bullets through the thick sides. In vain Lamont skilfully pierced the planking beneath water line. The gaunt bulwarks of this floating castle grew nearer. Even Justin shook his head and muttered, 'Bad!' McAuliffe swore and laid a brawny hand upon his axe. The boat was not more than a stone's throw from the end of the island, when a canoe, just launched from the opposite bank, came cutting a white line through the water. It had already reached mid-stream, when a strong cry rose from Winton's corner.

'What is it?' called McAuliffe, hurrying up.

'A canoe coming down stream. Not fifty yards off.'

'Attacked on three sides,' groaned the Factor, as he came to the young man's side. 'Half a dozen in it. Anything would send it over. Winton, boy, you must tackle it.'

'Right, Alf,' said the young fellow simply.

The Factor turned away heavily, but the voice behind called him back. 'Here, Alf, you've been square to the deadbeat.'

An oily, powder-stained hand was extended. McAuliffe clutched it in his great fingers, then hurried along the loose shingle.

He soon came up with the half-breed, who was firing steadily, but without apparent success, at the black boat. The Indians reserved their fire for close quarters. With them reloading was a lengthy process.

For the time Lamont's skill seemed to have left him. Shot after shot he aimed at the speeding canoe, but with no decisive result. At length his nerve was restored, and he disabled the Indian in the bows. The next time his rifle cracked, water poured through the birch bark, and the frail canoe settled at once, not fifteen yards from shore. Then Lamont pulled out his revolver, and coolly picked off the dark heads bobbing among the waves caused by the furious struggles of desperate swimmers.

Hard by, young Winton toiled single-handed. With the speed and coolness which had won him his football blue during that short 'Varsity career, he aimed, fired and reloaded, though his boyish face grew pale at the odds against him. If Lamont had only been by his side, as he so easily might have been! Opportunities were narrowing down rapidly – the canoe was perilously close, and so many of his bullets went astray.

Ah! that was a good shot. The canoe had overturned, but there were still three men uninjured. One held his weapon above water, and clung to the inverted canoe, which he steered towards land, employing it as a life-buoy and shield. Also, he could rest his gun on the birch bark, and take fairly deliberate aim. The other two reached shallow water, and were making for the bank.

Winton pressed his lips fiercely, as, with a hand that trembled for the first time that night, he fired at the approaching foe. The tension was fearful, after the attack of deer fever and the fright of Sinclair's end. If Lamont would only come! From the other end of the island came the loud yells of Indians, and over all the roar of the Factor's deep voice.

For McAuliffe's opening had arrived at last. With the imperturbable Justin at his side, he 'lay for' that York boat. Hurriedly he explained, 'We must empty their guns, boy. When I call "down," flop for your life.'

With jerky motions the black monster drew down, the water rippling and gurgling along the sides. Paddles flashed in the moonlight, while drops rained from the quickly moving blades in fiery points of light.

Not more than a dozen yards distant, and a head appeared. Justin's rifle flashed from the crook of his arm – a paddle dropped, and floated away down stream. That was a shot Lamont might have envied. Three more strokes, and a dozen pointing guns flashed within sight, as many painted faces glared defiance from the stocks.

'Down!' roared McAuliffe, in a voice that set the leaves trembling.

Before the echoes threw back the sound, they were sprawling against the wet sand. Literally at the same moment a thrilling report shrieked over island, up river, across distant forests. Small boughs and bunches of leaves rained from surrounding trees, while each trunk bled from a thousand wounds. The shot crashed, like the bursting of a hurricane, against the rocks, while the air was thick with fluttering wads, and foul with powder.

A wild shout of triumph burst from the black boat. There were two lifeless figures stretched upon the beach! So the paddles worked faster, while the keel ground sullenly on fine sand. There was no thought of concealment. Every warrior leaned over the side, laughing and howling in foolish joy.

But as the smoke collected overhead in one large cloud, and commenced to drift away, extraordinary animation visited one of the supposed corpses. It sprang to its feet and rushed into the water, pointing a heavy gun. At a merely nominal distance it levelled a great gun, then pulled the trigger, with a result that it fell floundering backwards with the force of recoil. It was up directly, spluttering and jubilant. 'You skunks! I've fixed your dirty racket. Goldam! if I haven't made a straight shot this journey, call me Ananias.'

Justin stood behind, stolidly chewing. He grunted and expressed his feelings by the monosyllable, 'Good!'

The attacking party were quiet enough now, for there was hardly a single man unwounded. True to their nature, all had emptied their guns together. Now the foremost idea was immediate departure; so a couple of men sprang overboard to push the boat off.

But McAuliffe threw down the gun, and swung round his axe. 'I'll spoil the first man who starts shoving,' he said cheerfully.

The half-breed fired again, and a man who had been endeavouring secretly to load his gun fell forward in the boat.

This robbed the Indians of their last vestige of determination. They all cried aloud for mercy.

The Factor was now in his element. 'Throw up your hands! Come ashore one by one, and fling down your fixings!'

This injunction was obeyed. The warriors threw knives and ammunition to the beach, then stood with uplifted hands.

'Bring along that new rope, Justin!' The half-breed disappeared within the hut, while McAuliffe, with the air of a general, reviewed his prisoners. 'First that makes a break gets a bullet in his liver! If any want to commit suicide, all he's got to do is move out of his place!'

When the rope was brought, Justin cut it into lengths, while his superior, with considerable zest, fastened the hands of each warrior behind his back. To each he addressed a few conciliatory remarks. Such as to the leader, —

'Well, Muskwah, my boy, you've gone to work and made a derved fool of yourself to-night. Now I've got to use a good bit of new rope to decorate your arms; but see here, boy, I shall notch it down to your score in the store books. You'll have to bring along a gallon of fish oil to get square.'

However, it was not reserved for Justin to fire the last shot of the fight.

His share of the work completed, Lamont exchanged rifle for pipe, and began to chop at a plug of T.&B. Thus employed, he suddenly heard a rattling of footsteps along the shingle towards his left. He turned, expecting to see Winton; but it was a native, speeding along stealthily, with a long knife in his hand.

Lamont dropped smoking materials, and with quick movement jerked up his revolver. He was lying in a perfectly opaque shadow, so was safe from the hostile eyes, which, indeed, never glanced in his direction. Probably this man had some personal grudge against McAuliffe, and meant now to settle it. How he had managed to elude Winton was a question Lamont could not attempt to answer.

He crouched lower, and brought the muzzle down, until it finally rested at the crook of his left elbow. His hand was like a rock. In the dim light he could see his victim's head through the sight.

'Poor devil!' he muttered to himself, with a smile. 'I'll give him a few more seconds to enjoy life in.'

The Indian slackened speed, then began to crawl towards a bush. Half a dozen movements he made, then every muscle in his body tightened with a strange agony. For a second he knelt, as though turned into stone, then dropped over noiselessly, with right side pressing the sand, and head supported on his bent arm, as though he had suddenly been overcome with sleep. And a sleep it was – yet one which leaves the body for ever silent.

CHAPTER VI

THE BREAKING OF THE DAWN

The prisoners had been secured to the last man when Lamont came slowly along the beach. Then Justin tapped the Factor's arm, and said in his usual direct manner, 'Chief coming.'

The last navigable birch bark was crossing the river in their direction. When it came closer, the victors perceived two old men huddled together in their blankets, like a couple of dreary crows. The paddle was wielded deftly and gracefully by a young, slender girl, who knelt upright in the centre, with her dark hair streaming and tossing behind.

Along the east, red light was waving and breaking. Misty clouds crept over the forest, to burst in a soaring dew. Damp air crept from the bosom of the Saskatchewan and made the men shiver. The night was merging into a new day.

McAuliffe rubbed his hands briskly, and peered through the shadowy gloom.

'It's old whisky bottle, sure enough. He's going to tumble to his knee bones and lick my shoes.'

Lamont was gazing too – but not at the withered Chief. 'Who is the girl?' he asked, with slow intonation.

The Factor laughed. 'She calls herself his daughter. How the shrivelled old hulk can claim to be her father, darned if I know. She's a daisy, I tell you. If she comes pleading for these fellows with her pretty face held up, and the tears shining in her eyes – well, I shall likely make a fool of myself.'

'What are you going to do with them, anyhow?'

'Let 'em go, soon as they've sworn not to fight against us again. They're all heathens here, so will stay by their word. I've just fixed them up to scare the old chap, and bring him to his senses. Here they come. You watch me give old whisky bottle a good rubbing down.'

Justin came up with the two old men, not speaking but occasionally tapping his rifle with a significant gesture, and grunting loudly. Ahead, Menotah tripped gaily, full as ever of life and happiness, though she had that night seen her tribe more than decimated. She was safe enough in the hands of white men, who might be cruel, yet who always fell down to worship beauty. Therefore she had twisted a fresh wreath among her black tresses, and volunteered to lead her father with Antoine to sue for pardon.

The girl's bright eyes were, however, quickly attracted and held. Lamont, as he stood leaning against a fir, among the shadows slowly turning from black to grey, was a sight good to look upon. He was bareheaded, with the cool morning wind passing through his wavy hair. The excitement of the fight still lingered over his refined face, while a self-satisfied smile round the mouth and a certain tired look in the eyes were both singularly adapted to that clear style of masculine beauty he possessed in no ordinary degree.

To her it was as if the sun had just descended from heaven and taken the form of a man. For the first time in her short life she found herself conflicting with nervousness. This was of short duration, however. Then she gave him a smiling glance, lightly touching with dainty finger tips the bright wreath which twined along her thick fringe. He recalled the scene of the previous evening, and smiled back.

This was McAuliffe's opportunity for asserting his power. Before him stood the Chief, pleading and gesticulating, throwing the blame upon the shoulders of the conveniently absent Riel and his associates, making abundant promises for future obedience. Close by, old Antoine, the real sower of strife, stood wrapped to the chin in his yellow blanket, malevolent and silent.

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