

Bindloss Harold

# Blake's Burden



Harold Bindloss

**Blake's Burden**

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## CHAPTER I THE BLAKE AFFAIR

It was a fine morning and Mrs. Keith sat with a companion, enjoying the sunshine, near the end of Dufferin Avenue, which skirts the elevated ground above the city of Quebec. Behind her rose the Heights of Abraham where the dying Wolfe wrested Canada from France; in front, churches, banks, offices and dwellings, curiously combining the old and the very new, rose tier on tier to the great red *Frontenac* hotel, at which she was staying. It is a picturesque city that climbs back from its noble river; supreme, perhaps, in its situation among Canadian towns, and still retaining something of the exotic stamp set upon it by its first builders whose art was learned in the France of long ago.

From where she sat Mrs. Keith could not see the ugly wooden wharves. Her glance rested on the flood that flowed towards her, still and deep, through a gorge lined with crags and woods, and then, widening rapidly, washed the shores of a low, green island. Opposite her white houses shone on the Levis ridge, and beyond this a vast sweep of country, steeped in gradations of colour that ended in ethereal blue, rolled away towards the hills of Maine. Quebec was then filled with distinguished guests. British royalty had visited it, with many who belonged to the great world in London and some who aspired to do so. Canada had become fashionable, and in addition to English folk of station, Westerners and Americans of note had gathered in the ancient city. The ceremonies were over, but the company had not all dispersed.

The two ladies were elderly. They had played their part in the drama of life, one of them in a strenuous manner, and now they were content with the position of lookers on. So far, however, nothing had occurred since breakfast to excite their interest, and by and by Mrs. Keith turned to her companion with characteristic briskness.

"I think I'll go to Montreal by the special boat to-night," she said. "The hotel's crowded, the town's full, and you keep meeting people whom you know or have heard about. I came here to see Canada, but find it hard to realize that I'm not in London; I'm tired of the bustle."

Mrs. Ashborne smiled. She had met Margaret Keith by chance in Quebec, but their acquaintance was of several years' standing.

"Tired?" she said. "That is surely a new sensation for you. I've often envied you your energy."

Age had touched Mrs. Keith lightly, though she had long been a childless widow and had silvery hair. Tall and finely made, with prominent nose and piercing eyes, she was marked by a certain stateliness and a decided manner. She was blunt without rudeness, and though often forceful was seldom arrogant. Careless of her dress, as she generally was, Margaret Keith bore the stamp of refinement and breeding.

"Ah!" she said; "I begin to feel I'm old. But will you come to Montreal with me to-night?"

"I suppose I'd better, though the boat takes longer than the train and I hear that the *Place Viger* is full. I don't know anything about the other hotels; they mightn't be comfortable."

"They'll no doubt be able to offer us all that we require, and I never pamper myself," Mrs. Keith replied. "In fact, it's now and then a relief to do something that's opposed to the luxuriousness of the age."

This was a favourite topic, but she broke off as a man came towards her, carrying one or two small parcels which apparently belonged to the girl at his side. He was a handsome man, tall and rather spare, with dark eyes and a soldierly look. His movements were quick and forceful, but a hint

of what Mrs. Keith called swagger somewhat spoiled his bearing. She thought he allowed his self-confidence to be seen too plainly. The girl formed a marked contrast to him; she was short and slender, her hair and eyes were brown, while her prettiness, for one could not have called her beautiful, was of an essentially delicate kind. It did not strike one at first sight, but grew upon her acquaintances. Her manner was quiet and reserved and she was plainly dressed in white, but when she turned and dismissed her companion her pose was graceful. Then she handed Mrs. Keith some letters and papers.

"I have been to the post office and Captain Sedgwick made them search for our mail," she said. "It came some time ago, but there was a mistake through its not being addressed to the hotel."

Mrs. Keith took the letters and gave Mrs. Ashborne an English newspaper, but the girl went on: "The bobcat has torn a hole in the basket and I'm afraid it's trying to get at the mink."

"Tell some of the hotel people to take it out at once and see that the basket is sent to be mended."

The girl withdrew and Mrs. Ashborne looked up. "Did I hear aright? She said a bob-cat."

"You did. I am making a collection of the smaller American animals, and a bob-cat is something like a big English ferret. It has high hindquarters and walks with a curious jump, which I suppose is why it got its name. I'm not sure it lives in Canada, and an American got this one for me. I find natural history interesting."

Margaret Keith was known to be eccentric, and her companion laughed. "I should imagine you found it expensive, and aren't some of the creatures savage?"

"Millicent looks after them, and I always beat the sellers down. Fortunately, I can afford to indulge in my caprices, and you can consider this my latest fad if you like. I am subject to no claims, and my means are hardly large enough to make me an object of interest to sycophantic relatives."

"Is your companion fond of attending to wild animals?" Mrs. Ashborne inquired. "I have wondered where you got her. You have had a number, but she is different from the rest."

"I suppose you mean she is too good for the post?" Mrs. Keith suggested. "However, I don't mind telling you that she is Eustace Graham's daughter; you must have heard of him."

"Eustace Graham? Wasn't he in rather bad odour? – only tolerated on the fringe of society? I seem to recollect some curious tales about him."

"Latterly he was outside the fringe; indeed, I don't know how he kept on his feet so long, but he went downhill fast towards the end. A plucker of plump pigeons, an expensive friend to smart young subalterns and boys about town. Cards, bets, loans arranged, and that kind of thing! All the same, he had his good points when I first knew him."

"But after such a life as his daughter must have led, do you consider her a suitable person to take about with you? What do your friends think? They have to receive her now and then."

"I can't say that I have much cause to respect my friends' opinions, and I'm not afraid of the girl's contaminating me," Mrs. Keith replied. "Besides, Millicent, who lost her mother early, lived with her aunts until a few months before her father's death. I expect Eustace felt more embarrassed than grateful when she came to take care of him, but, to do him justice, he would see that none of the taint of his surroundings rested on the girl. He did wrong, but I think he paid for it, and it is better to be charitable."

She broke off, and glanced down at the big liner with cream-coloured funnel that was slowly swinging across the stream as she resumed: "I must send Millicent to buy our tickets for Montreal. The hotel will be crowded before long with that steamer's noisy passengers."

"Do you know anything about Captain Sedgwick, who brought you your letters?" her companion asked.

"Not much. Distinguished himself somewhere and holds a Government post in a West African colony. Came home on furlough, and seems to have had some part in the state functions here. I'm inclined to think he's a soldier of fortune; a man with a humble beginning, determined to get on."

"Isn't that Mrs. Chudleigh he's now talking to?"

Mrs. Ashborne was short-sighted, but Margaret Keith's eyes were better, and she noticed the stylish woman whom Sedgwick had joined.

"Yes," she said. "A widow, I believe, though one would not suspect it from her clothes. She seems to know some of my friends, but I met her here for the first time a few days ago."

"She married very young and her husband, who died in a few years, left her a good deal of money; he was a merchant in Calcutta. She's too smart and advanced for my taste, but her people have some standing. It looks as if she were attracted by Sedgwick; she's undoubtedly gracious to him."

"Then it's an opportunity he won't miss. The man's an adventurer."

Sedgwick and his companion passed out of sight, and Mrs. Ashborne opened the *Morning Post*, from which she presently looked up.

"A marriage – between Blanche Newcombe and Captain Challoner – at Thornton Holme, in Shropshire," she read out. "Do you know the bride?"

"I know Bertram Challoner better," Mrs. Keith replied, and was silent for a minute or two, musing on former days. Then she went on: "His mother was an old friend of mine; a woman of imagination, with strong artistic tastes, and Bertram resembles her. It was his father, the Colonel, who forced him into the army, and I'm somewhat astonished that he has done so well."

"They were all soldiers, I understand. But wasn't there some scandal about a cousin?"

"Richard Blake?" said Mrs. Keith, making room for Millicent Graham, her companion, who rejoined them. "It's getting an old story, and I always found it puzzling. So far as one could judge, Dick Blake should have made an excellent officer; his mother, the Colonel's sister, was true to the Challoner strain, his father a reckless Irish sportsman."

"But what was the story? I haven't heard it."

"After Blake broke his neck when hunting, the Colonel brought Dick up and, as a matter of course, sent him into the army. He became a sapper, and, entering the Indian service, met his cousin, Bertram, who was in the line, somewhere on the frontier. They were both sent with an expedition into the hills, and there was a night attack. It was important that an advanced post should be defended, and Dick had laid out the trenches. In the middle of the fight an officer lost his nerve, the position was stormed, and the expedition terribly cut up. Owing to the darkness and confusion there was a doubt about who had led the retreat, but Dick was blamed and made no defence. In spite of this, he was acquitted at the inquiry, perhaps because he was a favourite and Colonel Challoner was well known upon the frontier, but the opinion of the mess was against him. He left the service and the Challoners never speak of him."

"I once met Lieutenant Blake," Millicent broke in with a flush in her face. "Though he only spoke a word or two to me, he did a very chivalrous thing; one that needed courage and coolness. I find it hard to believe he could be a coward."

"So do I," Mrs. Keith agreed. "Still I must say that I haven't seen him since he was a boy."

"I met him once," said Mrs. Ashborne. "There was a man in the hotel yesterday who strongly reminded me of him, but I think he must have left last night."

"I have forgotten my letters, but I know from whom they come, and they'll no doubt give me some news of the wedding," Mrs. Keith remarked, and while she opened them Millicent sat looking down on the glistening river with her thoughts far away.

She was reconstructing a scene from the past, and she could picture with vivid distinctness the small, untidy drawing-room of a London flat, in which she sat, alone and half-dismayed, one evening soon after she had joined her father. A few beautiful objects of art were scattered amongst the shabby furniture; there were stains of wine on the fine Eastern rug, an inlaid table was scraped and damaged, and one chair had a broken leg. All she saw spoke of neglect and vanished prosperity. Hoarse voices and loud laughter came from an adjoining room and a smell of cigar smoke accompanied them. Sitting at the piano, she restlessly turned over some music and now and then played a few bars to divert her

troubled thoughts. Until a few weeks before she had led a peaceful life in the country, and the finding her father of such doubtful character and habits had been a painful surprise.

She was interrupted by the violent opening of the door and a group of excited men burst into the room. They were shouting with laughter at a joke which made her blush, and one dragged a companion in by the arm. Another, breaking off from rude horse-play, came towards her with a drunken leer. She shrank from his hot face and wine-laden breath as she drew back, wondering how she could reach her father, who stood in the doorway trying to restrain his guests. Then a young man sprang forward, with disgust and anger in his brown face, and she felt that she was safe. He looked clean and wholesome by contrast with the rest and his movements were swift and athletic.

Millicent could remember him very well, for she had often thought of Lieutenant Blake with gratitude. Just as the tipsy gallant stretched out his hand to seize her, the electric light went out; there was a brief scuffle in the darkness, the door banged, and when the light flashed up again only Blake and her father were in the room. Afterwards her father told her with a look of shame in his handsome, dissipated face, that he had been afraid of something of the kind happening and she must leave him. Millicent refused, for worn as he was by many excesses, his health was breaking down and when he fell ill she nursed him until he died. She had not seen Lieutenant Blake since.

By and by Mrs. Keith's voice broke in upon her recollections. "It's possible we may see Bertram and the new Mrs. Challoner. She is going out with him, but they are to travel by the Canadian Pacific route and spend some time in Japan before proceeding to his Indian station." Referring to the date of her letter she resumed, "They may have caught the boat that has just come in; she's one of the railway Empresses, and there's an Allan liner due to-morrow. Now I think we'll go to the hotel and try to get a list of the passengers."

She rose and they walked slowly back along the avenue.

## CHAPTER II

### MILLICENT RENEWS AN ACQUAINTANCE

Dusk was falling on the broad river, and the bold ridge behind the city stood out sharp and black against a fading gleam in the western sky, when Richard Blake hurried along the wharf. Close at hand a big, sidewheel steamer, spotlessly white, with tiers of decks that towered above the sheds and blazed with light, was receiving the last of her passengers, and on reaching the gangway Blake stood aside to let an elderly lady pass. She was followed by her maid and a girl whose face he could not see. It was a few minutes after the sailing time, and as the lady stepped on board a rope fell with a splash. There was a shout of warning as the bows, caught by the current, began to swing out into the stream, and the end of the gangway slipped along the edge of the wharf. It threatened to fall into the river, the girl was not on board yet, and Blake leaped upon the plank. Seizing her shoulder, he drove her forward until a seaman, reaching out, drew her safe on deck. Then the paddles splashed and as the boat forged out into the stream, the girl turned and thanked Blake. He could not see her clearly, because an over-arching deck cast a shadow upon her face.

"Glad to have been of assistance, but I don't think you could have fallen in," he said. "The guy-rope they had on the gangway might have held it up."

Turning away, he entered the smoke-room, where he spent a while over an English newspaper that devoted some space to social functions and the doings of people of importance, noticing once or twice, with a curious smile, mention of names he knew. He had the gift of making friends, and before he went to India had met a number of men and women of note who had been disposed to like him. Then he had won the good opinion of responsible officers on the turbulent frontier and made acquaintances that might have been valuable. Now, however, he had done with all that; he was banished from the world they moved in, and if they ever remembered him it was, no doubt, as one who had gone under.

Shaking off these thoughts, he joined some Americans in a game of cards, and it was late at night when he went out into the moonlight as the boat steamed up Lake St. Peter. A long plume of smoke trailed across the cloudless sky, the water glistened with silvery radiance, and, looking over the wide expanse, he could see dark trees etched faintly on the blue horizon. Ahead the lights of Three Rivers twinkled among square, black blocks of houses and tall sawmill stacks.

A few passengers were strolling about, but the English newspaper had made him restless and to wish to be alone, so, descending to a quieter deck, he was surprised to see the girl he had assisted sitting in a canvas chair near the rail. Close by stood several large baskets from which there rose an angry snarling.

"What is this?" he asked with the careless abruptness which usually characterized him. "With your permission." He raised a lid, while the girl watched him with amusement.

"Looks like a menagerie on a small scale," he remarked. "Are these animals yours?"

"No," she answered; "they belong to Mrs. Keith."

"Mrs. Keith?" he said sharply. "The lady I saw at the *Frontenac* with the autocratic manners and a Roman nose? It's curious, but she reminds me of somebody I knew and the name's the same. I wonder –"

He broke off, and Millicent Graham studied him as he stood in the moonlight. She did not think he recognized her and perhaps he was hardly justified in supposing that his timely aid at the gangway dispensed with the need for an introduction, but she liked his looks, which she remembered well. She had no fear of this man's presuming too far; he had a humorous, good-natured air and his surprise when she mentioned Mrs. Keith had roused her interest.

"Yes," she said; "I believe it was my employer you knew."

He did not follow this lead, but asked: "Are you supposed to sit up all night and watch the animals for her?"

"Only for an hour or two. The steamboat people refused to have them in the saloon, and the maid should have relieved me. She was tired, however, with packing and running errands all day, and I thought I'd let her sleep a while."

"Then it can't be much of an intrusion if I try to make you more comfortable. Let me move your chair nearer the deckhouse, where you'll be out of the wind; but I'll first see if I can find another rug."

He left her without waiting for a reply and, returning with a rug, placed her chair in a sheltered spot, after which he leaned against the rails.

"So you are Mrs. Keith's companion," he remarked. "It strikes me as rather unfeeling of her to keep you here in the cold." He indicated the baskets. "But what's her object in buying these creatures?"

"Caprice," said Millicent, smiling. "Some of them are savage, and they cost a good deal. I can't imagine what she means to do with them, and I don't think she knows. One of them, however, has been growling all day, and as it's apparently unwell it mustn't be neglected."

"If it growls any more, I'll feel tempted to turn yonder hose upon it or try some other drastic remedy."

"Please don't!" cried Millicent in alarm. "But you mustn't think Mrs. Keith is inconsiderate. I have much to thank her for, but she gets very enthusiastic over her hobbies."

"Do you know if she ever goes down to a little place in Shropshire?"

"She does; I have been with her. Once she took me to your old home." Then the colour crept into Millicent's face. "You don't seem to remember me, Lieutenant Blake."

Blake, who had learned self-control, did not start, though he came near doing so as he recalled a scene he had taken part in some years earlier. He had just risen from a dining-table, where the talk had been of favourite dancers and the turf, and the wine had circulated too freely, and entered a small drawing-room with several men whom his host was assisting in a career of dissipation. As they came in a girl rose from the piano and on seeing her Blake felt a sense of awkwardness and shame. She looked very fresh and pretty, untainted, he thought, by her surroundings, and the annoyance in her father's face suggested that he had not expected to find her there. Blake saw that she shrank from his noisy companions in alarm. One of them, who had drunk too deep, not noticing that she was startled and imagining that she was a fit subject for rough gallantry, pursued her as she tried to escape, but Blake with a quick movement reached a switch and cut off the light. Next moment he seized the offender and hustled him out of the room. He had saved an awkward situation and was afterwards thanked by the man he had roughly handled.

"It would have been inexcusable if I had forgotten you," he answered with a smile. "Still, I couldn't quite place you until a few moments ago, when you faced the light. But you were wrong in one thing; I'm no longer Lieutenant Blake."

She appreciated the frankness which had prompted this warning and saw that she had made a tactless blunder, but she looked at him steadily.

"I forgot," she said; "forgive me. I heard of – what happened in India – but I felt that there must have been some mistake." She hesitated for a moment. "I think so now."

Blake made a sudden movement, and then leaned back against the rails. "I'm afraid that an acquaintance which lasted three or four minutes could hardly enable you to judge; first impressions are often wrong, you know. Anyhow, I don't complain of the opinion of gentlemen who knew more about me."

Millicent saw that the subject must be dropped and resuming, said: "At our first meeting I had no opportunity of thanking you, and you gave me none to-night. It's curious that while I've only met you twice, on both occasions you turned up just when you were needed. Is it a habit of yours?"

"That's a flattering thing to hint. The man who's always on hand when he's wanted is an estimable person."

"It's not quite what I meant," she answered, laughing. "What struck me most was that you don't seem to like gratitude."

"One ought to like it. It's supposed to be rare, but, on the whole, I haven't found that so."

He studied her with an interest which she noticed but could not resent. The girl had changed and gained something since their first meeting, and he thought it was a knowledge of the world. She was, he felt, neither tainted nor hardened by what she had learned, but her fresh childish look which suggested ignorance of evil had gone and could not come back. Indeed, he wondered how she had preserved it in her father's house. This was not a matter he could touch upon, but by and by she referred to it.

"I imagine," she said shyly, "that on the evening when you came to my rescue in London you were surprised to find me – so unprepared; so incapable of dealing with the situation."

"That is true," Blake answered with some awkwardness. "A bachelor dinner, you know, after a big race meeting at which we had backed several winners! One has to make allowances."

Millicent smiled rather bitterly. "You may guess that I had to make them often in those days, but it was on the evening we were speaking of that my eyes were first opened, and I was startled. But you must understand that it was not by my father's wish I came to London and stayed with him – until the end. He urged me to go away, but his health had broken down and he had no one else to care for him. When he was no longer able to get about everybody deserted him, and he felt it."

Blake was stirred to compassion. Graham had, no doubt, suffered nothing he had not deserved, but the man had once been a social favourite, and it was painful to think of his dying alone in poverty. His extravagance and the shifts by which he evaded his creditors were known, and Blake could imagine how hard he would be pressed when he lay sick and helpless. It must have been a harrowing experience for a young girl to nurse him and at the same time to grapple with financial difficulties.

"I was truly sorry to hear of his death," he said. "Your father was once a very good friend to me. But, if I may ask, how was it he let you come to his flat?"

"I forced myself upon him," Millicent answered, with a grateful glance. "My mother died long ago and her unmarried sisters took care of me. They lived very simply in a small secluded country house; two old-fashioned Evangelicals, gentle but austere, studying small economies, giving all they could away. In winter we embroidered for missionary bazaars; in summer we spent the days in a quiet, walled garden. It was all very peaceful, but I grew restless, and when I heard that my father's health was failing I felt I must go to him. My aunts were grieved and alarmed, but they said they dare not hinder me if I thought it my duty."

Stirred by troubled memories and perhaps encouraged by the sympathy he showed, she had spoken on impulse without reserve, and Blake listened with pity. The girl, brought up, subject to wholesome Puritanical influences, in such surroundings as she had described, must have suffered a cruel shock when suddenly plunged into the society of the rakes and gamblers who frequented her father's flat.

"Could you not have gone back when you were no longer needed?" he asked.

"No," she said; "it would not have been fair. I had changed since I left my aunts. They were very sensitive, and I think the difference they must have noticed in me would have jarred on them. I should have brought something alien into their unworldly life. It was too late to return; I had to follow the path I had chosen."

Blake mused a while, watching the lights of Three Rivers fade astern and the broad white wake of the paddles stream back across the glassy surface of the lake. The girl must have learned much of human failings since she left her sheltered home, but he thought the sweetness of character which could not be spoiled by knowledge of evil was greatly to be admired. He was, however, a man of action and not a philosopher.

"Well," he said, "I appreciate your letting me talk to you, but it's cold and getting late, and you have sat on deck long enough. I'll see that somebody looks after the animals."

Millicent felt dubious, though she was sleepy and tired. "If anything happened to her pets, Mrs. Keith would not forgive me."

"I'll engage that something will happen to some of them very soon unless you promise to go to your room," Blake said, laughing. Then he called a deckhand. "What have you to do?"

"Stand here until the watch is changed."

"Then you can keep an eye on these baskets. If any of the beasts inside them makes an alarming noise, send to my room; the second, forward, port side. Look me up before we get to Montreal."

"That's all right," said the man, and Blake held out his hand to Millicent as she rose.

"Now," he said, "you can go to rest with a clear conscience."

She left him with a word of thanks, wondering whether she had been indiscreet, and why she had told him so much. She knew nothing to his advantage except one chivalrous action, and she had not desired to arouse his pity, but he had an honest face and had shown an understanding sympathy which touched her, because she had seldom experienced it. He had left the army with a stain upon his name, but she shrank from judging harshly and felt that he had not merited his disgrace. Then she forgot him and went to sleep.

Blake stayed on deck some time, thinking about her, but presently decided that this was an unprofitable occupation. He was a marked man, with a lonely road to travel, and, though he found some amusement by the way it led him apart from the society of women of the kind he most cared for.

## CHAPTER III

### THE COUSINS

Dinner was over at the *Windsor* in Montreal, and Mrs. Keith, who found the big hotel rather noisy and uncomfortably warm, was sitting with Mrs. Ashborne in the square between it and St. Catharine's Street. A cool air blew uphill from the river and the patch of grass with its fringe of small, dusty trees had a certain picturesqueness in the twilight. Above it the wooded crest of the mountain rose darkly against the evening sky; lights glittered behind the network of thin branches and fluttering leaves along the sidewalk, and the dome of the cathedral bulked huge and shadowy across the square. Down hill, towards St. James's, rose towering buildings, with the rough-hewn front of the Canadian Pacific depot prominent among them, and the air was filled with the clanging of street cars and the tolling of locomotive bells. Once or twice, however, when the throb of the traffic momentarily subsided, music rose faint and sweet from the cathedral, and Mrs. Keith, who heard the uplifted voices and knew what they sang, turned to listen. She had heard them before, through her open window in the early morning when the city was silent and its busy toilers slept, and now it seemed to her appropriate that the voices could not be wholly drowned by its hoarse commercial clamour.

The square served as a cool retreat for the inhabitants of crowded tenements and those who had nowhere else to go, but Margaret Keith was not fastidious about her company. She was interested in the unkempt emigrants who, waiting for a Westbound train, lay upon the grass, surrounded by their tired children, and she had sent Millicent down the street to buy fruit to distribute among the travellers; she liked to watch the French Canadian girls who slipped quietly up the broad cathedral steps. They were the daughters of the rank and file, but their movements were graceful and they were tastefully dressed. Then the blue-shirted, sinewy men, who strolled past, smoking, roused her curiosity. They had not acquired their free, springy stride in the cities; these were adventurers who had met with strange experiences in the frozen North and the lonely West. Some of them had hard faces and a predatory air, but that added to their interest. Margaret Keith liked to watch them all and speculate about their mode of life; that pleasure could still be enjoyed, though as she sometimes told herself with humorous resignation, she could no longer take a very active part in things.

By and by, however, something that appealed to her in a more direct and personal way occurred, for a man came down the steps of the *Windsor* and crossed the well-lighted street with a very pretty English girl. He carried himself well and had the look of a soldier, his figure was finely proportioned, but his handsome face suggested sensibility rather than decision of character and his eyes were dreamy. His companion, so far as Mrs. Keith could judge by her smiling glance as she laid her hand upon his arm when they left the sidewalk, was proud of and much in love with him.

"Whom are you looking at so hard?" Mrs. Ashborne inquired.

"Bertram Challoner and his bride," said Mrs. Keith. "They're coming towards us yonder."

Then a curious thing happened, for a man who was crossing the street seemed to see the Challoners and, turning suddenly, stepped back behind a passing cab. They had their backs to him when he went on, but he looked round, as if to make sure he had not been observed before he entered the hotel.

"That was strange," said Mrs. Ashborne. "It looked as if the fellow didn't want to meet our friends. Who can he be?"

"How can I tell?" Mrs. Keith rejoined. "I think I've seen him somewhere, but that's all I know."

Looking round as Millicent joined them, she noticed her puzzled expression. The girl had obviously seen the stranger's action, but Mrs. Keith did not wish to pursue the subject then. Next moment Challoner came up and greeted her heartily, while his wife spoke to Mrs. Ashborne.

"We only arrived this afternoon and must have missed you at dinner," he said. "We may go West to-morrow, though we haven't decided yet. I've no doubt we shall see you again to-night or at breakfast."

After a few pleasant words the Challoners passed on, and Mrs. Keith looked after them thoughtfully.

"Bertram has changed in the last few years," she said. "I heard he had malaria in India, which perhaps accounts for it, but he shows signs of his mother's delicacy. She was not strong, and I always thought he had her highly-strung nervous temperament, though he must have learned to control it in the army."

"He couldn't have got in unless the doctors were satisfied with him," said Mrs. Ashborne.

"That's true, but both mental and physical traits have a way of lying dormant while we're young and of developing later. Bertram has shown himself a capable officer, but to my mind, he looked more like a soldier when he was at Sandhurst than he does now."

A few minutes later Mrs. Chudleigh came out of the hotel with Sedgwick and stopped to speak to Mrs. Keith.

"I came up by the last train and heard that you were here. Captain Sedgwick travelled with me, but he's going on to Toronto to-morrow. I suppose you have seen the Challoners? Such a number of English people in the town! But isn't this a curious place to spend the evening?"

"It's cool," said Mrs. Keith. "I like fresh air."

Mrs. Chudleigh, glanced towards Millicent, who was distributing a basket of peaches among a group of untidy, emigrant children.

"That's a charming picture, isn't it? Miss Graham fits the part very well, but I suppose you're responsible."

There was a sneer in her tone and Sedgwick broke in: "Miss Graham's a very nice girl; you can see that she's sorry for the dirty little beggars. They don't look as if they'd had a happy time, and a liner's crowded steerage isn't a luxurious place."

"Since you feel so pitiful, it would be more to the purpose if you gave them something," Mrs. Chudleigh rejoined.

"A good idea!" said Sedgwick coolly. "I'll carry it out."

He crossed the grass and scattered a few small coins among the children, who clustered round him, after which he stood talking to Millicent, while Mrs. Chudleigh watched him with an impatience she did not try to hide.

"It's a new role for Sedgwick," she remarked. "When he has finished, we are going into the cathedral to hear the music. I'm fond of churches, and we spent the afternoon in Notre Dame."

Mrs. Ashborne said it was worth seeing and conversation languished for the next three or four minutes, after which Mrs. Chudleigh moved forward imperiously and took Sedgwick away. Mrs. Keith turned to her companion with an amused expression.

"I daresay you noticed that he didn't mind keeping her waiting."

"I thought he meant to flout her when he acted on her suggestion, and I half expected something of a scene," said Mrs. Ashborne. "The woman has a temper."

Mrs. Keith smiled. "The man is a fortune hunter, but he's taking the right way. She's used to admiration, and her other suitors have, no doubt, deferred to her. It's a change to be defied instead of courted, and though it makes her angry I imagine it strengthens his hold. If he shows his is the firmer hand, she'll give in."

"You're taking it for granted that she's in love with him."

"It looks like it," Mrs. Keith replied. "He has his attractions and has done one or two dashing things of the kind that catches the public eye. However, I have some English letters to write, and I think we'll go in."

Next evening, about an hour before sunset, Challoner and his wife leaned upon the rails of a wooden gallery built out from the rock on the summit of the green mountain that rises close behind Montreal. It is a view-point that visitors frequent, and they gazed with appreciation at the wide landscape. Wooded slopes led steeply down to the stately colleges of McGill and the rows of picturesque houses along Sherbrook Avenue; lower yet, the city, shining in the clear evening light, spread across the plain, dominated by its cathedral dome and the towers of Notre Dame. Green squares with trees in them checkered the blocks of buildings; along its skirts, where a haze of smoke hung about the wharves, the great river gleamed in a broad silver band. On the farther bank the plain ran on again, fading from green to grey and purple until it melted into the distance and the hills on the Vermont frontier cut, faintly blue, against the sky.

"How beautiful this world is!" Challoner exclaimed. "I have seen grander sights and there are more picturesque cities than Montreal – I'm looking forward to showing you the work of the Moguls in India – but happiness such as I've had of late casts a glamour over everything. It wasn't always so with me; I've had my bad hours when I was blind to beauty."

Though Blanche Challoner was very young and much in love, she ventured a smiling rebuke.

"You shouldn't wish to remember them; I'm afraid, Bertram, there's a melancholy strain in you, and I don't mean to let you indulge in it. Besides, how could you have had bad hours? You have been made much of and given everything you could wish for since you were a boy. Indeed, I sometimes wonder how you escaped from being spoiled."

"When I joined it, I hated the army; that sounds like high treason, doesn't it? However, I got used to things and made art my hobby instead of my vocation. You won't mind if I confess that a view of this kind makes me long to paint?"

"Oh! no; I intend to encourage you. You mustn't waste your talent. When we stay among the Rockies we will spend the days in the most beautiful places we can find and I shall take my pleasure in watching you at work. But didn't your fondness for sketching amuse the mess?"

"I used to be chaffed about it and repaid my tormentors by caricaturing them. On the whole, they were very good-natured."

"I expect they admired the drawings; they ought to have done. You have talent. Indeed, I never quite understood why you became a soldier."

"I think it was from a want of moral courage; you have seen that determination is not among my virtues," Challoner replied. "It's as much to the purpose that you don't know my father very well. Though he's fond of pictures, he looks upon artists and poets as a rather effeminate and irresponsible set, and I must own that he has met one or two unfavourable specimens. Then he couldn't imagine the possibility of a son of his not being anxious to follow the family profession, and, knowing how my defection would grieve him, I let him have his way. There has always been a Challoner fighting or ruling in India since John Company's time."

"They must have been fine men by their portraits. There's one of a Major Henry Challoner I fell in love with. He was with Outram, wasn't he? You have his look, though there's a puzzling difference. I think these men were bluffer and blunter than you are. You're gentler and more sensitive; in a way, finer drawn."

"My sensitiveness has not been a blessing," said Challoner soberly.

"But it makes you lovable," Blanche declared. "There must have been a certain ruthlessness about those old Challoners which you couldn't show. After all, their pictures suggest that their courage was of the unimaginative, physical kind."

A shadow crept into Challoner's face, but he banished it.

"I am happy in having a wife who won't see my faults." Then he added humorously: "After all, however, that's not good for one."

Blanche gave him a tender smile, but he did not see it, for he was gazing at a man who came down the steps from the neighbouring cable railway. The newcomer was about thirty years of age, of

average height, and strongly made. His face was deeply sunburned and he had eyes of a curious dark-blue with a twinkle in them and dark lashes, though his hair was fair. As he drew nearer, Blanche was struck by something that suggested the family likeness of the Challoners. He had their firm mouth and wide forehead, but by no means their somewhat austere expression. He looked as if he went careless through life and could be readily amused. Then he saw Bertram, and, starting, made as if he would pass the entrance to the gallery, and Blanche turned her surprised glance upon her husband. Bertram's hand was tightly closed on the glasses he held and his face was tense and flushed, but he stepped forward with a cry of "Dick!"

The newcomer moved towards him, and Blanche knew he was the man who had brought dishonour upon her husband's family.

"This is a fortunate meeting," Bertram said, and his voice was cordial, though rather strained. Then he turned to his wife. "Blanche, here's my cousin, Dick Blake."

Blake showed no awkwardness. Indeed, on the whole he looked amused, but his face grew graver as he fixed his eyes on Mrs. Challoner.

"Though I'm rather late, you'll let me wish you happiness," he said. "I believe it will be yours. Bertram's a very good fellow; I have much to thank him for."

There was a sincerity and a hint of affection in his tone which touched Blanche. She had been prepared to suspend her judgment and be charitable, but she found that she pitied the man. He had failed in his duty in time of stress, but he had suffered for it and it must be hard to be an outcast. Blake saw her compassion and was moved by it.

"But how did you come here?" Bertram asked. "Where have you been since –"

He stopped abruptly and Blake laughed. "Since you surreptitiously said good-bye to me at Peshawur? Well, after that I went to Penang and from there to Queensland. Stayed a time at a pearl-fishing station among the Kanakas, and then came to England for a few months."

"But how did you manage?" Bertram inquired with some diffidence. "It raises a point you wouldn't let me talk about at Peshawur, but I've often felt guilty because I didn't insist. Travelling about as you have done is expensive."

"Not to me," Blake rejoined with a twinkle. "I've turned adventurer and I have the Blake gift of getting along without money." He added in an explanatory aside to Blanche: "For two or three generations we kept open house, and a full stable in Ireland, on a revenue derived from rents which were rarely paid, and if I hadn't been too young when a disaster gave the creditors their chance, I'd have given them a sporting run."

"But what did you do when you left England?" Bertram broke in.

"Went to East Africa; after that to this country where I tried my hand at prairie farming. Found it decidedly monotonous and sold the homestead at a profit. Then I did some prospecting, and now I'm here on business."

"On business!" Bertram exclaimed. "You could never be trusted to get proper value for a shilling."

"I've learned to do so lately, and that's not going far. If you're in commerce in this country, you must know how to put down fifty cents and take up a dollar's worth. Anyhow, I'm here to meet an American whose acquaintance I made farther West. He's a traveller in paints and varnishes and a very enterprising person as well as an unusually good sort. But I've told you enough about myself; I want your news."

Blanche, who had been watching him, thought it cost her husband an effort to fall in with his cousin's casual mood. Blake, however, seemed quite at ease, and she was growing interested in him. He reminded her of the Challoner portraits in the dark oak gallery at Sandymere, but she thought him lighter, more brilliant, and, in a sense, more human than those stern soldiers. Then she remembered his Irish father, which explained something. They talked a while about English friends and relatives; and then Blake said rather abruptly —

"And the Colonel?"

"Well," said Bertram. "I heard that you saw him, Dick."

"I did, for half an hour. I felt it was my duty, though the interview was hard on both. He was fair, as he always was, and tried to hide his feelings. I couldn't blame him because he failed."

Bertram looked away, and Blake's face was troubled. There was a hint of emotion in his voice as he went on, turning to Blanche —

"Whatever he may think of me, Colonel Challoner is a man I have a sincere respect for, and I owe him more than I can ever repay. He brought me up after my father's death and started me, like a son, in an honourable career." Then his tone grew lighter. "It's one of my few virtues that I don't forget my debts."

He made as if he would leave them. "And now I've kept you some time. My American friend hasn't turned up yet and I may be here a few days. Where are you staying? I'll look you up before I leave."

"We go West to-morrow morning. Come down and have dinner with us at the *Windsor*," Bertram said, and when Mrs. Challoner seconded the request they went up the steps to the platform from which the cable train started.

## CHAPTER IV

### CHALLONER RESUMES HIS JOURNEY

Blake, who had known hardship, enjoyed an excellent dinner and the society of his cousin's wife, whose good opinion he rapidly gained. He would not have blamed her had she treated him with cold politeness, but instead of this she was gentle and quietly cordial. She had seen his affection for her husband, and made him feel that he had her sympathy, without being openly pitiful. He was quick to appreciate her tact, and it had its effect on him. After dinner Mrs. Keith took Blanche away, and the men found a quiet corner in the rotunda, where they sat talking for a time. At length Blake glanced at his watch.

"I have an appointment to keep and must go in a few minutes. Make my excuses to your wife; I shall not see her again. It would be better, because there's no reason why she should be reminded of anything unpleasant now. She's a good woman, Bertram, and I'm glad she didn't shrink from me. It would have been a natural thing, but I believe she was sorry and anxious to make all the allowances she could."

Challoner was silent for a few moments, his face showing signs of strain.

"I don't deserve her, Dick; the thought of it troubles me. She doesn't know me for what I really am."

"Rot!" Blake exclaimed. "It's your misfortune that you're a sentimentalist with a habit of exaggerating things; but if you don't indulge in your weakness too much, you'll go a long way. You showed the true Challoner pluck when you smoked out that robbers' nest in the hills and the pacification of the frontier valley was a very smart piece of work. When I read about the business I never thought you would pull it off with the force you had. It must have impressed the authorities, and you'll get something better than your major's commission before long. I understand that you're already looked upon as a coming man."

It was a generous speech, but it was justified, for Challoner had shown administrative as well as military skill in the affairs his cousin mentioned. He, however, still looked troubled, and his colour was higher than usual.

"Dick," he said, "I wish you would let me give you a lift in the only way I can. You know you had never any idea of economy, and I'm afraid you must find it hard to get along."

"No," said Blake curtly; "it's impossible. Your father made me a similar offer and I couldn't consent. I suppose I have the Blakes' carelessness about money, but what I get from my mother's little property keeps me on my feet." He laughed as he went on: "It's lucky that your people, knowing the family failing, arranged matters so that the principal could not be touched. Besides, I've a plan for adding to my means."

Bertram dropped the subject. Dick was often rather casual and inconsequent, but there was a stubborn vein in him. When he took the trouble to think a matter out he was apt to prove immovable.

"Anyway, you will let me know how you get on."

"I think not. What good would it do? The Challoners gave me a fair start and I disappointed them. While I'm grateful, it's better that they should have nothing more to do with me. Think of your career, keep your wife proud of you – she has good reason for being so, and let me go my way and drop out of sight again. I'm a common adventurer and have been mixed up in matters that fastidious people would shrink from, which may happen again. Still, I manage to get a good deal of pleasure out of the life, which suits me in many ways." He rose, holding out his hand. "Good-bye, Bertram. We may run across each other somewhere again."

"I'll always be glad to do so," Challoner said with feeling. "Be sure I won't forget you, Dick."

Blake turned away, but when he left the hotel his face was sternly set. It had cost him something to check his cousin's friendly advances and break the last connexion between himself and the life he once had led, but he knew it must be broken, and felt no pang of envious bitterness. For many years Bertram had been a good and generous friend, and Blake sincerely wished him well.

The Challoners left by the Pacific Express next morning, and during the evening Captain Sedgwick stood talking to Millicent, who had stopped a few moments in passing, near a pillar in the entrance hall of the hotel. It was characteristic of him that he wore evening dress, though a number of the other guests did not, but it displayed his fine, symmetrical figure. He was a handsome, soldierly man, with a boldness of manner which sometimes passed for dash and sometimes prejudiced fastidious people against him. Now he was watching Millicent, whom he admired, with a smile.

"I didn't know you and Mrs. Keith were leaving the *Frontenac* until you had gone," he said, and his tone suggested that he wished to explain why he had not accompanied them. "You didn't give me an opportunity of speaking to you until just now, but I noticed that you looked disturbed at dinner."

"I daresay I did," Millicent answered ruefully.

"I should be distressed to think there was any serious cause for it."

Millicent laughed. "Mrs. Keith believes it's serious enough, and I'm in disgrace. One of the animals bit the bob-cat, and now the creature's missing."

"A catastrophe! But does the absurd old woman hold you responsible for her ferocious pets?"

"I was told to see that her maid took the unfortunate animal to a veterinary surgeon. Judkins was frankly mutinous, the hotel porters were busy with some baggage, and there was not a cab on the rank. I told her to put the basket down while she looked for a hack near the station; and then crossed the street as I saw one coming. When I got back the basket had gone, but a boy gave me a note on a scrap of torn paper. It said, 'Don't worry; the beast is in safe hands. You'll get it back to-night.'"

"Most mysterious!" Sedgwick remarked. "But it's unpleasant to think you should have to suffer from the foibles of the creature's owner."

Millicent felt that he was too intimate for their brief acquaintance, and that in keeping her behind the pillar, where the semi-privacy of their position suggested confidential relations, he was hardly showing good taste. Indeed, she realized that there was often something lacking in his manners, though he had a certain charm and was much sought after at the hotel.

"I must go," she said. "Mrs. Keith wants me."

Sedgwick moved aside with a bow which Millicent thought need not have been made, and afterwards crossed the floor to the lounge where Mrs. Chudleigh was waiting. She was a rather striking, high-coloured woman, with eyes that had a hard sparkle, and, when her face was in repose, unusually firm lips. She wore the latest and most pronounced type of dinner dress with a few jewels of value, but they gave her no air of ostentation.

"I thought you were never coming," she said impatiently. "Why did you stay talking to that girl so long?"

"Miss Graham? She's amusing and hasn't many acquaintances in the hotel. I'm inclined to think her employer keeps a tight hand on her."

"She's pretty in an unformed way, which is more to the purpose," Mrs. Chudleigh rejoined. "I heard the old woman abusing the manager because one of her ridiculous pets is missing. But this is of no consequence. You were going to tell me about your African plans."

"There are good reasons why I should do so. I haven't forgotten that my advancement is largely due to you."

Mrs. Chudleigh laughed. "If you hint as much in public, it may come to a sudden end. You ought to know that promotion is now made on merit."

"I'm modest. My merit's an uncertain quantity, but there's no doubt about your influence. I'd sooner trust to it."

The remark was justified. He had shown courage and ability in controlling rebellious tribes and settling disputes with French officials on the frontier of the African colony, but Mrs. Chudleigh had worked well for him. She had many friends, men of importance in political and military circles were to be met in her London drawing-room, but she was clever and those she obtained favours from did not always realize how far they had yielded to her powers of persuasion.

"Never mind that," she said. "Give me an opportunity and I'll exert my powers; I'm fond of using them. Moving other people's hands and making up their minds for them is a fascinating game, but I must have something to act upon."

"I understand; we're both ambitious. Well, I'm in charge of a strip of frontier territory, but so far I've had the veto of a cautious and vacillating superior to contend with. The climate, however, is breaking down his health, and he can't keep his post much longer; I want full control. Now to the north of my malaria-haunted district there's a belt of dry and valuable country, inhabited by industrious Mohammedans. The French have their eye upon it, but our people know its worth. Though our respective spheres of influence are badly defined, neither side has found an excuse for occupying the coveted region."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Chudleigh. "You intend to make an excuse."

"If I can, but it will have to be a good one. That is, we must give the French no reasonable grounds for objecting; but when we enter the country in question we stay there."

"It's risky. If you get into difficulties or the French are clever enough to spoil your game, you'll be disgraced."

"That's a hazard I recognize. If I fail, our authorities will disown me, but it can't be allowed to count."

Mrs. Chudleigh admired his daring, which was what had first attracted her. His shortcomings were not hidden, he now and then offended her more cultivated taste, but he could boldly seize an opportunity and she thought he would go a long way. There was force in him.

"But the excuse?" she asked.

"I can't tell you exactly what it will be, but there's an unruly tribe between us and the territory we want, and they're inclined to give trouble." He paused with a meaning smile. "It may be necessary to subjugate them, and, if we enter their country, we'll no doubt find ourselves compelled to move farther north. Something, however, must be left to chance. When one is ready to act, an occasion often presents itself."

"And the benefit to England?"

"Can't be doubted. We'll have pushed the frontier back and opened up trade. It's a region that's rich in useful products, and as soon as it is ours new factories will spring up wherever there's a suitable spot along the rivers. I've already thought out a route for a light railway."

Mrs. Chudleigh was satisfied. She believed in Colonial expansion, but her views were honest in a sense. Where her country stood to gain, the rights of small native races did not count, and she argued, with some reason, that they were better off under civilized rule; but she would have intrigued for no scheme that did not further British interests.

"I daresay," she answered thoughtfully, "something can be done."

"I'm content with that, and perhaps we have said enough. Those rubies of yours are very fine, but they owe a good deal to their background. How they gleam on the satiny whiteness they rest upon!"

This was a transgression, but it was one that she could pardon. The man's taste was defective, but he had charm and she let him lead her into intimate personal talk.

In the meanwhile, a group of men were engaged in conversation at the opposite end of the hall. One was a sawmill owner; another served the Hudson's Bay Company in the northern wilds; the third was a young, keen-eyed American, quick in his movements and concise in speech.

"You're in lumber, aren't you?" he said, taking a strip of wood from his pocket and handing it to the mill owner. "What would you call this?"

"Cedar, sawn from a good log."

"That's so, red cedar. You know something about that material?"

"I ought to, considering how much of it I've cut." The lumber man held up his right hand, from which the two middle fingers were missing. "Lost those twenty years ago when I worked in my first, one-horse mill, and I could show you a number of other scars."

"Very well," the American took out another strip. "The same stuff, sir. How would you say it had been treated?"

The sawmiller carefully examined the piece of wood. "It's not French polish, but I haven't seen varnish as good as this. Except that it's clear and shows the grain, it's more like some rare old Japanese lacquer."

"It is varnish. Try to scrape it with your knife."

The other failed to make a mark on it, and the American looked at him with a smile.

"What would you think of it as a business proposition?"

"If not too dear, it ought to drive every other high-grade varnish off the market. Do you make the stuff?"

"We're not ready to sell it yet; can't get hold of the raw material in quantities, and we're not satisfied about the best flux. I'll give you my card."

He did so, and it bore the address of a paint and varnish factory in Connecticut, with the words, "Represented by Cyrus P. Harding," at the bottom.

"Well," said the lumber man, "you seem to have got hold of a good thing, Mr. Harding, but if you're not open to sell it, what has brought you over here?"

"I'm looking round; we deal in all kinds of paints and miss no chance of a trade. Then I'm going way up North-West. Is there anything doing in my line there?"

"Not much," said the Hudson's Bay man. "You may sell a few kegs along the railroad track, but as soon as you leave it you'll find no paint required. The settlers use logs or shiplap and leave them in the raw. The trip won't pay you."

"Anyhow, I'll see the country and find out something about the coniferous gums."

"They're soft and resinous. Don't you get the material you make good varnish of from the tropics?"

Harding laughed. "You people don't know your own resources. There's most everything a white man needs right on this American continent, if he'll take the trouble to look for it. Lumber changes some of its properties with the location in which it grows, I guess. We have pines in Florida, but when you get right up to their northern limit you'll find a difference."

"There's something in that," the sawmiller agreed.

"If you're going up to their northern limit, you'll see some of the roughest and wildest country on this earth," remarked the Hudson's Bay agent. "It's almost impossible to get through in summer unless you stick to the rivers and to cross it in winter with the dog-sledges is pretty tough work."

"So I've heard," said Harding. "Now I'm going to take a smoke. Will you come along?"

They declined, and when he left them one smiled at the other.

"They're smart people across the frontier, but to send a man into the northern timber-belt looking for paint trade openings or resin they can make varnish of is about the limit to commercial enterprise."

## CHAPTER V

### MRS. KEITH GETS A SURPRISE

Harding was taking out a cigar in the vestibule when a man brushed past him wearing big mittens and a loose black cloak such as old-fashioned French-Canadians sometimes use.

"Why, Blake!" he cried. "What have you got on? Have you been serenading somebody?"

"I can't stop," the other answered with a grin. "Open that door for me, quick."

A porter held back the door, but as Blake slipped through Harding seized his cloak.

"Hold on; I want a talk with you. I've been waiting all day."

Blake made an effort to break loose, and as he did so the bob-cat dropped from beneath his arm and fell, spitting and snarling, to the ground. Its fur was torn and matted, tufts were hanging loose, and the creature had a singularly disreputable and ferocious appearance. Blake made an attempt to recapture it, but, evading him easily, it ran along the floor with a curious hopping gait and disappeared among the pillars. Then he turned to his friend with a rueful laugh.

"You see what you've done! It's gone into the rotunda, where everybody is."

Harding looked at him critically. "You seem sober. What made you get yourself up like an Italian opera villain and go round the town with a wild beast under your arm?"

"I'll tell you later. What we have to do now is to catch the thing."

"It's time," said Harding drily. "The circus is beginning."

Men's laughter and women's shrieks rose from the entrance hall, which, in a Canadian hotel, serves as general meeting place and lounge. Somebody shouted orders in French, there was a patter of running feet, and then a crash as of chairs being overturned. Blake sprang in and Harding, who followed, divided between amusement and impatience, looked on at an animated scene. Two porters were chasing the bob-cat which now and then turned upon them savagely, while several waiters, who kept at a judicious distance, tried to frighten it into a corner by flourishing their napkins. Women fled out of the creature's way, men hastily moved chairs and tables to give the pursuers room, and some of the more energetic joined in the chase. At one end of the room Mrs. Keith stood angrily giving instructions which nobody attended to. Millicent, who was close by, looked hot and unhappy, but for all that her eyes twinkled when a waiter, colliding with a chair, went down with a crash and the bobcat sped away from him in a series of awkward jumps.

At length, Blake managed to seize it with his mittened hands and after rolling it in a cloth and giving it to a porter, advanced towards Mrs. Keith, his face red with exertion but contrite, and the cloak, which had come unhooked, hanging down from one shoulder. She glanced at him in a puzzled, half-disturbed manner when he stopped.

"The cat is safe," he said. "The man I gave it to will put it with the other animals. If he holds it firmly, I don't think it can bite him."

"As I'm told you dropped it in the vestibule, I feel I'm entitled to an explanation," Mrs. Keith replied in a formal tone, looking hard at him. "I gave the cat to my maid this morning, sending Miss Graham to see it delivered to a man in the town, and it disappeared. How did it come into your possession?"

"Through no fault of Miss Graham's. I happened to notice your maid trying to carry an awkwardly shaped hamper and Miss Graham looking for a cab. It struck me the thing was more of a man's errand and I undertook it."

"It's curious that you knew what the errand was, unless Miss Graham told you." Mrs. Keith looked sternly at Millicent, who blushed. "I have been led to believe that you made her acquaintance, without my knowledge, on board the steamer by which we came up."

"That," said Blake respectfully, "is not quite correct. I was formally presented to Miss Graham in England some time ago. However, as I saw a car coming along St. Catharine's while your maid was looking for a hack and there was no time to explain, I scribbled a note on a bit of a letter and gave it to a boy, and then took the cat to a taxidermist."

"To a taxidermist! Why?"

"It struck me that he ought to know something about the matter. Anyhow, he was the nearest approach to a vet that I could find."

Mrs. Keith looked at him thoughtfully. "You seem to have a curious way of reasoning. But what did the man say?"

"His first remark was, 'Nom d'une pipe!' and he added something more which I couldn't catch, but when we became friends he promised to engage the services of a dog-fancier friend of his."

"You imagined that a dog-fancier would specialize in cats?"

Millicent's eyes twinkled, but Mrs. Keith's face was serious and Blake's perfectly grave.

"I don't know that I argued the matter out. To tell the truth, I undertook the thing on impulse."

"So it seems. You considered it necessary to make friends with the French-Canadian taxidermist?"

"Not necessary, perhaps." Blake appeared to reflect. "Still, it's a way of mine, and the fellow interested me by the tragic manner in which he broke his pipe when I first showed him the cat. His indignation was superb."

Mrs. Keith gave him a look of rather grim amusement. "I see, but you haven't told me what became of my hamper."

"The hamper was unfortunately smashed. The car was not allowed to stop where I wished to get off and I had to jump. I miscalculated the speed and fell down, after which, as there was a good deal of traffic, a transfer wagon ran over the hamper, luckily without hurting the animal inside. I left it at a basket shop and that explains the cloak. My friend the taxidermist insisted on lending it and his winter gloves to me. One looks rather conspicuous walking through the streets with a bob-cat on one's arm."

Then, to Blake's astonishment, Mrs. Keith broke into a soft laugh.

"I understand it all," she said. "It was a prank one would expect you to play. Though it's a very long time since I saw you, you haven't changed, Dick. Now take that ridiculous cloak off and come back and talk to me."

When Blake returned Millicent had gone and Mrs. Keith noticed the glance he cast about the room.

"I sent Miss Graham away," she said. "You have been here some days. Why didn't you tell me who you were?"

"I'll confess that I knew you. You have changed much less than I have, but I wasn't sure you would be willing to acknowledge me."

"Then you were very wrong. One may be forgiven a first offence and I never quite agreed with the popular opinion about what you were supposed to have done. It wasn't like you; there must have been something that did not come out."

"Thank you," Blake said quietly.

She gave him a searching glance. "Can't you say something for yourself?"

"I think not," he answered. "The least said, the soonest mended."

"But for the sake of others."

"So far as I know, only one person was much troubled about my disgrace. I'm thankful my father died before it came."

"Your uncle felt it very keenly. He was furious when the first news arrived and refused to believe you were to blame. Then when Major Allardyce wrote he scarcely spoke for the rest of the day and it was a long time before he recovered from the blow; I was staying at Sandymere. He loved you, Dick, and I imagined he expected you to do even better than his son."

Blake mused for a few moments, and Mrs. Keith could not read his thoughts. Then he said, "Bertram is a very good fellow and has brains. Why should his people think less of him because he likes to paint? But I've been sorry for the Colonel; more sorry than I've felt for myself."

There was a softness that appealed to Mrs. Keith in his dark-blue eyes. She had been fond of Dick Blake in his younger days and firmly believed in him. Now she could not credit his being guilty of cowardice.

"Well," she said, "you have, I trust, a long life before you, and if you have been at fault, you must make amends. There are people who would be glad to see you reinstated."

He made a sign of grave dissent. "That can't happen, in the way you mean. I closed the door of the old life against my return with my own hands, and you don't gain distinction, as the Challoners think of it, in business."

"What business have you gone into?"

Blake's eyes gleamed humorously. "At present I'm in the paint line."

"Paint!" Mrs. Keith exclaimed.

"Yes, but not common paint. We use the highest grade of lead and the purest linseed oil. Varnish also of unapproachable quality, guaranteed to stand exposure to any climate. There's nothing to equal our products in North America."

"Do you seriously mean that you are going about selling these things?"

"Well," said Blake drily, "I'm trying to do so, and I booked an order for two kegs yesterday, but it isn't to be paid for until arrival, when I shall not be here. Can't I induce you to give us a trial? Your house must need painting now and then, and we'll ship you the stuff to Liverpool in air-tight drums. Once you have tried it you'll use nothing else."

Mrs. Keith laughed. "Dick, you're a marvel and I'm glad adversity hasn't soured you; but you won't make enough to keep you in neckties at any business you take up. It's ludicrous to think of your running about with paint samples, but there's something pathetic in it that spoils my amusement." Her face softened and she changed her tone. "I'm a rather rich old woman, Dick, and your mother was a very dear friend of mine. You must let me help you to something better."

"Thank you," he answered with a flush. "But you can't give me money. It's curious that several of my friends have wanted to do so – first the Colonel, then Bertram, and now you. Not flattering, is it? Suggests that you doubt my talents, or that I look like a deserving object of charity."

"You're incorrigible. It was the Blakes' misfortune that they could never be serious, but I admire your pluck."

"We have our failings, but I'm boring you and I'll come back by and by if you'll allow me. My American partner has been waiting for a word with me since this morning."

"And you kept him waiting? That was a true Blake. But go to the man and then tell the hotel people to give you places at my table. I want to see your friend."

"He'll feel as honoured as I do," Blake said, and left her.

Harding was leaning back in his chair in the smoking-room with a frown on his face when Blake joined him. He had a nervous alert look and was dressed with fastidious neatness.

"You have come along at last," he remarked in an ironical tone. "Feel like getting down to business or shall we put it off again?"

"Sorry I couldn't come earlier," Blake replied. "Somehow or other I couldn't get away. Things kept turning up to occupy me."

"It's a way they seem to have. Your trouble is that you're too diffuse; you spread yourself out too much. You want to fix your mind on one thing and that will have to be business as soon as we leave here."

"I dare say you're right. My interest's apt to wander; but if you take advantage of every opportunity that offers, you get most out of life. Concentration's good, but if you concentrate on a thing and then don't get it, you begin to think what a lot of other things you've missed."

Harding made a gesture of resignation. "Guess you must be humoured; I'll wait until you're through. That's a nice girl you stole the bob-cat from, but if she were a sister of mine, I'd choke off that army man who's been trotting round after her most of the day."

"What's the matter with Captain Sedgwick?"

"He has a greedy eye. He'll play any game he goes into for his own hand. Not an unusual plan, but there's generally a code of rules and if it's going to pay him, Sedgwick will break them. Anyhow, as it looks as if Mrs. Chudleigh had him earmarked, why can't he let the girl alone?"

Blake, who had taken a protective interest in Millicent, was somewhat disturbed, but would not admit it.

"Oh!" he said, "our army men aren't ascetics, but I dare say the fellow's a harmless philanderer, and you're a bit of a Puritan."

"I'm married and don't forget it," snapped Harding. "Marianna – that's Mrs. Harding – is living in a two-room tenement, making her own dresses and cooking on a gasoline stove, so's to give me my chance of finding the gum. And I'm here in an expensive hotel, where I've made about five dollars commission in three days and written our people several folios about the iniquities of the Canadian tariff, which is all I've done. We have got to pull out as soon as possible. Did you get any information from the Hudson's Bay man?"

"I learned something about our route through the timber-belt and the kind of camp outfit we'll want; the temperature's often fifty below in winter. Then I was in Revillons', looking at their cheaper furs, and in a store where they supply especially light hand-sledges, snowshoes, and patent cooking cans. We must have these things good, and I estimate they'll cost six hundred dollars."

"Six hundred dollars will make a big hole in our capital."

"I'm afraid so, but we can't run the risk of freezing to death, and we may have to spend all winter in the wilds."

"That's true; I don't go back until I find the gum."

Harding's tone was resolute, and when he leaned forward, musing, with knitted brows, Blake, knowing his story, gave him a sympathetic glance. He had entered the paint factory when a very young man and had studied chemistry in his scanty spare time with the object of understanding his business better. He found the composition of varnishes an interesting subject, and as the best gums employed came from the tropics and were expensive he began to experiment with the exudations from American trees. His employers hinted that he was wasting his time, since the limits to the use of these products were already known, but Harding continued, trying to test a theory that the texture and hardness of the gums might depend upon climatic temperature. By chance a resinous substance which had come from the far North fell into his hands, and he found that when combined with an African gum it gave astonishing results. Before this happened, however, his employers had sent him out on the road, and as they were sceptical about his discovery and he would not take them fully into his confidence, they merely promised to keep his place open for a time. Now he was going to search for the gum at his own expense.

"We'll order the outfit in the morning," he said presently, glancing towards a man who sat across the room. "Do you think that fellow Clarke can hear? I've a notion that he's been watching us."

"Does it matter?"

"You must bear in mind that we have a valuable secret, and I understand he lives somewhere in the country we are going through."

As he spoke the Hudson's Bay agent came in with the sawmiller, who said to the man whom Harding suspected of listening, "That was good stuff you gave me a dose of. It fixed my ague, though I had the shakes bad last night."

Clarke rose and strolled with them to a seat nearer where Blake and Harding sat. "It's a powerful drug and must be used with discretion. If you feel you need it, I'll give you another dose. It's an Indian

remedy and I learned the secret up in the timber-belt, but I spent some time experimenting before I was satisfied about its properties."

Sedgwick, who was passing, stopped and lighted a cigar. "Then you get on with Indians?"

"I do," Clarke said shortly. "It isn't difficult when you grasp their point of view."

"Then your experience doesn't tally with mine and I know something about the primitive races. Their point of view is generally elusive."

"I can credit it." Clarke's tone was sneering. "You people don't try to understand them; you can't come down to it. Standing firm on your colour prejudice and official traditions, you expect the others to agree with you. It's an indefensible policy." He turned to the Hudson's Bay agent. "You ought to know something about the matter. On the whole, the Hudson's Bay treat the Indians well; there was a starving lad you picked up suffering from snow-blindness near Jack-pine river and sent back safely to his tribe."

"That's so, but I can't tell how you knew. I don't remember having talked about the thing; and my clerk has never left the factory. There wasn't another white man within a week's journey."

"I heard, all the same. You had afterwards some better furs than usual brought in."

The agent looked surprised. "Some of these people are grateful, but although I've been in the country twelve years I don't pretend to understand them."

"They understand you. The proof of it is that you can keep your factory open in a district where furs are rather scarce and have had very few mishaps. You can take that as a compliment."

There was something significant in Clarke's tone which Blake remarked, while Sedgwick, feeling that he was being left out, strolled on.

"Then you know the Jack-pine?" the agent asked.

"Pretty well, though it's not easy to reach. I came down it one winter from the Wild-goose hills. I'd put in the winter with a band of Stonies."

"The Northern Stonies? Did you find them easy to get on with?"

"They knew some interesting things," Clarke answered drily. "I went there to study."

"Ah!" said the agent. "What plain folk, for want of a better name, call the occult. But it's fortunate there's a barred door between white men and the Indian's mysticism."

"It has been opened to a white man once or twice."

"Just so. He stepped through into the darkness and never came out again. There was an instance I could mention."

"Civilized folk would have no use for him afterwards," Harding broke in. "We want sane, normal men on this continent. Neurotics, hoodoos and fakirs are worse than a plague; there's contagion in their fooling."

"How would you define them? Those who don't fit in with your ideas of the normal?"

"I know a clean, straight man when I meet him and that's enough for me."

"I imagine that cleverer people are now and then deceived," said Clarke, who moved away.

"That's a man I want to keep clear of," Harding remarked to Blake. "There's something wrong about him; he's not wholesome." He rose. "It's a fine night; let's walk up the mountain."

## CHAPTER VI

### HARDING GROWS CONFIDENTIAL

Next morning Blake and his partner breakfasted at Mrs. Keith's table, and during the afternoon drove up the mountain with her and one or two others. The city was unpleasantly hot and the breeze that swept its streets blew clouds of sand and cement about, for Montreal is subject to fits of feverish constructional activity and on every other block buildings were being torn down and replaced by larger ones of concrete and steel. Leaving its outskirts, the carriage climbed the road which winds in loops through the shade of overhanging trees. Wide views of blue hills and shining river opened up through gaps in the foliage; the air had lost its humid warmth and grew fresh and invigorating.

Reaching the level summit, they dismissed the hacks and found a seat near the edge of a steep, wooded slope. The strip of tableland is not remarkably picturesque, but it is thickly covered with trees, and one can look out across a vast stretch of country traversed by the great river. By and by the party scattered and Mrs. Keith was left with Harding. They were, in many ways, strangely assorted companions, the elderly English lady accustomed to the smoother side of life, and the young American who had struggled hard from boyhood, but they were sensible of a mutual liking. Mrs. Keith had a trace of the grand manner, which had its effect on Harding; he showed a naive frankness she found attractive. Besides, his talk and conduct were marked by a laboured correctness which amused and pleased her. She thought he had taken some trouble to acquire it.

"So you had to leave your wife at home," she said presently. "Wasn't that rather hard for both of you?"

"It was hard enough," he replied with feeling. "What made it worse was that I hadn't many dollars to leave with her, but I had to go. The man who will take no chances has to stay at the bottom."

"Then, if it's not an impertinence, your means are small?"

"Your interest is a compliment, ma'am, and what you say is true. We had two hundred dollars when we were married. You wouldn't consider that much to begin on."

"No," said Mrs. Keith, whose marriage settlement had made over to her valuable property. "Still, of course, it depends upon what one expects. After all; I think my poorest friends have been happiest."

"We had only one trouble; making the dollars go round," Harding told her with grave confidence. "It was worst in the hot weather when other people could move out of town, and it hurt me to see Marianna looking white and tired. I used to wish I could send her to one of the summer-boarders' farms up in the hills, though I guess she wouldn't have gone without me. She's brave, and when my chance came she saw that I must take it. She sent me off with smiles, but I knew what they cost."

"She will smile more brightly when you come back, and courage to face a hard task is a great gift. So you consider this trip to the North-West your opportunity? You must expect to sell a good deal of paint."

Harding looked up with a sudden twinkle. "I'll own to you, ma'am, that I've another object. The company will pay my commission on any orders I get at the settlements, but this is my venture, not theirs. I'm going up into the wilds to look for a valuable raw material."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Keith. "I suspected something like this. It's difficult to imagine Dick Blake's going into anything so sober and matter of fact as the paint business. Have you known him long?"

"I met him a year ago, and we spent two or three weeks together."

"But was that long enough to learn much about him? Do you know his history?"

Harding gave her a direct glance. "Do you?"

"Yes," she said; "I gather that he has taken you into his confidence."

"Now you set me free to talk. When I asked him to be my partner, he told me why he had left the army. That was the square thing, and it made me keen on getting him."

"Then you were not deterred by what you learned?"

"Not at all. I knew it was impossible that Blake should have done what he was charged with."

"I thought so, but I know him better than you do," Mrs. Keith said gravely. "What made you jump to the conclusion?"

"You shall judge whether I hadn't good reason. I was in one of our lake ports, collecting accounts, and Blake had come with me. It was late at night when I saw my last customer at his hotel, and I had a valise half-full of silver currency and bills. Going back along the waterfront where the second-rate saloons are, I thought that somebody was following me. The lights didn't run far along the street, I hadn't seen a patrol, and as I was passing a dark block a man jumped out. I got a blow on the shoulder that made me sore for a week, but the fellow had missed my head with the sandbag, and I slipped behind a telegraph post before he could strike again. Still, things looked ugly. The man who'd been following came into sight, and I was between the two. Then Blake ran up the street, and I was mighty glad to see him. He had two men to tackle, and one had a sandbag, while I guess the other had a pistol."

"But you were there. That made it equal."

"No," said Harding. "I'd been near knocked out with the sandbag and could hardly keep my feet. Besides, I'd my employers' money in the valise, and it was my business to take care of it."

Mrs. Keith made a sign of agreement. "I beg your pardon. You were right."

"Blake got after the first thief like a panther. He was so quick I didn't quite see what happened, but the man reeled half-way across the street before he fell, and when his partner saw Blake coming for him he ran. Then, when the trouble was over, a patrol came along, and he and Blake helped me back to my hotel. Knowing I had the money, he'd got uneasy when I was late." Harding paused and looked meaningly at his companion. "Later I was asked to believe that the man who went for those two toughs with no weapon but his fists ran away under fire. The thing didn't seem possible."

"And so you trust Blake, in spite of his story?"

"The North-West is a hard country in winter and I may find myself in a tight place before I've finished my search," Harding answered with grave quietness. "But if that happens I'll have a partner I can trust my life to beside me. What's more, Mrs. Harding, who's a judge of character, feels I'm safe with him."

Mrs. Keith was moved; his respect for his wife's judgment and his faith in his comrade appealed to her.

"Though my opinion of Blake is not generally held, I believe you are right," she said. "And now tell me something about your journey."

While they talked, Millicent and Blake sat in the sunshine on the slope of the hill. Beneath them a wide landscape stretched away towards the Ottawa valley, the road to the lonely North, and the girl, who had never left the confines of civilization, felt a longing to see the trackless wilds. The distance drew her.

"Your way lies up yonder," she said. "I suppose you are thinking about it. Are you looking forward to the trip?"

"Not so much as Harding is," Blake replied. "He's a bit of an enthusiast, and I've been in the country before. It's a singularly rough one, and I anticipate our meeting with more hardships than dollars."

"Which doesn't seem to daunt you."

"No," said Blake; "not to a great extent. Hardship is not a novelty to me, and I don't think I'm avaricious. The fact is, I'm a good deal better at spending than gathering."

"It's undoubtedly easier," the girl rejoined. "But while I like Mr. Harding I shouldn't consider him a type of the romantic adventurer."

"You're right in a sense and wrong in another. Harding's out for dollars, and I believe he'll get them if they're to be had. He'll avoid adventures so far as he can, but if there's trouble to be faced, it won't stop him. Then he has left a safe employment, broken up his home, and set off on this long journey for the sake of a woman who is trying to hold out on a very few dollars in a couple of poor rooms until his return. He's taking risks which I believe may be serious in order that she may have a brighter and fuller life. Is there no romance in this?"

What Blake said about his comrade's devotion to his wife appealed to the girl. Marriage had apparently not lessened his tender thought for her, and Millicent wondered whether she was capable of inspiring such a feeling. She had found life hard, and so far had shrunk from the few men who had cultivated her acquaintance. Indeed, she felt contaminated as she remembered the advances made by one.

"On the face of it, looking for openings in the paint business doesn't seem to be a very risky matter," she suggested.

"It depends a good deal on how it's done," Blake answered with a laugh. "With Harding, a business opening is a comprehensive term."

Millicent mused for a moment or two. She liked Blake and he improved upon acquaintance. He had a whimsical humour and a dash of reckless gallantry. It was not to his credit that he had frequented her father's house, and he was supposed to be in disgrace, but she had cause to know that he was compassionate and chivalrous.

"Though you have not been with us long, we shall be duller when you have gone," she told him.

"Well," he said, "in a sense that's nice to hear, but it's with mixed feelings one leaves friends behind." His tone grew serious. "I've lost some good ones."

"I can imagine your making others easily, but haven't you retained one or two? I think, for instance, you could count on Mrs. Keith."

"Ah!" he said, "I owe a good deal to her. A little charity, such as she shows, goes a very long way."

Millicent did not answer, and he watched her as she sat looking out into the distance with grave brown eyes. Her face was gentle; he thought there was pity for him in it and felt strongly drawn to her, but he remembered that he was a man with a tainted name and must travel a lonely road. She was conscious of his scrutiny, but took no offence at it.

"Perhaps we had better change our place," she said by and by. "The sun is rather strong now the wind has gone."

Some of the others joined them, and soon afterwards they walked down the winding road to the city; when they sat outside the hotel after dinner Blake asked Harding if he had enjoyed the afternoon.

"I did," said Harding with earnestness. "I'd only one regret; that Mrs. Harding wasn't here to share it with me. Your friends are charming ladies of a stamp Marianna and I so far haven't had much chance to meet." Then his face grew very resolute as he added: "But she shall have her opportunity. If things go right with us she'll get her share of all that's best in life – and, with that at stake, we have to make things right."

Two days later Harding got some letters he had been waiting for, and as there was now nothing to keep them in Montreal, Blake said good-bye to Mrs. Keith next morning. Though she was gracious to him he felt a strong sense of disappointment at finding her alone, but when he was going out he met Millicent in the hall. She wore her hat and the flush of colour in her face indicated that she had been walking fast.

"I'm glad I didn't miss you, but I had an errand to do," she said. "You are going now; by the Vancouver express?"

"Yes," said Blake, stopping beside a pillar; "I was feeling rather gloomy until I saw you. Harding's at the station, and it's depressing to set off on a long journey feeling that nobody minds your going."

"Mrs. Keith will mind," said Millicent. "I'm sure she was very friendly and gave you her good wishes."

Blake looked at her with a smile. "Somehow they didn't seem enough. I think I wanted yours."

She coloured, but met his glance. "Then," she said, "you have them. I haven't forgotten what happened one evening in London, and I wish you a safe journey and success."

"Thank you," he answered with feeling. "It will be something to remember that you have wished me well." Then as his eyes rested upon her he forgot that he was a marked man. She looked very fresh and desirable; there was a hint of regret and pity in her face and a trace of shyness in her manner. "I suppose I can't ask you to think of me now and then; it would be too much," he went on. "But won't you give me something of yours, some trifle to keep as a memento."

Millicent hesitated and then took a tiny bunch of flowers from the lace at the neck of her white dress. "Will these do?" she asked, and added with a smile: "They won't last very long."

"They will last a long time, well taken care of, but what you said had a sting. Did you mean that you wouldn't give me anything more enduring?"

"No," she said shyly, "not that altogether. I think I meant that they would last as long as you might care to remember our acquaintance."

Blake bowed. "My memory's good. When I come back I will show you your gift as a token."

"But I shall be in England then."

"I bore that in mind. It is not very far off, and I'm a wanderer."

"Well," she said with faint confusion, "unless you hurry you will miss your train. Good-bye and good fortune!"

He took the hand she gave him and held it a moment. "I wonder whether your last wish will ever be realized, if so, I shall come to thank you, even in England."

Then he turned and went out with hurried steps, wondering what had led him to break through the reserve he had prudently determined to maintain. What he had said might mean nothing, but it might mean much. He had seen Millicent Graham for a few minutes in her father's house, and afterwards met her every day during the week spent in Montreal, but brief as their friendship had been, he had yielded to her charm. Had he been free to seek her love he would eagerly have done so, but he was not free. He was an outcast, engaged in a desperate attempt to repair his fortune. Miss Graham knew this, and had probably taken his remarks for what they were worth as a piece of sentimental gallantry, but something in her manner suggested a doubt and the trouble was that he did not wish her to regard them in this light. It looked as if he had made a fool of himself, but he had promised to show her the flowers again some day, and he carefully placed them in his pocket book.

The train was ready to start when he found Harding impatiently waiting him on the platform and a few moments later the long cars were swiftly rolling west.

## CHAPTER VII

### MRS. CHUDLEIGH GATHERS INFORMATION

It was a fine morning when Mrs. Keith sat on the saloon deck of a river boat steaming with the ebb tide down the St. Lawrence. The terraced heights of Quebec had faded astern; ahead a blaze of sunshine rested on the river, up which a big liner with crowded decks and her smoke-trail staining the clear blue sky moved majestically. To starboard dark pinewoods, with here and there a sawmill stack, were faintly marked upon the lofty bank; to port rose rugged hills with wooden villages at their feet. The light wind that rippled the blue water was pleasantly cool, and Mrs. Keith, laying down the book she had been reading, looked about with languid enjoyment.

"I suppose I'm neglecting my opportunities, but this is very delightful and I don't think they have anything finer than the river in Canada," she said. "Its width impresses one; the French villages with their church spires are so picturesque – I wonder how many churches there are in this part of the country. One sees them everywhere."

"You were urged to see the Ontario forests and the prairie," Millicent remarked.

"One cannot do everything, and I'm not insatiable. I'm getting too old to stand the shaking in the hot and dusty cars, and I can't accustom myself to going to bed in public, without undressing. No doubt, it's a matter of prejudice, but I've been used to more room for taking my clothes off than they give you behind the flapping curtain."

Millicent laughed as she remembered their experiences during a journey on a crowded express.

"Getting up is worse," she said. "However, they told us it was very pretty and generally cool at Saguenay. Then you'll have somebody to talk to, as Mrs. Chudleigh is coming. But didn't she make up her mind rather suddenly?"

"I thought so, since she didn't speak of going until I sent you for the tickets. Still, Sedgwick was sent to Ottawa, where she doesn't know anybody, which may have had something to do with it."

Millicent, who looked very pretty in her light summer dress as she leaned back in a deckchair, did not reply. Sun and wind had brought a fine warm colour into her face, but her brown eyes were grave, for there was a point upon which she must try to form a correct judgment and she distrusted her inexperience. She was young and had a natural love of pleasure, as well as a certain longing for excitement and a willingness to take a risk which she had inherited from her gambling father. Mrs. Keith had prevented her indulging these tendencies, and the girl, thrust for the most part into the society of older people, suffered at times from a feeling of depressing monotony.

Then she had met Captain Sedgwick, who paid her rather marked attention, at Quebec, and at first had been attracted by the handsome soldier and flattered by his singling her out among women of higher station and maturer beauty; but the attraction did not last long. There was a vein of sound sense in Millicent, and when she tested Sedgwick by it, he did not ring true, and when Mrs. Chudleigh openly claimed him as her property she acquiesced. Afterwards she met Blake on board the steamer and the gratitude and admiration which a chivalrous act of his had roused suddenly revived. Moreover she was sorry for him and felt that he had been unjustly blamed, while, though it was generally hidden by his careless manner, she thought she saw in him a strong sincerity. Now she wondered whether she was foolish in letting her thoughts dwell on him, and if he would soon forget her. Recalling his words when he said good-bye she knew he had been stirred, but before this she had been conscious of a certain restraint in his manner which had only broken down at the last moment. By and by Mrs. Keith disturbed her reflections.

"It looks as if we were to be favoured with Mrs. Chudleigh's society," she remarked with ironical amusement. "Mine appears to have become more valuable during the last few days."

Millicent saw Mrs. Chudleigh moving towards them, followed by a steward carrying a folding chair and a maid who brought a book, a bunch of flowers, an ornamental leather bag, and several other odds and ends. Mrs. Chudleigh was elaborately attired, but the large plumed hat and dress cut in the extreme of the current fashion became her. She made a stately progress along the deck with her burdened attendants in her train, and it took a few minutes to arrange her belongings to her satisfaction. Then she sank into the big chair with marked grace of movement and smiled at Mrs. Keith.

"A delightful morning. I ought to have been writing letters, but the sunshine brought me out."

Mrs. Keith agreed and Mrs. Chudleigh went on: "I have enjoyed this visit greatly and find Canada a most interesting country. In fact, I wish I could stay another month or two, but, of course, when one has duties."

As Mrs. Chudleigh had neither husband nor children, Margaret Keith wondered what her duties were, unless she considered the taking a part in a round of social amusements as such.

"After all," she remarked, "I imagine that one doesn't see very much of the real Canada from the *Frontenac* or a big hotel in Montreal."

"True," said Mrs. Chudleigh. "I must confess that I didn't come out to study the country, though I'm charmed with all I've seen. I'm afraid I belong to a frivolous set and find a change refreshing. Then several old friends of mine were going to take a part in the celebrations at Quebec – Captain Sedgwick among others."

"Is Captain Sedgwick a very old friend?" Mrs. Keith asked, willing to give the other the lead she seemed to wish for.

"Oh, yes; I met him first as a subaltern in India, when he was very raw and troubled by a seriousness he has since grown out of, but I thought he would make his mark."

Mrs. Keith pondered the explanation. She could not imagine her companion's patronizing a callow young lieutenant, but this was not important. Admitting that a hint might have been intended for Millicent's benefit, Mrs. Chudleigh's boldness in laying claim to the man by suggesting that she had come out for his sake was puzzling. It was not in good taste, but although Mrs. Chudleigh's position was assured, there was something of the audacity of the adventuress about her. Margaret Keith, however, had no admiration for Sedgwick, whom she thought of as second-rate, and she was glad to believe that Millicent did not wish to dispute the woman's right to him.

"Are you going home soon?" she asked.

"Before long, I think. There is a round of visits I have promised to make and I may stay some time with the Fosters in Shropshire near Colonel Challoner's place. I believe he is a friend of yours."

"He is. Have you met him?"

"Once; I found him charming. A very fine, old-fashioned gentleman, and I understand a famous soldier. Somebody told me he never quite got over his nephew's disgrace and seemed to think it reflected upon the whole family. Very foolish, of course, but one can admire his sense of honour."

Mrs. Keith began to understand why her companion had sought her. She wished to speak about Richard Blake and Mrs. Keith was forced to acquiesce, since he had been seen in her company.

"I suppose you know the nephew was in Montreal," she said.

"To tell the truth, I do. I saw him talking to Bertram Challoner, whom I met in London, and the family likeness struck me. Then I saw his name in the hotel register."

"No doubt you studied him after that. What opinion did you form?"

Mrs. Chudleigh gave her a look of thoughtful candour. "I was puzzled and interested. I don't know him, but he did not look the man to run away."

"He is not," Mrs. Keith declared. "I knew him as a boy, and even then he was marked by reckless daring. What's more, I noticed very little change in him."

"It's strange." Mrs. Chudleigh's tone was sympathetically grave. "I feel much as you do. After all, it may have been one of the affairs about which the truth never quite comes out."

"What do you wish to suggest by that?"

"Nothing in particular; I've no means of forming an accurate conclusion. But the regimental honour was threatened and a scapegoat needed. A mistake may have been made by somebody of greater importance. One hears of some curious things."

"That's true," Mrs. Keith drily agreed. "I believe in Dick Blake, but it must be admitted that he made no defence."

Mrs. Chudleigh pondered this. "One meets men capable of making a great sacrifice, though they're by no means numerous. I suppose Colonel Challoner really felt it a heavy blow?"

"Those who know him can't doubt it, though he never speaks of the matter."

"It must have been a shock. Apart from whatever affection he had for his nephew, there was, in a sense, the stigma reflected upon himself – an old man who has bravely won distinction and retains some influence! I'm told he has friends in administrative circles and that his opinion on Indian subjects still carries weight."

"I believe so," said Mrs. Keith. "He certainly holds his opinions firmly, and was once looked upon as an authority on frontier defence. Indeed, he gave up his command because he could not get some drastic change which events subsequently proved needful adopted. His honesty is remembered by men who hold him in esteem."

"All you have said bears out my impression of him. I must renew our acquaintance when I am in Shropshire. Are you staying here long?"

Mrs. Keith was glad to change the subject, but while they talked a steward appeared with a letter for Millicent, which he explained had been sent on board the steamer at Quebec. As the girl laid down the opened envelope Mrs. Chudleigh recognized Sedgwick's writing and her face grew contemptuously hard. Then she laughed and started a different topic, which she continued for a time. When she went away, Mrs. Keith turned to Millicent.

"I wonder whether I have told her too much, though it's hard to see what use she can make of it. Innocent or not, Dick Blake is a favourite of mine and when I speak of him I'm apt to be unguarded. Of course, it's obvious that she joined us on purpose to talk about him."

"One would have imagined it was Captain Sedgwick. She dragged him in rather pointedly."

"Oh! no. That was by the way, and perhaps intended to put me off the scent. She's a scheming woman."

"But she has not learned much from you."

"She has learned two things," Mrs. Keith answered thoughtfully. "First, that I don't believe Dick Blake failed in his duty; and, secondly, that Colonel Challoner has some influence. I think she was particularly interested in the latter point. I've been incautious and let my tongue run away with me."

Then she took up her book while Millicent read her letter. Though young and to some extent inexperienced, her judgment was generally sound, and she had come to see how Sedgwick really regarded her. She had pleased his eye, and he was a man who would boldly grasp at what delighted him, but love would not be permitted to interfere with his ambitions. He wrote in a tone of forced and insincere sentiment, and his words brought a blush into Millicent's face as well as a rather bitter smile into her eyes. By and by she tore the sheet into pieces and dropped them over the steamer's rail. That affair was ended.

As the fragments of paper fluttered astern Mrs. Keith looked up. "You are treating somebody's letter very unceremoniously."

"Perhaps I am," said Millicent. "It's from Captain Sedgwick."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mrs. Keith. "Has he anything of interest to say?"

"He mentions that he is going back to Africa sooner than he expected because the officer above him has suffered so much from the climate that he has asked to be relieved of his post. Captain Sedgwick believes this will give him a chance of advancement."

"Then I've no doubt he'll make the most of it. I suppose he doesn't waste much pity on his unfortunate chief? The man's personal interest stands first with him."

"Isn't that the usual thing with men?"

"There are exceptions. Colonel Challoner, for instance, threw up his career when he found he was forced to act against his convictions, and I've a suspicion that another man I know made as great a sacrifice. However, Sedgwick will make every effort to get the vacant post, and I wonder whether he told Mrs. Chudleigh how matters stood. She may have had a letter before you did."

Millicent knew her employer's penetration, but did not understand the drift of her remarks.

"I dare say he wrote to her. She told us they were old friends. But why should it interest you?"

"It does," Mrs. Keith rejoined. "I have a habit of putting things together and drawing my conclusions, though, of course, I'm now and then mistaken. Whether I'm right or not in the present instance time will show, but I must try to watch the woman when we go home." Then she added sharply: "As you have torn it up, you don't mean to answer Sedgwick's letter?"

"No," said Millicent, with a trace of colour; "I don't think it needs a reply."

Mrs. Keith made a sign of agreement. "On the whole," she said pointedly, "I should imagine that to be a wise decision."

On reaching Saguenay, Mrs. Keith spent the first morning sitting outside her hotel. Rugged mountains with dark belts of pines straggling up their sides were spread about her, but she gave the wild grandeur of the landscape scanty attention as she consulted the engagement book in her hand. It contained a list of the friends she wished to entertain and the visits she had thought of making in England during the winter, and she wondered which could be shortened and whom she could put off, because it might be desirable to spend some time in Shropshire.

Margaret Keith was a strong-willed woman who had led a busy life, but now, when she had resolved to retire into the background and rest, it looked as if she might again be forced to take an active part in affairs. She had enjoyed her Canadian trip, but during the last week or two it had begun to lose its interest, and she was conscious of a call to be up and doing. She suspected Mrs. Chudleigh, she doubted Sedgwick, and she was disturbed by the way the unfortunate affair on the Indian frontier had cropped up again. Somehow, she felt Colonel Challoner's peace was threatened, which could not be permitted. For many years she had cherished a warm liking for him, and long ago, when he was a young lieutenant, she could have made him hers. Family arrangements, complicated by the interests of landed property, had, however, stood in the way. Challoner was not free to marry as he pleased; he had been taught that the desire of the individual must be subordinated to the welfare of the line, and when he first met Margaret Keith, who was beautiful then, it was too late for him to rebel. She let him go, but he had always had a place in her heart, and now they were firm and trusted friends.

During her stay at Saguenay, Mrs. Chudleigh made two or three attempts to extract some further information about the Challoners but without success, and one day, soon after she had left, Mrs. Keith sent Millicent for a list of steamer sailings.

"This place is very pretty, but we have been here some time and I'm beginning to think of home," she said.

"One of the Empresses sails next week," said Millicent, returning with the card. "Mr. Gordon told me this morning that Mrs. Chudleigh went in the *Salmatian* the day before he left Quebec."

"Did she?" Mrs. Keith rejoined. "Well, perhaps you had better write to the Montreal office about our berths." Then, for the call had grown clearer, she smiled as the girl went away, and added: "It might be wiser to keep the woman in sight."

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE PRAIRIE

A strong breeze swept the wide plain, blowing fine sand about, when Blake plodded beside the jaded Indian pony that drew his Red-river cart. It was loaded with preserved provisions, camp stores, and winter clothes, and he had bought it and the pony because that seemed cheaper than paying for transport. The settlement for which he was bound stands near the northern edge of the great sweep of grass which stretches across central Canada, and means of communication between it and the outer world were scarce. Harding, accordingly, had agreed to the purchase of the animal with the idea of selling it afterwards to one of the settlers.

Since leaving the railroad they had spent four days upon the trail, which sometimes ran plain before them, marked by dints of wheels among the wiry grass, and sometimes died away, leaving them at a loss in a wilderness of sand and short poplar scrub, through which Blake steered by compass. Now it was late in the afternoon and the men were tired of battling with the wind which buffeted their sunburned faces with sharp sand. They were crossing one of the high steppes of the middle prairie towards the belt of pines and muskegs which divides it from the barrens of the North. The broad stretch of fertile loam, where prosperous wooden towns are rising fast among the wheatfields, lay to the south of them, and the arid tract they journeyed through had so far no attraction for even the adventurous homestead pre-emptor.

They found it a bleak and cheerless country, crossed by the ravines of a few sluggish creeks, the water of which was unpleasant to drink, and dotted at long intervals by ponds bitter with alkali. In places, stunted poplar bluffs cut against the sky, but, for the most part, there was only a rolling waste of dingy grass. The trail was heavy, the wheels sank deep in sand as they climbed a low rise, and, to make things worse, the rounded, white-edged clouds which had scudded across the sky since morning were gathering in threatening masses. This had happened every afternoon, but now and then the cloud ranks had broken, to pour out a furious deluge and a blaze of lightning. Harding anxiously studied the sky.

"I guess we're up against another thunderstorm," he said. "My opinion of the mid-continental climate is singularly mean, but I'd put this strip of Canada near the limit. Our Texan northers are fierce when they come along, but here it blows all the time."

"We'll make camp, if you like; I don't feel very fresh," Blake replied.

"Not here," snapped Harding, "Where I stop I sleep, and I've no use for sheltering under the cart. Last time we tried it the pony stampeded and the wheel went over my foot. The tent's no good; you'd want a chain to stop its blowing away. We'll go on until we bring up to lee of a big, solid bluff."

"Very well," Blake agreed. "I daresay we ought to find one in the hollow we got a glimpse of from the last rise, but we haven't had to put up with much discomfort yet."

"It's a matter of opinion; you haven't limped forty miles on a bad foot, but I'm not complaining," Harding rejoined, "In fact, I've most been happy since we left the depot. It's something to feel that you have started; doing nothing takes the sand out of me."

Blake had once or twice suggested that his comrade should ride, but the pony was overburdened and Harding refused. He explained that they could not expect to sell it in a worn-out condition, but his partner suspected him of sympathy for the patient beast.

They crossed the ridge and seeing a wavy line of trees in the wide hollow, quickened their pace. The soil was firmer, the scrub the wheels crushed through was short, and the trail led smoothly down a slight descent. This was comforting, because half the sky was barred with leaden cloud and the parched grass gleamed beneath it lividly white, while the light that struck a ridge-top here and there

had a sinister luridness. It was getting cold and the wind was dropping, which was not a favourable sign.

Pushing the cart through the softer places, dragging the jaded pony by the head, they hurried on and at length plunged through a creek with the trees close in front. A few minutes later they tethered the pony to lee of the cart and set up their tent. Then, while Blake was rummaging out provisions and Harding searching the bluff for dry sticks, they heard a beat of hoofs and a man rode up, leading a second horse. He got down and throwing a bundle off his saddle hobbled the beasts before he turned to Blake.

"From the south? You're for Sweetwater?" he said.

Blake told him he had guessed correctly, and asked how far they had still to go.

"You ought to make it in a day and a half," said the other. "I'll ride in with you; run a store and hotel there, but feel I want to get out on the prairie now and then, and as a horse was missing I went after him. A looker, isn't he?"

Blake admired the animal, and suggested that the stranger had better join them instead of cooking a separate supper. The fellow, who told them that his name was Gardner, had a good-humoured, sunburned face and an honest look. The prairie was now wrapped in inky gloom, and there was an impressive stillness except for the occasional rustle of a leaf, but when Harding came out of the bluff with a load of wood a puff of icy wind suddenly stirred the grass. The harsh rustle it made was followed by a deafening crash, and a jagged streak of lightning fell from the leaden clouds; then the air was filled with the roar of driving hail. It swept the wood, rending leaves and smashing twigs, while the men crouched inside the straining tent and a constant blaze of lightning flickered about the grass. By and by the thunder died away and the hail gave place to torrential rain, while the slender trees rocked in the blast and small branches drove past the tent. This lasted some minutes, after which the rain ceased suddenly and a fierce red light streamed along the saturated grass from the huge sinking sun. Harding, who had brought the wood into the tent, took it out and with the stranger's help soon made a fire.

It was getting dark, though a band of transcendental green still burned upon the prairie's western edge when they finished supper and, sitting round the fire, took out their pipes. The hobbled horses were quietly grazing near them.

"That's undoubtedly a fine animal," Blake remarked. "Is it yours?"

"No; it belongs to Clarke's Englishman."

"Who's he? It's a curious way to speak of a fellow."

"It fits him," said the other. "Guess he's Clarke's, hide and bones, and that's all there'll be when the doctor has done with him. He's a sucker the doctor taught farming and then sold land to."

"Then who's the doctor?" Harding inquired.

"That's not so easy to answer, but he's a man you want to be friends with if you stay near the settlement. Teaches farming to tenderfoot young Englishmen and Americans; finds them land and stock to start with, and makes a mighty good thing out of it. Goes to Montreal now and then, but whether it's to look up fresh suckers or on the jag is more than I know."

"We met a fellow called Clarke at the *Windsor* not long since. What's he like?"

Gardner described him and Harding said, "That's the man."

"Then I can't see what he was doing at the *Windsor*; an opium joint would have been more in his line."

"Does the fellow live at Sweetwater?" Blake asked.

"Has a farm, and runs it well, about three miles back, but he's away pretty often in the North and at a settlement on the edge of the bush country. Don't know what he does there, and they're a curious crowd; Dubokars, Russians of sorts, I guess."

Blake had seen the Dubokars in other parts of Canada and had found them an industrious people, leading, from religious convictions, a remarkably primitive life. There were, however, fanatics

among them, and he understood that these now and then led their followers into outbreaks of emotional extravagance.

"They make good settlers, as a rule," he said. "But, as they don't speak English, how does the fellow get on with them?"

"Told me he was a philologist, when I asked him; then he allowed two or three of them were mystics and he was something in that line. He was a doctor once and got fired out of England for something he shouldn't have done. Anyhow, the Dubokars are like the rest of us, good, bad, and pretty mixed, and the crowd back of Sweetwater belong to the last. At first some of them didn't believe it was right to work horses and made the women drag the plough, and they'd one or two other habits that brought the North-West Police down on them. After that they've given no trouble, but they get on a jag of some kind now and then."

Blake nodded. He knew that the fanatic with untrained and unbalanced mind is liable under the influence of excitement to indulge in crude debauchery; but it was strange that a man of culture, such as Clarke appeared to be, should take a part in these excesses. He had, however, no interest in the fellow and turned the talk on to other matters, and when it got cold they went to sleep.

Starting early next morning, they reached Sweetwater after an uneventful journey and found it by no means an attractive place. South of it rolling prairie ran back, greyish white with withered grass, to the skyline; to the north straggling poplar bluffs and scattered Jack-pines crowned the summits of the ridges. A lake gleamed in a hollow, a slow creek wound across the foreground in a deep ravine, and here and there in the distance one could see an outlying farm. A row of houses followed the crest of the ravine, the side of which formed a dumping ground for domestic refuse. Some were built of small logs, and some of shiplap lumber which had cracked with exposure to the sun, but all had a neglected and poverty-stricken air. The land was poor and the settlement located too far from a market. With leaden thunderclouds hanging over it, the place looked as desolate as the sad-coloured waste.

Following the deeply-rutted street, which had a narrow, plank sidewalk, they reached the Imperial hotel; a somewhat pretentious, double-storeyed building of unpainted wood, with a verandah in front of it. Here Gardner took the pony from them and gave them a room which had no furniture except a chair and two rickety iron beds. Before he went out he indicated a printed list of the things they were not allowed to do. Harding studied it with a sardonic smile.

"I don't see much use in prohibiting folks from washing their clothes in the bedrooms when they don't give you any water," he remarked. "This place must be about the limit in the way of cheap hotels."

"It isn't cheap," said Blake; "I've seen the tariff, but on the whole I like the fellow who keeps it."

They found their supper better than they had reason to expect, and afterwards sat out on the verandah with the proprietor and one or two of the settlers who boarded at the hotel. The sun had set and now and then a heavy shower beat upon the shingled roof, but the western sky was clear and flushed with vivid crimson, towards which the prairie rolled away in varying tones of blue. Lights shone in the windows behind the verandah, and from one which stood open a hoarse voice drifted out, singing in a maudlin fashion snatches of an old music-hall ditty.

"It's that fool Benson – Clarke's Englishman," Gardner explained. "Found he'd got into my bed with his boots on after falling down in a muskeg. It's not the first time he's played that trick; when he gets worse than usual he makes straight for my room."

"Why do you give him the liquor?" Harding inquired.

"I don't," said Gardner drily. "He's a pretty regular customer, but he never gets too much at this hotel."

"And there isn't another."

"That's so," Gardner agreed, but he offered no explanation and Blake changed the subject.

"Unless you're fond of farming, life in these remote districts is trying," he remarked. "The loneliness and monotony are apt to break down men who are not used to it."

"Turns some of them crazy and kills off a few," agreed a farmer, who appeared to be well educated. "After all, worse things might happen to them."

"It's conceivable," said Blake. "But what particular things were you referring to?"

"I was thinking of men who go to the devil while they're alive. There's a fellow in this neighbourhood who's doing something of the kind."

"Rot!" exclaimed a thick voice, and a man's figure appeared against the light at the open window. "Devil'sh a myth; allegorolical gentleman, everybody knowsh. Hard word that – allegorolical. Bad word too, reminds you of things in the rivers down in Florida. Must be some in the creek here; seen them in my homestead."

"You go to bed," said Gardner sternly.

"Nosh a bit," replied the other. "Who you talking to?" He leaned forward in danger of falling through the window. "Lemme out."

"It's not all drink," Gardner explained. "He has something like shakes and ague now and then. Says he got it in India."

The other disappeared and a few moments afterwards reeled out of the door and held himself upright by one of the verandah posts.

"Now I'm here, don't let me interrupt," he said. "Nice place if this post would keep still."

Warned by a sign from Gardner, the others ignored him, and Harding remarked to the farmer, "You hadn't finished what you were saying when he disturbed you."

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