

Raymond Evelyn

A Daughter of the Forest



Evelyn Raymond
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CHAPTER I

THE STORM

“Margot! Margot!”

Mother Angelique’s anxious call rang out over the water, once, twice, many times. But, though she shaded her brows with her hands and strained her keen ears to listen, there was no one visible and no response came back to her. So she climbed the hill again and, reëntering the cabin, began to stir with almost vicious energy the contents of a pot swinging in the wide fireplace. As she toiled she muttered and wagged her gray head with sage misgivings.

“For my soul! There is the ver’ bad hoorican’ a-comin’, and the child so heedless. But the signs, the omens! This same day I did fall asleep at the knitting and waked a-smother. True, ’twas Meroude, the cat, crouched on my breast; yet what sent her save for a warning?”

Though even in her scolding the woman smiled, recalling how Margot had jeered at her superstition; and that when she had dropped her bit of looking-glass the girl had merrily congratulated her on the fact; since by so doing she had secured “two mirrors in which to behold such loveliness!”

“No, no, not so. Death lurks in a broken glass; or, at the best, must follow seven full years of bad luck and sorrow.”

On which had come the instant reproof:

“Silly Angelique! When there is no such thing as luck but all is of the will of God.”

The old nurse had frowned. The maid was too wise for her years. She talked too much with the master. It was not good for womenkind to listen to grave speech or plague their heads with graver books. Books, indeed, were for priests and doctors; and, maybe, now and then, for men who could not live without them, like Master Hugh. She, Angelique, had never read a book in all her life. She never meant to do so. She had not even learned a single letter printed in their foolish pages. Not she. Yet was not she a most excellent cook and seamstress? Was there any cabin in all that northland as tidy as that she ruled? Would matters have been the better had she bothered her poor brain with books? She knew her duty and she did it. What more could mortal?

This argument had been early in the day. A day on which the master had gone away to the mainland and the house-mistress had improved by giving the house an extra cleaning. To escape the soapsuds and the loneliness, Margot had, also, gone, alone and unquestioned; taking with her a luncheon of brown bread and cold fowl, her book and microscope. Angelique had watched the little canoe push off from shore, without regret, since now she could work unhindered at clearing the room of the “rubbishy specimen” which the others had brought in to mess the place.

Now, at supper time, perfect order reigned, and perfect quiet, as well; save for the purring of Meroude upon the hearth and the simmering of the kettle. Angelique wiped her face with her apron.

“The great heat! and May but young yet. It means trouble. I wish – ”

Suddenly, the cat waked from her sleep and with a sharp meouw leaped to her mistress’s shoulder; who screamed, dropped the ladle, splashed the stew, and boxed the animal’s ears – all within a few seconds. Her nerves were already tingling from the electricity in the air, and her anxiety returned with such force that, again swinging the crane around away from the fire, she hurried to the beach.

To one so weatherwise the unusual heat, the leaden sky, and the intense hush were ominous. There was not a breath of wind stirring, apparently, yet the surface of the lake was already dotted by tiny white-caps, racing and chasing shoreward, like live creatures at play. Not many times, even

in her long life in that solitude, had Angelique Ricord seen just that curious coloring of cloud and water, and she recalled these with a shudder. The child she loved was strong and skilful, but what would that avail? Her thin face darkened, its features sharpened, and making a trumpet of her hands, she put all her force into a long, terrified halloo.

“Ah-ho-a-ah! Margot – Mar-g-o-t – Margot!”

Something clutched her shoulder and with another frightened scream the woman turned to confront her master.

“Is the child away?”

“Yes, yes. I know not where.”

“Since when?”

“It seems but an hour, maybe two, three, and she was here, laughing, singing, all as ever. Though it was before the midday, and she went in her canoe, still singing.”

“Which way?”

She pointed due east, but now into a gloom that was impenetrable. On the instant, the lapping wavelets became breakers, the wind rose to a deafening shriek, throwing Angelique to the ground and causing even the strong man to reel before it. As soon as he could right himself he lifted her in his arms and staggered up the slope. Rather, he was almost blown up it and through the open door into the cabin, about which its furnishings were flying wildly. Here the woman recovered herself and lent her aid in closing the door against the tempest, a task that, for a time, seemed impossible. Her next thought was for her dinner-pot, now swaying in the fireplace, up which the draught was roaring furiously. Once the precious stew was in a sheltered corner, her courage failed again and she sank down beside it, moaning and wringing her hands.

“It is the end of the world!”

“Angelique!”

Her wails ceased. That was a tone of voice she had never disobeyed in all her fifteen years of service.

“Yes, Master Hugh.”

“Spread some blankets. Brew some herb tea. Get out a change of dry clothing. Make everything ready against I bring Margot in.”

She watched him hurrying about securing all the windows, piling wood on the coals, straightening the disordered furniture, fastening a bundle of kindlings to his own shoulders, putting matches in the pocket of his closely buttoned coat, and caught something of his spirit. After all, it was a relief to be doing something, even though the roar of the tempest and the incessant flashes of lightning turned her sick with fear. But it was all too short a task; and when, at last, her master climbed outward through a sheltered rear window, closing it behind him, her temporary courage sank again and finally.

“The broken glass! the broken glass! Yet who would dream it is my darling’s bright young life must pay for that and not mine, the old and careworn? Ouch! the blast! That bolt struck – and near! Ah! me! Ah! me!”

Meroude rubbed pleadingly against her arm and, glad of any living companionship, she put out her hand to touch him; but drew it back in dread, for his surcharged fur sparkled and set her flesh a-tingle, while the whole room grew luminous with an uncanny radiance. Feeling that her own last hour had come, poor Angelique crouched still lower in her corner and began to say her prayers with so much earnestness that she became almost oblivious to the tornado without.

Meanwhile, by stooping and clinging to whatever support offered, Hugh Dutton made his slow way beachward. But the bushes uprooted in his clasp and the boulders slipped by him on this new torrent rushing to the lake. Then he flung himself face downward and cautiously crawled toward the point of rocks whereon he meant to make his beacon fire.

“She will see it and steer by it,” he reflected; for he would not acknowledge how hopeless would be any human steering under such a stress.

Alas! the beacon would not light. The wind had turned icy cold and the rain changed to hail which hurled itself upon the tiny blaze and stifled its first breath. A sort of desperate patience fell on the man and he began again, with utmost care, to build and shelter his little stock of fire-wood. Match after match he struck and with unvarying failure, till all were gone; and realizing at last how chilled and rigid he was growing he struggled to his feet and set them into motion.

Then there came a momentary lull in the storm and he shouted aloud, as Angelique had done:

“Margot! Little Margot! Margot!”

Another gust swept over lake and island. He could hear the great trees falling in the forest, the bang, bang, bang, of the deafening thunder, as, blinded by lightning and overcome by exhaustion, he sank down behind the pile of rocks and knew no more.

CHAPTER II

SPIRIT OR MORTAL

The end of that great storm was almost as sudden as its beginning. Aroused by the silence that succeeded the uproar, Angelique stood up and rubbed her limbs, stiff with long kneeling. The fire had gone out. Meroude was asleep on the blankets spread for Margot, who had not returned, nor the master. As for that matter the house-mistress had not expected that they ever would.

“There is nothin’ left. I am alone. It was the glass. Ah! that the palsy had but seized my unlucky hand before I took it from its shelf! How still it is. How clear, too, is my darling’s laugh – it rings through the room – it is a ghost. It will haunt me al-ways, al-ways.”

Unable longer to bear the indoor silence, which her fancy filled with familiar sounds, she unbarred the heavy door and stepped out.

“Ah! is it possible! Can the sun be settin’ that way? as if there had been nothin’ happenin’.”

Wrecks strewed the open ground about the cabin, poultry coops were washed away, the cow shed was a heap of ruins, into which the trembling observer dared not peer. That Snowfoot should be dead was a calamity but second only to the loss of master and nursling.

“Ah! my beast, my beast. The best in all this northern Maine. That the master bought and brought in the big canoe for an Easter gift to his so faithful Angelique. And yet the sun sets as red and calm as if all was the same as ever.”

It was, indeed, a scene of grandeur. The storm, in passing northward, had left scattered banks of clouds, now colored most brilliantly by the setting sun and widely reflected on the once more placid lake. But neither the beauty, nor the sweet, rain-washed air, appealed to the distracted islander who faced the west and shook her hand in impotent rage toward it.

“Shine, will you? With the harm all done and nothin’ left but me, old Angelique! Pouf! I turn my back on you!”

Then she ran shoreward with all speed, dreading what she might find yet eager to know the worst, if there it might be learned. With her apron over her head she saw only what lay straight before her and so passed the point of rocks without observing her master lying behind it. But a few steps further she paused, arrested by a sight which turned her numb with superstitious terror. What was that coming over the water? A ghost! a spirit!

Did spirits paddle canoes and sing as this one was singing?

“The boatman’s song is borne along far over the water so blue,
And loud and clear, the voice we hear of the boatman so honest and
true;
He’s rowing, rowing, rowing along,
He’s rowing, rowing, rowing along —
He’s rowing and singing his song.”

Ghosts should sing hymns, not jolly little ballads like this, in which one could catch the very rhythm and dip of oar or paddle. Still, it was as well to wait and see if this were flesh or apparition before pronouncing judgment.

It was certainly a canoe, snowy white and most familiar – so familiar that the watcher began to lose her first terror. A girl knelt in it, Indian fashion, gracefully and evenly dipping her paddle to the melody of her lips. Her bare head was thrown back and her fair hair floated loose. Her face was

lighted by the western glow, on which she fixed her eyes with such intentness that she did not perceive the woman who awaited her with now such mixed emotions.

But Tom saw. Tom, the eagle, perched in the bow, keen of vision and of prejudice. Between him and old Angelique was a grudge of long standing. Whenever they met, even after a brief separation, he expressed his feelings by his hoarsest screech. He did so now and, by so doing, recalled Margot from sky-gazing and his enemy from doubt.

“Ah! Angelique! Watching for me? How kind of you. Hush, Tom. Let her alone, good Angelique, poor Angelique!”

The eagle flapped his wings with a melancholy disdain and plunged his beak in his breast. The old woman on the beach was not worth minding, after all, by a monarch of the sky – as he would be but for his broken wing – but the girl was worth everything, even his obedience.

She laughed at his sulkiness, plying her paddle the faster, and soon reached the pebbly beach, where she sprang out, and drawing her canoe out of the water, swept her old nurse a curtsey.

“Home again, mother, and hungry for my supper.”

“Supper, indeed! Breakin’ my heart with your run-about ways! and the hoorican’, with ever’tthin’ ruined, ever’tthin’! The master – Where’s he, I know not. The great pine broken like a match; the coops, the cow-house, and Snowfoot – Ah, me! Yet the little one talks of supper!”

Margot looked about her in astonishment, scarcely noticing the other’s words. The devastation of her beloved home was evident, even down on the open beach, and she dared not think what it might be further inland.

“Why, it must have been a cyclone! We were reading about them only yesterday and Uncle Hugh – did you say that you knew – where is he?”

Angelique shook her head.

“Can I tell anythin’, me? Into the storm he went and out of it he will come alive, as you have. If the good Lord wills,” she added reverently.

The girl sprang to the woman’s side, and caught her arm impatiently.

“Tell me, quick. Where is he? where did you last see him?”

“Goin’ into the hoorican’, with wood upon his shoulder. To make a beacon for you. So I guess. But you – tell how you come alive out of all that?” Sweeping her arm over the outlook.

Margot did not stop to answer but darted toward the point of rocks where, if anywhere, she knew her guardian would have tried his signal fire. In a moment she found him.

“Angelique! Angelique! He’s here. Quick – quick – He’s – Oh! is he dead, is he dead?”

There was both French and Indian blood in mother Ricord’s veins, a passionate loyalty in her heart, and the suppleness of youth still in her spare frame. With a dash she was at the girl’s side and had thrust her away, to kneel herself and lift her master’s head from its hard pillow of rock.

With swift nervous motions she unfastened his coat and bent her ear to his breast.

“Tis only a faint, maybe shock. In all the world was only Margot, and Margot was lost. Ugh! the hail. See, it is still here – look! water, and – yes, the tea! It was for you – Ah!”

Her words ended with a sigh of satisfaction as a slight motion stirred the features into which she peered so earnestly, and she raised her master’s head a bit higher. Then his eyes slowly opened and the dazed look gradually gave place to a normal expression.

“Why, Margot! Angelique? What’s happened?”

“Oh! Uncle Hugh! are you hurt? are you ill? I found you here behind the rocks and Angelique says – but I wasn’t hurt at all. I wasn’t out in any storm, didn’t know there had been one, that is, worth minding, till I came home – ”

“Like a ghost out of the lake. She was not even dead, not she. And she was singin’ fit to burst her throat while you were – well, maybe, not dead, yourself.”

At this juncture, Tom, the inquisitive, thrust his white head forward into the midst of the group and, in her relief from her first fear, Margot laughed aloud.

“Don’t, Tom! You’re one of the family, of course, and since none of the rest of us will die to please that broken mirror, you may have to! Especially, if there’s a new brood out – ”

But here Angelique threw up her free hand with such a gesture of despair that Margot said no more, and her face sobered again, remembering that, even though they were all still alive, there might be suffering untold among her humbler woodland friends. Then, as Mr. Dutton rose, almost unaided, a fresh regret came:

“That there should be a cyclone, right here at home, and I not to see it! See! Look, uncle, look! You can trace its very path, just as we read. Away to the south there is no sign of it, nor on the northeast. It must have swept up to us out of the southeast and taken our island in its track. Oh! I wouldn’t have missed it for anything.”

The man rested his hand upon her shoulder and turned her gently homeward. His weakness had left him as it had come upon him, with a suddenness like that of the recent tempest. It was not the first seizure of the kind, which he had had, though neither of these others knew it; and the fact added a deeper gravity to his always thoughtful manner.

“I am most thankful that you were not here; but where could you have been to escape it?”

“All day in the long cave. To the very end of it I believe, and see! I found these. They are like the specimens you brought the other day. They must be some rich metal.”

“In the long cave, you? Alone? All day? Margot, Margot, is not the glass enough? but you must tempt worse luck by goin’ there!” cried Angelique, who had preceded the others on the path, but now faced about, trembling indignantly. What foolish creature was this who would pass a whole day in that haunted spot, in spite of the dreadful tales that had been told of it. “Pouf! But I wear out my poor brain, everlastin’ to study the charms will save you from evil, me. And yet – ”

“You would do well to use some of your charms on Tom, yonder. He’s found an overturned coop and looks too happy to be out of mischief.”

The woman wheeled again and was off up the slope like a flash, where presently the king of birds was treated to the indignity of a sound boxing, which he resented with squawks and screeches, but not with talons, since under each foot he held the plump body of a fat chicken.

“Tom thinks a bird in the hand is worth a score of cuffs! and Angelique’s so determined to have somebody die – I hope it won’t be Tom. A pity, though, that harm should have happened to her own pets. Hark! What is that?”

“Some poor woodland creature in distress. The storm – ”

“That’s no sound belonging to the forest. But it is – distress!”

CHAPTER III

AN ESTRAY FROM CIVILIZATION

They paused by the cabin door, left open by Angelique, and listened intently. She, too, had caught the alien sound, the faint, appealing halloo of a human voice – the rarest of all cries in that wilderness. Even the eagle’s screeches could not drown it, but she had had enough of anxieties for one day. Let other people look out for themselves; her precious ones should not stir afield again, no, not for anything. Let the evil bird devour the dead chickens, if he must, her place was in the cabin, and she rushed back down the slope, fairly forcing the others inward from the threshold where they hesitated.

“Tis a loon. You should know that, I think, and that they’re always cryin’ fit to scare the dead. Come. The supper’s waited this long time.”

With a smile that disarmed offense Margot caught the woman’s shoulder and lightly swung her aside out of the way.

“Eat then, hungry one! I, too, am hungry, but – Hark!”

The cry came again, prolonged, entreating, not to be confounded with that of any forest wilding.

“It’s from the north end of our own island!”

The master’s ear was not less keen than the girl’s, and both had the acuteness of an Indian’s, but his judgment was better.

“From the mainland, across the narrows.”

Neither delayed, as a mutual impulse sent them toward the shore, but again Angelique interposed.

“Thoughtless child, have you no sense? With the master just out of a faint that was nigh death itself! With nothin’ in his poor stomach since the mornin’ and your own as empty. Wait. Eat. Then chase loons, if you will.”

Mr. Dutton laughed, though he also frowned and cast a swift, anxious glance toward Margot. But she was intent upon nothing save answering that far-off cry.

“Which canoe, uncle?”

“Mine.”

The devoted servant made a last protest, and caught the girl’s arm as it pushed the light craft downward into the water.

“My child, he is not fit. Believe me. Best leave others to their fate than he should over-tax himself again, so soon.”

Margot was astonished. In all her life she had never before associated thought of physical weakness with her stalwart guardian, and a sharp fear of some unknown trouble shot through her heart.

“What do you mean?”

The master had reached them and now laid his own hand upon Angelique’s detaining one.

“There, woman, that’s enough. The storm has shaken your nerves. If you’re afraid to stay alone, Margot shall stop with you. But let’s have no more nonsense.”

Mother Ricord stepped back, away. She had done her best. Let come what might, her conscience was clear.

A few seconds later the canoe pushed off over the now darkening water and its inmates made all speed toward that point from which the cry had been heard, but was heard no more. However, the steersman followed a perfectly direct course and, if he were still weak from his seizure, his movement showed no signs of it, so that Margot’s fear for him was lost in the interest of their present adventure. She rhymed her own stroke to her uncle’s and when he rested her paddle instantly stopped.

“Halloo! Hal-l-oo!” he shouted, but as no answer came, said: “Now – both together!”

The girl's shriller treble may have had further carrying power than the man's voice, for there was promptly returned to them an echoing halloo, coming apparently from a great distance. But it was repeated at close intervals and each time with more distinctness.

"We'll beach the boat just yonder, under that tamarack. Whoever it is has heard and is coming back."

Margot's impatience broke bounds and she darted forward among the trees, shouting: "This way! this way! here we are – here!" Her peculiar life and training had made her absolutely fearless, and she would have been surprised by her guardian's command to "Wait!" had she heard it, which she did not. Also, she knew the forest as other girls know their city streets, and the dimness was no hindrance to her nimble feet. In a brief time she caught the crashing of boughs as some person, less familiar than she, blundered through the underbrush and finally came into view where a break in the timber gave a faint light.

"Here! Here! This way!"

He staggered and held out his hands, as if for aid, and Margot clasped them firmly. They were cold and tremulous. They were, also, slender and smooth, not at all like the hands of any men whom she was used to seeing. At the relief of her touch, his strength left him, but she caught his murmured:

"Thank God. I – had – given up – "

His voice, too, was different from any she knew, save her own uncle's. This was somebody, then, from that outside world of which she dreamed so much and knew so little. It was like a fairy tale come true.

"Are you ill? There. Lean on me. Don't fear. Oh! I'm strong, very strong, and uncle is just yonder, coming this way. Uncle – uncle!"

The stranger was almost past speech. Mr. Dutton recognized that at once and added his support to Margot's. Between them they half-led, half-carried the wanderer to the canoe and lifted him into it, where he sank exhausted. Then they dipped their paddles and the boat shot homeward, racing with death. Angelique was still on the beach and still complaining of their foolhardiness, but one word from her master silenced that. "Lend a hand, woman! Here's something real to worry about. Margot, go ahead and get the lights."

As the girl sprang from it, the housekeeper pulled the boat to a spot above the water and, stooping, lifted a generous share of the burden it contained.

It had not been a loon, then. No. Well, she had known that from the beginnin', just as she had known that her beloved master was in no fit condition to go man-huntin'. This one he had found was, probably, dead anyway. Of course. Somebody had to die – beyond chickens and such – had not the broken glass so said?

Even in the twilight Mr. Dutton could detect the grim satisfaction of her face and smiled, foreseeing her change of expression when this seemingly lifeless guest should revive.

They laid him on the lounge that had been spread with blankets for Margot, and she was already beside it, waiting to administer the herb tea which had, also, been prepared for herself, and which she had marveled to find so opportunely brewed.

Mr. Dutton smiled again. In her simplicity the girl did not dream that the now bitter decoction was not a common restorative outside their primitive life, and in all good faith forced a spoonful of it between the closed lips.

"After all, it doesn't matter. The poor fellow is doubtless used to richer cordials, but it's hot and strong and will do the work. You, Angelique, make us a pot of your best coffee, and swing round that dinner-pot. The man is almost starved, and I'm on the road to follow him. How about you, Margot?"

"Poh! I guess I'm hungry – I will be – see! He's swallowing it. Fast. Give me that bigger spoon! Quick!"

"What would you? Scald the creature's throat? So he isn't dead, after all. Well, he needn't have made a body think so, he needn't. There, Margot! You've messed him with the black stuff!"

Indignantly brushing her child aside the woman seized the cup and deftly administered its entire contents. The stranger had not yet opened his eyes, but accepted the warm liquid mechanically, and his nurse hurried to fill a bowl with the broth of the stew in the kettle. This, in turn, was taken from her by Margot, who jealously exclaimed:

“He’s mine. I heard him first, I found him first, let me be the first he sees. Dish up the supper, please, and set my uncle’s place.”

So when, a moment later, having been nearly choked by the more substantial food forced into his mouth, the guest opened his eyes, they beheld the eager face of a brown skinned, fair haired girl very close to his and heard her joyous cry:

“He sees me! he sees everything! He’s getting well already!”

He had never seen anybody like her. Her hair was as abundant as a mantle and rippled over her shoulders like spun silver. So it looked in the lamplight. In fact, it had never been bound nor covered, and what in a different social condition might have been much darker, had in this outdoor life become bleached almost white. The weather which had whitened the hair had tanned the skin to bronze, making the blue eyes more vivid by contrast and the red lips redder. These were smiling now, over well kept teeth, and there was about the whole bearing of the maid something suggestive of the woodland in which she had been reared.

Purity, honesty, freedom, all spoke in every motion and tone, and to this observer, at least, seemed better than any beauty. Presently, he was able to push her too willing hand gently away and to say:

“Not quite so fast, please.”

“Oh! uncle! Hear him? He talks just as you do! Not a bit like Pierre, or Joe, or the rest.”

Mr. Dutton came forward, smiling and remonstrating.

“My dear, our new friend will think you quite rude, if you discuss him before his face, so frankly. But, sir, I assure you she means nothing but delight at your recovery. We are all most thankful that you are here and safe. There, Margot. Let the gentleman rest a few minutes. Then a cup of coffee may be better than the stew. Were you long without food, friend?”

The stranger tried to answer but the effort tired him, and with a beckoning nod to the young nurse, the woodlander led the way back to the table and their own delayed supper. Both needed it and both ate it rather hastily, much to the disgust of Angelique who felt that her skill was wasted; but one was anxious to be off out of doors, to learn the damage left by the storm, and the other to be back on her stool beside the lounge. When Mr. Dutton rose, the housekeeper left her own seat.

“I’ll fetch the lantern, master. But that’s the last of Snowfoot’s good milk you’ll ever drink,” she sighed, touching the pitcher sadly.

“What? Is anything wrong with her?”

“The cow-house is in ruins. So are the poultry coops. What with falling ill yourself just at the worst time and fetchin’ home other sick folks we might all go to wrack and nobody the better.”

The familiar grumbling provoked only a smile from the master, who would readily have staked his life on the woman’s devotion to “her people” and knew that the apparent crossness was not that in reality.

“Fie, good Angelique! Never so happy as when you’re miserable. Come on. Nothing must suffer if we can prevent. Take care of our guest, Margot, but give him his nourishment slowly, at intervals. I’ll get some tools, and join you at the shed, Angelique.”

He went out and the housekeeper followed with the lantern, not needed in the moonlight, but possibly of use at the fallen cow-house.

They were long gone. The stranger dozed, waked, ate, and dozed again. Margot, accustomed to early hours, also slept and soundly, till a fearful shriek roused her. Her patient was wildly kicking and striking at some hideous monster which had settled on his chest and would not be displaced.

“He’s killing me! Help – help! Oh-a-ah!”

CHAPTER IV

WHAT WAS IN THE NAME

Thrusting back the hair that had fallen over her eyes, Margot sprang up and stared at the floundering mass of legs, arms, and wings upon the wide lounge – a battle to the death, it seemed. Then she caught the assailant in her strong hands and flung him aside, while her laughter rang out in a way to make the stranger, also, stare, believing she had gone crazy with sudden fear.

But his terror had restored his strength most marvelously, for he too, leaped to his feet and retreated to the furthest corner of the room, whence he regarded the scene with dilated eyes.

“Why – why – it’s nobody, nothing but dear old Tom!”

“It’s an eagle! The first – ”

“Of course, he’s an eagle. Aren’t you, dear? The most splendid bird in Maine, or maybe Canada. The wisest, the most loving, the – Oh! You big blundering precious thing! Scaring people like that. You should be more civil, sir.”

“Is – is – he tame?”

“Tame as a pet chicken. But mischievous. He wouldn’t hurt you for anything.”

“Humph! He would have killed me if I hadn’t waked and yelled.”

“Well, you did that surely. You feel better, don’t you?”

“I wish you’d put him outdoors, or shut him up where he belongs. I want to sit down.”

“There’s no reason why you shouldn’t,” she answered, pushing a chair toward him.

“Where did you get it – that creature?”

“Uncle found him when he was ever so young. Somebody or something, a hunter or some other bird, had hurt his wing and one foot. Eagles can be injured by the least little blow upon their wings, you know.”

“No. I know nothing about them – yet. But I shall, some day.”

“Oh! I hope so. They’re delightful to study. Tom is very large, we think. He’s nearly four feet tall, and his wings – Spread your wings, sir! Spread!”

Margot had dropped upon the floor before the wide fireplace, her favorite seat. Her arms clasped her strange pet’s body while his white head rested lovingly upon her shoulder. His eyes were fixed upon the blazing logs and his yellow irises gleamed as if they had caught and held the dancing flames. But at her command he shook himself free, and extended one mighty wing, while she stretched out the other. Their tips were full nine feet apart and seemed to fill and darken the whole place.

In spite of this odd girl’s fearless handling of the bird, it looked most formidable to the visitor, who retreated again to a safe distance, though he had begun to advance toward her. And again he implored her to put the uncanny “monster” out of the house.

Margot laughed; as she was always doing; but going to the table filled a plate with fragments from the stew and calling Tom, set the dish before him on the threshold.

“There’s your supper, Thomas the King! Which means, no more of Angelique’s chickens, dead or alive.”

The eagle gravely limped out of doors and the visitor felt relieved, so that he cast somewhat longing glances upon the table, and Margot was quick to understand them. Putting a generous portion upon another plate, she moved a chair to the side nearest the fire.

“You’re so much stronger, I guess it won’t hurt you to take as much as you like now. When did you eat anything before?”

“Day before yesterday – I think. I hardly know. The time seems confused. As if I had been wandering, round and round, forever. I – was almost dead, wasn’t I?”

“Yes. But ’twas our housekeeper who was first to see it was starvation. Angelique is a Canadian. She lived in the woods long before we came to them. She is very wise.”

He made no comment, being then too busy eating; but at length, even his voracity was satisfied and he had leisure to examine his surroundings. He looked at Margot as if girls were as unknown as eagles; and indeed such as she were – to him, at least. Her dress was of blue flannel, and of the same simple cut that she had always worn. A loose blouse, short skirt, full knickerbockers, met at the knees by long shoes, or gaiters of buckskin. These were as comfortable and pliable as Indian moccasins, and the only footgear she had ever known. They were made for her in a distant town, whither Mr. Dutton went for needed supplies, and, like the rest of her costume, after a design of his own. She was certainly unconventional in manner, but not from rudeness so much as from a desire to study him – another unknown “specimen” from an outside world. Her speech was correct beyond that common among schoolgirls, and her gaze was as friendly as it was frank.

Their scrutiny of each other was ended by her exclaiming:

“Why – you are not old! Not much older than Pierre, I believe! It must be because you are so dirty that I thought you were a man like uncle.”

“Thank you,” he answered drily.

But she had no intention of offense. Accustomed all her own life to the utmost cleanliness, in the beginning insisted upon by Angelique because it was “proper,” and by her guardian for health’s sake, she had grown up with a horror of the discomfort of any untidiness, and she felt herself most remiss in her attentions, that she had not earlier offered soap and water. Before he realized what she was about, she had sped into the little outer room which the household used as a lavatory and whirled a wooden tub into its centre. This she promptly filled with water from a pipe in the wall, and having hung fresh towels on a chair, returned to the living room.

“I’m so sorry. I ought to have thought of that right away. But a bath is ready now, if you wish it.”

The stranger rose, stammered a little, but accepted what was in truth a delightful surprise.

“Well, this is still more amazing! Into what sort of a spot have I stumbled? It’s a log house, but with apparently, several rooms. It has all the comforts of civilization and at least this one luxury. There are books, too. I saw them in that inner apartment as I passed the open door. The man looks like a gentleman in the disguise of a lumberman, and the girl – what’ll she do next? Ask me where I came from and why, I presume. If she does, I’ll have to answer her, and truthfully. I can’t fancy anybody lying to those blue eyes. Maybe she won’t ask.”

She did, however, as soon as he reëntered the living room, refreshed and certainly much more attractive in appearance than when he had had the soil and litter of his long wandering upon him.

“Oh! how much more comfortable you must be. How did you get lost? Is your home far from here?”

“A long, long way;” and for a moment, something like sadness touched his face. That look passed quickly and a defiant expression took its place.

“What a pity! It will be so much harder to get word to your people. Maybe Pierre can carry a message, or show you the road, once you are strong enough again.”

“Who’s Pierre?”

“Mother Ricord’s son. He’s a woodlander and wiser even than she is. He’s really more French than Indian, but uncle says the latter race is strongest in him. It often is in his type.”

“A-ah, indeed! So you study types up here, do you?”

“Yes. Uncle makes it so interesting. You see, he got used to teaching stupid people when he was a professor in his college. I’m dreadfully stupid about books, though I do my best. But I love living things; and the books about animals, and races, are charming. When they’re true, that is. Often they’re not. There’s one book on squirrels uncle keeps as a curiosity, to show how little the writer knew about them. And the pictures are no more like squirrels than – than they are like me.”

“A-ah,” said the listener, again. “That explains.”

“I don’t know what you mean. No matter. It’s the old stupidity, I suppose. How did you get lost?”

“The same prevailing stupidity,” he laughed. “Though I didn’t realize it for that quality. Just thought I was smart, you know – conceit. I – I – well, I didn’t get on so very well at the lumber camp I’d joined. I wasn’t used to work of that sort and there didn’t seem to be room, even in the woods, for a greenhorn. I thought it was easy enough. I could find my way anywhere, in any wilderness, with my outfit. I’d brought that along, or bought it after I left civilization; so one night I left, set out to paddle my own canoe. I paddled it into the rapids, what those fellows called rips, and they ripped me to ruin. Upset, lost all my kit, tried to find my way back, wandered and walked forever and ever, it seemed to me, and – you know the rest.”

“But I do not. Did you keep hallooing all that long time? or how did it happen we heard you?”

“I was in a rocky place when that tornado came and it was near the water. I had just sense enough left to know they could protect me and crept under them. Oh! that was awful – awful!”

“It must have been, but I was so deep in our cave that I heard but little of it. Uncle and Angelique thought I was out in it and lost. They suffered about it, and uncle tried to make a fire and was sick. We had just got home when we heard you.”

“After the storm I crawled out and I saw you in the boat. You seemed to have come right out of the earth and I shouted, or tried to. I kept on shouting, even after you were out of sight and then I got discouraged and tried once more to find a road out.”

“I was singing so loud I suppose I didn’t hear, at first. I’m so sorry. But it’s all right now. You’re safe, and some way will be found to get you to your home, or that lumber camp, if you’d rather.”

“Suppose I do not wish to go to either place? What then?”

Margot stared. “Not – wish – to go – to your own dear – home?”

The stranger smiled at the amazement of her face.

“Maybe not. Especially as I don’t know how I would be received there. What if I was foolish and didn’t know when I was well off? What if I ran away, meaning to stay away forever?”

“Well, if it hadn’t been for the rocks, and me, it would have been forever. But God made the rocks and gave them to you for a shelter; and He made me, and sent me out on the lake so you should see me and be found. If He wants you to go back to that home He’ll find a way. Now, it’s queer. Here we’ve been talking ever so long yet I don’t know who you are. You know all of us: Uncle Hugh Dutton, Angelique Ricord, and me. I’m Margot Romeyn. What is your name?”

“Mine? Oh! I’m Adrian Wadislav. A good-for-nought, some people say. Young Wadislav, the sinner, son of old Wadislav, the saint.”

The answer was given recklessly, while the dark young face grew sadly bitter and defiant.

After a moment, something startled Margot from the shocked surprise with which she had heard this harsh reply. It was a sigh, almost a groan, as from one who had been more deeply startled even than herself. Turning, she saw the master standing in the doorway, staring at their visitor as if he had seen a ghost and nearly as white as one himself.

CHAPTER V IN ALADDIN LAND

It seemed to Margot, watching, that it was an endless time her uncle stood there gazing with that startled look upon their guest. In reality it was but a moment. Then he passed his hand over his eyes, as one who would brush away a mist, and came forward. He was still unduly pale, but he spoke in a courteous, almost natural manner, and quietly accepted the chair Margot hastened to bring him.

“You are getting rested, Mr. – ”

“Oh! please don’t ‘Mister’ me, sir. You’ve been so good to me and I’m not used to the title. Though, in my scratches and wood-dirt, this young lady did take me for an old fellow. Yes, thanks to her thoughtfulness, I’ve found myself again, and I’m just ‘Adrian,’ if you’ll be so kind.”

There was something very winning in this address, and it suited the elder man well. The stranger was scarcely out of boyhood and reminded the old collegian of other lads whom he had known and loved. “Wadislaw” was not a particularly pleasing name that one should dwell upon it, unless necessary. “Adrian” was better and far more common. Neither did it follow that this person was of a family he remembered far too well; and so Mr. Dutton reassured himself. In any case the youth was now “the stranger within the gates” and therefore entitled to the best.

“Adrian, then. We are a simple household, following the old habit of early to bed and to rise. You must be tired enough to sleep anywhere, and there is another big lounge in my study. You would best occupy it to-night, and to-morrow Angelique will fix you better quarters. Few guests favor us in our far-away home,” he finished with a smile that was full of hospitality.

Adrian rose at once and bidding Margot and Angelique good-night, followed his host into a big room which, save for the log walls, might have been the library of some city home. It was a room which somehow gave him the impression of vastness, liberality, and freedom – an enclosed bit of the outside forest. Like each of the other apartments he had seen it had its great fireplace and its blazing logs, not at all uncomfortable now in the chill that had come after the storm.

But he was too worn out to notice much more than these details, and without undressing, dropped upon the lounge and drew the Indian blanket over him. His head rested upon great pillows stuffed with fragrant spruce needles, and this perfume of the woods soothed him into instant sleep.

But Hugh Dutton stood for many minutes, gravely studying the face of the unconscious stranger. It was a comely, intelligent face, though marred by self-will and indulgence, and with each passing second its features grew more and more painfully familiar. Why, why, had it come into his distant retreat to disturb his peace? A peace that it had taken fifteen years of life to gain, that had been achieved only by bitter struggle with self and with all that was lowest in a noble nature.

“Alas! And I believed I had at last learned to forgive!”

But none the less because of the bitterness would this man be unjust. His very flesh recoiled from contact with that other flesh, fair as it might be in the sight of most eyes, yet he forced himself to draw with utmost gentleness the covering over the sleeper’s shoulders, and to interpose a screening chair between him and the firelight.

“Well, one may at least control his actions, if not his thoughts,” he murmured and quietly left the place.

A few moments later he stood regarding Margot, also, as she lay in sleep, and all the love of his strong nature rose to protect her from the sorrow which she would have to bear some time but – not yet! Oh! not yet! Then he turned quickly and went out of doors.

There had been nights in this woodlander’s life when no roof could cover him. When even the forest seemed to suffocate, and when he had found relief only upon the bald bare top of that rocky height which crowned the island. On such nights he had gone out early and come home with the

daybreak, and none had known of his absence, save, now and then, the faithful Angelique, who knew the master's story but kept it to herself.

Margot had never guessed of these midnight expeditions, nor understood the peculiar love and veneration her guardian had for that mountain top. She better loved the depths of the wonderful forest, with its flowers and ferns, and its furred or feathered creatures. She was dreaming of these, the next morning, when her uncle's cheery whistle called her to get up.

A cold plunge, a swift dressing, and she was with him, seeing no signs of either illness or sorrow in his genial face, and eager with plans for the coming day. All her days were delightful, but this would be best of all.

"To think, uncle dear, that somebody else has come at last to see our island! why, there's so much to show him I can hardly wait, nor know where best to begin."

"Suppose, Miss Impatience, we begin with breakfast? Here comes Adrian. Ask his opinion."

"Never was so hungry in my life!" agreed that youth, as he came hastily forward to bid them both good-morning. "I mean – not since last night. I wonder if a fellow that's been half-starved, or three-quarters even, will ever get his appetite down to normal again? It seems to me I could eat a whole wild animal at a sitting!"

"So you shall, boy. So you shall!" cried Angelique, who now came in carrying a great dish of browned and smoking fish. This she placed at her master's end of the table and flanked it with another platter of daintily crisped potatoes. There were heaps of delicate biscuits, with coffee and cakes galore; enough, the visitor thought, to satisfy even his own extravagant hunger, and again he wondered at such fare in such a wilderness.

"Why, this might be a hotel table!" he exclaimed, in unfeigned pleasure. "Not much like lumberman's fare: salt pork, bad bread, molasses-sweetened tea, and the everlasting beans. I hope I shall never have to look another bean in the face! But that coffee! I never smelled anything so delicious."

"Had some last night," commented Angelique, shortly. She perceived that this stranger was in some way obnoxious to her beloved master, and she resented the surprise with which he had seen her take her own place behind the tray. Her temper seemed fairly cross-edged that morning and Margot remarked:

"Don't mind mother. She's dreadfully disappointed that nobody died and no bad luck followed her breaking a mirror, yesterday."

"No bad luck?" demanded Angelique, looking at Adrian with so marked a manner that it spoke volumes. "And as for dyin' – you've but to go into the woods and you'll see."

Here Tom created a diversion by entering and limping straight to the stranger's side, who moved away, then blushed at his own timidity, seeing the amusement with which the others regarded him.

"Oh! we're all one family here, servants and ever'body," cried the woman, tossing the eagle a crumb of biscuit.

But the big bird was not to be drawn from his scrutiny of this new face; and the gravity of his unwinking gaze was certainly disconcerting.

"Get out, you uncanny creature! Beg pardon, Miss Margot, but I'm – he seems to have a special grudge against me."

"Oh! no. He doesn't understand who you are, yet. We had a man here last year, helping uncle, and Tom acted just as he does now. Though he never would make friends with the Canadian, as I hope he will with you."

Angelique flashed a glance toward the girl. Why should she, or anybody speak as if this lad's visit were to be a prolonged one? And they had, both she and the master. He had bidden the servant fill a fresh "tick" with the dried and shredded fern leaves and pine needles, such as supplied their own mattresses; and to put all needful furnishings into the one disused room of the cabin.

“But, master! When you’ve always acted as if that were bein’ kept for somebody who was comin’ some day. Somebody you love!” she protested.

“I have settled the matter, Angelique. Don’t fear that I’ve not thought it all out. ‘Do unto others,’ you know. For each day its duty, its battle with self, and, please God, its victory.”

“He’s a saint, ever’body knows; and there’s somethin’ behind all this I don’t understand!” she had muttered, but had also done his bidding, still complaining.

Commonly, meals were leisurely affairs in that forest home, but on this morning Mr. Dutton set an example of haste that the others followed; and as soon as their appetites were satisfied he rose and said:

“I’ll show you your own room now, Adrian. Occupy it as long as you wish. And find something to amuse yourself with while I am gone; for I have much to do out of doors. It was the worst storm, for its duration, that ever struck us. Fortunately, most of the outbuildings need only repairs, but Snowfoot’s home is such a wreck she must have a new one. Margot, will you run up the signal for Pierre?”

“Yes, indeed! Though I believe he will come without it. He’ll be curious about the tornado, too, and it’s near his regular visiting time.”

The room assigned to Adrian excited his fresh surprise; though he assured himself that he would be amazed at nothing further, when he saw lying upon a table in the middle of the floor, two complete suits of clothing, apparently placed there by the thoughtful host for his guest to use. They were not of the latest style, but perfectly new and bore the stamp of a well-known tailor of his own city.

“Where did he get them, and so soon? What a mammoth of a house it is, though built of logs. And isn’t it the most fitting and beautiful of houses, after all? Whence came those comfortable chairs? and the books? Most of all, where and how did he get that wonderful picture over that magnificent log mantel? It looks like a room made ready for the unexpected coming of some prodigal son! I’m that, sure enough; but not of this household. If I were – well, maybe – Oh! hum!”

The lad crossed the floor and gazed reverently at the solitary painting which the room contained. A marvelously lifelike head of the Man of Sorrows, bending forward and gazing upon the onlooker with eyes of infinite tenderness and appealing. Beneath it ran the inscription: “Come Unto Me”; and in one corner was the artist’s signature – a broken pine branch.

“Whew! I wonder if that fellow ran away from home because he loved a brush and paint tube! What sort of a spot have I strayed into, anyway? A paradise? Hmm. I wish the mater could see me now. She’d not be so unhappy over her unworthy son, maybe. Bless her, anyhow. If everybody had been like her – ”

He finished his soliloquy before an open window, through which he could see the summit of the bare mountain that crowned the centre of the island, and was itself crowned by a single pine-tree. Though many of its branches had been lopped away, enough were left to form a sort of spiral stairway up its straight trunk and to its lofty top.

“What a magnificent flagstaff that would make! I’d like to see Old Glory floating there. Believe I’ll suggest it to the magician – that’s what this woodlander is – and doubtless he’ll attend to that little matter! Shades of Aladdin!”

Adrian was so startled that he dropped into a chair, the better to sustain himself against further Arabian-nights-like discoveries.

It was a flagstaff! Somebody was climbing it – Margot! Up, up, like a squirrel, her blond head appearing first on one side then the other, a glowing budget strapped to her back.

Adrian gasped. No sailor could have been more fleet or sure-footed. It seemed but a moment before that slender figure had scaled the topmost branch and was unrolling the brilliant burden it had borne. The stars and stripes, of course. Adrian would have been bitterly disappointed if it had been anything else this agile maiden hoisted from that dizzy height.

In wild excitement and admiration the watcher leaned out of his window and shouted hoarsely:

“Hurrah! H-u-r-rah! H-u-r – !”

The cheer died in his throat. Something had happened. Something too awful to contemplate. Adrian's eyes closed that he might not see. Had her foot slipped? Had his own cry reached and startled her?

For she was falling – falling! and the end could be but one.

CHAPTER VI

A ONE-SIDED STORY

Adrian was not a gymnast though he had seen and admired many wonderful feats performed by his own classmates. But he had never beheld a miracle, and such he believed had been accomplished when, upon reaching the foot of that terrible tree, he found Margot sitting beneath it, pale and shaken, but, apparently, unhurt.

She had heard his breathless crashing up the slope and greeted him with a smile, and the tremulous question:

“How did you know where I was?”

“You aren’t – dead?”

“Certainly not. I might have been, though, but God took care.”

“Was it my cheers frightened you?”

“Was it you, then? I heard something, different from the wood sounds, and I looked quick to see. Then my foot slipped and I went down – a way. I caught a branch just in time and, please, don’t tell uncle. I’d rather do that myself.”

“You should never do such a thing. The idea of a girl climbing trees at all, least of any, such a tree as that!”

He threw his head back and looked upward, through the green spiral to the brilliant sky. The enormous height revived the horror he had felt as he leaped through the window and rushed to the mountain.

“Who planned such a death-trap as that, anyway?”

“I did.”

“You! A girl!”

“Yes. Why not. It’s great fun, usually.”

“You’d better have been learning to sew.”

“I can sew, but I don’t like it. Angelique does that. I do like climbing and canoeing and botanizing, and geologizing, and astronomizing, and – ”

Adrian threw up his hands in protest.

“What sort of creature are you, anyway?”

“Just plain girl.”

“Anything but that!”

“Well, girl, without the adjective. Suits me rather better;” and she laughed in a way that proved she was not suffering from her mishap.

“This is the strangest place I ever saw. You are the strangest family. We are certainly in the backwoods of Maine, yet you might be a Holyoke senior, or a circus star, or – a fairy.”

Margot stretched her long arms and looked at them quizzically.

“Fairies don’t grow so big. Why don’t you sit down? Or, if you will, climb up and look toward the narrows on the north. See if Pierre’s birch is coming yet.”

Again Adrian glanced upward, to the flag floating there, and shrugged his shoulders.

“Excuse me, please. That is, I suppose I could do it, only seeing you slip – I prefer to wait awhile.”

“Are you afraid?”

There was no sarcasm in the question. She asked it in all sincerity. Adrian was different from Pierre, the only other boy she knew, and she simply wondered if tree-climbing were among his unknown accomplishments.

It had been, to the extent possible with his city training and his brief summer vacations, though unpracticed of late; but no lad of spirit, least of all impetuous Adrian, could bear even the suggestion of cowardice. He did not sit down, as she had bidden, but tossed aside his rough jacket and leaped to the lower branch of the pine.

“Why, it’s easy! It’s grand!” he called back and went up swiftly enough.

Indeed, it was not so difficult as it appeared from a distance. Wherever the branches failed the spiral ladder had been perfected by great spikes driven into the trunk and he had but to clasp these in turn to make a safe ascent. At the top he waved his hand, then shaded his eyes and peered northward.

“He’s coming! Somebody’s coming!” he shouted. “There’s a little boat pushing off from that other shore.”

Then he descended with a rapidity that delighted even himself and called a bit of praise from Margot.

“I’m so glad you can climb. One can see so much more from the tree-tops; and, oh! there is so much, so much to find out all the time! Isn’t there?”

“Yes. Decidedly. One of the things I’d like to find out first is who you are and how you came here. If you’re willing.”

Then he added, rather hastily: “Of course, I don’t want to be impertinently curious. It only seems so strange to find such educated people buried here in the north woods. I don’t see how you live here. I – I – ”

But the more he tried to explain the more confused he grew, and Margot merrily simplified matters by declaring:

“You are curious, all the same, and so am I. Let’s tell each other all about everything and then we’ll start straight without the bother of stopping as we go along. Do sit down and I’ll begin.”

“Ready.”

“There’s so little, I shan’t be long. My dear mother was Cecily Dutton, my Uncle Hugh’s twin. My father was Philip Romeyn, uncle’s closest friend. They were almost more than brothers to each other, always; though uncle was a student and, young as he was, a professor at Columbia. Papa was a business man, a banker, or a cashier in a bank. He wasn’t rich, but mamma and uncle had money. From the time they were boys uncle and papa were fond of the woods. They were great hunters, then, and spent all the time they could get up here in northern Maine. After the marriage mamma begged to come with them, and it was her money bought this island, and the land along the shore of this lake as far as we can see from here. Much farther, too, of course, because the trees hide things. They built this log cabin and it cost a great, great deal to do it. They had to bring the workmen so far, but it was finished at last, and everything was brought up here to make it – just as you see.”

“What an ideal existence!”

“Was it? I don’t know much about ideals, though uncle talks of them sometimes. It was real, that’s all. They were very, very happy. They loved each other so dearly. Angelique came from Canada to keep the house and she says my mother was the sweetest woman she ever saw. Oh! I wish – I wish I could have seen her! Or that I might remember her. I’ll show you her portrait. It hangs in my own room.”

“Did she die?”

“Yes. When I was a year old. My father had passed away before that, and my mother was broken-hearted. Even for uncle and me she could not bear to live. It was my father’s wish that we should come up here to stay, and Uncle Hugh left everything and came. I was to be reared ‘in the wilderness, where nothing evil comes,’ was what both my parents said. So I have been, and – that’s all.”

Adrian was silent for some moments. The girl’s face had grown dreamy and full of a pathetic tenderness as it always did when she discussed her unknown father and mother, even with Angelique. Though, in reality, she had not been allowed to miss what she had never known. Then she looked up with a smile and observed:

“Your turn.”

“Yes – I – suppose so. May as well give the end of my story first – I’m a runaway.”

“Why?”

“No matter why.”

“That isn’t fair.”

He parried the indignation of her look by some further questions of his own. “Have you always lived here?”

“Always.”

“You go to the towns sometimes, I suppose.”

“I’ve never seen a town, except in pictures.”

“Whew! Don’t you have any friends? Any girls come to see you?”

“I never saw a girl, only myself in that poor broken glass of Angelique’s; and, of course, the pictured ones – as of the towns – in the books.”

“You poor child!”

Margot’s brown face flushed. She wanted nobody’s pity and she had not felt that her life was a singular or narrow one, till this outsider came. A wish very like Angelique’s, that he had stayed where he belonged, arose in her heart, but she dismissed it as inhospitable.

“I’m not poor. Not in the least. I have everything any girl could want and I have – uncle! He is the best, the wisest, the noblest man in all the world. I know it, and so Angelique says. She’s been in your towns, if you please. Lived in them and says she never knew what comfort meant until she came to Peace Island and us. You don’t understand.”

Margot was more angry than she had ever been, and anger made her decidedly uncomfortable. She sprang up hastily, saying:

“If you’ve nothing to tell, I must go. I want to get into the forest and look after my friends there. The storm may have hurt them.”

She was off down the mountain, as swift and sure-footed as if it were not a rough pathway that made him blunder along very slowly. For he followed, at once, feeling that he had not been “fair,” as she had accused, in his report of himself; and that only a complete confidence was due these people who had treated him so kindly.

“Margot! Margot! Wait a minute! You’re too swift for me! I want to – ”

Just there he caught his foot in a running vine, stumbled over a hidden rock, and measured his length, head downward, on the slope. He was not hurt, however, though vexed and mortified. But when he had picked himself up and looked around the girl had vanished.

CHAPTER VII

A WOODLAND MENAGERIE

“Hoo-ah! Yo-ho! H-e-r-e! This – way!”

Adrian followed the voice. It led him aside into the woods on the eastern slope, and it was accompanied by an indescribable babel of noises. Running water, screaming of wild fowl, cooing of pigeons, barking of dogs or some other beasts, cackling, chattering, laughter.

All the sounds of wild life had ceased suddenly in the tree-tops, as Adrian approached, recognizing and fearing his alien presence. But they were reassured by Margot’s familiar summons, and soon the “menagerie” he had suspected was gathered about her.

“Whew! It just rains squirrels – and chipmunks – and birds! Hello! That’s a fawn. That’s a fox! As sure as I’m alive, a magnificent red fox! Why isn’t he eating the whole outfit? And – Hurra!”

To the amazement of the watcher there came from the depths of the woods a sound that always thrills the pulses of any hunter – the cry of a moose-calf, accompanied by a soft crashing of branches, growing gradually louder.

“So they tame even the moose – these wonderful people! What next!” and as Adrian leaned forward the better to watch the advance of this uncommon “pet,” the “next” concerning which he had speculated also approached. Slowly up the river bank, stalked a pair of blue herons, and for them Margot had her warmest welcome.

“Heigho, Xanthippé, Socrates! What laggards! But here’s your breakfast, or one of them. I suppose you’ve eaten the other long ago. Indeed, you’re always eating, gourmands!”

The red fox eyed the newcomers with a longing eye and crept cautiously to his mistress’ side as she coaxed the herons nearer. But she was always prepared for any outbreak of nature among her forest friends, and drew him also close to her with the caressing touch she might have bestowed upon a beloved house-dog.

“Reynard, you beauty! Your head in my lap, sir;” and dropping to a sitting posture, she forced him to obey her. There he lay, winking but alert, while she scattered her store of good things right and left. There were nuts for the squirrels and ’munks, grains and seeds for the winged creatures, and for the herons, as well as Reynard, a few bits of dried meat. But for Browser, the moose-calf, she pulled the tender twigs and foliage with a lavish hand. When she had given some dainty to each of her oddly assorted pets, she sprang up, closed the box, and waved her arms in dismissal. The more timid of the creatures obeyed her, but some held their ground persistently, hoping for greater favors. To these she paid no further attention, and still keeping hold of Reynard’s neck started back to her human guest.

The fox, however, declined to accompany her. He distrusted strangers and it may be had designs of his own upon some other forest wilding.

“That’s the worst of it. We tame them and they love us. But they are only conquered, not changed. Isn’t Reynard beautiful? Doesn’t he look noble? as noble as a St. Bernard dog? If you’ll believe me, that fellow is thoroughly acquainted with every one of Angelique’s fowls, and knows he must never, never touch them, yet he’d eat one, quick as a flash, if he got a chance. He’s a coward, though; and by his cowardice we manage him. Sometimes;” sighed Margot, who had led the way into a little path toward the lake.

“How odd! You seem actually grieved at this state of things.”

“Why shouldn’t I be? I love him and I have a notion that love will do anything with anybody or anything. I do believe it will, but that I haven’t found just the right way of showing it. Uncle laughs at me, a little, but helps me all he can. Indeed, it is he who has tamed most of our pets. He says it is the very best way to study natural history.”

“Hmm. He intends your education shall be complete!”

“Of course. But one thing troubles him. He cannot teach me music. And you seem surprised. Aren’t girls, where you come from, educated? Doesn’t everybody prize knowledge?”

“That depends. Our girls are educated, of course. They go to college and all that, but I think you’d down any of them in exams. For my own part, I ran away just because I did not want this famous ‘education’ you value. That is, I didn’t of a certain sort. I wasn’t fair with you awhile ago, you said. I’d like to tell you my story now.”

“I’d like to hear it, of course. But, look yonder! Did you ever see anything like that?”

Margot was proud of the surprises she was able to offer this stranger in her woods, and pointed outward over the lake. They had just come to an open place on the shore and the water spread before them sparkling in the sunlight. Something was crossing the smooth surface, heading straight for their island, and of a nature to make Adrian cry out:

“Oh! for a gun!”

CHAPTER VIII

KING MADOC

“If you had one you should not use it! Are you a dreadful hunter?”

Margot had turned upon her guest with a defiant fear. As near as she had ever come to hating anything she hated the men, of whom she had heard, who used this wonderful northland as a murder ground. That was what she named it, in her uncompromising judgment of those who killed for the sake of killing, for the lust of blood that was in them.

“Yes. I reckon I am a ‘dreadful’ hunter, for I am a mighty poor shot. But I’d like a try at that fellow. What horns! What a head! And how can that fellow in the canoe keep so close to him, yet not finish him!”

Adrian was so excited he could not stand still. His eyes gleamed, his hands clenched, and his whole appearance was changed. Greatly for the worse, the girl thought, regarding him with disgust.

“Finish him? That’s King Madoc, Pierre’s trained bull-moose. You’d be finished yourself, I fear, if you harmed that splendid creature. Pierre’s a lazy fellow, mostly, but he spent a long time teaching Madoc, and with his temper – I’m thankful you lost your gun.”

“Do you never shoot things up here? I saw you giving the fox and herons what looked like meat. You had a stew for supper, and fish for breakfast. I don’t mean to be impertinent, but the sight of that big game – Whew!”

“Yes. We do kill things, or have them killed, when it is necessary for food. Never in sport. Man is almost the only animal who does that. It’s all terrible, seems to me. Everything preys upon something else, weaker than itself. Sometimes when I think of it my dinner chokes me. It’s so easy to take life, and only God can create it. But uncle says it is also God’s law to take what is provided, and that there is no mistake, even if it seems such to me.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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