

Kingston William Henry Giles

**Among the Red-skins: or,
Over the Rocky Mountains**



William Kingston

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W.H.G. Kingston

Among the Red-skins Or Over the Rocky Mountains

Chapter One. Missing

An Unexpected Return – Hugh is Absent – No Knowledge of his Whereabouts – Uncle Donald’s Apprehensions – A Hurried Supper, and Preparations for a Search

“Hugh, my lad! Hugh, run and tell Madge we have come back,” cried Uncle Donald, as he and I entered the house on our return, one summer’s evening, from a hunting excursion in search of deer or any other game we could come across, accompanied by three of our dogs, Whiskey, Pilot, and Muskymote.

As he spoke, he unstrapped from his shoulders a heavy load of caribou meat. I, having a similar load, did the same – mine was lighter than his – and, Hugh not appearing, I went to the door and again called. No answer came.

“Rose, my bonnie Rose! Madge, I say! Madge! Where are you all?” shouted Uncle Donald, while he hung his rifle, with his powder-horn and shot-pouch, in their accustomed places on the wall.

On glancing round the room he seemed somewhat vexed to perceive that no preparations had been made for supper, which we expected to have found ready for us. It was seldom, however, that he allowed himself to be put out. I think I can see him now – his countenance, though weather-beaten and furrowed by age, wearing its usual placid and benignant expression; while his long silvery beard and the white locks which escaped from beneath his Highland bonnet gave him an especially venerable appearance. His dress was a plaid shooting-coat, and high leggings of well-tanned leather, ornamented with fringe after the fashion of the Indians. Upright as an arrow, with broad shoulders and wiry frame, he stood upwards of six feet in his mocassins, nor did he appear to have lost anything of the strength and energy of youth.

As no one appeared, I ran round to the back of the house, thinking that Rose and Madge, accompanied by Hugh, had gone to bring in the milk, which it was the duty of Sandy McTavish to draw from our cows, and that he, for some cause or other, being later than usual, they had been delayed. I was not mistaken. I presently met them, Madge carrying the pails, and Rose, a fair-haired, blue-eyed little maiden, tripping lightly beside her. She certainly presented a great contrast in appearance to the gaunt, dark-skinned Indian woman, whose features, through sorrow and hardship, had become prematurely old. I inquired for Hugh.

“Is he not with you?” asked Rose, in a tone of some little alarm. “He went off two hours ago, saying that he should be sure to fall in with you, and would assist in bringing home the game you might have killed.”

“Yes, Hugh would go. What he will he do,” said the Indian woman, in the peculiar way of speaking used by most of her people.

“He felt so much better in the afternoon that he was eager to go out and help you,” said Rose. “He thought that Uncle Donald would not be angry with him, though he had told him to remain at home.”

We soon got back to the house. When Uncle Donald heard where Hugh had gone, though he expressed no anger, he looked somewhat troubled. He waited until Rose had gone out of the room, then he said to me —

“I noticed, about four miles from home, as we went out in the morning, the marks of a ‘grizzly,’ which had been busy grubbing up a rotten log, but as his trail appeared to lead away up the mountains to the eastward I did not think it worth my while to chase him; and you having just before separated from me, I forgot to mention the fact when you came back. But vexed would I be if Hugh should have fallen in with the brute. He’s too venturesome at times; and if he fired and only wounded it, I doubt it would be a bad job for him. Don’t you let Rose hear a word about the ‘grizzly,’ Archie,” he hastily added, as she re-entered the room.

Both Madge and Rose were, however, very anxious when they found that Hugh had not returned with us. There was still an hour or so of daylight, and we did not therefore abandon the hope that he would return before dark. Uncle Donald and I were both very hungry, for we had been in active exercise the whole of the day, and had eaten nothing.

Madge knowing this set about preparing supper with all haste. She could not, however, help running to the door every now and then to ascertain if Hugh were coming. At length Sandy McTavish came in. He was something like Uncle Donald in figure, but though not so old, even more wiry and gaunt, looking as if he were made of bone and sinews covered with parchment.

He at once volunteered to set out and look for Hugh.

“Wait till we get our supper, and Archie and I will go too. What’s the use of man or boy with an empty stomach?” said Uncle Donald.

“Deed an’ that’s true,” observed Sandy, helping himself from the trencher which stood in the centre of the table. “It’s a peety young Red Squirrel isn’t here; he would ha’ been a grand help if Maister Hugh’s missin’. But I’m thinkin’ he’s no far off, sir. He’ll have shot some beast likely, and be trying to trail it hame; it wud be a shame to him to hae lost his way! I canna believe that o’ Maister Hugh.”

Sandy said this while we were finishing our supper, when, taking down our rifles, with fresh ammunition, and bidding Rose and Madge “cheer up,” we three set out in search of Hugh.

Fortunately the days were long, and we might still hope to discover his track before darkness closed upon the world.

Chapter Two. An Indian Raid

Scene of the Story – History of Archie and Hugh – A Journey Across the Prairie – A Village Burnt by the Indians – Uncle Donald pursues the Blackfeet – Arrival at the Indian Camp

But where did the scene just described occur? And who were the actors?

Take a map of the world, run your eye over the broad Atlantic, up the mighty St. Lawrence, across the great lakes of Canada, then along well-nigh a thousand miles of prairie, until the Rocky Mountains are reached, beyond which lies British Columbia, a region of lakes, rivers, and streams, of lofty, rugged, and precipitous heights, the further shores washed by the Pacific Ocean.

On the bank of one of the many affluents of its chief river – the Fraser – Uncle Donald had established a location, called Clearwater, far removed from the haunts of civilised man. In front of the house flowed the ever-bright current (hence the name of the farm), on the opposite side of which rose rugged pine-crowned heights; to the left were others of similar altitude, a sparkling torrent running amid them into the main stream. Directly behind, extending some way back, was a level prairie, interspersed with trees and bordered by a forest extending up the sides of the variously shaped hills; while eastward, when lighted by the rays of the declining sun, numberless snow-capped peaks, tinged with a roseate hue, could be seen in the far distance. Horses and cattle fed on the rich grass of the well-watered meadows, and a few acres brought under cultivation produced wheat, Indian corn, barley, and oats sufficient for the wants of the establishment.

Such was the spot which Uncle Donald, who had won the friendship of the Sushwap tribe inhabiting the district, had some years ago fixed on as his abode. He had formerly been an officer in the Hudson's Bay Company, but had, for some reason or other, left their service. Loving the country in which he had spent the best years of his life, and where he had met with the most strange and romantic adventures, he had determined to make it his home. He had not, however, lost all affection for the land of his birth, or for his relatives and friends, and two years before the time I speak of he had unexpectedly appeared at the Highland village from which, when a young man, more than a quarter of a century before, he had set out to seek his fortune. Many of his relatives and the friends of his youth were dead, and he seemed, in consequence, to set greater value on those who remained, who gave him an affectionate reception. Among them was my mother, his niece, who had been a little blooming girl when he went away, but was now a staid matron, with a large family.

My father, Mr Morton, was a minister, but having placed himself under the directions of a Missionary Society, he was now waiting in London until it was decided in what part of the world he should commence his labours among the heathen. My two elder brothers were already out in the world – one as a surgeon, the other in business – and I had a fancy for going to sea.

“Let Archie come with me,” said Uncle Donald. “I will put him in the way of doing far better than he ever can knocking about on salt water; and as for adventures, he'll meet with ten times as many as he would if he becomes a sailor.” He used some other arguments, probably relating to my future advantage, which I did not hear. They, at all events, decided my mother; and my father, hearing of the offer, without hesitation gave his consent to my going. It was arranged, therefore, that I should accompany Uncle Donald back to his far-off home, of which he had left his faithful follower, Sandy McTavish, in charge during his absence.

“I want to have you with me for your own benefit, Archie; but there is another reason. I have under my care a boy of about your own age, Hugh McLellan, the son of an old comrade, who died

and left him to my charge, begging me to act the part of a father to him. I have done so hitherto, and hope to do so as long as I live; you two must be friends. Hugh is a fine, frank laddie, and you are sure to like one another. As Sandy was not likely to prove a good tutor to him, I left him at Fort Edmonton when I came away, and we will call for him as we return.”

I must pass over the parting with the dear ones at home, the voyage across the Atlantic, and the journey through the United States, which Uncle Donald took from its being in those days the quickest route to the part of the country for which we were bound.

After descending the Ohio, we ascended the Mississippi to its very source, several hundred miles, by steamboat; leaving which, we struck westward, passing the head waters of the Bed River of the north, on which Fort Garry, the principal post of the Hudson’s Bay Company, is situated, but which Uncle Donald did not wish to visit.

We had purchased good saddle-horses and baggage animals to carry our goods, and had engaged two men – a French Canadian, Pierre Le Clerc, and an Irishman, Cornelius Crolly, or “Corney,” as he was generally called. Both men were known to Uncle Donald, and were considered trustworthy fellows, who would stick by us at a pinch. The route Uncle Donald proposed taking was looked upon as a dangerous one, but he was so well acquainted with all the Indian tribes of the north that he believed, even should we encounter a party of Blackfeet, they would not molest us.

We had been riding over the prairie for some hours, with here and there, widely scattered, farms seen in the distance, and were approaching the last frontier settlement, a village or hamlet on the very outskirts of civilisation, when we caught sight of a column of smoke ascending some way on directly ahead of us.

“Can it be the prairie on fire?” I asked, with a feeling of alarm; for I had heard of the fearful way in which prairie fires sometimes extend for miles and miles, destroying everything in their course.

Uncle Donald stood up in his stirrups that he might obtain a better view before us.

“No; that’s not the smoke of burning grass. It looks more like that from a building, or may be from more than one. I fear the village itself is on fire,” he answered.

Scarcely had he spoken when several horsemen appeared galloping towards us, their countenances as they came near exhibiting the utmost terror. They were passing on, when Uncle Donald shouted out, “Hi! where are you going? What has happened?” On hearing the question, one of the men replied, “The Indians have surprised us. They have killed most of our people, set fire to our houses, and carried off the women and children.”

“And you running away without so much as trying to recover them? Shame upon ye!” exclaimed Uncle Donald. “Come on with me, and let’s see what can be done!”

The men, however, who had scarcely pulled rein, were galloping forward. Uncle Donald shouted to them to come back, but, terror-stricken, they continued their course, perhaps mistaking his shouts for the cries of the Indians.

“We must try and save some of the poor creatures,” said Uncle Donald, turning to our men. “Come on, lads! You are not afraid of a gang of howling red-skins!” and we rode on, making our baggage horses move much faster than they were wont to do under ordinary circumstances.

Before reaching the village we came to a clump of trees. Here Uncle Donald, thinking it prudent not to expose his property to the greedy eyes of the Indians, should we overtake them, ordered Corney and Pierre to halt and remain concealed, while he and I rode forward. By the time we had got up to the hamlet every farm and log-house was burning, and the greater part reduced to ashes.

No Indians were to be seen. According to their custom, after they had performed their work they had retreated.

I will pass over the dreadful sights we witnessed. Finding no one alive to whom we could render assistance, we pushed on, Uncle Donald being anxious to come up with the enemy before they had put their captives to death. Though darkness was approaching, we still rode forward.

“It’s likely they will move on all night, but, you see, they are loaded, and we can travel faster than they will. They are sure to camp before morning, and then we’ll get up with them,” observed Uncle Donald.

“But what will become of our baggage?” I asked.

“Oh, that will be safe enough. Pierre and Corney will remain where we left them until we get back,” he answered.

I was certain that Uncle Donald knew what he was about, or I should have been far from easy, I confess.

We went on and on, the Indians keeping ahead of us. From this circumstance, Uncle Donald was of opinion that they had not taken many prisoners. At length we came to a stream running northward, bordered by willows poplars, and other trees. Instead of crossing directly in front of us, where it was somewhat deep, we kept up along its banks. We had not got far when we saw the light of a fire, kindled, apparently, at the bottom of the hollow through which the stream passed.

“If I’m not far wrong, that fire is in the camp of their rear guard. Their main body cannot be far off,” observed Uncle Donald. “Dismount here, Archie, and you hold the horses behind these trees, while I walk boldly up to them. They won’t disturb themselves much for a single man.”

I dismounted as he desired, and he proceeded toward the fire. I felt very anxious, for I feared that the Blackfeet might fire and kill him without stopping to learn who he was.

Chapter Three. With the Red-skins

Uncle Donald and the Blackfeet – The Chief’s Speech – A Fortunate Recognition – Ponoko gives up a Little Girl to Uncle Donald – Impossible to do any more – Ponoko urges Departure – Rose is Adopted by Uncle Donald – Hugh McLellan – Madge – Story of a Brave Indian Mother – Red Squirrel – The Household at Clearwater

I waited with intense anxiety for Uncle Donald who appeared to have been a long time absent. I dared not disobey his orders by moving from the spot, yet I felt eager to creep up and try and ascertain what had happened. I thought that by seeming the horses to the trees, I might manage to get near the Indian camp without being perceived, but I overcame the temptation. At length I heard footsteps approaching, when, greatly to my relief, I saw Uncle Donald coming towards me, carrying some object wrapped up in a buffalo-robe in his arms.

I will now mention what occurred to him. He advanced, as he told me afterwards, without uttering a word, until he was close up to the fire round which the braves were collected, then seating himself opposite the chief, whom he recognised by his dress and ornaments, said, “I have come as a friend to visit my red brothers; they must listen to what I have to say.” The chief nodded and passed the pipe he was smoking round to him, to show that he was welcome as a friend. Uncle Donald then told them that he was aware of their attack upon the village, which was not only unjustifiable, but very unwise, as they would be certain to bring down on their heads the vengeance of the “Long-knives” – so the Indians call the people of the United States. That wide as was the country, the arm of the Long-knives could stretch over it; that they had fleet horses, and guns which could kill when their figures appeared no larger than musk rats; and he urged them, now that the harm was done, to avert the punishment which would overtake them by restoring the white people they had captured.

When he had finished, the chief rose and made a long speech, excusing himself and his tribe on the plea that the Long-knives had been the aggressors; that they had killed their people, driven them from their hunting-grounds, and destroyed the buffalo on which they lived. No sooner did the chief begin to speak than Uncle Donald recognised him as a Sioux whose life he had saved some years before. He therefore addressed him by his name of Ponoko, or the Red Deer, reminding him of the circumstance. On this the chief, advancing, embraced him; and though unwilling to acknowledge that he had acted wrongly, he expressed his readiness to follow the advice of his white friend. He confessed, however, that his hand had only one captive, a little girl, whom he was carrying off as a present to his wife, to replace a child she had lost. “She would be as a daughter to me; but if my white father desires it, I will forego the pleasure I expected, and give her up to him. As for what the rest of my people may determine I cannot be answerable; but I fear that they will not give up their captives, should they have taken any alive,” he added.

“It would have been a terrible thing to have left the little innocent to be brought up among the savages and taught all their heathen ways, though they, no doubt, would have made much of her, and treated her like a little queen,” said Uncle Donald to me; “so I at once closed with the chief’s offer. Forthwith, a little girl, some five years of age, was brought out from a small hut built of boughs, close to where the party was sitting. She appeared almost paralysed with terror; but when, looking up, she saw that Uncle Donald was a white man, and that he was gazing compassionately at her, clinging to his hand, she entreated him by her looks to save her from the savages. She had been so overcome by the terrible scenes she had witnessed that she was unable to speak.”

Uncle Donald, lifting her up in his arms, endeavoured to calm her fears, promising that he would take care of her until he had restored her to her friends. He now expressed his intention of proceeding to the larger camp, but Ponoko urged him on no account to make the attempt, declaring that his life would not be safe, as several of their fiercest warriors were in command, who had vowed the destruction of all the Long-knives or others they should encounter.

“But the prisoners! What will they do with them?” asked Uncle Donald. “Am I to allow them to perish without attempting their rescue?”

“My white father must be satisfied with what I’ve done for him. I saw no other prisoners taken. All the pale-faces in the villages were killed,” answered Ponoko. “For his own sake I cannot allow him to go forward; let him return to his own country, and he will there be safe. I know his wishes, and will, when the sun rises, go to my brother chiefs and tell them what my white father desires.”

Ponoko spoke so earnestly that Uncle Donald, seeing that it would be useless to make the attempt, and fearing that even the little girl might be taken from him, judged that it would be wise to get out of the power of the savages; and carrying the child, who clung round his neck, he bade the other braves farewell, and commenced his return to where he had left me. He had not got far when Ponoko overtook him, and again urged him to get to a distance as soon as possible.

“Even my own braves cannot be trusted,” he said. “I much fear that several who would not smoke the pipe may steal out from the camp, and try to kill my white father if he remains longer in the neighbourhood.”

Brave as Uncle Donald was, he had me to look after as well as the little girl. Parting with the chief, therefore, he hurried on, and told me instantly to mount.

I was very much astonished to see the little girl, but there was no time to ask questions; so putting spurs to our horses, we galloped back to where we had left our men and the baggage.

As both we and our horses required rest, we camped on the spot, Pierre and Corney being directed to keep a vigilant watch.

The little girl lay in Uncle Donald’s arms, but she had not yet recovered sufficiently to tell us her name, and it was with difficulty that we could induce her to take any food.

Late in the day we met a party going out to attack the Indians; but, as Uncle Donald observed, “they might just as well have tried to catch the east wind. We waited to see the result of the expedition. They at length returned, not having come near the enemy. The few men who had escaped the massacre were unable to give any information about the little girl or her friends, nor could we learn to whom she belonged. All we could ascertain from her was that her name was Rose, for her mind had sustained so fearful a shock that, even after several days had passed, she was unable to speak intelligibly.

“Her fate among the Indians would have been terrible, but it would be almost as bad were we to leave her among the rough characters hereabouts,” observed Uncle Donald. “As none of her friends can be found, I will be her guardian, and, if God spares my life, will bring her up as a Christian child.”

It was many a long day, however, before Rose recovered her spirits. Her mind, indeed, seemed to be a blank as to the past, and Uncle Donald, afraid of reviving the recollection of the fearful scenes she must have witnessed, forbore to say anything which might recall them. However, by the time we reached Fort Edmonton, where Hugh McLellan had been left, she was able to prattle away right merrily. The officers at the fort offered to take charge of her, but Uncle Donald would not consent to part with his little “Prairie Rose,” as he called her; and after a short stay we set out again, with Hugh added to our party, across the Rocky Mountains, and at length arrived safely at Clearwater.

Corney and Pierre remained with us, and took the places of two other men who had left.

Hugh McLellan was a fine, bold little fellow, not quite two years my junior; and he and I – as Uncle Donald had hoped we should – soon became fast friends.

He had not much book learning, though he had been instructed in the rudiments of reading and writing by one of the clerks in the fort, but he rode fearlessly, and could manage many a horse which grown men would fear to mount.

“I want you, Archie, to help Hugh with his books,” said Uncle Donald. “I believe, if you set wisely about it, that he will be ready to learn from you. I would not like for him to grow up as ignorant as most of the people about us. It is the knowledge we of the old country possess which gives us the influence over these untutored savages; without it we should be their inferiors.”

I promised to do my best in fulfilling his wishes, though I took good care not to assert any superiority over my companion, who, indeed, though I was better acquainted with literature than he was, knew far more about the country than I did.

But there was another person in the household whose history is worthy of narration – the poor Indian woman – “Madge,” as we called her for shortness, though her real name was Okenmadgelika. She also owed her life to Uncle Donald.

Several years before this, she, with her two children, had accompanied her husband and some other men on an expedition to trap beavers, at the end of autumn, towards the head waters of the Columbia. While she was seated in her hut late in the evening, one of the men staggered in desperately wounded, and had just time to tell her that her husband and the rest were murdered, when he fell dead at her feet. She, instantly taking up her children – one a boy of six years of age, the other a little girl, an infant in arms – fled from the spot, with a horse and such articles as she could throw on its back, narrowly escaping from the savages searching for her.

She passed the winter with her two young ones, no human aid at hand. On the return of spring she set off, intending to rejoin her husband’s people far away to the westward. After enduring incredible hardships, she had been compelled to kill her horse for food. She had made good some days’ journey, when, almost sinking from hunger, and fearing to see her children perish, she caught sight of her relentless foes, the Blackfeet. In vain she endeavoured to conceal herself. They saw her and were approaching, when, close to the spot where she was standing, a tall white man and several Indians suddenly emerged from behind some rocks. The Blackfeet came on, fancying that against so few they could gain an easy victory; but the rifles of the white man and his party drove them back, and Uncle Donald – for he was the white man – conveyed the apparently dying woman and her little ones to his camp.

The house at Clearwater had not yet been built. By being well cared for the Indian woman and her children recovered; but though the boy flourished, the little girl seemed like a withered flower, and never regained her strength.

Grateful for her preservation, the poor woman, when she found that Uncle Donald was about to settle at Clearwater, entreated that she might remain with her children and labour for him, and a faithful servant she had ever since proved.

Her little girl at length died. She was for a time inconsolable, until the arrival of Rose, to whom she transferred all her maternal feelings, and who warmly returned her affection.

But her son, whose Indian name translated was Red Squirrel, by which appellation he was always known, had grown up into a fine lad, versed in all Indian ways, and possessing a considerable amount of knowledge gained from his white companions, without the vices of civilisation. He was a great favourite with Uncle Donald, who placed much confidence in his intelligence, courage, and faithfulness.

Nearly two years had passed since Rose, Hugh, and I had been brought to Clearwater, and by this time we were all much attached to each other. We had also learned to love the place which had become our home; but we loved Uncle Donald far more.

Chapter Four. Three Grizzlies

The Start after Hugh – A Foot-print – Following the Trail – Archer meets a Grizzly – A Miss-fire – Discretion the Better Part of Valour – Far more Bears – Help, and a Joint Attack – Hugh up in a Tree – The Result of Disobedience

I must now continue my narrative from the evening Hugh was missing.

The moment we had finished our hurried meal we set out. Sandy, in case we should be benighted, had procured a number of pine torches, which he strapped on his back; and Uncle Donald directed Corney and Pierre who came in as we were starting, to follow, keeping to the right by the side of the torrent, in case Hugh should have taken that direction.

Whiskey, Pilot, Muskymote followed closely at our heels – faithful animals, ready to drag our sleighs in winter, or, as now, to assist us in our search. We walked on at a rapid rate, and were soon in a wild region of forests, rugged hills, and foaming streams. As we went along we shouted out Hugh's name, and searched about for any signs of his having passed that way. At length we discovered in some soft ground a foot-print, which there could be no doubt was his, the toe pointing in the direction we were going.

“Now we have found the laddie's trail we must take care not to lose it,” observed Uncle Donald. “It leads towards the very spot where I saw the grizzly this morning.”

On and on we went. Soon another foot-print, and then a mark on some fallen leaves, and here and there a twig bent or broken off, showed that we were on Hugh's trail.

But the sun had now sunk beneath the western range of mountains, and the gloom of evening coming on would prevent us from tracing our young companion much further. Still, as we should have met him had he turned back, we followed the only track he was likely to have taken.

We were approaching the spot where Uncle Donald had seen the bear, near a clump of trees with a thick undergrowth, a rugged hill rising beyond. We were somewhat scattered, hunting about for any traces the waning light would enable us to discover. I half feared that I should come upon his mangled remains, or some part of his dress which might show his fate. I had my rifle, but was encumbered with no other weight, and in my eagerness, I ran on faster than my companions. I was making my way among some fallen timber blown down by a storm, when suddenly I saw rise up, just before me, a huge form. I stopped, having, fortunately, the presence of mind not to run away, for I at once recognised the animal as a huge grizzly, which had been engaged in tearing open a rotten trunk in search of insects. I remembered that Uncle Donald had told me, should I ever find myself face to face with a grizzly, to throw up my arms and stand stock still.

The savage brute, desisting from its employment, came towards me, growling terribly, and displaying its huge teeth and enormous mouth.

I was afraid to shout, lest it might excite the animal's rage; but I acted as Uncle Donald had advised me. As I lifted up my rifle and flourished it over my head, the creature stopped for a moment and got up on its hind legs.

Now or never was my time to fire, for I could not expect to have a better opportunity, and bringing my rifle, into which I had put a bullet, to my shoulder, I took a steady aim and pulled the trigger. To my dismay, the cap snapped. It had never before played me such a trick. Still the bear kept looking at me, apparently wondering what I was about. Mastering all my nerve, and still keeping my eye fixed on the shaggy monster in front of me, I lowered my rifle, took out another cap, and placed it on the nipple. I well knew that should I only wound the bear my fate would be sealed, for it would be

upon me in an instant. I felt doubly anxious to kill it, under the belief that it had destroyed my friend Hugh; but still it was sufficiently far off to make it possible for me to miss, should my nerves for a moment fail me. As long as it remained motionless I was unwilling to fire, in the hope that before I did so Uncle Donald and Sandy might come to my assistance.

Having re-capped my rifle, I again lifted it to my shoulder. At that moment Bruin, who had grown tired of watching me, went down on all fours. The favourable opportunity was lost; for although I might still lodge a bullet in its head, I might not kill it at once, and I should probably be torn to pieces. I stood steady as before, though sorely tempted to run. Instead, however, of coming towards me, to my surprise, the bear returned to the log, and recommenced its occupation of scratching for insects.

Had it been broad daylight I might have had a fair chance of shooting it; but in the obscurity, as it scratched away among the fallen timber, from which several gnarled and twisted limbs projected upwards, I was uncertain as to the exact position of its head. Under the circumstances, I considered that discretion was the better part of valour; and feeling sure that Uncle Donald and Sandy would soon come up and settle the bear more effectually than I should, I began slowly to retreat, hoping to get away unperceived. I stepped back very cautiously, scarcely more than a foot at a time, then stopped. As I did so I observed a movement a little distance off beyond the big bear, and presently, as I again retreated, two other bears came up, growling, to the big one, and, to my horror, all three moved towards me.

Though smaller than their mother, each bear was large enough to kill me with a pat of its paw; and should I even shoot her they would probably be upon me. Again, however, they stopped, unwilling apparently to leave their dainty feast.

How earnestly I prayed for the arrival of Uncle Donald and Sandy! I had time, too, to think of poor Hugh, and felt more convinced than ever that he had fallen a victim to the ferocious grizzlies. I still dared not cry out, but seeing them again turn to the logs, I began, as before, to step back, hoping at length to get to such a distance that I might take to my heels without the risk of being pursued. In doing as I proposed I very nearly tumbled over a log, but recovering myself, I got round it. When I stopped to see what the bears were about they were still feeding, having apparently forgotten me. I accordingly turned round and ran as fast as I could venture to go among the trees and fallen trunks, till at length I made out the indistinct figures of Uncle Donald and Sandy, with the dogs, coming towards me.

“I have just seen three bears,” I shouted. “Come on quickly, and we may be in time to kill them!”

“It’s a mercy they did not catch you, laddie,” said Uncle Donald, when he got up to me. “With the help of the dogs we’ll try to kill them, however. Can you find the spot where you saw them?”

“I have no doubt about that,” I answered.

“Well, then, before we go further we’ll just look to our rifles, and make sure that there’s no chance of their missing fire.”

Doing as he suggested, we moved on, he in the centre and somewhat in advance, Sandy and I on either side of him, the dogs following and waiting for the word of command to rush forward.

The bears did not discover us until we were within twenty yards of them, when Uncle Donald shouted to make them show themselves.

I fancied that directly afterwards I heard a cry, but it might only have been the echo of Uncle Donald’s voice. Presently a loud growl from the rotten log showed us that the bears were still there, and we soon saw all three sitting up and looking about them.

“Sandy, do you take the small bear on the right; I will aim at the big fellow, and leave the other to you, Archie; but do not fire until you are sure of your aim,” said Uncle Donald. “Now, are you ready?”

We all fired at the same moment. Sandy’s bear dropped immediately, but the big one, with a savage growl, sprang over the logs and came towards us, followed by the one at which I had fired.

Uncle Donald now ordered the dogs, which had been barking loudly, to advance to the fight; but before they reached the larger bear she fell over on her side, and giving some convulsive struggles,

lay apparently dead. The dogs, on this, attacked the other bear, which, made furious by its wound, was coming towards us, growling loudly. On seeing the dogs, however, the brute stopped, and sat up on its hind legs, ready with its huge paws to defend itself from their attacks. We all three, meantime, were rapidly reloading, and just as the bear had knocked over Whiskey and seized Muskymote in its paws, Uncle Donald and Sandy again fired and brought it to the ground, enabling Muskymote, sorely mauled, to escape from its deadly embrace.

I instinctively gave a shout, and was running on, when Uncle Donald stopped me.

“Stay!” he said; “those brutes play ‘possum’ sometimes, and are not to be trusted. If they are not shamming, they may suddenly revive and try to avenge themselves.”

“We’ll soon settle that,” said Sandy, and quickly reloading, he fired his rifle into the head of the fallen bear.

“Have you killed them all?” I heard a voice exclaim, which seemed to come from the branches of a tree some little distance off.

I recognised it as Hugh’s. “Hurrah!” I shouted; “are you all right?”

“Yes, yes,” answered Hugh, “only very hungry and stiff.”

We quickly made our way to the tree, where I found Hugh safe and sound, and assisted him to descend. He told us that he had fallen in with the bears on his way out, and had just time to escape from them by climbing up the tree, where they had kept him a prisoner all day.

“I am thankful to get ye back, Hugh. You disobeyed orders, and have been punished pretty severely. I hope it will be a lesson to you,” was the only remark Uncle Donald made as he grasped Hugh’s hand. I judged, by the tone of his voice, that he was not inclined to be very angry.

Having flayed the bears by the light of Sandy’s torches, we packed up as much of the meat as we could carry, and hung up the remainder with the skins, intending to send for it in the morning. We then, having met the other two men, hastened homewards with Hugh; and I need not say how rejoiced Rose and Madge were to see him back safe.

Chapter Five. An Expedition

Waiting for the Messengers – Two Tired Indians – Bad News of Archie's Father – Uncle Donald Determines to Cross the Rocky Mountains – Preparations – News of the Blackfeet – Indian Canoes – The Expedition Starts

Summer was advancing, and we had for some time been expecting the return of Red Squirrel and Kondiarak, another Indian, who had been sent in the spring to Fort Edmonton with letters, and directions to bring any which might have come for us. At length we became somewhat anxious at their non-appearance, fearing that some serious accident might have happened to them, or that they might have fallen into the hands of the savage Blackfeet, the chief predatory tribe in the country through which they had to pass.

Hugh and I were one evening returning from trapping beaver, several of which we carried on our backs. Though the skins are the most valued, the meat of the animal serves as food. We were skirting the edge of the prairie, when we caught sight of two figures descending the hills to the east by the pass which led from Clearwater towards the Rocky Mountains.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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