Stoddard William Osborn

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I.
ALL AROUND A FIREPLACE

The gate that opened from the yard into the lane leading back to the barn was directly opposite the side-door of the house. The door was shut, but the gate was open; and in it stood a gray-haired dame with a sharp nose and silver-rimmed spectacles. The house behind her was a small one, white-painted, without blinds to its windows, but with an air of snug comfort all over it. Just beyond the gate and the woman stood a tall, vigorous-looking young fellow of not more than eighteen; and his left hand was on the nose of a nice-looking horse; and behind the horse was a neat, bright, very red cutter. The boy's face was also somewhat rosy; and so, for that frosty moment, was the tip of his mother's nose.

"Now, Lavawjer, that there cutter's all you've got to show for about as hard a month's work as ever you put in; but I won't say that the deacon drew a hard bargain with ye."

"Well, mother, just look at it."

"I'm a-lookin' at it, and it isn't the cutter it was. You've had it painted red, and varnished, and you've put on a new goose-

neck in place of the broken one, and there's room in it for two if neither one on 'em was too heavy."

"That's so, mother; and all you've got to do is just to try it. I'll take you to meeting in it next Sunday. You ought to see how the colt gets over the snow with only that cutter behind him."

"I ain't a bit sorry you've got somethin' for him to do. You've been a-raisin' on him since before he was a yearlin', and he hasn't earned his keep."

Mrs. Stebbins had made her first look at her son's new cutter a severe and searching one, and she told him very fully all her thoughts about it and about the sorrel colt. She was a faithful mother; but there was pride in her eye, and more red on the tip of her nose, when she turned to go into the house. He did not hear her say to herself, —

"He's the smartest boy in all Benton Valley, and now he's got the nicest horse and cutter, – that is, for his age, considerin', – and I ain't one bit afraid it'll spile him."

He was now leading his sorrel pet, with the jaunty cutter following, out through the lane to the barn. It was a grand thing, and out of the common range of human events, for a country-boy of his age to have such an outfit all his own. Such things can always be accounted for, when you find them happening. If he were not just a little "spiled," it was no fault of his mother. She was a widow, and he was her only son; and she had talked to him and about him pretty steadily from the day he was born. He looked older than he really was now, and she often said so; but

she sometimes added that he knew enough for a man of forty. She had named him "Le Voyageur," after a great French traveller whose name she had seen in a book when she was a girl; but the Valley boys had massacred all the beauty of it, and shortened it into "Vosh." No other fellow in all that country had so very remarkable a nickname.

"Now, Jeff," he said, as he cast the sorrel loose from the cutter, "maybe there's a chance a-coming that you'll have a better-looking load to haul next time you're hitched in. I'll want ye to show your oats if you do."

That remark could hardly have referred to Mrs. Stebbins and her next Sunday's ride to the meeting-house; but Jeff whinnied gently in reply, as if to express his willingness for any improvement, and Vosh led him into the stable.

"City folks know some things," he remarked to Jeff, while he poured some oats in the manger; "but they don't know what good sleighing is. We'll show 'em, soon as we get some bells; and the deacon's got more buffaloes than he knows what to do with."

That was a good half-hour before supper, and he seemed in no hurry to get into the house; but it was odd that his mother, at the very same time, should have been talking to herself, in default of any other hearer, about "city folks" and their ways and by-ways and shortcomings. She seemed to know a great deal about them, and particularly about their general ignorance concerning snow, ice, cold weather, and all the really good things of genuine winter. Both she and her son evidently had kindly and liberal

feelings towards the hardest kind of frost, and were free to say as much, but were in doubt as to whether city people could live and be comfortable in such weather as had already come. Beyond a doubt, they were waiting for somebody. There is nothing else in the wide world that will keep people talking as that will; and Mrs. Stebbins said some things that sounded as if she were asking questions of the teakettle.

Down the road a little distance, and on the other side of it, a very different pair of people were even more interested in city folk, and not in their shortcomings so much as in the fact that certain of them seemed to be too long a-coming. They were away back in the great old-fashioned kitchen of a farmhouse, as large as three of the one in which Mrs. Stebbins was getting supper for Vosh.

"Aunt Judith, I hear 'em!"

"Now, Pen, my child!"

The response came from the milk-room, and was followed by the clatter of an empty tin milk-pan falling on the floor.

"It sounded like bells."

"It's the wind, Pen. Sakes alive! but they ought to be here by this time."

"There, aunt Judith!"

Pen suddenly darted out of the kitchen, leaving the long hind-legs of a big pair of waffle-irons sticking helplessly out from the open door of the stove.

"Pen! Penelope! – I declare, she's gone. There, I've dropped

another pan. What's got into me to-night? I just do want to see those children. Poor things, how froze they will be!"

Penelope was pressing her eager, excited little face close to the frost-flowers on the sitting-room window. It was of no use, cold as it made the tip of her nose, to strain her blue eyes across the snowy fields, or up the white, glistening reaches of the road. There was nothing like a sleigh in sight, nor did her sharpest listening bring her any sound of coming sleigh-bells.

"Pen! Penelope Farnham! What's that a-burnin'? Sakes alive! if she hasn't gone and stuck them waffle-irons in the fire! She's put a waffle in 'em too."

Yes, and the smoke of the lost waffle was carrying tales into the milk-room.

"O aunt Judith! I forgot. I just wanted to try one."

"Jest like you, Penelope Farnham. You're always a-tryin' somethin'. If you ain't a trial to me, I wouldn't say so. Now, don't you tetch them waffles once again, on no account."

"It's all burned as black" —

"Course it is, – black as a coal. I'd ha' thought you'd ha' known better'n that. Why, when I was ten years old I could ha' cooked for a fam'ly."

"Guess I could do that," said Pen resolutely; but aunt Judith was shaking out the smoking remains of the spoiled waffle into the "pig-pail," and curtly responded, —

"That looks like it. You'll burn up the irons yet."

Half a minute of silence followed, and then she again spoke

from the milk-room: —

"Penelope, look at the sittin'-room fire, and see if it wants any more wood on it. They'll be chilled clean through when they git here."

Pen obeyed; but it only needed one glance into the great roaring fireplace to make sure that no kind of chill could keep its hold on anybody in the vicinity of that blaze.

A stove was handier to cook by, and therefore Mr. Farnham had put aside his old-fashioned notions, to the extent of having one set up in the kitchen. The parlor too, he said, belonged to his wife more than it did to him, and therefore he had yielded again, and there was a stove there also. It was hard at work now. He had insisted, however, that the wide, low-ceilinged, comfortable sitting-room should remain a good deal as his father had left it to him; and there the fireplace held its wood-devouring own. That was one reason why it was the pleasantest room in the house, especially on a winter evening.

Penelope had known that fireplace a long while. She had even played "hide-and-coop" in it in warm weather, when it was bright and clean. But she thought she had never before seen it so full. "Such a big back-log!" she exclaimed aloud. But aunt Judith had followed her in to make sure of the condition of things, and it was her voice that added, —

"Yes, and the fore-stick's a foot through. Your father heaped it up just before he set out for the village. He might a'most as well have piled the whole tree in."

"Father likes fire: so do I."

"He's an awful wasteful man with his wood, though. Pen, just you put down that poker. Do you want to have them there top logs a-rollin' across the floor?"

"That one lies crooked."

"My child! let it be. I daresn't leave you alone one minute. You'll burn the house down over our heads, one of these days."

Pen obeyed. She slowly lowered the long, heavy iron rod, and laid it down on the hearth; but such a fire as that was a terrible temptation. Almost any man in the world might have been glad to have a good poke at it, if only to see the showers of sparks go up from the glowing hickory logs.

"There they come!"

Pen turned away from the fire very suddenly; and aunt Judith put her hand to her ear, and took off her spectacles, so she could listen better.

"I shouldn't wonder."

"That's the sleigh-bells! It's our sleigh, I know it is. Shall I begin to make the waffles?"

"Don't you tetch 'em. Pen, get out that chiny thing your mother got to put the maple-sirup in."

"Oh, I forgot that."

She brought it out like a flash now; and it must have been the only thing she had forgotten when she set the table, for she had walked anxiously around it twenty times, at least, since she put the last plate in its place.

Faint and far, from away down the road, beyond the turn, the winter wind brought up the merry jingle of bells. By the time Pen had brought the china pitcher for the sirup from its shelf in the closet, and once more darted to the window, she could see her father's black team – blacker than ever against the snow – trotting towards the house magnificently.

"Don't I wish I'd gone with 'em! But it was Corry's turn. I guess Susie isn't used to waffles, but she can't help liking 'em."

That was quite possible, but it might also be of some importance whether Penelope or aunt Judith should have the care of the waffle-irons.

Jingle-jangle-jingle, louder and louder, came the merry bells, till they stopped at the great gate, and a tall boy sprang out of the sleigh to open it. The front-door of the house swung open quicker than did the gate, and Pen was on the stoop, shouting anxiously, —

"Did they come, Corry? Did you get 'em?"

A deep voice from the sleigh responded with a chuckle, —

"Yes, Pen, we caught 'em both. They're right here, and they can't get away now."

"I see 'em! There's cousin Susie!"

At that moment she remembered to turn and shout back into the house, —

"Aunt Judith, here they are! They've got 'em both!"

But there was her aunt already in the doorway, with the steaming waffle-irons in one hand.

"Sakes alive, child! You'll freeze the whole house. Poor things! and they ain't used to cold weather."

Aunt Judith must have had an idea that it was generally summer in the city.

The sleigh jangled right up to the bottom step of the stoop now. Mr. Farnham got out first, and was followed by his wife. They were followed by a very much wrapped-up young lady, into whose arms Pen fairly jumped, exclaiming, —

"Susie! Susie Hudson!"

There were no signs of frost-bite on Susie's rosy cheeks, and she hugged Penelope vigorously. Just behind her, a little more dignifiedly, there descended from the sleigh a boy who may have been two years younger, say fourteen or fifteen, who evidently felt that the occasion called upon him for his self-possession.

"Pen," said her mother, "don't you mean to kiss cousin Porter?"

Pen was ready. Her little hands went out, and her bright, welcoming face was lifted for the kiss; but, if Porter Hudson had been a waffle, he would not have been burned by it at all. It was not altogether because he was a boy, and a big one, but that he was more a stranger. Susie had paid her country-cousins a long summer visit only the year before, while Porter had not been seen by any of them since he was four years old. Both he and they had forgotten that he had ever been so small as that.

Mr. Farnham started for the barn, to put away his team, bidding Corry go on into the house with his cousins. Aunt Judith

was at last able to close the door behind them, and keep any more of the winter from coming in.

It took but half a minute to help Susie and Porter Hudson get their things off, and then aunt Judith all but forced them into the chairs she had set for them in front of the great fireplace.

"What a splendid fire!"

It was Susie said that, with the glow of it making her very pretty face look brighter and prettier, and very happy. She had already won aunt Judith's heart over again by being so glad to see her, and she kept right on winning it, needlessly; for every thing about that room had to be looked at twice, and admired, and told how nice it was.

"It is indeed a remarkably fine fire," said Porter with emphasis, at the end of a full minute.

"And we're going to have waffles and maple-sugar for supper," said Pen. "Don't you like waffles?"

"Yes," said Porter: "they're very nice, no doubt."

"And after such a sleigh-ride," chimed in Susie. "The sleighing is splendid, beautiful!"

"More snow here than you have in the city?" suggested Corry to Porter.

"Yes, a little; but then, we have to have ours removed as fast as it comes down, – get it out of the way, you know."

"It isn't in the way here. We'd have a high time of it if we tried to get rid of our snow."

"I should say you would. And then it does very well where the

people make use of sleighs."

"Don't you have 'em in the city?"

Pen was looking at her cousins with eyes that were full of pity, but at that moment aunt Judith called to her from the kitchen, —

"Penelope, come and watch the waffle-irons while I make the tea."

"Waffles!" exclaimed Susie. "I never saw any made."

"Come with me, then. I'll show you; that is, if you're warm enough."

"Warm! Why, I wasn't cold one bit. I'm warm as toast."

Out they went; and there were so many errands on the hands of aunt Judith and Mrs. Farnham just then, that the girls had the kitchen stove to themselves for a few moments. Pen may have been six years younger, but she was conscious of a feeling of immense superiority in her capacity of cook. She kept it until, as she was going over, for Susie's benefit, a list of her neighbors, and telling what had become of them since the summer visit, Mr. Farnham came in at the kitchen-door, and almost instantly exclaimed, —

"Mind your waffles, Pen. You're burning 'em."

"Why, so I did, – that one, just a little. I was telling Susie" —

"A little, my child!" interrupted aunt Judith. "I'd as lief eat burnt leather. Oh, dear! give me those irons."

"Now, aunt Judith, please fill 'em up for Susie to try. I want to show her how."

The look on Susie's face was quite enough to keep aunt Judith

from making a breath of objection, and the rich creamy batter was poured into the smoking moulds.

"Don't you let it burn, Susie," said Pen. "They want to come out when they're just a good brown. I'll show you."

Susie set out to watch the fate of that waffle most diligently; but she had not at all counted on what might come in the mean time, – a visitor, for instance.

Susie had already asked about the Stebbinses, and Pen had answered, —

"They know you're coming. Vosh was here this very morning, and I told him; and he said he'd be glad to have you call and see him."

"Call and see him? Well."

No more remarks had room to be made in just then; for, only a few minutes before aunt Judith poured out that waffle, Mrs. Stebbins had said to her son, —

"I heered the deacon's sleigh come up the road, Lavawjer. Jest you take a teacup, and go over and borry a drawin' of tea of Miss Farnham. Don't you miss nothin'. City ways'll spile most anybody; and that there Hudson gal – Susie, her name was – is likely gettin' stuck up enough by this time."

She told him a great deal more than that before he got out of the door with his teacup, and it looked as if he were likely to have questions to answer when he should come back.

He escaped a little unceremoniously, right in the middle of a long sentence. And so, just when Susie was most deeply absorbed

in her experiment, there came a loud rap at the kitchen-door; then, without waiting for any one to come and open it, the door swung back, and in walked Vosh, as large as life, with the teacup in his hand.

He did look large; but no amount of frost or fire could have made him color so red as he did when Susie Hudson let go of the irons, and stepped right forward to shake hands with him.

"How d'ye do, Vosh? How is your mother?"

"Pretty well, thank you. How do you do? Mother's first-rate, but she's wrong this time. I don't see as you're stuck up a bit. You're just like you was last summer, only prettier."

The one great weakness in the character of Vosh Stebbins was that he could not help telling the truth, to save his life. It was very bad for him sometimes; and now, before Susie could smother her laugh, and make up her mind what to answer him, he held out his teacup to aunt Judith.

"Miss Farnham, mother told me to borrow a drawing of tea. We ain't out of tea, by a long ways; but she heard the deacon's sleigh a-coming, and she wanted to know if the folks from the city'd got here."

"They've come," said aunt Judith shortly, "Susie and her brother. You tell your mother I wish she'd send me over a dozen of eggs. The skunks have stolen ours as fast as the hens have laid 'em."

"We've got some," said Vosh. "I'll fetch 'em over. – Susie, where's your brother?"

"He's in the sitting-room."

"Yes, Vosh," said Pen, "he's there. Walk right in. Corry's there too, and mother, and – O Susie! Dear me! our waffle's burned again."

"Why! so it is."

"Never mind, Susie," said aunt Judith with the most hospitable recklessness, as she shook out the proceeds of that careless cookery upon a plate. "It's only spiled on one side. There's always some of 'em get burned. Some folks like 'em better when they're kind o' crisp. I'll fill ye up another."

Vosh looked as if he would willingly stay and see how the next trial succeeded; but politeness required him to walk on into the sitting-room, and be introduced to Porter Hudson.

"Vosh," said Corry, "he's never been in the country in winter before in all his life, and he's come to stay ever so long. So's Susie."

"That's good," began Vosh; but he was interrupted by an invitation from Mrs. Farnham to stay to supper, and eat some waffles, and he very promptly replied, —

"Thank you, I don't care if I do. I threw our waffle-irons at Bill Hinks's dog one day last fall. It most killed him, but it busted the irons, and we've been 'tending to have 'em mended ever sence. We haven't done it yet, though, and so we haven't had any waffles."

Aunt Judith had now taken hold of the business at the kitchen stove; for Susie had made one triumphant success, and she might

not do as well next time. All the rest were summoned to the supper-table.

The room was all one glow of light and warmth. The maple-sugar had been melted to the exact degree of richness required. The waffles were coming in rapidly and in perfect condition. Everybody had been hungry, and felt more so now; and even Porter Hudson was compelled to confess that the first supper of his winter visit in the country was at least equal to any he could remember eating anywhere.

"City folks," remarked Penelope, "don't know how to cook waffles, but I'll teach Susie. Then she can make 'em for you when you go back, only you can't do it without milk and eggs."

"We can buy 'em."

"Of course you can; but we lay our own eggs, only they get stole. You'll have to send up here for your maple-sugar."

"We can buy that too, I guess."

"But we get it right out of the woods. You just ought to be here in sugar-time."

"Pen," said her father, "we're going to keep 'em both till then, and make them ever so sweet before we let 'em go home."

He was at that moment glancing rapidly from one to another of those four fresh young faces. He did not tell them so, but he was tracing that very curious and shadowy thing which we call "a family resemblance." It was there, widely as the faces varied otherwise; and all their years had not taken it out of the older faces. Perhaps the city cousins, with especial help from Susie

rather than Porter, had somewhat the advantage in good looks. They had it in dress also; but when it came to names – well, aunt Judith herself had had the naming of her brother's children, and she had done her best by them. Penelope and Coriolanus were every way larger names than Porter and Susan; and Vosh could have told them that there is a great deal in a name, if you can get it well boiled down for every-day use.

CHAPTER II.
RIGHT OUT INTO THE WOODS

Vosh Stebbins hurried away from Deacon Farnham's pretty soon after supper, but he had made no sort of mistake in staying that long. He had understood his duty to his mother precisely, and he had done it to her entire satisfaction. Almost her first words, after his return home, were, —

"Made ye stay to tea, did they? Well, I wouldn't have had ye not to stay, for any thing. Susie's fetched along her brother with her, has she? Now, jest you sit right down, and tell me; and I won't say one word till you git through, and I want to know."

"Miss Farnham wants a dozen of eggs."

"You don't say! Well, you jest take 'em right over, but don't you wait a minute. They won't want ye 'round the first evening. Tell her our poultry's doin' first-rate, and I don't see why she doesn't ever have any kind of luck with winter layin'. She doesn't manage right, somehow. Tell her it's all in feedin' of 'em. No kind of hens'll do well onless they git somethin' to eat."

Vosh was counting his eggs into a basket, thirteen to the dozen; and he was out of the door with them before his mother had said half she wished to say about the best method for making hens prosper in cold weather. He obeyed his orders excellently, however, and came back at once to make his report to his mother

as to the results of his first visit; that is, he returned to sit still, and put in a few words here and there, while she told him all he had done and said, and a good deal more than he had said or done, at Deacon Farnham's tea-table.

It looked at last as if Mrs. Stebbins could almost have gone right on with an account of what was yet doing and saying around the great fire in the sitting-room. Vosh loved his mother dearly; but he was all the while thinking of that other fireplace, and wishing he were there – not in it, of course, but sitting in front of it.

There was indeed a great deal of merry talk going on there, but Mrs. Farnham was a considerate woman. She insisted upon it that her niece and nephew must be tired with their long journey, and that they should go to bed in good season. It was of little use for them to assert the contrary, and Susie knew more about country hours than her brother did. The sitting-room had to be given up, fire and all, in favor of sleep.

The last words Porter Hudson heard anybody say that night came from the lips of Penelope: —

"You needn't wait for me to ring the second bell in the morning. You'd a good deal better come right down into the sitting-room, where it's warm."

It had taken three generations of hard-working and well-to-do Farnhams to build all there was of that great, queer, rambling, comfortable old farmhouse. Each owner had added something on one side or the other, or in the rear; so that there was now

room enough in it for the largest kind of a family. Porter Hudson now had a good-sized chamber all to himself; but he remarked of it, shortly after he got in, —

"No furnace heaters in this house; of course not: they don't have such things in the country."

No: nor was there any gas, nor hot and cold water; and the furniture was only just as much as was really needed. He had never before slept in a feather-bed; but he was not at all sorry to burrow into one that night, out of the pitilessly frosty air of that chamber.

"How a fellow does go down!" he said to himself; "and it fits all around him. I'll be warm in a minute." And so he was, and with the warmth came the soundest kind of slumber. The Farnhams had kept any number of geese, year after year, in earlier days, and all their feather-beds were uncommonly deep and liberal.

Susie had Pen for a chum, and that was a good reason why neither of them fell asleep right away. It is always a wonder how much talking there is to be done. It is a good thing, too, that so many enterprising people, old and young, are always ready to take up the task of talking it, even if they have to lie awake for a while.

Silence came at last, creeping from room to room; and there is hardly anywhere else such perfect silence to be obtained as can be had in and about a farmhouse away up country, in the dead of winter and the dead of night. It is so still that you can almost hear the starlight crackle on the snow, if there is no wind blowing.

Winter mornings do not anywhere get up as early as men and women are compelled to, but it is more completely so on a farm than in the city. The chamber Porter Hudson slept in was as dark as a pocket when he heard the clang of Penelope's first bell that next morning after his arrival. He sprang out of bed at once, and found his candle, and lighted it to dress by. One glance through the frosty windows told him how little was to be seen at that time of the year and of the day.

In another instant all his thoughts went down stairs ahead of him, and centred themselves upon the great fireplace in the sitting-room. He dressed himself with remarkable quickness, and followed them. He thought that he had never in his life seen a finer-looking fire, the moment he was able to spread his hands in front of it.

Mrs. Farnham was there too, setting the breakfast-table, and smiling on him; and Porter's next idea was, that his aunt was the rosiest, pleasantest, and most comfortable of women.

"It would take a good deal of cold weather to freeze her," he said to himself; and he was right.

He could hear aunt Judith out in the kitchen, complaining to Susie and Pen that every thing in the milk-room had frozen. When Corry and his father came in from feeding the stock, however, they both declared that it was a "splendid, frosty, nipping kind of a morning." They looked as if it might be, and Porter hitched his chair a little nearer the fire; but Corry added,

—

"Now, Port, we're in for some fun."

"All right. What is it?"

"We're going to the woods after breakfast. You and I'll take our guns with us, and see if we can't knock over some rabbits."

"Shoot some rabbits!"

"I'll take father's gun, and you can take mine."

Just then Pen's voice sounded from the kitchen excitedly, —

"Do you hear that, Susie? They're going to the woods. Let's go!"

"Oh! if they'll let us."

"Course they will."

"Pen! Penelope Farnham! Look out for those cakes."

"I'm turning 'em, aunt Judith. I'm doing 'em splendidly. – Susie, some of your sausages are a'most done. Let me take 'em out for you."

"No, Pen: I want to cook them all myself. You 'tend to your cakes."

Buckwheat-cakes and home-made sausages, – what a breakfast that was for a frosty morning!

Susie Hudson was puzzled to say which she enjoyed most, – the cooking or the eating; and she certainly did her share of both very well for a young lady of sixteen from the great city.

"Port, can you shoot?" asked Corry a little suddenly at table.

"Shoot! I should say so. Do you ever get any thing bigger than rabbits out here?"

"Didn't you know? Why, right back from where we're going

this morning are the mountains. Not a farm till you get away out into the St. Lawrence-river country."

"Yes, I know all that."

"Sometimes the deer come right down, specially in winter. Last winter there was a bear came down and stole one of our hogs, but we got him."

"Got the hog back? Wasn't he hurt?"

"Hurt! Guess he was. The bear killed him. But we followed the bear, and we got him, – Vosh Stebbins and father and me."

Porter tried hard to look as if he were quite accustomed to following and killing all the bears that meddled with his hogs; but Pen exclaimed, —

"Now, Susie, you needn't be scared a bit. There won't be a single bear – not where you're going."

"Won't there?" said Susie almost regretfully. "How I'd like to see one!"

There was a great deal more to be said about bears and other wild creatures; and, just as breakfast was over, there came a great noise of rattling and creaking and shouting in front of the sitting-room windows.

"There he is!" said Corry.

Susie and her brother hurried to look; and there was Vosh Stebbins with Deacon Farnham's great wood-sleigh, drawn by two pairs of strong, long-horned, placid-looking oxen.

"Couldn't one pair draw it?" asked Porter of Corry.

"Guess they could, but two's easier; and, besides, they've

nothing else to do. We'll heap it up too. You just wait and see."

There was not long to wait, for the excitement rose fast in the sitting-room, and Susie and Pen were in that sleigh a little in advance of everybody else. Its driver stood by the heads of his first yoke of oxen, and Susie at once exclaimed, —

"Good – morning, Vosh. What a tremendous whip!"

"Why, Susie," said Pen, "that isn't a whip, it's an ox-gad."

"That's it, Pen," said Vosh; but he seemed disposed to talk to his oxen rather than to anybody else. The yoke next the sleigh stood on either side of a long, heavy "tongue;" but the foremost pair were fastened to the end of that by a chain which passed between them to a hook in their yoke. These latter two animals, as Vosh explained to Susie, "were only about half educated, and they took more than their share of driving."

He began to do it for them now, and it was half a wonder to see how accurately the huge beasts kept the right track down through the gate and out into the road. It seemed easier then, for all they had to do was to go straight ahead.

"Let me take the whip, do, please," said Susie; and Vosh only remarked, as he handed it to her, —

"Guess you'll find it heavy."

She lifted it with both hands; and he smiled all over his broad, ruddy face, as she made a desperate effort to swing the lash over the oxen.

"Go 'long now! Git ap! Cluck-cluck."

She chirruped to those oxen with all her might, while Vosh

put his handkerchief over his mouth, and had a violent fit of coughing.

"You'll do!" shouted her uncle from behind the sleigh. "That's first-rate. I'll hire you to team it for me all the rest of the winter. – Boys, you'd better put down your guns. Lay them flat, and don't step on 'em."

Porter Hudson had stuck to his gun manfully from the moment it was handed him. He had carried it over his shoulder, slanting it a little across towards the other shoulder. He had seen whole regiments of city soldiers do that, and so he knew it was the correct way to carry a gun. He was now quite willing, however, to imitate Corry, and put his weapon down flat on the bottom of the sleigh. The gun would be safe there; and, besides, he had been watching Vosh Stebbins, and listening, and he had an idea it was time he should show what he knew about oxen. They were plodding along very well, and Susie was letting them alone at the moment.

"Susie," he said, "give me that gad."

Vosh looked somewhat doubtful as she surrendered the whip. They were going up a little ascent, and right beyond them the fences on either side of the road seemed to stop. Beyond that, all was forest, and the road had a crooked look as it went in among the trees.

Porter had stronger arms than his sister, and he could do more with an ox-gad. The first swing he gave the long hickory stock, the heavy, far-reaching lash at the end of it came around with a

"swish," and knocked the coon-skin cap from the head of Vosh. Then the whip came down – stock, lash, and all – along the broad backs of the oxen.

"Gee! Haw! G'lang! Get up! G'lang now! Haw! Gee!"

Porter felt that his reputation was at stake. He raised the gad again, and he shouted vigorously. The tongue-yoke of oxen right under his nose did not seem to mind it much, and plodded right along as if they had not heard any one say a word to them; but their younger and more skittish helpers in front shook their heads a little uneasily.

"Gee! Haw! G'lang!"

Porter was quite proud of the way the lash came down that time, and the cracker of it caught the near ox of the forward team smartly on the left ear. It was a complete success, undoubtedly; but, to Porter's astonishment, that bewildered yoke of steers forward whirled suddenly to the right. The next moment they were floundering in a snow-drift, as if they were trying to turn around and look at him.

Perhaps they were; but Vosh at that moment snatched the gad from Porter, and sprang out of the sleigh, saying something, as he went, about "not wanting to have the gals upset." Corry was dancing a sort of double shuffle, and shouting, —

"That's it! First time I ever saw an ox-team gee and haw together. Hurrah for you, Port!"

"Pen," said Susie, "what does he mean?"

"Mean? Don't you know? Why, it's 'gee' to turn 'em this way,

and it's 'haw' to turn 'em that way. They can't turn both ways at once."

That double team had set out to do it quite obediently, but Vosh got matters straightened very quickly. Then he stuck to his whip and did his own driving, until the sleigh was pulled out of the road, half a mile farther, into a sort of open space in the forest. There was not much depth of snow on the ground, and there were stumps of trees sticking up through it in all directions. Vosh drove right on until he halted his team by a great pile of logs that were already cut for hauling.

"Are they not too big for the fireplace?" asked Susie of Pen.

"Of course they are," said Pen; but Corry added, —

"We can cut up all we want for the stoves after we get 'em to the house. The big ones'll cut in two for back-logs."

He had been telling Porter, all the way, about the fun there was in felling big trees, and that young gentleman had frankly proposed to cut down a few before they set out after any rabbits or bears.

"Just see father swing that axe!" said Pen proudly, as the stalwart old farmer walked up to a tall hickory, and began to make the chips fly.

"It's splendid!" said Susie.

Vosh Stebbins had his axe out of the sleigh now, and seemed determined to show what he could do.

It looked like the easiest thing in the world. He and the deacon merely swung their axes up, and let them go down exactly in the

right place; and the glittering edges went in, in, with a hollow thud, and at every other cut a great chip would spring away across the snow.

"It doesn't take either of them a great while to bring a tree down," said Corry. "You fetch along that other axe, and we'll try one. They've all got to come down: so it doesn't make any difference what we cut into."

The girls were contented to stay in the sleigh and look on, and the oxen stood as still as if they intended never to move again.

"Susie!" exclaimed Pen, "here comes Ponto. Nobody knew where he was when we started."

There he was now, however, – the great shaggy, long-legged house-dog, – coming up the road with a succession of short, sharp barks, as if he were protesting against being left out of such a picnic-party as that.

"Pen! he's coming right into the sleigh."

"No, he ain't. You'll see. He'll go after Corry. He's only smelling to see if the guns are here. He knows what they mean."

"Will he hunt?"

"I guess he will. When father or Corry or Vosh won't go, he goes off and hunts by himself, only he doesn't bring home any game."

He seemed just now to be stirred to a sort of frenzy of delighted barking by what his nose told him, but at the end of it he sat down on the snow near the sleigh. No dog of good common sense would follow a boy with an axe away from the place where

the guns were.

Meantime, Corry had picked out a maple-tree of medium size, and had cut a few chips from it. It was easy to see that he knew how to handle an axe, if he could not bury one as deeply in the wood of a tree as could his father or Vosh. He also knew enough too, somehow, to get well out of the way when he handed the axe to Porter Hudson, remarking, —

"Now, Port, cut it right down. Maybe it's a bee-tree."

"Bee-tree! Are there any in winter? Do you ever find any?"

"Well, not all the while; but there are bee-trees, and the bees must be in 'em, just the same, in any kind of weather."

That was so, no doubt; but if there had been a dozen hives of bees hidden away in the solid wood of that vigorous maple-tree, they would have been safe there until spring, for all the chopping of Porter Hudson. He managed to make the edge of the axe hit squarely the first time it struck, but it did not more than go through the bark. No scratch like that would get a chip ready. Porter colored with vexation; and he gave his next cut a little hastily, but he gave it with all his might. The edge of the axe hit several inches from the first scratch, and it seemed to take a quick twist on its own account just as it struck. It glanced from the tree, and away it went into the snow, jerking its handle rudely out of Porter's hands.

"I declare!"

"I say, Port, don't let's cut down any more trees. Let's get our guns, and go down into the swamp for some rabbits. There's

Ponto. He'll stir 'em up for us."

Porter was fishing for his axe with a pretty red face, and he replied, —

"I guess we'd better. I'm not much used to chopping."

"Of course not."

"We burn coal in the city."

"No chopping to do. I know how it is. Got your axe? Come on."

All that was very polite; but Corry had less trouble now, in keeping up a feeling of equality with his city cousin. They were nearly of an age; but a city boy of fourteen has seen a great many things that one of the same years, brought up among the northern lakes and mountains, knows nothing about, and Corry had been a little in awe of Porter.

They had tucked their trousers into their boots when they left the house; and now they got their guns out of the sleigh, slung their powder-flasks and shot-pouches over their shoulders, and marched away through the woods.

The two girls looked after them as if they also were hungry for a rabbit-hunt. As for Ponto, that very shaggy and snowy dog was plainly intending to run between every two trees, and through each and every clump of bushes, as if in a desperate state of dread lest he might miss the tracks of some game or other. Sniff, sniff, sniff, everywhere! and twice he actually began to paw the snow before he and his two sportsmen were out of sight from the sleigh.

"Boys can have more fun in the woods than girls," began Susie

half regretfully.

"No, they can't, Susie. Just you watch that tree. It'll come down pretty quickly. It'll make the splendidest kind of a crash."

It was good fun to watch that chopping, and see the chips fly. Susie found herself becoming more and more deeply interested, as the wide notches sank farther and farther into the massive trunks of the two trees her uncle and Vosh Stebbins were working on. Vosh chopped for dear life; but, in spite of all he could do, the deacon had his tree down first. It was a tall, noble-looking tree. There were no branches near the ground, but there was a fine broad crown of them away up there where the sun could get at them in summer. It seemed almost a pity to destroy a forest-king like that, but at last it began to totter and lean.

"O Pen! it's coming."

"Don't shut your eyes, Susie: keep 'em open, and see it come."

Susie did try; but when that tall, majestic trunk seemed to throw out its great arms, and give the matter up, she could not look any longer, and she put her head down. Then she heard a tremendous dull, crashing sound, and her eyes came open to see a cloud of light snow rising from the spot on which the forest-king had fallen.

"Isn't it splendid!"

"Yes, Pen, it's wonderful."

"Vosh's tree is almost ready. There! it's going to go."

Vosh had not been as careful as Deacon Farnham in aiming the fall of his tree, for it went down into the arms of a smaller one,

crashing and breaking through them; and the sharp, snapping sound of the crushed branches went far and wide through the silence of the snowy forest.

Pen said nothing, and Susie was conscious of a sort of still feeling, as if she had no further remarks to make just then.

CHAPTER III.
THE RABBIT-HUNT

Deacon Farnham was fond of chopping down trees; but he had not brought a big sleigh into the woods that morning, with two yoke of oxen, merely to have them stand still in the snow while he did some chopping. Such fires as he kept up at the farmhouse called for liberal supplies; and so Susie was to have an opportunity to see a load of logs put on.

She and Pen had to get out of the sleigh, and then she expressed her wonder if her uncle and Vosh would be strong enough to lift those huge "back-log" pieces into it: —

"They never can do it, Pen, not in all the world."

"Lift 'em! Of course they won't. I'll show you how they do it: it's dreadful easy, soon as you know how."

It would hardly have been as easy for Pen and Susie as it seemed to be for Vosh and the deacon.

They took all the side-stakes out of the sleigh, on the side towards the wood-pile; and they put down, with one end of each on the sleigh, and the other end in the snow, a pair of long, strong pieces of wood that Vosh called "skids: " that made an inclined plane, and it was nothing but good hard work to roll the logs up, and into their places on the sleigh. They made a tier all over the sleigh-bottom, and then the lighter logs were piled on them in

regular order, till the load was finished off on top with a heap of bark and brushwood.

"That'll crackle good when it burns," said Vosh. "I like brush on a fire: don't you?"

Susie said she did; and she probably told the truth, for she was beginning to think she liked every thing in the country, even in winter.

"Now, Pen," said Vosh, "if you and Susie'll climb up, we'll set out for home with this load."

"Isn't your father coming, Pen?"

"No, Susie, I guess he won't."

"Will he stay here and chop trees all alone?"

"He says he likes it, and he isn't a bit afraid of being alone. There's a man at the house to help Vosh when we get there. Now, Susie, we must climb."

There was fun in that, but Pen was up first.

"Is your dress caught, Susie? – Vosh, help Susie: she's caught on a splinter."

"I'll help her."

"No, you needn't. There, it isn't torn much. – Now, Pen, do you think the oxen can pull such a load as this?"

"Of course they can."

In a minute or so more, Susie began to have new ideas about the management of oxen, and how strong they were, and how wonderfully willing. They seemed to know exactly what to do, with a little help from Vosh and his long whip. When all was

ready, and they bowed their horns, and strained against their yokes with their powerful necks, it seemed as if they could have moved any thing in the world.

One long strain, a creaking sound, and then a sudden giving-way and starting, and the snow began to crunch, crunch, beneath the wide, smooth runners of the sleigh. Vosh walked beside his team, and drove it away around in a semicircle, carefully avoiding trees and stumps, until he and his load were once more in the road, and on their way home.

"Hark!" exclaimed Susie just then. "Was that the report of a gun, or was it the sound of another tree falling?"

"Guess it was a gun," said Vosh. "It's one of the boys shooting at something. Plenty of game, if they can hit it."

If they had been listening with any kind of attention, they might have heard a similar sound before, although the place where the boys were was at some distance from what Vosh called "the clearing."

Corry and Porter had pushed on after Ponto as best they could; but he had not stirred up for them any game in the thick, gloomy forest.

"No rabbits here," said Porter.

"Sometimes there are a few," said Corry; "but this isn't the place. We're most there now: we'd better load up."

"The guns, – aren't they loaded?"

"No. We never leave a charge in. Father says a gun's always safe when it's empty."

Corry put the butt of his gun on the ground while he spoke, and Porter watched him narrowly.

"That's his powder-flask," he said to himself. "I might have known that much. The powder goes in first: of course it does."

He had never loaded a gun in all his life, and his experience with the axe had made him feel a little cautious. Still he tried to make quick work of it; and, when Corry began to push down a wad of paper after the powder, his city cousin did the same thing, only he was a little behindhand, and he put in a much bigger wad of paper.

"How he does ram it! So will I," Porter remarked.

"Don't put too many shot into that gun. I'll measure 'em for you. You'll know next time. It scatters too much if you overcharge it."

Porter was wondering at that very moment how many shot he had better put in, or whether he should try the big shot from one side of his shot-pouch, or the smaller shot from the other.

"What are the big ones for?" he asked, when he saw Corry choose the smaller size.

"Buckshot? Oh! you can kill almost any thing with buckshot, – deer, or even bear."

"Can you? I never used 'em. Thought they were big for rabbits."

He was glad to know his gun was correctly loaded, however; and he imitated Corry in putting on the caps for both barrels, as if he had served a long apprenticeship at that very business.

"We haven't reached the swamp yet, have we?"

"No, but we have a'most. It's a great place for rabbits, when you get there. Halloo! Ponto's started one! Come on, Port!"

They did not really need to stir a foot, for the swift little animal the dog had disturbed from his seat among the bushes was running his best right toward them.

"There he is!" shouted Porter.

"Try him, Port."

"No, you try him."

Corry's gun was at his shoulder, and in another second the bright flash leaped from the muzzle.

"Did you hit him? He didn't stop running: he kept right on."

"Missed him, I guess. Too many trees, and it was a pretty long shot."

"Why, it didn't seem far."

"Didn't it? That's 'cause it was over the snow: it was more'n ten rods. Hark! hear Ponto!"

The old dog was barking as if for dear life, and the boys ran as fast as the snow would let them. They had not far to go before they could see Ponto dancing around the foot of a huge beech-tree.

"If he hasn't treed him!"

"Treed a rabbit! Why, do you mean they can climb?"

"Climb! Rabbits climb! I guess not. But that tree's hollow. See that hole at the bottom? The rabbit's in there, sure."

"Can we get him?"

"We'll try, but it won't pay if it takes too long, – just one rabbit."

Porter Hudson had a feeling that it would be worth almost any thing in the world to catch that rabbit. He hardly knew how to go to work for it; but he felt very warm indeed while his cousin stooped down and poked his arm deeper and deeper into the hole in the tree. It did not go down, but up; and it was a pretty big one at its outer opening.

"Is it a hollow tree, Corry?"

"Guess not, only a little way up."

"Can you feel him?"

"Arm isn't long enough."

Ponto whimpered, very much as if he understood what his master was saying. That was probably not the first runaway game which had disappointed him by getting into a den of safety of one kind or another.

"Hey, Port! Here he comes!"

"Got him, have you?"

"There he is."

Corry withdrew his arm as he spoke, and held up in triumph a very large, fat, white rabbit.

"You did reach him."

"No, I didn't. Some of my shot had hit him, and he came down the hole of his own weight. Don't you see? They didn't strike him in the right place to tumble him right over: he could run."

"Poor fellow!" said Porter: "he won't run any more now."

It was of small use to pity that rabbit, when the one thought uppermost in his mind was that he could not go home happy unless he could carry with him another of the same sort, and of his own shooting.

Corry loaded his gun again, and on they went; but pretty soon he remarked, —

"We're in the swamp now, Port."

"I don't see any swamp: it's all trees and bushes and snow."

"That's so, but there's ice under the snow in some places. You can't get through here at all in the spring, and hardly in summer. It's a great place for rabbits."

Ponto was doubtless aware of that fact, for he was dashing to and fro most industriously.

There were plenty of little tracks on the snow, as the boys could now plainly see; but they crossed each other in all directions, after a manner that puzzled Porter Hudson exceedingly.

"How will he find out which one of them he'd better follow up?"

"Wait, Port: you'll see."

Porter was taking his first lesson as a sportsman, and was peering anxiously behind trees and in among the nearest bushes. Suddenly he saw something, or thought he saw it, which made him hold his breath and tremblingly lift his gun.

"Can that be a real rabbit," he thought, "sitting there so still?"

He did not utter a loud word; and the first Corry heard about

it was from both barrels of his cousin's gun, fired in quick succession. Bang, bang! they went.

"What is it, Port?"

"I've got him! I've got him!"

He was bounding away across the snow, and disappeared among some thick hazel-bushes. A moment more, and he was out again, with a rabbit in his hand every ounce as big as the one Corry had killed.

"First-rate, Port! Was he running?"

"No, he was sitting still, and listening for something."

Corry was too polite to say that no regular sportsman fired at a rabbit unless it was running. It would have been a pity to have dampened Porter Hudson's tremulous exultation over his first game.

He held that rabbit up, and looked at it, until he grew red in the face.

He had no time to talk then; for he had his gun to load, and he was in no small anxiety as to whether he should succeed in getting the charge in rightly. Besides, there was Ponto racing across the farther side of the swamp, with a big rabbit just ahead of him. He was a capital jumper, that rabbit, and he was gaining on his barking pursuer when he ran out within range of Corry Farnham's gun.

Only one barrel was fired, but Ponto's master was ahead again.

"Two to my one," said Porter.

"You'll have chances enough. Don't you let off both barrels

every time, though, or you may lose some of 'em. Fill your rabbits all full of shot, too, like that one."

Port's idea had been that both barrels of his gun were there for the purpose of being fired off, but he was quite ready to take a hint. He had more and more serious doubts, however, about his ability to hit a rabbit on the run. The first time he actually tried to do it, he doubted more than ever. His chance and his disappointment came to him a little after Corry's gun was loaded, and while they were crossing the swamp.

"I must have hit him," he said, as he lowered his gun, and looked after the rabbit he had fired at, and which was still clearing the snow with long, vigorous jumps.

"Well, if you did," said Corry, "he hasn't found it out yet."

"Your first one didn't find out he was hit till he got into the tree."

"That's so. But I never knew it to happen just so before. Ponto's after that one again! He's turned him around those sumach-bushes. He's coming this way. Give him your other barrel. Shoot ahead of him."

Porter was positive, in his own mind, that he could not hit that rabbit, and he felt himself blushing as he raised his gun; but he tried to see the rabbit somewhere beyond the end of it, and then he blazed away.

"I declare! you've done it! A good long distance too."

It was so very long, that the shot had scattered a great deal, and one of the little leaden pellets had strayed in the direction of

that rabbit, – just one, but it was as good as a dozen, for it had struck in a vital spot; and Porter was as proud as if the skin of his game had been filled with shot-holes.

"I'm even with you now."

"That's so. If you only had practice, you'd shoot well enough."

Almost two hours went by, after that, and they tramped all over the swamp. Porter killed another sitting rabbit; but Corry was again one ahead of him, and was feeling half sorry for it, when he suddenly stopped marching, and lifted his hand, exclaiming, —

"Hear Ponto! Hark! Away yonder!"

"Started another rabbit."

"No, he hasn't. It isn't any rabbit this time."

"What is it? What is it?"

"Hear that jumping? Hear Ponto's yelp? It's a deer."

"Deer! Did you say it was a deer? Can you tell?"

"Hark! Listen!"

Ponto was no deer-hound. He was somewhat too heavily built for that kind of sport; but any deer of good common sense would get away from his neighborhood, all the same. The certainty that the dog could not catch him would not interfere with his running.

Ponto's discovery was a really splendid buck, and he was in a terrible hurry when his long, easy bounds brought him out from among the forest-trees into the more open ground in the edge of the swamp. Porter thought he had never before seen any thing half so exciting, but the buck went by like a flash.

Just half a minute later, Corry turned ruefully to his cousin, and asked him, —

"Port, what did you and I fire both barrels of our guns for?"

"Why, to hit the deer."

"At that distance? And with small shot too? If they'd reached him, they'd hardly have stung him. Let's go home."

Porter was ready enough; and it was not long before even Ponto gave up following the buck, and came panting along at the heels of his master. He looked a little crestfallen, as if he were nearly prepared to remark, —

"No use to drive deer for boys. I did my duty. No dog of my size and weight can do more."

They had a tramp before them. Not that they were so far from home, but then it was one long wade through the snow until they reached the road; and Porter Hudson knew much more about the weight of rabbits by the time he laid his game down at the kitchen-door of the farmhouse.

They had been growing heavier and heavier all the way, until he almost wished he had not killed more than one.

CHAPTER IV.
WINTER COMFORT

Susie and Pen had a grand ride to the farmhouse on the wood-sleigh.

Perched away up there on top of the brushwood, they could get the full effect of every swing and lurch of the load under them. Vosh Stebbins had to chuckle again and again, in spite of his resolute politeness; for the girls would scream a little, and laugh a great deal, when the sleigh sank suddenly on one side in a snowy hollow, or slid too rapidly after the oxen down a steeper slope than common. It was great fun; and, when they reached the house, Susie Hudson almost had to quarrel with aunt Judith to prevent being wrapped in a blanket, and shoved up in a big rocking-chair into the very face of the sitting-room fireplace.

"Do let her alone, Judith," said aunt Farnham. "I don't believe she's been frost-bitten."

"I'm not a bit cold."

"I'm real glad o' that," said aunt Judith; "but ain't you hungry? – Pen, you jest fetch up some krullers."

Susie admitted that she could eat a kruller, and Pen had no need to be told twice.

When Vosh came back from the woods with his second load, it was dinner-time; and Deacon Farnham came with him. Only a

few minutes later, there was a great shouting at the kitchen-door, and there were the two boys. The whole family rushed out to see what they had brought home, and Susie thought she had never seen her brother look quite so tall.

"Corry beat ye, did he?" said Vosh as he turned the rabbits over. Something in the tone of that remark seemed to add, "Of course he did;" and Port replied to it, —

"Well, he's used to it. I never fired a gun before in all my life."

That was a frank confession, and a very good one to make; for the deacon exclaimed, —

"You never did! I declare! then you've done tip-top. You'll make a marksman one of these days."

"I hit two of my rabbits on the full run, anyhow."

"How about the deer?" said Vosh with a sly look. "Did you hit him on the run?"

"When you meet him," said Corry, "you can just ask him. He's the only fellow that knows: I don't."

"Like as not he doesn't either."

"Vosh," said Mrs. Farnham, "tell your mother to come over with you after tea, and spend the evening."

"She'll come: I know she will. I'll finish my chores early."

He swung his axe to his shoulder, and marched away, very straight, with a curious feeling that some city people were looking at him.

The boys and the girls and the older people were all remarkably ready for that dinner as soon as it was on the table.

"Pen," said Susie, "I didn't know chopping down trees would make me so hungry."

"Yes," said Deacon Farnham, "it's as bad as killing deer. Port and Corry are suffering from that. You did your chopping, as they did their deer-killing, at a safe distance."

After dinner it was a puzzle to everybody where the time went, it got away so fast. Pen took Susie all over the house, and showed her every thing in it, from the apples in the cellar to the spinning-wheel that had been carried up stairs the day before, and would have to come down again to-morrow.

"Aunt Judith's got a pile of wool, Susie. You ought to see it. She's going to spin enough yarn to last her all next summer."

"I'll get her to teach me to spin."

"Can you knit? If you can't, I'll teach you how. It's awful easy, as soon as you know."

Susie told Pen about her tidies and crochet-work and some other things, and was getting a little the best of it, until Pen asked very doubtfully, —

"Can you heel a stocking? It's worse, a good deal, than just to narrow 'em in at the toes. Aunt Judith says there ain't many women nowadays that can heel a stocking."

"I'll make her show me how. Dear me, Pen! did you know how late it is? Where can all the time have gone to?"

Corry and Porter knew where a part of theirs had gone, after they got back from the barns, and delivered to Mrs. Farnham and aunt Judith the eggs they had found. Corry got out his checker-

board, and laid it on the table in the sitting-room.

"It's a big one," said Porter. "Where are your men?"

"Hanging up there in that bag. The wooden men got lost. We take horse-chestnuts for black men, and walnuts for white ones."

"S'pose you make a king?"

"That's a butternut, if it's black. If it's white, you put on one of those chunks of wood."

There was no danger of their getting out of checker-men; but Corry Farnham had a lesson to learn.

Porter Hudson knew a great deal more about checkers than he did about tree-chopping or rabbits.

Game after game was played, and it seemed to Corry as if his cousin "hit some of them on a full run." He got up from the last one they played, feeling a very fair degree of respect for Port; and the latter was pretty well restored to his own good opinion of himself.

That was something, for all his morning's experiences had been a little the other way; and he was not half sure he could again hit a running rabbit, if he should have a chance to try.

Susie and Pen had watched them for a while, but both boys had been very obstinate in not making any of the good moves Pen pointed out to them.

There were chores to do both before and after tea; and Porter went out with Corry, determined on undertaking his share of them.

"Did you ever milk cows, Port?"

"Well, no, I never did; but I guess I could if I tried."

"Well, I guess you'd best not try to-night, but you can learn before you go home. Some of our cows are skittish in cold weather."

Port was quite contented, after getting into the cowyard, to let the milking be done by some one who knew how; and he had the satisfaction of seeing Corry kicked over into the snow – pail, milk, and all – by a brindled heifer who had no need of any kind of weather to bring out her natural skittishness.

There were pigs and cattle and horses to feed, and supper to be eaten; and when, at last, the boys had finished their duties, the rest of the family was already gathered in the sitting-room.

Mrs. Farnham and aunt Judith had their knitting; and the deacon had a newspaper in his lap, with his spectacles lying in the middle of it. It seemed, however, the most natural thing in the world, that they should all be sitting in a great semicircle in front of the fireplace. The night promised to be a cold one, and the fire had been built for it in the most liberal manner.

"Corry," said Porter, "what are all those flat-irons and hammers for?"

"Why, to crack nuts. I'm going down cellar to bring 'em up, – butternuts and hickory-nuts. There was a big crop of 'em last fall."

"I'll go with you."

"So will I," said Pen. "Come, Susie, and we'll bring up the apples and pears and some cider."

"Now, Pen," said aunt Judith, "look out you don't leave the cider runnin', like you did once. You may fetch up a cake of maple-sugar, if anybody wants any. And don't you tetch them hard russets. They won't be fit to eat till spring."

Aunt Judith's instructions continued almost without cessation, till the young folk were all at the bottom of the cellar-stairs. Corry and Pen carried candles; but the light of these only served to make that cellar look ten times larger and darker and more mysterious. It seemed as if it had neither sides nor ends; but the heavy black beams overhead were not so wonderfully far away. Pen showed Susie bin after bin of carefully selected winter apples and pears, and there were half a dozen barrels of cider ranged against the wall.

"It's all pretty sweet now, but it'll be hard enough some time. Then some of it'll make vinegar."

"What's in the little barrel?"

"Aunt Judith's currant-wine. She says it'll be the best wine in the world when it's old enough. Whenever anybody in the Valley gets sick, she takes a bottle of it, and goes there."

"She's real good."

"Susie, look at all the mince-pies on the swing-shelf."

"Ever so many!"

Scores of them, for the swing-shelf ran the whole length of the cellar right down the middle, and it held double rows of pies all ready to be carried up and warmed for use. Susie would have been willing to stay a few minutes, and look at the treasures in

that cellar; but Corry suddenly exclaimed, —

"Port, let's hurry. They've come. Don't you hear Mrs. Stebbins?"

Just a little before that, aunt Judith up stairs had turned to the deacon with the remark, —

"Joshaway, I knew she'd come with Vosh. You can always hear her before she gets to the gate; leastwise, on a quiet night like this. I remember one night it was a-stormin', and the wind blew so hard she got right up to the door, and I hadn't heard a sound till she had her hand on the latch."

They could hear her now.

"And, Lavawjer, you must just mind one thing: you mustn't talk too much. Let them do their own talkin', specially Susie. I can't begin to tell what kind of a gal she's growin' up to be, onless I can hear her talk."

"Then Vosh'll have to keep a-givin' his mother somethin' to eat," snapped aunt Judith: "she never stops talkin' any other time."

Mrs. Farnham herself, while the young people were down stairs, had thoughtfully walked out into the storeroom adjoining the kitchen, and returned with a long-handled wire corn-popper, and a bag of what she called "'tucket corn." It was corn with small, round, blue-black kernels, that can pop out larger and whiter, for its size, than any other kind that grows. There is a legend that the seed of it came originally from the island of Nantucket; but it has short "nubbin" ears, and even the island

Indians must have found it a poor crop for any thing but popping.

Mrs. Stebbins was at the door now; and she never dreamed of knocking, and waiting out there in the cold until somebody should come to let her in. She was hardly over the threshold, before she said, as she loosened her shawl, —

"Judith, where is Susie and her brother, and Corry and Pen? They haven't gone away somewhere the very first night, have they? Vosh he told me they'd be at home, and I just thought I'd come over."

"They're down cellar. They'll be right up in a minute. Now, Angeline, you jest take off your hood and sit down. – Vosh, there's a chair. Hadn't you better take that popper and set to work?"

"Vosh tells me," continued his mother, "the boys got half a dozen of rabbits to-day. I don't care much for rabbits, but their hind-legs'll do to brile. And they seen a deer too. I'd ha' thought they might ha' shot it, if it was nigh enough. But then, deer isn't anyways like as easy to kill as they was when I was a gal. And they was only a couple of boys. I do say, now, here they come, and they're makin' racket enough for twenty."

They were coming indeed, streaming up out of the cellar, with every pair of hands full and a little more; and Mrs. Stebbins did not stop for an instant.

"Susie, is that you? Well, now, I must kiss you right away. Vosh said you was lookin' real pretty, and so you be; but he ain't always a good jedge. I knowed your mother when she wasn't no

older'n you be now. She was Joshaway Farnham's sister. And so she's gone South for her health, and your father's gone with her, and you've come to put in the rest of your winter up here? – I do declare, Lavawjer, ef you ain't kerful, you'll burn up every kernel of that corn. Don't you stop to talk, and gawk around. Jest you tend to your corn-poppin'."

She had managed to get up from her chair and kiss Susie without interrupting the steady clack of her tongue; but she was a little out of breath for a moment, and sat still and watched them while they deposited upon the table the tall brown pitcher of cider, the pans of fruit, and the maple-sugar. The young folks had a chance to say a word to Vosh, and Corry and Porter each picked up a flat-iron and a hammer. There were plenty of nuts ready for them; and the sound of the cracking, and of the rattling, bursting corn in the popper, mingled oddly with Susie's efforts to answer the rapid inquiries poured upon her by Mrs. Stebbins.

"Now, Susie, I'm glad you've come. You're right from the city, and you're a well-grown gal now, and you know all about the fashions. We don't hear a word about 'em up here away till they've all come and gone, and somethin' else is in fashion. Got to wearin' short dresses, hev they? Think of me, or Judith, or your aunt Sarah Farnham, in short dresses! Wearin' panners too. I do say! What won't they put on next! Last thing they got up was them little skimp skirts for hard times, that came so nigh bein' the ruin of the dry-goods men. Didn't take no cloth at all. – Lavawjer, you're a-talkin' again. You just tend to your pop-corn."

"Now, Angeline," said Mrs. Farnham, "do take an apple, or a pear."

"Yes, Angeline," said aunt Judith, "and here's a plate of popped corn, and some nuts. – Joshaway, pour her out a mug of cider. – Pen, go to the cupboard and fetch a plate of krullers. It's the coldest kind of a night."

"So it is," began Mrs. Stebbins, "but the winters ain't what they used to be. No more the butternuts aren't, somehow; but I must say, you make out to have good fruit, though how you do it in these times beats me. Our trees die out."

Likely as not they did; but the attack had fairly begun, and poor Mrs. Stebbins found herself out-numbered. The deacon pressed her with the cider, and Mrs. Farnham with the krullers. There was the heaped-up plate of snowy white popped corn, and beside it was the tempting little hill of cracked hickory-nuts and butternuts. Susie broke off for her a noble piece of maple-sugar; and aunt Judith herself took a candle, and went down cellar for a couple of the best mince-pies. It was all too much for conversation of the kind Mrs. Stebbins delighted in.

"O Vosh!" suddenly exclaimed Susie. "Corry told us this morning about the bear you killed last winter."

It was cruel to mention such a thing just as Mrs. Stebbins had lifted a kruller, and she began to say, —

"Yes, about that bear. Lavawjer's father" – But she had to pause a moment, and Vosh took it up with, —

"No, Susie, I didn't kill him: I guess it was all three of us. He

was chockfull of lead when he rolled over. We weren't twenty feet from him. Deacon Farnham he fired first, and then I did, and Corry; and we all had double-barrelled guns, and we didn't one of us miss. But it was a big bear" —

"Biggest kind," said Corry, "or he never could ha' lifted a fat hog clean out of the pen the way he did."

"I knowed a bear," began Mrs. Stebbins; but aunt Judith interrupted her with, —

"Now, Angeline, do take a slice of mince-pie. It's cold, but sometimes it's better cold than it is when it's warm."

The pie was too much for the memory of that other bear.

The sound of popping corn and cracking nuts had been almost incessant, and the young people had now succeeded in breaking all the ice the fire had left in that sitting-room. They were old acquaintances all around, and were chatting away merrily among themselves, with less and less reference to what might be going forward among the old folk by the table.

Mrs. Farnham and aunt Judith seemed to keep right along with their knitting, whatever else they might be doing. It seemed to do itself, a great deal like their breathing. Even the deacon managed to look into the corners of his newspaper while he pared an apple, or talked to Mrs. Stebbins. The light of the great astral-lamp on the table mingled with that from the fireplace in a sort of reddish-golden glow, that flickered over the walls and faces in a way to make every thing and every body wear a warm, contented, cosey look, that was just the right thing for a frosty winter evening.

By and by there came almost a full half-minute of silence, and at the end of it Vosh burst out as if an idea had taken him by surprise.

"I do declare! I never saw any thing jollier'n this is, in all my born days."

"Vosh," said Corry, "Port can beat you at checkers. You ought to have seen the way he beat me to-day. You just try him a game."

"Now, Lavawjer," said his mother from beyond the table, "you kin play well enough for way up here, but you can't think of comin' up to sech a young feller as Porter Hudson. He'll beat ye, sure."

At all events, he needed no more than that to make him try to do it; and Penelope brought out the great square board, and the bag of home-made checkers.

It must be confessed, that, after his triumphant experience with Corry, Porter Hudson imagined himself to have quite taken the measure of up-country skill and science at that game. He sat down to his new trial, therefore, with a proud assurance of a victory to come. It would have been kind of Corry to have given his cousin the least bit of a warning, but that young gentleman had been himself too roughly handled to feel very merciful. Besides, he had some very small and lingering doubt as to the result, and was willing to wait for it.

He need not have had any doubt, since there was really no room for any. Vosh was a born checker-player, and it is never easy to beat a fellow of that sort. Nobody ever knows exactly how

they do it, and they themselves cannot tell. Their spare men get to the king-row, and their calculations come out right; and if you are Porter Hudson, and are playing against them, you get beaten very badly, and there's no help for you.

Corry watched that game with a suppressed chuckle, but it was a dreadful puzzle to Port. Even Pen did not venture to suggest a single good move, and the older people talked very quietly.

Mrs. Stebbins was a proud woman when Susie exclaimed, —

"Vosh has won it!"

It was of no use for aunt Judith to say, —

"Won't you have another slice of pie, Angeline, and some more cider?"

Mrs. Stebbins responded, —

"I don't keer if I do. Only I'm afeard it'll make me dream and talk in my sleep. Lavawjer always did play checkers mighty spry, but he ain't the player his father was when he was a young man. He didn't have no time to play checkers after he got to runnin' a farm of his own. Pie? Yes, Judith, you've got jest the right knack of makin' mince-pies." And while she went on to tell of the various good and bad pies she had seen or tasted, all the rest agreed with her about those they were eating. In fact, the good things of all sorts went far to reconcile even Porter Hudson to his defeat, and Vosh was truly polite about that. In less than two minutes he managed to get the other boys, and even the girls, talking about hunting, skating, coasting, sleigh-riding, and catching fish through the ice.

The evening seemed to melt away, it went so fast; and no one was willing to believe how late it was when Mrs. Stebbins began to put on her hood. They all saw her and Vosh to the door, and did not close that until the gate shut behind the last words the good woman succeeded in sending back to them.

It was something about boiled cider in mince-pies, but they failed to get it.

CHAPTER V.
A WINTER PICNIC-PARTY

The Stebbins farm was not a large one, and neither its house nor barns compared well with Deacon Farnham's; but there was a great deal to be done in and around them, even in winter. Vosh was a busy boy, therefore, the next morning, and his mother was a busy woman; and it was not until an hour after breakfast that she said to him, —

"Now, Lavawjer, you jest hitch up that there new red cutter of yourn, and fetch it around. I want you to drive me to Benton Village, and, if I can't find what I want there, I'm goin' right on to Cobbleville."

Vosh had been thinking up a series of excuses for going over to the deacon's, but he made no mention of them; and it was a credit to him that his new turnout was so soon standing, all ready, by the front gate.

It was not a bad idea, that his first long drive in it should be with his mother; but he had a string of surprises before him that day.

The first came in the fact that his mother was unaccountably silent, and that, whenever she did open her lips, she had something to say about economy. Then she talked a little of the wickedness and vanity of buying or wearing any thing "just for

show." City people, she freely declared, were doing that very thing all the while, and she was glad enough no one alive could accuse her of it.

Vosh was quite sure she was right; but he could not help, when they drove by Deacon Farnham's, and he saw the girls at the window, being a little glad that his cutter was of so bright a red, and so remarkably well varnished.

Benton Village was right down there in the valley, and the sorrel colt pulled them there in so short a time that it was no sleigh-ride at all.

Mrs. Stebbins said as much, after she had bought some tea and sugar at one store, and some raisins and some coffee at another.

"They haven't got what I want, Lavawjer. You kin drive right along to Cobbleville. There never was better sleighin', not even when I was a gal."

That was a great deal for her to admit, and Vosh put the colt to his very best speed along the well-travelled road to Cobbleville. That was several long miles, but they were strangely silent ones.

"Where shall I pull up, mother?" asked Vosh as they drove into the one long street of the village.

"You kin make your first stop right there, at old Gillis's harness-shop. I want to look at some o' them things in his front winder."

Something or other must have winked at Vosh; for he was out of that cutter, and had his colt hitched in front of Gillis's, in about half his usual time.

"Lavawjer," she said to him as she paused on the sidewalk, "don't you ever buy a thing just for show. You mustn't ever let your vanity get the best of you."

Two minutes later she was holding in her right hand a very useful string of sleigh-bells, and saying to him, —

"Now, Lavawjer, if you're ever drivin' along after dark, you won't be run into. Anybody'll know you're there, by the jingle. I'll kinder feel safer about ye."

Vosh thought he had not often seen less vanity in any thing than there was in those bells, and he was thinking of going right out to put them on the sorrel, when his mother exclaimed, —

"There! that's what I've been a-lookin' for, – that there red hoss-blanket, with the blue border and the fringe. Jest tell me what the price of it is."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.