

Wells Carolyn

The Come Back



Carolyn Wells
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Carolyn Wells

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CHAPTER I

The Prophecy

Even when Peter Crane was a baby boy, with eyes the color of the chicory flowers that grow by the wayside along New England roads, and hair that rivaled the Blessed Damosel's in being "yellow like ripe corn," he was of an adventurous disposition.

His innocent face was never so devoid of guile, his winning smile never so cherubic as when he remarked that he would "jes' run froo the front gate a minyit," and the next instant he was out of sight. Far afield his roving spirit led him, and much scurrying was needed on the part of nurse or mother to bring him back.

At four he achieved a pair of most wonderful russet-topped boots, – aye, even with straps to lift himself over a fence, if a fence came his way. And these so accentuated and emphasized his world-faring inclinations that he came to be known as Peter Boots.

The name stuck, for Peter was always ready to boot it, and all through his school and college days he led his willing mates wherever he listed. He stalked forth and they followed; and, as he stopped not for brake and stayed not for stone, the boys who eagerly trailed Peter Boots became sturdy fellows.

And now, at twenty-seven, Peter Boots was more than sturdy. He was tall and big and strong, and the love of adventure, the dare-devil spirit of exploration still shone in his chicory blue eyes, and his indomitable will power was evident in his straight fine mouth and firm jaw.

He had traveled some, even before the war, and now, comfortably settled in his chosen niche and civilly engineering his way through the world, he grasped at vacation seasons because they offered him a chance to don his boots and be off.

This year he had a grand plan, – its objective point being nothing short of Labrador.

He had read many books of the North lands, but a delightful chance meeting with a doctor who lived up there gave him a sudden impetus to go and explore a little for himself. His decision to start was instantaneous, and there remained but to make the necessary arrangements.

For Peter Boots these arrangements consisted merely in getting two congenial companions, and to them he left all minor details of paraphernalia and equipment. Not that Peter was lazy or inclined to shift his burdens to others' shoulders, but he was so engrossed with the itinerary and calculations of distance, climate and season that he had no time to engage guides or buy camp outfits.

But the two men he picked, – and who jumped at the chance, – were more than willing and perfectly capable of all this, and so all details of the expedition were carefully looked after.

There had been opposition, of course. Peter's parents were emphatically unwilling to let their only son run dangers, all the more fearsome because only vaguely apprehended.

But their big boy smiled genially at them and went on with his calculations.

His sister, too, pretty Julie, besought him not to go. "You'll get lost in the ice," she wailed, "and never come back to me – and Carly."

Now Carly, – otherwise Miss Carlotta Harper – was a disturbing element in the even tenor of Peter's life, and of late her disturbance had attained such importance that tucked away in a corner of his big, happy heart was a cozy, cuddly little notion that when he came back from Labrador he would take her to embark with him on a certain Great Adventure.

Perhaps her womanly intuition sensed danger, for Carly joined with Peter's sister in her entreaties that he spend his vacation nearer home.

"But I don't want to," stated Peter, with the air of one giving a full explanation.

"That settles it," sighed Julie; "what Peter Boots wants is law in this house."

"Autocrat! Tyrant! Oppressor!" and Carlotta wrinkled her little nose in an effort to express scornful disdain.

"Yes," Peter agreed, with his benignant smile, "despot, demagogue, dictator, oligarch, lord of the roost and cock of the walk! It's a great thing to be monarch of all one surveys!"

"To the surveyor," flouted Carlotta, "but if you knew what the surveyed think of you!"

"I'd be all puffed up with pride and vanity, I suppose," Peter nodded his still golden head, though Time's caressing fingers had burnished the yellow to a deeper bronze.

"You'll break mother's heart," suggested Julie, but in a hopelessly resigned tone.

"Only the same old break, sister, and it's been cracked and mended so many times, I'm sure it'll stand another smash."

"Oh, he's going, and that's all there is about it," said Carlotta with the air of a fatalist.

"I'm going," Peter assented, "but that isn't all there is about it. I'm coming back!" and he looked at the girl with unmistakable intent.

"Maybe and maybe not," she returned, with crushing carelessness, whether real or assumed.

"Yes, indeed, maybe and maybe not!" put in Julie. "You don't know about the prophecy, Carly! Shall I tell her, Peter?"

"Tell me, of course," and Miss Harper looked eagerly interested. "Who prophesied what? and when?"

"Oh, it was years ago," Julie began, "we met a lot of gypsies, and mother would have them tell the family fortunes. And one of them said that Peter would go off on a long journey and that he would die a terrible death and never come home."

"Oh," Carly shuddered, "don't tell me any more!"

"But the more is the best part of it," said Peter, smiling; "you see, mother was so upset by this direful news, that another gypsy took pity on her and amended my cruel fate. The second seeress declared that I must meet the destiny number one had dealt me, but that to mitigate the family grief, I would return afterwards."

"As a spook?" cried Carlotta, "how interesting!"

"Perhaps; but it doesn't interest me at present. You see, this trip is not the fatal one –"

"How do you know?" from Julie.

"Oh, it's too soon. That old prophecy isn't fairly ripe yet. Moreover, I'm not ready for it. I'm going to Labrador, – and I'm coming back, – and then, if all goes well, perhaps I'll never want to go away again. And if not, –" he looked at Carly, "I may be glad to take the last and final trip! But if I go on with the program and return as my own ghost, I'll lead you girls a dance! I'll haunt you in season and out of season!"

"Pooh, I'm not afraid," Carly tossed her head; "I've no faith in any of this spiritist foolery."

"Don't call it foolery, my child," said a serious voice, as Peter's father came into the room.

Benjamin Crane gave the impression of power and gentleness, a fine combination and rarely seen in its perfection. A man of sixty, he looked older, for his thick hair was white and his smoothly shaven face was lined with deep furrows.

He joined the group of young people, and it was indicative of his nature that there was no pause in the conversation or appearance of constraint of any sort.

"But it is foolery, Mr. Crane," Carlotta defended, "I've tried the Ouija Board myself, and it's a silly business."

"Not so silly as to condemn something you know little or nothing about," Mr. Crane said, in his serious, kindly way. "My dear Carlotta, even though you don't 'believe in' the supernatural, do try to realize that your lack of belief doesn't bar the rest of us from having faith in revelation."

"Oh, that's all right, Mr. Crane," Carly wasn't a bit offended, "don't mind me! Believe all you want to. But, do you believe in this 'Gypsy's Warning' about Peter? That's different, you know, from the usual claptrap."

"It's not exactly a question of belief," Mr. Crane said, slowly. "You will, I am sure, agree that Peter may be killed on some of these wild and dangerous adventures in which his soul delights. Let us hope the day is far off, if it must come at all. And as to his spirit's return, – that is, of course, possible, – to my mind, at least."

"If possible, then extremely probable," declared Peter, laughing; "I've just told the girls, Dad, that I'll haunt them like a continuous performance, if conditions allow. Want me to appear to you, too?"

"Don't be so flippant, Son. If you die while away from us, and if your spirit can return and communicate with me, I shall, indeed, be glad to receive such messages, no matter through what medium."

"Oh, goodness, gracious!" exclaimed Carlotta; "not through a medium, I beg of you, Peter! I don't want spook messages that way! I don't mind a nice little Ouija or Planchette, but a common, blowsy, untidy medium person, – and they're all like that, – I can't stand for!"

"Why, you little rascal, what do *you* know about mediums?" Peter Boots frowned at her.

"I went to a *séance* once, – but, wow! never again!"

"I should hope not! You stay away from such places, or I won't come home to you at all, – dead or alive! How would you like that?"

"Not at all, oh, despot, oligarch, Grand Panjandrum, – or whatever you call yourself. Please come back, and all will be forgiven."

It was tea time in the Crane home, and though the home was only a summer cottage, up Westchester way, yet the big living room, with its hospitable easy chairs and occasional tables, its willow and chintz, gave an impression of an English household. It was late in July and, though warm, it was not sultry, and the breeze coming in at the big windows was crisp and fresh.

Mrs. Crane drifted into the room almost at the same moment two men appeared from outdoors.

A happy complacency was the chief attribute of Peter's mother, and this spoke from every smile of her amiable face and every movement of her plump but still graceful form.

As Peter adjusted the cushions she took a low willow chair and smiled a greeting at all, including the newcomers.

These were Kit Shelby and Gilbert Blair, the two companions of the Labrador trip.

They were good-looking, well set-up chaps, quite evidently unable to talk of anything save the plans for the momentous journey.

"Got a wonder for a guide," began Shelby, as soon as decent greetings had been made. "He's just been let loose by Sir Somebody of Somewhere, and I nailed him. Name o' Joshua, – but we can stand that. He really knows it all, – without continually proclaiming the fact."

"I'm thankful that you've a fine guide," murmured Mrs. Crane, in her satisfied way. "It means so much to me to know that."

"You're right, Lady Crane," assented young Blair. "And old Peter will have to obey him, too."

"Of course I shall," put in Peter. "I always bow to authority, when it's greater than my own. Oh, won't it all be great! I'm crazy to start. Think of it, Dad, – we three fellows sitting around a camp fire, smoking our pipes and spinning yarns of an evening, after a long day's hike over the ice and snow!"

"Thought you were going in a canoe," said his sister.

"Part of the way, – but, later, we abandon the craft and hoof it."

"Maybe and maybe not," said Shelby. "It all depends on the weather conditions. But the season is just right, and we'll have good going, one way or another, I'm sure."

"You're the surest thing I know, Kit," Gilbert Blair said; "now with no hint of pessimism, I own up I look for pretty hard lines a good bit of the time."

"Calamity Howler!" returned Shelby; "why damp our enthusiasm like that?"

"Can't damp mine," and Peter beamed with glad anticipation. "Let the hard lines come if they like. I'm expecting them and expecting to enjoy them along with the rest."

"Pollyanna Peter!" chaffed Carlotta; "shan't you mind it if the blizzard blows down your tent and the dogs run away with your dinner and your feet give out?"

"Nixy! I'll set up the tent again, get some more dinner from the larder and rest my feet for a spell."

"That's right, boy," said his father, "that's the spirit. But do take enough provisions and, if they run low, make a dash for home."

"Just my idea, Dad, exactly. And as Shelby's looking after the commissariat, and Blair attending to the tents and cooking outfit, something tells me they'll be top hole. Maybe not such traps as these – " and Peter nodded toward the elaborate tea service being brought in and arranged before Mrs. Crane, who was in her element as hostess.

"No, you poor boys," she said, "I suppose you'll drink out of horrible thick china – "

"Not china at all, ma'am," corrected Blair; "lovely white enamel, though, with blue edges – "

"I know!" cried Carlotta, "like our motor lunch-box."

"Yes, that sort, and not bad, either. Oh, we'll rough it more or less, but it won't be absolutely primitive, – not by a long shot!"

"It'll be absolutely perfect," said Peter, dreamily gazing off into space, and seeing in his mind great white stretches of snowy landscape, or black, gurgling holes in ice-bound rivers.

"You are so ridiculous!" declared his sister. "You're a regular Sybarite at home. You love easy chairs and pillows and fresh flowers all about, and all that, – then you want to go off where you'll have nothing nice at all, – not even a laundry!"

"Right you are, Sis. The Human warious is hard to understand. Come along, Carly, take me for a walk."

Rather slowly the girl rose, and the two sauntered forth, across the wide veranda, across the lawn and down a garden path. Neither spoke until, coming to a marble bench, they sat down and turned to look into each other's eyes.

"Going to say yes before I go, Carly, or after I come back?"

"After you come back," was the prompt response.

"Oh, good! You promise to say it *then*?"

"Well, I don't say how *soon* after."

"I'll decide on the soonness. Then I take it we're engaged?"

"You take it nothing of the sort! You know, Peter Crane, you can't boss me as you do your own family!"

"Heaven forbid! Why, dear, I want you to boss me! Our life together will be one grand boss, – and you can be it!"

"Don't be silly, I'm in earnest. I couldn't be happy with a dominating, domineering man."

"Of course you couldn't. But I assure you I'm not one. You see, I only dictate in my own family because they like to have me to do so. Mother would be awfully upset if I didn't tell her what to do. Dad the same, – although I'm not sure the old dear knows it himself. And as for Julie, – why she just depends on me. So I naturally gravitate to the place of Grand Mogul, because I can't help it. But with you, it's different. You're a whole heap wiser, better and more fit to rule than I. And if you'll rule me, I'll be greatly obliged, – honest, I will."

"Oh, you're so absurd, Peter! I don't want to rule, either. I want us to be equally interested in everything, and have equal say in any matter."

"All right, – equality goes. I'll race you to see which can be the equalest. Now, are we engaged?"

"No, Peter, not till you come back."

"But I want to kiss you, and I can't, I suppose, until we are engaged. Oh, can I?"

"Of course not! Take your hand off my hand."

"Lordy, can't I even touch your hand?"

"Not with that ownership grasp! I am afraid of your possessive qualities, Peter."

"Meaning just what?"

"Oh, that if I do give myself to you, you'll own me so – so emphatically."

"I sure shall! And then some. Don't imagine, my child, that I'll accept you with any reservations. You'll be 'mine to the core of your heart, my beauty!' Bank on that!"

"I do, – and if I'm yours at all, – it *will* be that way. But wait till you come back. There's time enough. I suppose there's no chance for letters?"

"No; not after the first few days. We'll be out of reach of mail very soon."

"And you're returning?"

"I want to be home for Christmas. Kit thinks we'll make it, but Blair is some doubtful. So, look for me when you see me."

"Alive or dead?"

"Carly! What made you say that?"

"I don't know." The girl shuddered and her eyes stared into Peter's. "I seemed to say it without any volition, – the words just came – "

"Well, don't let them come again. I don't like it a little bit. I'm coming home alive, very much alive, – and I'm coming home to claim you, – remember that."

"Unless either of us falls in love with some one else. Those girls of the far North are beautiful, I hear."

"An Eskimo with a nose ring? No, thank you! My heart is true to Poll! But don't you go and set your somewhat fickle heart on another man, 'cause if you do, I shall have to kill him, much as I'd regret such a necessity."

"My heart isn't fickle! What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. I think it is. I think my little black-eyed, rosy-cheeked Carly is quite capable of being on with a new love whether she's off with the old or not."

"Oh, Peter," and the black eyes showed moisture, "how cruel you are!"

"Isn't it so, Carly? Tell me it isn't, – I'll be so glad!"

But the coquettish glance that answered him was not entirely reassuring.

"Anyway," Peter pleaded on, "tell me you like me better than Kit or Gilbert. Tell me that if I'm a prey to green-eyed jealousy up there in the camp, at least, I needn't envy either of those chaps."

"Of course not!"

"Oh, you torment! Your words are all right, – but your emphasis is a little too strong. Carly, look me straight in the eyes and tell me you don't care for either of them!"

"Either of your eyes?"

"Silly! Well, yes, then, tell me that!"

The chicory flower eyes looked into the great, dark ones, and for a moment there was silence. The blue eyes were sweet and true, and they burned with a strong, deep lovelight. The eyes that gazed into them fell a little and seemed unable to meet them squarely.

"What is it, Carly? What is it, dear?" he begged.

"Nothing," she said, lightly. "I do l-like you, Peter, – better than any man I know – "

"Better than Kit Shelby?"

"Yes."

"Better than Gil Blair?"

"Yes."

"They're the ones I most feared. And mostly because I didn't want to go on a trip with a man I'm jealous of! That would be a fine kettle of fish!"

"Well, you won't do that. Don't worry about them, – or any one else."

"Oh, you blessed little girl! Carly, dearest, why can't you say yes, now? Won't you, Carly, – please."

The caressing voice was low and gentle, the pleading blue eyes were very earnest, but Carlotta still shook her head.

"When you come back," she repeated.

"All right, then," and Peter's face showed one of its masterful looks. "I'll accept your decree, – as I can't very well help myself, but just as sure as you're sitting there, Carly Harper, I'm going to kiss you!"

And he did; gathering her into his arms with a gentle insistence and kissing her squarely on her surprised red lips.

"There!" he said, "I guess you'll remember now that you belong to me, – whether you call yourself engaged or not! Mad?"

"Yes," she responded, but the one swift glance she gave him belied her words.

"You'll get over it," he said, cheerfully. "I'd like to kiss you again, though. May I?"

"When you come back," she said, and Peter waited.

CHAPTER II

The Labrador Wild

It was late in July before Peter Boots marshaled his merry men and let himself be marshaled by the guide, Joshua, on the trip of exploration and recreation.

A liner took them as far as Newfoundland, and at St. John's, a smaller steamer, the *Victoria Lake*, received them for their journey farther North. This ship belonged to a sealing fleet and also carried mails. It was not especially comfortable, and neither staterooms nor food were of the best.

But Peter was discomfort-proof, and his negligence of bothersome details and happy acceptance of existing conditions set a standard for the manners and customs of their party. Joshua, who had come to New York City to meet them, was not, by nature, possessed of the sort of heart that doeth good like medicine. But under the sunny smile of Peter's blue eyes, his customary scowl softened to a look of mild wonder at the effervescent gayety of the man who was yet so efficient and even hard-working when occasion required it.

Shelby was a close second in the matter of efficiency. He was a big chap, not handsome, but good-looking, in a dark, dignified way, and of a lithe, sinewy strength that enabled him to endure as well as to meet hardship bravely.

Not that they looked especially for hardships. Discomfort, even unpleasantness, they did anticipate, but nothing of more importance than inclement weather or possible colds or coughs. And against the latter ills Mrs. Crane had provided both remedies and preventions to such an extent that some were discarded as excess weight.

For the necessities of their trip, including as they did, canoe, tent, blankets, tarpaulins, duffel bags, shooting irons and cooking utensils, – besides food, were of no small bulk and weight even divided among four porters.

And Blair, though possessed of will and energy quite equaling the others', was less physically fit to stand the hard going.

It was already August when they were treated to a first sight of the Labrador.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Shelby, "and Shackelton, and Peary, – yes and old Doc Cook! What an outlook! If those breaking waves were looking for a stern and rockbound coast to dash on, they missed it when they chose the New England shore instead of this! I've seen crags and cliffs, I've climbed the dark brow of the mighty Helvellyn, but this puts it over all the earth! How do we get in, anyway?"

"Great, isn't it?" and Peter lay back in his inadequate little deck chair and beamed at the desolation he saw.

For the coast of Labrador is nearly a thousand miles of barren bleakness and forbidding and foreboding rock wall. After buffeting untold ages of icy gales and biting storms the bare rocks seem to discourage human approach and crave only their own black solitude.

The one softening element was the fog that rode the sea, and now and then swooped down, hiding the dangerous reefs until the danger was increased tenfold by the obscurity.

"Oh, great!" mocked Shelby. "You can have mine. I'm going to stay on the boat and go back."

"Yes, you are!" grinned Peter, knowing full well how little importance to attach to that speech; "inside of a week, you'll be crazy about it."

"I am now," said Blair, slowly. "Most weird sight I ever saw. The rocks seem like sentient giants ready to eat each other. Termagant Nature, unleashed and rampant."

"Idea all right," said Crane, lazily, "but your verbiage isn't hand-picked, seems to me."

"You can put it more poetically, if you like, but it's the thing itself that gets me, not the sand-papered description of it."

"Nobody wants you to sand-paper it, but you ought to hew to the line a little more nearly – "

"Lines be bothered! Free verse is the thing for this place!"

"I want free verse and I want fresh air," bantered Peter, "and Lasca, down by the Brandywine, – or wherever it was that Friend Lasca hung out."

"You're harking back to your school days and Friday afternoon declamation," put in Shelby, "and Lasca was down by the Rio Grande."

"Only Alaska isn't down there at all," Blair informed them, quite seriously, and the others roared.

After delays, changes and transfers made necessary by the uncertainties of Labrador travel, they came at last to Hamilton Inlet, and the little steamer approached the trading post at Rigolet.

"Reminds me of Hamilton Harbor, Bermuda," observed Shelby, shivering as he drew his furs round him.

"Oh, how can you!" exclaimed Blair; "that heavenly Paradise of a place, – and this!"

"But you'd rather be here?" and Crane shook a warning fist at him.

"Yes, – oh, yes! This is the life!" and if Blair wasn't quite sincere he gave a fair imitation of telling the truth.

"Will you look at the dogs!" cried Crane. "I didn't know there were so many in the world!"

The big Eskimo dogs were prowling about, growling a little, and appearing anything but friendly. Not even to sunny-faced and kindly-voiced Peter Boots did they respond, but snarled and pawed the ground until Joshua advised Crane to let them alone.

"They're mighty good things to keep away from," the guide informed, and his advice was taken.

"I'm glad we have a trusty canoe instead of those villainous looking creatures," Blair admitted, and when, later on, they heard tales of the brutality and treachery of the pack dogs, the others agreed.

At Rigolet final arrangements were decided on and last purchases made for the dash into the wilds.

Peter Boots, in his element, was as excited and pleased as a child with a new toy.

"Here I am, where I've longed to be!" he exulted; "at least, I'm on my way. Buck up, you fellows, and enjoy yourselves, or you'll answer to me why not!"

"I'm for it," Kit Shelby cried; "I hated that dinky little old steamer, but now we're ashore in this live wire of a place, I'm as excited and glad as anybody. I say, the mail from England comes every year! Think of that!"

"Once a year!" wondered Blair.

"Yep; the good ship *Pelican* brought it yesterday, and it's due again next summer! Up and coming, this place, I tell you!"

"It nothing means to us," said Crane, calmly; "I'm expecting no valentines from England myself, and we'll be back home before mails from the States get around again."

"And, moreover," said Shelby, who had been acquiring information by various means, "old Captain Whiskers, forninst, says that we're bound to get lost, strayed and stolen if we go the route we've planned."

"That's our route, then!" Peter said, satisfiedly; "they always prophesy all sorts of dismal fates, and, like dreams, they go by contraries. 'Fraid, boys!"

He extricated himself from the onslaught this speech brought and then all set about getting the outfit into shape for the start.

Pounds and pounds of flour, bacon, lard, pea meal, tea, coffee, rice, tobacco and other necessaries were packed and stowed and maneuvered by the capable Joshua, before whose superior judgment Peter Boots had to bow.

Some natives were hired to help carry things that were to be cached against the return trip, and three tired but happy men went to rest for their last night beneath a real roof for many weeks.

Next morning their happiness was even greater and their spirits higher, for the day was clear and perfect, the air full of exhilarating ozone and the golden sunlight and deep blue sky seemed to promise a fair trip and a safe return.

Gayly they started off, and gayly they continued, save when the rain poured unpleasantly, or the swarms of Labrador flies attacked them or steep banks or swift rapids made portage difficult.

However as no threats or persuasions could induce Joshua to travel in the rain, there were enforced rests that helped in the long run.

Another trial was the midday heat. Though the temperature might be at the freezing point at night, by noon it would buoyantly rise to ninety degrees, and the sudden changes made for colds and coughs, that were not easily cured by Mrs. Crane's nostrums.

"Fortunes of war," said Peter, serenely, and Shelby responded, "If that's what they are, I'm a regular profiteer!"

Days went by, the hours filled with alternate joy and woe, but accepted philosophically by willing hearts who had already learned to love the vicissitudes of the wild.

One morning a portage route was of necessity winding and rough. Not as much as usual could be carried by any of them and two or three trips of two miles must be made by each.

Joshua arranged the loads to weigh about seventy pounds each, but these became tiresome after a time. The work took all day, and when toward sunset camp was made and the tired pleasure seekers sought rest, each was far more exhausted than he was willing to admit.

"Had enough?" asked Peter, smiling. "Turn back any time you fellows say. Want to quit?"

"Quit! Never!" declared Shelby. "Go home when you like, or stay as long as you please, but no quitting!"

"It's goin' be nice now," put in Joshua, who was always sensitive to any discontent with his beloved North land. "Nice fishin', nice sleepin', – oh, yes!"

And there was. Rest that night on couches of spruce branches, that rocked like a cradle, and smelled like Araby the Blest, more than knit up the raveled sleeve of the hard day before.

And when they fished in a small, rocky stream, for heaven sent trout, contentment could go no further. Unless it might have been when later they ate the same trout, cooked to a turn by the resourceful Joshua, and then, lounging at ease before a camp-fire that met all traditions, they smoked and talked or were silent as the spirit moved.

The black firs showed gaunt against the sky; the stars came out in twinkling myriads and the dash and roar of the river was an accompaniment to their desultory chat.

"If I were a poet," Blair said, "I'd quote poetry about now."

"Your own, for choice?" asked Shelby, casually.

"You *are* a poet, Gil," said Peter. "I've noticed it all the way along. You don't have to lisp in numbers to be a poet. You just have to – "

"Well, to what?" asked Blair, as Peter paused.

"Why, you just have to want to recite poetry."

"Yes, that's it," put in Shelby, quickly; "understand, Gilbert, dear, you don't have to recite it, you know, only want to recite it. If you obey your impulse, – you're no poet at all."

"I'll restrain the impulse then, – but it's hard – hard!"

"Oh, go ahead," laughed Kit, "if it's as hard as all that! I'll bet it's highbrow stuff you want to get out of your system!"

"Yes, it is. In fact it's Browning."

"Oh, I don't mind him. Fire away."

"Only this bit:

"You're my friend;
What a thing friendship is, world without end.

How it gives the heart and the senses a stir-up,
As if somebody broached you a glorious runlet – "

"That'll do," laughed Peter. "That's far enough. And you didn't say it quite right, any way."

"No matter," said Blair, earnestly; "I mean the thing. Without any palaver, we three fellows are friends, – and I'm glad of it. That's all."

"Thank you very much," said Shelby, "for my share. And old Pete is fairly overflowing with appreciation, – I see it in his baby-blue eyes – "

"I'll baby you!" said Peter, with a ferocious smile. "Yes, old Gilbert, we're friends, or I shouldn't have picked us as the fittest for this trip."

"Good you did, for the fittest have the reputation of surviving."

"Let up on the croaks," Peter spoke abruptly. "Have you noticed any fearful dangers, that you apprehend non-survival of them?"

"No; but – "

"But nothing! Now, Blairsy, if you're in thoughtful mood, let's go on with that plot we started yesterday."

"What plot?" asked Shelby.

"Oh, a great motive for a story or play. Setting up here in the Labrador wilds and – "

Shelby yawned. "Mind if I doze off?" he said; "this fire is soporific – "

"Don't mind a bit," returned Peter gayly; "rather you would, then Gil and I can maudle on as we like."

And they did. Both were of a literary turn, and though they had achieved nothing of importance as yet, both hoped to write sooner or later.

"A story," Peter said, "maybe a book, but more likely a short story, with a real O. Henry punch."

"H'mph!" came in a disdainful grunt from the dozing Shelby.

"You keep still, old lowbrow," advised Peter. "Don't sniff at your betters. There's a great little old plot here, and we're going to make a good thing of it and push it along."

"Push away," and Shelby rolled himself over and dozed again.

"Where's Joshua?" asked Crane, later, as, the talk over, they prepared to bunk on their evergreen boughs.

"Haven't seen him since supper," said Shelby, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. "Queer, isn't it?"

Queer it surely was, and more so, as time went by and they could find no trace of their guide.

"He can't be lost," said Kit; "he's too good a scout for that."

"He can't have deserted us," declared Peter. "He's too good a friend for that! He'll no more desert us than we'd desert one another."

"Well, he's missing anyway," Blair said, undeniably; "then something must have happened. Could he be caught in a trap?"

"Not he! he's used to them about. No, he's had an accident, I think." Peter's eyes were anxious and his voice told of a fear of some real disaster.

The dusk fell early and though only about nine o'clock, it was as dark as midnight. Clouds had obscured the stars, and only the firelight relieved the black darkness.

But after an hour's worryment and distress on the part of the three men the guide returned. He looked a little shame-faced, and was disinclined to reply to their questions.

"Come, now, Joshua, own up," directed Peter; "I see by your eyes you've been up to mischief. Out with it!"

"I – I got lost!" was the astonishing reply, and they all burst into laughter. More at the rueful countenance, however, than at the news, for it was a serious matter.

"You, a guide, lost!" exclaimed Shelby. "How did it happen?"

"Dunno. Jest somehow couldn't find the way."

"Hadn't you a compass?"

"No, sir; I got sort of turned around like, – and I went a long hike the wrong way."

Simply enough, to be sure, but apparently it was only good fortune that had made him find at last the road home to camp.

Light-hearted Peter dismissed the whole affair with a "Look out after this; and always carry a compass or take one of us boys along," and then he sought his fragrant, if not altogether downy couch.

Blair, too, gave the episode little thought, but to Shelby it seemed more important. If a hardened guide could get lost as easily as that, it might happen to any of them. And a compass was not a sure safeguard. A man could wander round and round without finding a fairly nearby camp. Shelby was a few years older than the other two, and of a far more prudent nature. He had no dare-devil instincts, and not an overweening love of adventure. He was enjoying his trip because of the outdoor life and wildwood sports, but as for real adventure, he was content to omit it. Not from fear – Kit Shelby was as brave as any, – but he saw no sense in taking unnecessary risks.

While risks were as the breath of life to Peter Boots. Indeed, he was sighing because the conditions of modern camping ways and the efficiency of the guide left little or no chance for risk of life or limb.

He didn't by any means want to lose life or limb, but he was not at all unwilling to risk them pretty desperately. And he found no opportunity. The days were pleasantly taken up with fishing, shooting, moving on, setting up and taking down camp, and all the expected routine of a mountain expedition; but, so far, there had been nothing unusual or even uncomfortable to any great degree.

The next day brought a fearful storm, with gales and sleet and driving rain and the temperature dropped many degrees.

The party experienced their first really cold weather, and though it depressed the others Peter seemed to revel in it.

The tent was practically a prison, and an uncomfortable one, for the wind was terrific and the squalls became hourly more menacing.

Shelby was quiet, by reason of a sore throat, and Blair was quiet with a silence that was almost sulky.

Not quite though, for irrepressible Peter kept the crowd good-natured, by the simple process of making jokes and laughing at them himself, so contagiously, that all were forced to join in.

But at last he tired of that, and announced that he was going to write letters.

"Do," said Shelby, "and hurry up with them. The postman will be along any minute now."

Peter grinned, and really set himself to work with paper and pencil.

"I know what you're doing," said Blair; "you're beginning our story."

"I'm not, but that isn't half a bad idea. Let's start in, Gil. We can plan it and make up names and things – "

"Why can't you really write it?" asked Shelby. "I should think it would be the psychological moment. Isn't it to be all about the storms and other indigenous delights of Labrador?"

"You take that tone and I'll pitch you out into the indigenous delights," threatened Peter. "Come on, Gilbert, let's block out the backbone of the yarn right now."

They set to work, and by dint of much discussing, disagreeing, ballyragging and bulldozing each other, they did make a fair start.

"What's the heroine like?" asked Shelby, beginning to be interested.

"Like Carly Harper," said Blair promptly.

"Not the leastest, littlest mite like Carly Harper," said Peter, his blue eyes hardening with determination.

"Why not?" demanded Blair, who cared little what the heroine was like; but who objected to contradiction without reason.

"Because I say not," returned Peter, impatiently. "The heroine is a little rosy-cheeked, flax-haired doll. She has blue eyes, – something like mine, – and a saucy, turn-up nose, and a dimple in her left cheek."

"A peach," said Shelby, "but no sort of a heroine for that yarn you two fellows are spinning. I'm no author, but I'm an architect, and I can see the incongruity."

"If you know so much, write it yourself," said Peter, but not pettishly. "If I'm doing it, I create my own heroine or I quit."

"Oh, don't quit," begged Blair. "We're just getting a good start. Have the treacle and taffy heroine if you like, only keep on."

His point won, Peter did keep on, and a fair bit of work was accomplished. For the first time it began to seem as if the two authors would really produce something worth while.

"Not likely," Peter said, as they talked this over. "I'm no sort of a collaborator, – I'm too set in my ways. If I can't have it the way I want it, I can't do it at all."

"But you can have your own way in details," said Blair, musingly. "They don't matter much. Give me the swing of the plot and let me plan the climaxes, and I care not who makes the laws for the heroine's complexion."

"Well, I'm for a run in the rain," said Peter. "I've worked my brain into a tangled snarl, and I must go out and clear it out."

He shook himself into his storm togs, and as no one cared to go with him, he started off alone.

CHAPTER III

The Snowstorm

Given three good-natured young men, a satisfactory guide, a stretch of Labrador wild, and no cares of any sort, it is not surprising that the happy days and weeks followed one another into the maw of Time, until the date of departure for home drew near.

"I'd like to stay here forever," declared Blair, as he filled his pipe and stretched luxuriously before the fire. "Civilization has lost all charm for me."

"Go away with you!" scoffed Peter Boots, "that's a fine, ambitious spirit to show, and you a rising young author, – or about to become one."

"Not unless you duff in and help, old chap. Our book hangs on your efforts, I've pretty well done my part of it."

"And I'll do mine, don't worry. I'm a procrastinator and a put-offer, but I'll get there! Now, cut out the book till we get home. These last few days up here must be given over to Nature as she is snowed under!"

It was the last week in September, but snow-squalls were frequent, winds were high and rains were cold and sleety.

Joshua had been urging the homeward journey for several days, but the men were loath to go, until now, a more severe bit of weather had persuaded them. Even as they sat round the fire, with storm coats drawn high up around their ears, the sleet-squalls drove against their faces and the gale howled among the snowy trees.

Peter loved the life, the outdoor days and tented nights, but his mind once made up to leave, his volatile spirit turned toward home.

"A couple of days more staving round in the snowdrifts and I'll be ready," he announced, and Joshua began to pack up.

The guide growled a little at the reluctance of his party to start.

"You men wait too long, and you'll be sorry," he warned. "This wind won't only let up for a little spell at a time, – mostly it'll blow like somethin' let loose! And if a big snow comes, – and it's likely to, – we'll be in a fix."

"Now, now, old man," began Shelby, "don't growl. We've been a pretty good sort, haven't we? We're going home, aren't we? Why croak at us?"

"That's all right, sir, but meantime this Northwest wind keeps up its force, and – well, it means business."

"All right, we'll get the better of its business deal," prophesied Peter, and he and Blair went off for a hike.

As they started, the sun shone clear, and though the temperature was below thirty, the two men strode along, happy with sheer physical joy of living.

"This is the life!" said Peter, flapping his arms, and watching his breath congeal in frosty clouds.

"Yes," Blair agreed, "to a certain point –"

"Freezing point?"

"I guess that's right! I like it all as well as you do, but it's nicest when the sun shines. And by Jiminy, she's clouding over again!"

Clouds meant cold, – a raw, penetrating chill that seemed to strike to the marrow, and the pair were glad to turn back toward camp.

"What do you think most about, when you think of home?" asked Blair, idly.

"Carly Harper," replied Peter, speaking from the fullness of his heart.

"Good Lord! So do I!" exclaimed Blair, his tone that of surprise only.

Peter turned and looked at him. "Not a chance for you, old chap," he said. "Little Carly is waiting for me. Yeo, ho, lads, ho, – Yeo, ho!"

"Oh, I say! Really?" Blair's consternation was almost comic.

"Yes, sir! Fair warning, – keep off!"

"Engaged?"

"Same as."

"Meaning she hasn't said a positive yes?"

"Meaning that, if you like."

"Then it's fair field and no favor! We're too good friends to misunderstand, but let's call it a case of may the best man win."

"All right, but I'll win and you can be best man at the wedding, how's that?" Peter's eyes shone with good humor, and his happy face left Blair little room for doubt as to Peter's own view of the case. What Carly herself thought was another matter.

But the two were too good friends to quarrel, and moreover, each knew the other too well to mistrust him for a minute. It would, indeed, be a fair field where they were concerned.

"I didn't know you'd gone so far," said Blair, ruefully, "of course, there's no chance for me."

"I hope not," returned Peter, cheerfully. "But when we get back we'll soon find out."

"Perhaps find out that she's 'gone with a handsomer man,'" suggested Blair.

"Not impossible. I suppose there are such."

But a disinterested observer, looking at Peter's fine, strong face, with its radiant coloring, brought out by the sharp air, might not have agreed.

And then conversation became abstract, for the wind rose to a piercing gale and it was all they could do to keep their balance and fight their way along.

"I said this here wind was bound to ease up some time and it has," said Joshua, with decided satisfaction, the morning of the start for home. "We ought to make good goin' to-day, and maybe get ahead of our own schedule."

"That's the trick," said Shelby, "always get ahead of your own schedule, and you're bound to succeed. Come on, Peter, here we go."

The leave-taking was a bit silent, for all three had become attached to the camp, and they gave long farewell glances backward.

Then off they went, and throwing sentiment aside, turned their thoughts and their talk to the coming journey.

For home was yet a long way off. Many days' traveling before they reached the mail boat and then many more before they could lift New York Harbor.

"And I'm glad of it," declared Peter. "The longer we are on the home stretch, the better I'll be pleased."

"Granting we don't miss the boat," added Blair. "When I start out I want to arrive."

It was about three days later that a big storm set in. Relentlessly it blew and snowed and the gales were almost unbreastable.

"Don't dare stop," said Joshua, in his usual laconic way; "the winter's set in, and any day may be worse'n the day before. Old Merk is down to twenty-four, and we want to peg ahead, – that's what we want to do."

They did, – by day, – and by night they enjoyed the rest and warmth of camp, but still, Joshua urged them ahead continually.

He parceled out longer days and shorter nights, until even strong Peter began to feel the strain.

Shelby was of a wiry sort, and stood hard going well; Blair was a patient, plodding nature and wouldn't have complained if he had dropped in his tracks; but Peter was impulsive and impatient, and he growled frankly.

"We'll get there, Eli," he said to the guide; "don't hustle us so."

"Got to do it, Mr. Crane. I know more about this here winter that's closing in on us, than you do. It's a bit early, but it's sure!"

So on they went, through snow that was wet and heavy, through icy sleet that stung and cut their faces, through roaring winds that choked their lungs, but full of indomitable courage and perseverance and of unimpaired good nature.

And yet a week of this traveling at last began to tell on their *morale*. Not that they grew testy or irritable, but the silences were longer, the repartee less gay, and even buoyant Peter's spirits drooped a little.

Joshua then took a turn as comforter.

"The worst'll soon be over," he reassured them. "Two days will get us to Big Lake, and once we finish that, we'll be well on our way."

So on they pushed, heavily laden, traveling slowly, but all well and sound in wind and limb.

It was the middle of October, when a bright sunny day beamed on them and their spirits rose in consequence.

But Joshua did not smile. "Weather breeder," he said, laconically, and looked gloomy.

The others knew better than to call him a pessimist, for when Joshua predicted weather, it came.

And come it did. Not a squall; there was little if any wind, but a snowfall. A steady, straight down snow that was so thick, so dense, they could scarce see one another's forms.

"Keep a-going," directed Joshua; "and for the land's sake, don't get far apart. Stay close together, single trail, and close!"

Thus they went on, the guide first, then Shelby, then Blair, then Peter. There was no reason for the order they took, it merely happened that it was so.

They kept close, as directed, but the going was hard. If one stumbled, one must recover quickly and hasten ahead not to lose sight of the others.

And the snow continued. Soft, white, feathery flakes, more and more thickly falling every moment. Joshua plowed ahead, the others followed, and each had all he could do to keep his eyes clear enough to see the man in front.

Which is how it happened that when Peter stumbled and fell, and found himself unable to rise, the others had no knowledge of it.

As the big man went down, he essayed to rise quickly, but his right leg refused to move.

"Broken!" he said to himself, as one noting a trivial occurrence. "Queer, to break a leg, falling in a bed of soft snow!"

But that was exactly what he had done, and realizing it, he set up a yell that would have made a North American Indian envy its force and volume.

But for all the good it did, it might as well have been a whisper. The wind, though not violent, was against him, and carried the sound away from the plodding travelers. His friends could not hear it. Not looking back, as indeed, they had no thought of doing, they did not miss their fallen comrade and on they toiled, ignorant of the fact that they were three instead of four now.

And Peter, – big, strong Peter Crane, – brave, intrepid Peter Boots, – sat there in the furious snowstorm, unable to rise, but with brain and mind vividly alive to what had happened.

Quick of thought, always, he now traced with lightning rapidity, just what the future held for him – and such a short future, at that – unless —

His only hope lay in his lung power.

He yelled, screamed, whistled, hooted, and put all of his strength and nerve force in his desperate efforts to reach the ears of his comrades.

But it was impossible. The cruel wind drove his voice away from those it was meant to reach, the snowflakes filled his open mouth as he shouted; and as hope failed, strength failed and Peter faced his fate.

Strong, able-bodied, save for the broken leg, he tried to crawl along. The result was pitiful, for he merely floundered in the deep mass of soft whiteness. His share of the luggage was heavy packs, nothing of which he could make a flag of distress or even build a fire. He felt for his matches, and lighting a cigarette, waved it aloft, almost smiling at his tiny beacon.

Then came despair. His mind seemed to grow more alert as his body was overcome by the cold. His blood boiled, even as it froze in his veins. He felt abnormally acute of intellect, and plead with himself to think of something, – to invent something that would save his life.

Yet he knew there was no hope. The fast-falling snow obliterated all tracks almost instantly. Even though the others missed him, they could never find him, and, – this thought struck a new chill through his veins, – in a short time the snowfall would even obliterate him!

What a death! Helpless; unable even to meet it standing, he must lie there, and let the snow bury him alive!

He could maintain a half-sitting posture, – but what use? Why not lie down flat and get it over quickly? Yet he must hold on as long as possible, for the men might come back, – he began to think what they would do – but, he was sure they would not miss him until too late to do anything. If the snow would only let up. It was such a pity to have his whereabouts hidden by a foolish fall of snow! As Peter grew colder he grew calmer. His senses mercifully became numbed at last, and as the actual moment of his freezing to death came nearer and nearer, he cared less and less. A state of coma is a blessing to many dying men, and into this state Peter gently drifted, even as the snow drifted over and covered his stiff, silent form.

And his friends trudged on; not that it could be called trudging, – rather, they plodded, stumbled, pitched, fought and merely achieved progress by blindly plunging ahead.

It was nearly a half hour after Peter's fall that Blair, accidentally turned round by a gust of wind, called out an exasperated "Halloo!" which gained no response.

"Halloo!" he repeated, "Peter! how goes it?"

Still no return call, and Blair called to those ahead.

They turned, and, huddling together in the storm, they looked at one another with scared faces.

"I warned you to keep close together," began Joshua, but forbore to chide, as he saw the dumb agony in the eyes of the other two men.

"Turn back," said Shelby, "and quickly. How long do you suppose he has been gone? Has he missed the track? What happened, Joshua?"

"He must have fallen," the guide replied. "Or maybe just strayed off, blinded by the snow, and he's wandering around yet. He has a compass and he knows where to head for. Small use our trying to turn back and find him. He's 'way off by this time, – or, maybe, he ain't. Maybe he's close behind, – we couldn't see him ten yards off in this snow."

"I never saw such a thickness of white!" exclaimed Blair. "I've heard that when snow is so white and feathery, it doesn't last long."

"This snow does," returned Joshua, "and I tell you, Mr. Shelby, there's no use turning back. We'd just waste our time, – maybe our lives –"

"But, man, we can't go without Crane!" Shelby cried. "I won't go on and leave him to his fate!"

"'Tain't likely he's in any real danger," said Joshua, almost believing his own statement. "If it was one of you two, now, I'd feel more alarmed. But Mr. Crane, – he's got a head on him, and a compass, and he knows the route we're taking, – he went over it with me before we started. Lord knows I'd be the first one to go to his rescue, if it was rescue he needed, but I don't think it is."

"Rescue or not," said Blair, "I will not go on without Peter. You two do what you like. I'm going to turn back and hunt for him."

"So am I," declared Shelby, and the two turned to face the backward trail.

"All foolishness," muttered Joshua, "but of course, I'll go along."

It was all foolishness, there was no doubt of that. The snow had covered all signs of their own tracks, there was no road to follow, no landmarks to go by. Though Joshua had pursued his route by compass, he could not retrace it surely enough to find a lost man.

However, they persisted; they dashed at snow-covered mounds only to find them hummocks or rocks. They hallooed and shouted; they stared into the snowy distance, hoping to discern smoke; but though their big, strong Peter was less than half a mile away from them, they could get no hint of his presence.

Night came on. They built their camp fire of enormous dimensions, hoping against hope that it might attract the lost man.

None slept, save for a few fitful dozes from sheer exhaustion and grief. Joshua stolidly insisted that Peter was undoubtedly all right, and though they could scarcely believe it, this comforted the other two.

Next morning they held council. Joshua was all for going on and giving up the search for Crane. Blair, too, felt it a useless waste of time to remain, but Shelby begged for a few hours.

"If the storm abates just a little – " he began.

"It won't," declared Joshua. "It's a little mite less windy but this snowfall's only just begun. It won't quit for days, – lessen it turns to rain, – and then the goin'll be a heap worse."

It didn't seem as if the going could be much worse. Already the men had difficulty in moving because of their wet, half-frozen clothing. Available wood was buried under the snow, their strength was becoming impaired, and all things pointed to even worse weather conditions.

Reluctantly Shelby and Blair agreed to Joshua's plans, realizing that Peter might be all right and on his homeward journey, and further delay might result in their own loss of life. For the outlook was menacing, and Joshua's knowledge and advice were sincere and authoritative.

And still it snowed. Steadily, persistently, uninterruptedly. There seemed a permanency about that soft, downward moving mass that foreboded danger and defeat to any one who remained to dare it further.

And so they started again, half glad to go, half unwilling to leave. It was the terrible uncertainty that told on them. They shrank from facing the thought of what it would mean if they didn't find Peter, and forced themselves to believe that they would meet him.

Their objective point was a trapper's log house on the shore of the lake.

They reached it, tired, footsore, but full of hope for good news. A quick glance round the tiny interior, consisting of but two rooms, showed no smiling-faced Peter.

A few words from Joshua to the trappers gave no cause for rejoicing, and further conversation and explanation revealed the fact that the experienced trappers had no doubt as to Peter's fate.

Nor did they blame Joshua in any way. Had he stayed for a longer search, they averred, there would have been four dead men instead of one.

And then both Shelby and Blair realized that Joshua's expressed hopefulness of finding Peter safe at the end of their journey was merely by way of urging them to move on, knowing the result if they did not.

They also realized that he was right. The opinions and assertions of the experienced trappers could not be gainsaid. The two came to know that there was but one fate that could have overtaken their comrade and that there was no hope possible.

If Shelby had a slight feeling that Blair ought to have looked back oftener, he gave it no voice, for he knew he himself had never looked back with any idea of watching over Blair. To be sure the last one of the four was in the most dangerous position, but Peter had come last by mere chance, and no one had given that point a thought.

They surmised something must have disabled him. Perhaps a cramp or a fainting spell of exhaustion. But it was necessarily only surmise, and one theory was as tenable as another.

Long parleys were held by Blair and Shelby as to what was best to be done. It proved to be impossible to persuade any one to start on a search for the body of Crane. The winter had set in and it was a hopeless task to undertake in the snows of the wild. No, they were told, not until March at the earliest, could a search be undertaken, and there was small chance of finding the body until later spring melted the snow. It was to be an especially bad winter, all agreed, and no pleas, bribes or threats of the men could move the natives from their decision.

Then, they debated, should they go home, or wait till spring?

The latter plan seemed foolish, for it was now nearly November and to wait there idly for five or six months was appalling. Moreover, it seemed their duty to go home and report Peter's loss to his father, even if they returned in the spring to search for the body of their chum.

The last boat left for Newfoundland the middle of November, and they concluded that if there was no news of Peter by that time they would sail on it. "I feel cowardly to go," said Shelby, whose brain was weary, working out the problem of duty. "Yet, why stay?"

"It's right to go," Blair said, gravely. "You see, Mr. Crane must be *told*, – not written to."

"One of us might go, – and one stay," Shelby suggested.

"No use in that," Blair said, after a moment's consideration; "the remaining one couldn't do anything."

"You men talk foolishness," said Joshua, gravely. "Mr. Peter Crane is by this time buried under eight feet of snow. You can do nothing. You'd both better go home."

So they went.

CHAPTER IV

The Prophecy Recalled

The steamer from Newfoundland that brought Shelby and Blair to New York arrived during Christmas week.

The two men, however, were far from feeling holiday cheer as they reached the wharf and faced the hard trial of telling Mr. and Mrs. Crane of their son's death.

But it had to be done, and they felt it their duty to lose no time in performing the sad errand.

No one met them at the steamer, for its hour of arrival was uncertain and they had discouraged their friends from the attempt.

Indeed only telegrams from Newfoundland had apprised any one of their arrival, for letters would have come by the same boat they came themselves.

"Let's go straight to the Cranes' and get it over," said Blair; with a sigh. "I dread the ordeal."

"So do I," Shelby confessed. "I wish we could see Mr. Crane alone, first."

"We must do that, of course. It's only eight o'clock, and we're ready to start now. Come ahead."

They sent their luggage to their homes and took a taxi for the Crane town house, on upper Park Avenue.

By good fortune, Mr. Crane was at home and received them in his library. They had asked to see him alone, giving no names.

"My stars, if it isn't the wanderers returned!" exclaimed their host, as he entered and saw the two. "Where's my boy? Hiding behind the window curtain?"

But the expression on his visitors' faces suddenly checked his speech, and turning pale, Benjamin Crane dropped into the nearest chair.

"What is it?" he whispered, in a shaking voice. "I know it's bad news. Is Peter –"

"Yes," said Shelby, gently, but feeling that the shortest statement was most merciful. "The Labrador got him."

By a strange locution, Labrador, as we call it, is spoken of up there as The Labrador, and the phrase gives a sinister sound to the name. It personifies it, and makes it seem like a living menace, a sentient danger.

"Tell me about it," said Benjamin Crane, and his tense, strained voice told more of his grief than any outburst could have done.

"Lost in the snow! My little Peter Boots –" he said, after he had listened in silence to their broken recital. "Tell me more," he urged, and eagerly drank in any details they could give him of the tragedy and also of the doings of the party before that last, fatal day.

Blair looked at him in secret amazement. How could the man take it so calmly? But Shelby, a deeper student of human character, understood how the fearful shock of tragedy had stunned the loving father-heart. Slowly and quietly, Shelby related many incidents of the trip, drew word pictures of Peter in his gayest moods, told tales of his courage, bravery and unfailing good spirits.

But, though these things interested Crane and held his attention, there was no way to lessen the poignant sorrow of the last story, – the account of the terrible storm and the awful fate of Peter.

Shelby broke down, and Blair finished, with a few broken sentences.

The deep grief of the two, the sincere love of Peter and sorrow at his death proved better than protestations that they had done all mortal effort could do.

"I am not sure, sir," Shelby said, finally, "that we acted wisely, but it seemed the only course to take. We could not persuade any one to go for us or with us in search of Peter's body, until March at the earliest. To go alone, was mere suicide, and though I was tempted to do even that, rather than to return without him, it would not have been allowed."

"Oh, I understand perfectly," Crane said, quickly, "I wouldn't have had you do otherwise than just as you did. There was no use trying the impossible."

"But we will return in March – " began Blair.

"Perhaps," said Crane, a little preoccupied in manner, "or I will send a search party myself. There's no reason you boys should go."

This was a real relief, for though more than willing, the two men were far from anxious to undertake the gruesome errand.

"And now," their host went on, "if you agree, I'll send for Mrs. Crane. At first, I thought I'd rather tell her the news when we were by ourselves, – but, I know there are questions she will want to ask you, things that I might not think of, – and I know you'll be willing to answer her."

All unconscious of the scene awaiting her, Mrs. Crane came into the room.

A bewildered look on her sweet, placid face showed her inability to grasp the situation quickly.

Then, "Why, boys," she cried, "when did you come home? Where's Peter?"

To the others' relief Benjamin Crane told his wife of their mutual loss. Very gently he told her, very lovingly he held her hand and comforted her crushed and breaking heart. Shelby and Blair instinctively turned aside from the pitiful scene and waited to be again addressed.

At length Mrs. Crane turned her tear-stained face to them. Not so calm as her husband, she begged for details, then she wept and sobbed so hysterically she could scarcely hear them. Her thoughts flew back to the years when Peter was a lad, a child, a baby, – and her talk of him became almost incoherent.

"There, there, dear," Benjamin Crane said, smoothing her hair, "try to be quieter, – you will make yourself ill. Perhaps, boys, you'd better go now, and come round again to-morrow evening."

"No, no!" cried Mrs. Crane; "stay longer, – tell me more. Tell me everything he said or did, – all the time you were gone. Did he know he was going to die?"

"Oh, no, Mrs. Crane," Shelby assured her. "It was an accident, you see. The storm was beyond anything you can imagine. The wind was not only icy and cutting, but of a sharp viciousness that made it impossible to hear or to see. Almost impossible to walk. We merely struggled blindly against it, —*against* it, you understand, so that if Peter, who was behind, had called out, we could not have heard him."

"Why was he last?" demanded Mrs. Crane.

"It happened so," replied Shelby. "I've tried hard to think if we were to blame for that, – but I cannot see that we were. Whenever we walked single file, we fell into line in any order. The subject never was mentioned or thought of. And so, that day, Peter was the last one. If Blair or I had fallen or been overcome by the cold, – which is what we know must have happened, – we would have been seen by Peter, of course. But when he gave out, no one looked backward."

"You had been trudging like that long?" asked Crane.

"Oh, yes, for hours. We were all pretty nearly all in, but Joshua wouldn't let us stop, – dared not, in fact, for he knew the danger of that storm far better than we did. No, Mr. Crane, on the part of Blair and myself, I want to say that we had no thought other than our individual progress. That was all any one could think of, as Peter himself would say if he could speak."

"He has spoken," returned Crane, quietly; "he did say it."

"What!" exclaimed the two men together.

"Yes," the older man went on; "I think I will tell you, though I had half decided not to: What do you say, Mother?"

Mrs. Crane looked up. Her expression of dumb despair gave way to a look of quiet peace as she said, slowly: "Yes, dear, tell them. But let it be held confidential."

"You'll promise that, boys, won't you?" asked Crane, and only half understanding Blair and Shelby promised.

"Well, it was this way," Crane began, "You know we couldn't get letters from you chaps all the time you were away, – except the few early ones. Of course we knew that before you went, but we didn't realize how lonely we would be without Peter Boots. Whenever he has been away before we could hear from him frequently. Julie is a dear girl, but she is a busy little butterfly, and many a time my wife and I are alone of an evening."

"And we're happy enough together," Mrs. Crane put in, gently; "but being alone, we naturally talked a great deal of Peter, and – and we couldn't help remembering the Gypsy's warning."

"Oh, I'd forgotten that!" exclaimed Blair. "What was it, now?"

"A prophecy that Peter would go on a long journey, and would meet with a terrible death. Now, the prophecy is fulfilled." Mrs. Crane's face, as she gazed upward, her eyes filled with tears, was like that of a seeress or prophetess. She appeared exalted, and unconscious of her grief for the moment.

"And there was further prophecy," Benjamin Crane continued, "that after his death, Peter would return. And when I say he has done so, I expect you to respect my story and not to doubt its truth."

"We shall most certainly respect your story, and no one could doubt your veracity, Mr. Crane," said Shelby, sincerely, though with a mental reservation that believing in Benjamin Crane's veracity did not necessarily mean subscribing to his hallucinations.

Blair's face showed his interest and curiosity, and Benjamin Crane went on with the tale to a breathlessly absorbed audience.

"It did come about, I've no doubt, because of our talks of Peter; and also, because we chanced to hear of some neighbors who had wonderful success with a Ouija Board."

A sudden, involuntary exclamation on the part of Blair was immediately suppressed by a warning glance from Shelby. It would never do to show scorn of the Ouija Board and all its works in the presence of this afflicted couple. If any comfort from its use had reached them or could reach them, it must be a blessing indeed.

"Yes," Crane said, catching the meaning of the look on Blair's face, "I know how you feel about such things, but just reserve judgment until you hear our experiences. We bought a Board, and mother and I tried to use it alone. We had no success at all. It would spell nothing coherent, – only meaningless jumbles of letters, – or simply refuse to move. Of course, you understand, we had no thought that our boy was – was in any danger, – but we had been told that sometimes living persons communicated by such means. So we persevered, but we never got a message."

"Then what happened?" asked Blair, eagerly, seeing from the faces of the older people that something had.

"Why then," Mrs. Crane spoke now, – "we found somebody to help us. I'd rather not tell the name, – it was a lady –"

"A medium?" asked Shelby.

"Oh, no! I mean, not a professional medium, – a lady we've known for years. She had had some experience with the Board, and she tried it with us. And then, – you tell it, father."

"Then," said Mr. Crane, speaking very seriously, "then we got a message from Peter. The message said that he had died in the snow."

"What!" cried Shelby, "incredible! When was this?"

"In November."

"Peter died the seventeenth of October."

"Yes, and it was the tenth of November that we had the message."

"Just what did it say?" asked Blair, his eyes wide with amazement.

"It was a little stammering and uncertain, as if hard to get it through. But the Ouija spelled out Peter's name, and when she – Miss – when the lady with us asked if it had a message from Peter, it pointed to 'yes.' Then she tried to get the message. But the words were a little mixed up. There was *snow* and *ice* and *storm* and at last the word *dead*. When we asked if Peter had died in a snowstorm

the Board said yes. So, we knew the prophecy was fulfilled at last. The news you brought us was corroboration, not a surprise."

Shelby restrained himself by an effort. His sharp glance at Blair made him keep quiet also. Neither was at all impressed at the story Crane told them, except to be moved to ridicule. Well they knew how a Ouija Board will make glib statements as startling as they are untrue.

But this one happened to be true. Even so, the fact of its relation by such means was unbelievable to both the hearers.

Yet, they could not disturb the faith of the parents of their lost chum.

"I am glad, for your sakes, that you had a premonitory warning," said Shelby, in all sincerity. "Such things are indeed beyond our ken. Did you get any further details?"

"No," said Crane; "but, I learn, you have no further details yourselves. My boy perished in the snowstorm, alone and helpless. What more is there to know?"

"Nothing that we could tell," spoke up Blair, a little excitedly, "but surely, the spirit of Peter, – if it was he speaking to you, – could have told more!"

"It is clear you have had no experience in these matters," Crane said, mildly; "the messages are not easy to get, nor are they concise and clear, like a telegram. Only occasionally does one get through, and then if it is informative we are duly grateful, – and not dissatisfied and clamoring for more."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Crane; I am inexperienced, but I assure you I am not a scoffer. And of course, I believe your statements."

"Of course!" exclaimed Mrs. Crane, a little crisply. "Surely we would not invent such a story!"

"No, indeed," said Shelby. "It is strange, you must admit. Have you had any further communications from Peter?"

"A few," Mr. Crane spoke a bit reluctantly, for he could see that the men were receptive from a motive of politeness, and not with sympathetic interest. "He has sent other messages, but they would not, I fear, convince you."

"Now, don't blame us, Mr. Crane," Blair broke out, impetuously; "remember, we're just from the place where we left Peter, – remember, we love him, too, – and remember, if we could be convinced that he had spoken we would be as interested as you are."

"Well put, my boy," and Crane seemed greatly mollified. "Now, merely as an admission of facts, do you believe that the Ouija Board gave the messages exactly as I have detailed the proceedings to you?"

"I do," said Blair, "that is, I believe you have told the exact truth of what you observed."

"Then, can you refuse to believe that the message came from the spirit of my dead boy? Who else knew of his death? How could any one know of it?"

"True enough," and Blair shook his head, noncommittally.

Crane sighed. "You don't believe," he said, but without annoyance. "Yet, remember, greater minds and wiser brains than yours believe. Are not you a little presumptuous to set your opinion against theirs?"

"I don't mean to be presumptuous, Mr. Crane," Blair spoke decidedly, "but I do think my opinion on this subject as good as any man's."

"Then you are condemning the matter, unheard, which you will allow is not strictly just."

"Come, come, Blair," said Shelby, distressed at his attitude, "don't discuss things of which you know nothing. Mr. Crane has gone deeply into the subject and must know more about it than we do." He gave Blair a positive glance of reproof, and tried to make him see that he must stop combating their host's theories, if only for reasons of common politeness.

"But I'm interested," persisted Blair. "If Peter came here and told his father he was dead, – I want to look into these things. You see, it's the first time I've ever been up against a real case of this sort. Own up, Shelby, it's all mighty queer."

Benjamin Crane looked kindly at Blair. "That's the talk, my boy. If you're really interested, come round some night, and with you here, Peter may talk through, all the better."

"Rubbish!" Shelby thought, silently, but aloud, he only said:

"Yes, Blair, do that. And drop the subject for the present. Is Julie at home, Mrs. Crane?"

"No; she's away for a few days. Poor child, she will be heartbroken. She adored Peter Boots," and Mrs. Crane again gave way to tears.

"What does Julie think about the messages?" asked Blair, thoughtfully.

"We didn't tell her," said Crane. "She's so emotional, and – well, of course, we couldn't help hoping that it mightn't be true. And, too, Julie hates all talk of spiritism."

"Sensible girl!" thought Shelby, as Mrs. Crane was saying:

"But Julie went to Sir Rowland's lectures and she was deeply interested."

"Lectures?" asked Blair.

"Yes; there have been a great many this season. I'm sorry you had to miss them. They're over now. But I can't see how any one could listen to that delightful man talk on such subjects in his beautiful way and not be convinced of the truth of it all."

"What did he say?" asked Shelby.

"That's too big a question to be answered in a sentence," and Crane smiled a little, "but he gave us incontrovertible proof that the spirits of the dead return and communicate with their friends who are still on earth."

"Through a Ouija Board?" Blair inquired.

"Yes; and by actual manifestation as well. I've never consulted a real medium, but now that I know Peter is gone, I shall do so."

"Don't!" Shelby said, quite involuntarily. Then, seeing the look in Crane's eyes, he added: "Forgive me, sir, I have no right to advise. But I've been told that all professional mediums are frauds."

"We are told many things, – both for and against," returned Crane, "but if Sir Rowland is willing to consult them, and believes in them, I'm ready to sail under his flag."

"Of course. And you've a perfect right to do so." Shelby felt he couldn't control his real opinions much longer, and wanted to go. "May I come to see you again, soon, – and talk over the matters of Peter's things, – which, of course, we brought home? And, I'd like to see Julie."

"She'll be home by to-morrow evening. Of course, we'll send for her. And I know she'll want to see you both. Perhaps not just at first, but after a few days. Please come to the house whenever you will, – just as you used to do."

"Yes, do," added Mrs. Crane, her lip quivering at the remembrance of the old days when the boys were jolly together.

"And Miss Harper, how is she?" asked Blair, who had been longing to put the question for some time.

"Well, as usual," replied Mrs. Crane. "She was here last night. She –"

"She's a dear girl," Crane interrupted his wife, and a peculiar look crossed his face. "You come round soon again, boys, but I fear we must let you go now. My wife is keeping up bravely, but –" he glanced at the little woman tenderly, and took her hand in his. "And I, too, don't feel like talking more now. So good-night, – and, thank you for all your good comradeship with my boy, – my Peter Boots."

"We want sympathy, too, Mr. Crane," said Blair; "Peter was very dear to us both. We're not given to spilling over, but we have lost a dear friend and chum whose place can never be filled by another."

"Right!" said Shelby, in a choked voice, and his handclasp with Peter's father said the rest.

But once on the street his exasperation broke forth in words. "I can stand any sort of idiots," he said, "except spook idiots! They make me want to go back to the Labrador!"

"Sort of queer, though, that message, – from Peter –"

"From Peter – nothing! Don't desecrate that boy's memory by even an implication that he'd fiddle with a Ouija Board! Ugh!"

"How do you explain it, then?"

"There's nothing to explain."

"You think Crane, – er – misstated?"

"Oh, I think he thought he had a message, – but he was duped. They all are. I know all about that Sir Rowland. I've read his books. He's dotty on the subject. Keep off the rocks, Blair. You've a leaning that way, and if you don't look out you'll fall for it, too."

"Wonder why Mr. Crane shut his wife up when she started to say something about Carly Harper."

"Oh, that was nothing particular. Anyway, you can see Carly for yourself. I expect she'll be hard hit by Peter's death. They were practically engaged."

"How'd you know?"

"Peter told me, – not in words, bless his heart! He just let it out when he was in a babbling mood. I mean, he let fall side remarks, and I just gathered the truth. I didn't tell him I knew. Open-hearted as he was, Peter was reserved in some ways."

"Dear old chap, so he was. Our great work will never materialize now. Unless I write it alone. I'd like to do that, – and publish it over both our names, and explain in a preface."

"Do," said Shelby; "it would please the old people a lot."

CHAPTER V

Madame Parlato

Blair's first interview with Carly Harper was painful for both. The Cranes had told her of Peter's death, but the sight of Blair seemed to bring home to the girl a further and more vivid realization of her loss.

"I wish now I'd been kinder to him," she said, her voice quivering.

"Oh, come now, Carly, I know you weren't unkind."

"No; but I wouldn't – wouldn't do what he asked me – "

"Never mind, dear; I think I know what you mean, and, let me tell you, old Peter was happy enough – about you. He seemed pretty sure that things were coming his way."

"Of course," the girl said frankly. "I only wanted him to go away, free, and then if he still wanted me when he came back – and now he'll never come back!" she gave way to silent weeping.

"His parents say he has come back," offered Blair, more by way of diversion than comfort.

Carly looked up quickly. "They told you that?" she said.

"Yes, told me pretty much all about their 'messages.' Foolishness, of course, but it seems to comfort them."

"It doesn't comfort me," and Carly sighed. "I don't believe in it, you see." And she looked at him with a curious glance.

"No; I don't either. But the old people do, and if it helps them bear their grief, – why – "

"Yes; I understand. How – how much did they tell you?"

"All, I suppose. They said some medium, – well, not a professional, but some friend of theirs, – helped them to get messages 'through,' as they call it."

"Didn't they tell you who the friend was?"

"No; but they weren't mysterious about it. They simply didn't say. I believe Julie doesn't like to have them try it, – the Ouija, I mean."

"Oh, she feels as I do, – as anybody must, – if they like it let them have it. She went to the lectures."

"Everybody did, it seems."

"Yes, the whole town went crazy on the subject. Is yet, but not quite to the same extent."

"The war brought it all about, of course. After a short time, the fad will die out."

"Yes, if it is a fad. But, – do you never think there may be a grain of truth in it all?"

"I haven't seen the grain yet, but I'm open to conviction."

"Oh, well, I've no intention of trying to convince you. Tell me all about your trip, – tell me all the queer experiences you had, and everything you can think of. And tell me lots about Peter."

Blair did her bidding. He described their life in the Labrador, told of their exploits and discomforts and also of the glorious outdoor days and nights that were so enjoyed by them all.

"I'd love it!" Carly declared. "Oh, not all the tramping and portaging, but the camp life."

"Better try it nearer home. The Adirondacks would give you enough excitement. There's no use braving that cold up there, and those fierce storms."

"If it hadn't stormed, Peter wouldn't have been lost, would he?"

"Probably not. You see, we've mulled it over and over. He must have fallen and hurt himself in some way, or he would have followed us somehow."

"He would have called out."

"That's the point. The wind was in our faces, it was a villainous blast, and nothing any one said could be heard by one in front of him, unless they were near each other. If Peter had shouted, the wind would have carried his voice back and away from us. That is undoubtedly what happened."

"Don't you think the guide was greatly to blame?"

"No; he had no reason to look back at us, as if we were sheep. We had always followed his trail, there was to all appearances no difference between this trip and any other. We had breasted equally severe storms, and come home, laughing. I feel sure Peter met with an accident, – or, it may be, – probably enough, – his strength suddenly gave out, or even his heart went bad, or something like that. Perhaps he couldn't shout. I blame myself, of course, for not looking back sooner, but I do honestly feel that it was not a culpable omission."

"Of course it wasn't! I see just how it was. Great, big, stalwart Peter was not a baby to be looked after by you others. But – oh, Gilbert, – it's so dreadful to think of his dying there alone! Perhaps he – he didn't die right away – "

"Don't, Carly! Try not to think about that. Think only that old Peter Boots is gone, – that he lived a fine, clean, splendid life, and met his end bravely, whatever happened. And, too, I'm told that he couldn't have suffered much. He must have lost consciousness very quickly."

"Yes, – I suppose so. But – oh, Gilbert, I didn't know how much I cared, until – until I lost him."

"I know, dear, – it's awful hard for you. Come on, get your hat and let's go over to Julie's. I haven't seen her yet, and I promised to call to-day."

They went to the Cranes', and found Shelby already there.

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